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Beyond Distress: Emotions, Digital Addictions and Youth Delinquency. A Study on the Emotional Vulnerabilities of Today's Adolescents

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Abstract

Introduction: This article is the result of research carried out by Dr Aurida Pardini and Dr Francesca Lissandrello, with the contribution and under the supervision of Dr Domenico Piccininno, concerning the study of emotions, digital addictions and juvenile delinquency.

Materials and Methods: A test entitled 'Beyond distress: emotions and juvenile deviance', created by Dr Aurida Pardini and supervised by Dr Domenico Piccininno, was used with the aim of analysing the emotions most frequently experienced by adolescents, their awareness of various types of violence (perpetrated, suffered and witnessed) and the associated emotions, the use, frequency and type of social media and video games, and the emotions experienced whilst using them, as well as their planning and the link to deviant and antisocial behaviour. A structured questionnaire comprising 52 items was used and administered via Google Forms, both through social media channels and during face-to-face sessions in schools, and investigated five areas: background information, experiences and emotions, socio-criminological aspects, digital addictions and future plans.

Results: In this study, the sample consisted of 311 Italian adolescents and young adults. The study involved 311 participants, predominantly female (64%), aged between 16 and 18 (50%), and Italian citizens (95.8%). The majority hold a lower secondary school certificate (56.4%) and are either not in employment or unemployed (78.2%). In terms of values, respect (86.1%), friendship (76.5%), honour (75.8%), loyalty (71.3%), love (69.7%) and family (66.5%) were cited. With regard to emotions experienced on a daily basis, the following emerge: joy (57.6%), empathy (49.7%), anxiety (49.7%), anger (42.4%), enthusiasm (40.1%), boredom (35.1%) and sadness (33.8%). With regard to experiences, a sense of belonging was high in all contexts (especially within the family), listening is very high amongst friends, lower amongst colleagues, and variable within the family; support is highest within the family, good amongst friends, and much lower in formal settings; exclusion is very low within the family and amongst friends; boredom is very high and loneliness is intermittent, creating a paradox whereby people are part of groups and relationships but not necessarily engaged. With regard to the types of violence experienced, 93% cite verbal violence, 85.7% psychological violence, 83.7% physical violence, 82.7% bullying, 76.1% digital violence and

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73.1% cyberbullying. As for social media, these are used frequently by 80.5%, with users primarily experiencing indifference (53.4%), joy (36.4%) and boredom (27.9%), whilst video games. With regard to the emotions experienced whilst playing video games, these are used frequently in only 13.7% of cases, with users primarily experiencing joy (54.6%) and adrenaline (40.5%).

Conclusion: The results highlight a state of apparent social integration associated with significant emotional fragility, characterised by anxiety, loneliness, a sense of inadequacy and difficulties in emotional regulation. Significant gender differences also emerge in the ways in which distress is expressed, along with a relationship between the use of digital technologies, emotional experiences and relational vulnerability. The data suggest the need for preventive interventions based on the development of socio-emotional skills and the strengthening of adult role models.

Keywords: Baldus; Race; Death Penalty; Race Studies; Capital Punishment; McCleskey; Aggravators; Overcharging

Introduction

Adolescence represents one of the most complex and significant stages of the entire life cycle. It constitutes a period of profound biological, cognitive, emotional and social transformation during which the individual is called upon to redefine their identity and their role within society [1]. In recent decades, the scientific literature has highlighted that youth distress and deviance cannot be interpreted exclusively as individual or moral phenomena but must be understood in the light of a complex interaction between neurobiological, emotional, family, social and cultural factors [2]. At the same time, the advent of digital technologies has profoundly altered the environments in which adolescents grow up, introducing new opportunities but also new risks, including digital addictions and forms of online deviance. This paper aims to analyse the relationship between emotional distress, neurobiological development, deviant processes and digital addictions, offering an overview of the main theoretical perspectives and findings emerging from contemporary scientific research.

Adolescence as a Complex Developmental Stage

Adolescence represents a developmental stage characterised by profound biological, psychological and social transformations that can expose the individual to conditions of emotional and behavioural vulnerability. In recent years, the growing incidence of psychological distress among adolescents and the spread of digital technologies have stimulated widespread scientific interest in the factors contributing to the onset of juvenile deviance. This study aims to analyse the relationship between emotional distress, neurobiological development, processes of deviant socialisation and digital addictions through a review of the psychological, sociological and neuroscientific literature. The analysis highlights how adolescent deviance constitutes a multifactorial phenomenon resulting from the interaction between individual vulnerabilities, emotional dysregulation, adverse relational experiences, peer group influence and specific characteristics of brain development.

The literature reviewed also suggests that digital addictions, including social media addiction, problematic gaming and compulsive smartphone use, may represent both a manifestation of psychological distress and a factor in the perpetuation of risky behaviours and emerging forms of online deviance. The findings highlight the importance of adopting integrated interpretative models and preventive strategies focused on enhancing socio-emotional skills, family support and mindful digital education. Adolescence is traditionally defined as the transitional period between childhood and adulthood. However, contemporary literature tends to view it as a broader developmental process, which can extend up to the age of twenty-four [3]. According to Erikson EH [1], the primary developmental task of this stage is the construction of personal identity.

The adolescent must integrate childhood experiences with new social demands, developing a coherent self-concept. This process inevitably involves moments of crisis, conflict and experimentation.

The main developmental tasks concern:

- The construction of personal identity
- autonomy from the family
- the acquisition of interpersonal skills
- the development of a value system
- planning for the future
- the development of sexuality and emotional development

Contemporary society has made these tasks particularly complex. Adolescents are, in fact, confronted with phenomena such as globalisation, social pressure, economic insecurity, digital hyper-connectivity and increasing academic competitiveness. These factors contribute to increased uncertainty and the risk of psychological distress.

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Project Objectives and Structure

The primary objective of the project is to advance scientific criminological research in Italy, particularly focusing on a sample such as that of young adults who are going through a delicate and complex transitional and videogames, and their possible phase. A secondary objective of the project is to investigate emotions, perceptions and the frequency of violence in its various forms, as well as the use and types of social relantionship with deviant and antisocial behaviour. This quantitative, descriptive-exploratory cross-sectional study, based on an anonymous online questionnaire and supplemented by a review of the scientific literature, stems from the need to explore the relationship between emotional distress and deviant behaviour in adolescence, a particularly delicate developmental phase characterised by profound biological, psychological and social transformations. In recent years, the rise in psychological distress among young people, coupled with the growing prevalence of digital technologies, has made it increasingly necessary to understand the factors contributing to the emergence of problematic behaviours and forms of deviance, both traditional and online.

The main objective of this study is to analyse juvenile deviance not simply as a transgression of social norms, but as a multidimensional phenomenon influenced by the interaction between neurobiological processes, emotional vulnerabilities, family dynamics, peer group relationships and the sociocultural context to which they belong. Specifically, this study aims to:

- Examine the main characteristics of development of adolescent development and their impact on behaviour
- to explore the role of emotions and emotional regulation processes in the genesis of deviant behaviour
- to analyse the contribution of the main psychological, sociological and criminological theories to the understanding of juvenile deviance
- to explore the influence of family relationships and peer groups on the development of risky behaviours
- to investigate the relationship between psychological distress, digital addictions and new forms of online deviance
- to highlight the main risk factors and protective factors identified in the scientific literature
- promote reflection aimed at prevention and the development of effective educational and psychosocial interventions.

Through a review of the scientific literature and the analysis of data collected via an anonymous online questionnaire, this study aims to contribute to an understanding of adolescents' developmental needs and to emphasise the importance of preventive strategies based on the enhancement of socio-emotional skills, support for families, social inclusion and informed digital education. The ultimate aim of the study is to foster an understanding of adolescent deviance centred on the processes underlying the behaviour, moving beyond exclusively punitive interpretations and promoting a culture of listening, prevention and the psychological well-being of the younger generation.

Youth Distress

Youth distress represents a multidimensional condition characterised by psychological distress, relational difficulties and behavioural problems. The literature generally distinguishes between two broad categories of manifestations:

Internalising distress Includes:

- anxiety
- depression
- social withdrawal
- isolation
- low self-esteem
- feelings of inadequacy.

Externalising distress Includes:

- aggression
- impulsivity
- oppositional behaviour
- rule-breaking
- antisocial behaviour.

According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological model [2], psychological distress arises from the interaction between the individual and the environment. Family, school, peer groups and the community exert a decisive influence on the psychological development of adolescents.

Among the main risk factors identified by research are:

- family conflict
- emotional neglect
- educational deprivation
- social exclusion
- bullying
- academic failure
- exposure to violence.

The Neurobiology of the Adolescent Mind

Neuroscience has made a fundamentalto our understanding of adolescent behaviour. Numerous studies show that the adolescent brain undergoes a phase of intense structural and functional reorganisation [4]. Particularly significant is the asynchronous maturation between the limbic system and the prefrontal cortex. The limbic system, responsible for emotional processing and the pursuit of immediate gratification, matures early.

The prefrontal cortex, involved in the processes of:

- planning

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- inhibitory control
- emotional regulation
- decision-making
- forecasting consequences

is only fully developed in early adulthood. According to Steinberg L [5], this imbalance promotes behaviours characterised by impulsivity, risk-seeking and greater susceptibility to social influence.

Emotional Regulation and Socio-Affective Development

Emotional regulation is a fundamental skill for psychological well-being and social adaptation. Gross JJ [6] defines it as the set of processes through which individuals influence the intensity, duration and expression of their emotions. Numerous studies show that adolescents involved in deviant behaviour frequently exhibit difficulties with emotional regulation.

The emotions most commonly associated with deviance are:

- anger
- shame
- frustration
- fear
- loneliness
- sense of exclusion

When such emotions are not adequately processed, they can result in aggressive, oppositional or transgressive behaviour (Figure 1).

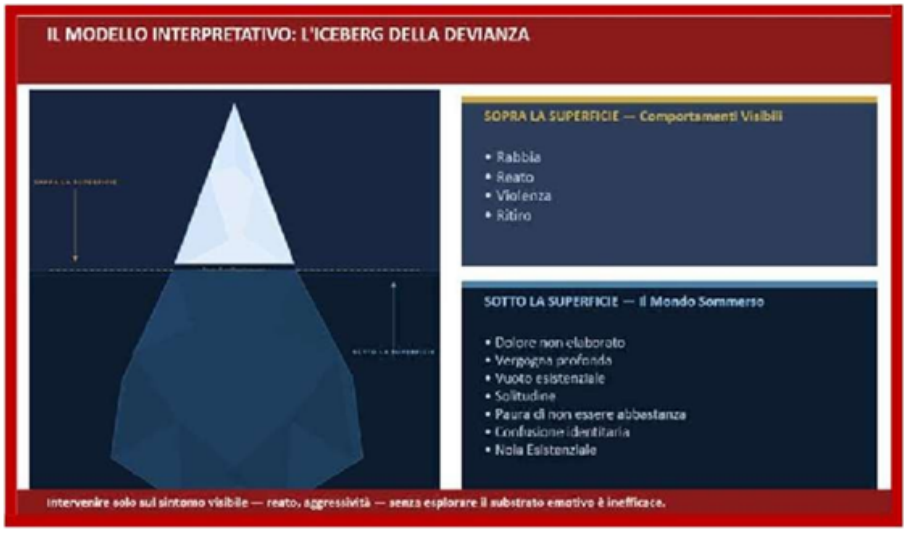


Figure 1: Model Interpretation.

The Emotional Roots of Deviance

Juvenile deviance cannot be interpreted solely as a violation of social norms. Many authors consider it a dysfunctional response to unmet emotional needs. The General Strain Theory proposed by Agnew R [7] argues that frustrating or perceived unfair events produce negative emotions that increase the likelihood of deviant behaviour. Deviance can serve various psychological functions:

- seeking recognition
- identity formation
- compensation of experiences of exclusion
- expression of distress
- search for social belonging.

From this perspective, deviant behaviour becomes a form of communication of distress rather than a mere transgression.

Attachment and Vulnerability to Deviance

Bowlby's attachment theory [8] represents one of the main interpretative models of antisocial behaviour. The relationships formed with primary caregivers during childhood profoundly influence the development of personality and relational skills.

Secure attachment promotes:

- self-esteem
- empathy
- emotional regulation
- interpersonal skills.

Conversely, forms of insecure attachment are associated with:

- impulsivity
- aggression

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- oppositional behaviour
- vulnerability to addiction.

Adverse childhood experiences therefore constitute a significant risk factor for the subsequent emergence of deviant behaviour.

The Main Theories of Deviance

Sociological and criminological literature has developed numerous interpretative models of deviance.

Theory of anomie: Merton RK [9] argues that deviance arises when individuals perceive a discrepancy between socially valued goals and the actual possibilities of achieving them.

Social learning theory: Bandura A [10] highlights the role of imitation and observation in the acquisition of deviant behaviours.

Differential association theory: Sutherland EH [11] asserts that criminal behaviour is learned through interaction with individuals who share definitions that condone transgression.

Social control theory: Hirschi T [12] argues that ties to family, school and the community reduce the likelihood of deviant behaviour.

Labelling theory: According to Becker HS [13], deviance also depends on the social processes through which certain behaviours are defined as deviant.

The Deviant Group

The peer group plays a central role during adolescence. The need for belonging and recognition makes young people particularly susceptible to peer influence.

In deviant groups, the following processes are frequently observed:

- normative conformity
- social reinforcement
- deindividuation
- diffusion of responsibility.

Belonging to the group can provide psychological protection, identity and social recognition, whilst contributing to the normalisation of transgressive behaviour.

Digital Addictions

The increasing digitalisation of daily life has fostered the emergence of so-called technological behavioural addictions. The main forms include:

- Internet Addiction
- Smartphone Addiction
- Social Media Addiction
- Gaming Disorder.

These phenomena are characterised by:

- loss of control
- compulsive use
- interference with daily activities
- impaired social functioning.

From a neurobiological perspective, digital addictions involve the dopaminergic reward system, which is responsible for mechanisms of gratification and reinforcement (Figure 2) [14-16].

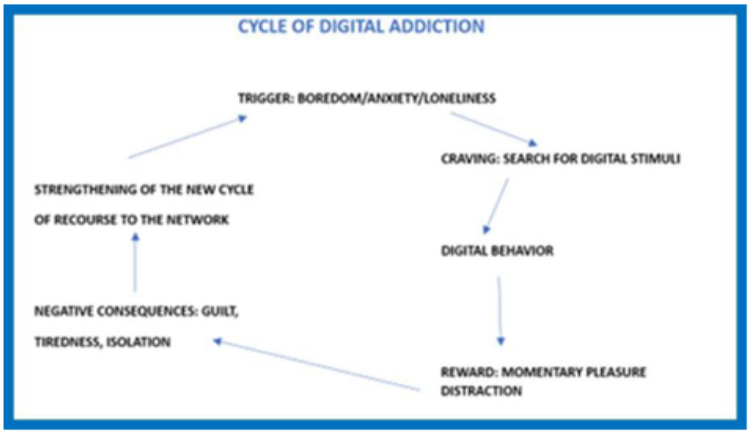


Figure 2: Cycle of Digital addiction.

Nomophobia and Fear of Missing Out

Among the most common manifestations of digital addictions are nomophobia and Fear of Missing Out (FOMO). Nomophobia refers to the intense fear of being without a smartphone, an internet connection or access to social media [17]. FOMO, on the other hand, consists of the persistent fear of being excluded from social experiences considered

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significant.
Both phenomena are associated with:

- increased anxiety
- a reduction in psychological well-being
- a deterioration in quality of sleep
- compulsive use of social media.

Digital Addictions and Deviance

The scientific literature suggests a significant relationship between problematic use of digital technologies and deviant behaviour.
The main mechanisms involved include:

- Online disinhibition
- Anonymity reduces the perceived social control
- Cyberbullying
- A form of psychological aggression mediated by digital technologies.
- Impulsivity
- Instant gratification reduces tolerance for frustration.
- Social isolation
- Excessive immersion in the virtual world can compromise the development of interpersonal skills.
- Exposure to problematic content
- Continuous exposure to aggressive content may promote processes of emotional desensitisation.

Digital addictions therefore appear to be both a consequence and a possible contributing factor to psychological distress in adolescents.

Prevention and Protective Factors

Scientific evidence shows that the prevention of deviant behaviour requires multidimensional interventions.

Key protective factors include:

- positive family relationships
- support at school
- social-emotional skills
- digital literacy
- social inclusion
- participation in community life.

A preventive approach is generally more effective than purely repressive measures.

In recent decades, the phenomenon of juvenile delinquency has undergone profound changes. Whereas in the past the focus was mainly on overt antisocial behaviour, today the need to understand the psychological and emotional dimensions that precede and accompany such behaviour is becoming increasingly evident [18-20]. Incidents of peer violence, the growing phenomenon of cyberbullying, digital addictions and the rise in psychological distress among adolescents call for a reflection that goes beyond a simple analysis of observable behaviours. Behind every aggressive, transgressive or antisocial act lies a complex emotional world, often invisible to adults. While anger, violence and crime represent the tip of the iceberg, beneath the surface lie emotions such as shame, loneliness, pain, guilt, confusion, inadequacy and existential emptiness.

The scientific literature highlights how emotions such as anger, shame, frustration, a sense of exclusion and loneliness can constitute significant risk factors for the development of aggressive, self-harming or transgressive behaviour. At the same time, the growing prevalence of digital technologies has radically altered the ways in which adolescents construct their identity, form social relationships and regulate their emotions [21,22].

This research stems from the need to bridge the gap between the quantitative description of deviance and an understanding of young people's subjective experiences. The main objective is to explore the relationship between emotions, social relationships, use of social media, video games and deviant behaviour, with a view to identifying potential risk factors and protective factors useful for prevention.

The Research

Sample

The study involved 311 participants.
The sample consists mainly of:

- subjects of female (64%)
- young people aged between 16 and 18 (50%)
- Italian citizens (95.8%).

The majority hold a lower secondary school certificate (56.4%) and are either not in employment or unemployed (78.2%), a figure consistent with the age group in question.

Materials and Methods

This study adopts a descriptive-exploratory methodology based on the analysis of national and international scientific literature concerning adolescent distress, juvenile delinquency, emotional regulation and digital addictions. The literature review was conducted by consulting scientific articles, monographs and theoretical contributions published in the fields of psychology, sociology and criminological and neuroscientific fields [23-26]. To complement the theoretical analysis, an anonymous online questionnaire was used, administered on a voluntary basis, aimed at gathering information regarding adolescents' perceptions of emotional distress, the use of digital technologies, peer relationships and risky behaviours.

A structured questionnaire comprising 52 items was used; it was administered via Google Forms both through

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social media channels and during face-to-face sessions in schools, and covered five areas of investigation:

Background information

- Personal details
- Leisure time and friendships
- Family relationships
- Values

Experiences and emotion

- Emotions
- Experiences
- Relationship with one's own body
- Ways of reacting to suffering

Sociocriminological area

- Knowledge of violence
- Violence perpetrated, suffered, witnessed and emotions
- Ways of reacting to violence

Social media and video games

- Social Networks
- Video Games

Personal and professional goals

- Concerns about the future
- Personal goals
- Professional goals

The aim was not merely to describe the phenomenon of deviance, but to understand the inner experiences that may contribute to its emergence.

Setting and Participants: Description of the Group

The data were analysed using descriptive statistics and a qualitative interpretation of the results, with particular attention to the relationships between emotional, relational and behavioural dimensions.

Results

Patient History

Demographic data

The study involved 311 participants, predominantly female (64%; Figure 3), aged between 16 and 18 years (50%; Figure 4), of Italian nationality (95.8%; Figure 5), with a level of education predominantly at lower secondary school level (56.4%; Figure 6) and mostly not in employment or unemployed (77.8%; Figure 7, data consistent with a young sample, predominantly student or in transition.

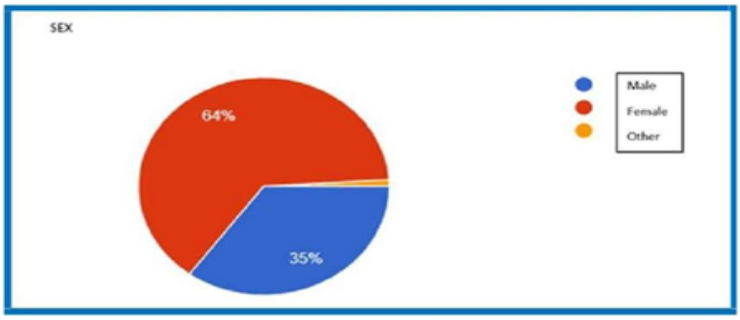


Figure 3: Sex.

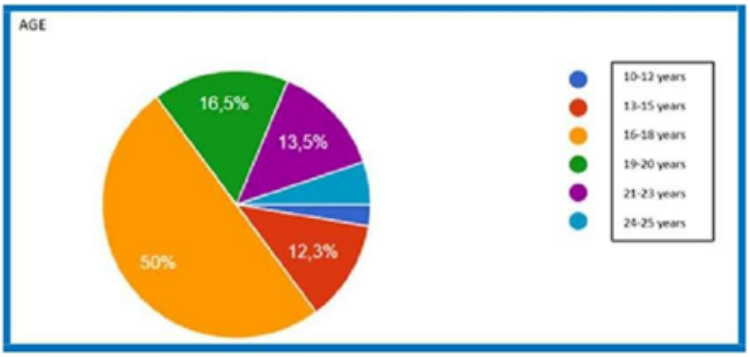


Figure 4: Age.

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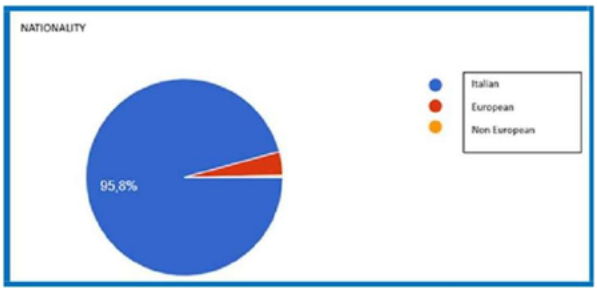


Figure 5: Nationality.

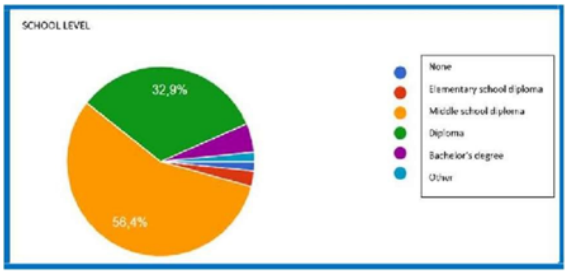


Figure 6: School level.

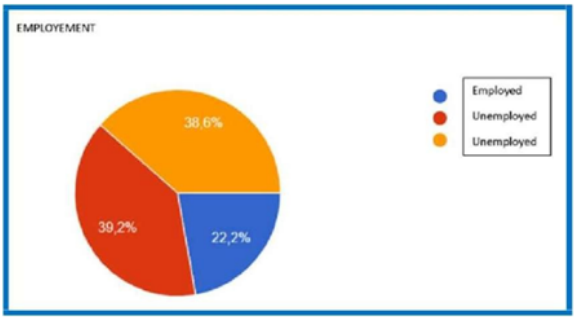


Figure 7: Employment.

Leisure and Friendships

With regard to leisure time, 76.6% of the sample regularly takes part in some form of sporting activity, predominantly individual sports (58.6%; Figure 8), and has a wide network of friends (95.5%; Figure 9).

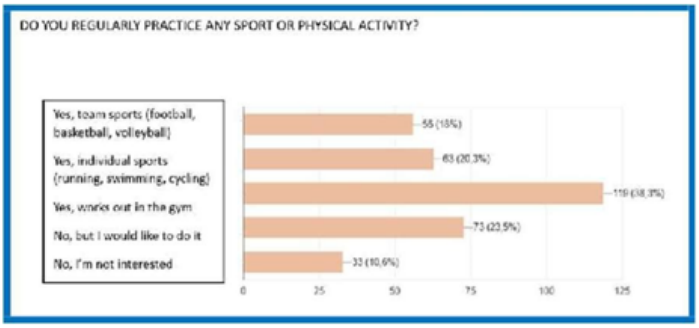


Figure 8: Physical activity.

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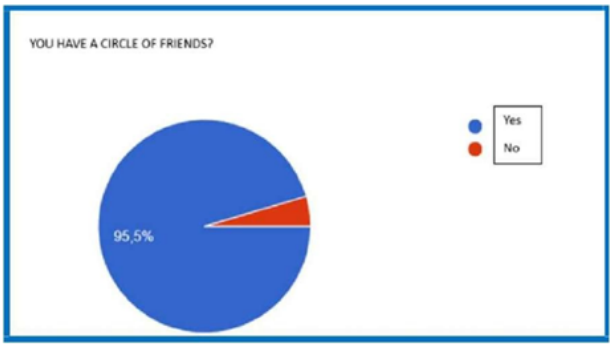


Figure 9: Circle of friends.

Family Composition

With regard to family composition, 70.4% of the sample live with both parents (Figure 10) and 79% have brothers and sisters (Figure 11). As for relationships with both parents and brothers and sisters, these are reported to be mostly good (80.6% and 84.1%; Figures 12 & 13).

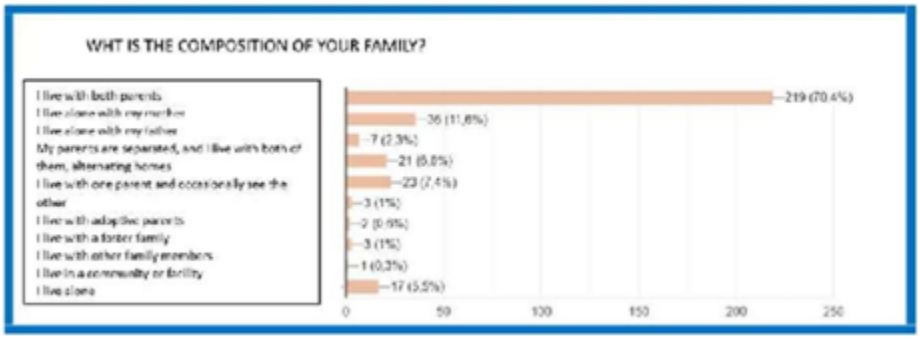


Figure 10: Family composition.

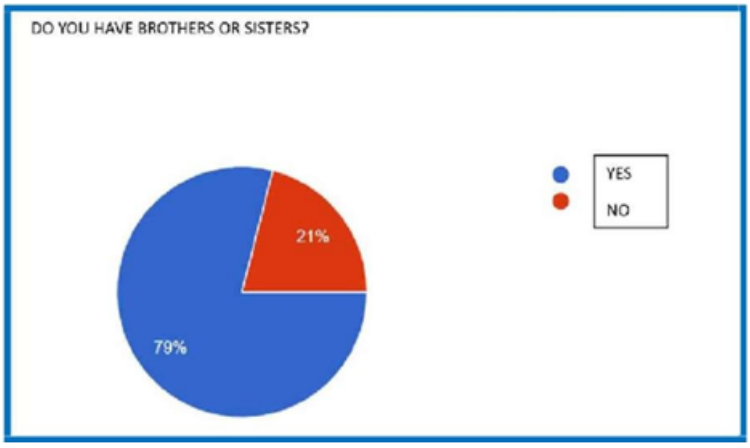


Figure 11: Brothers or sisters.

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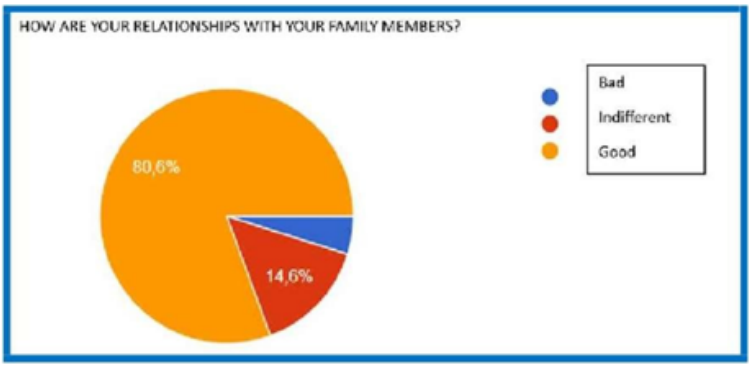


Figure 12: Relationship with family members.

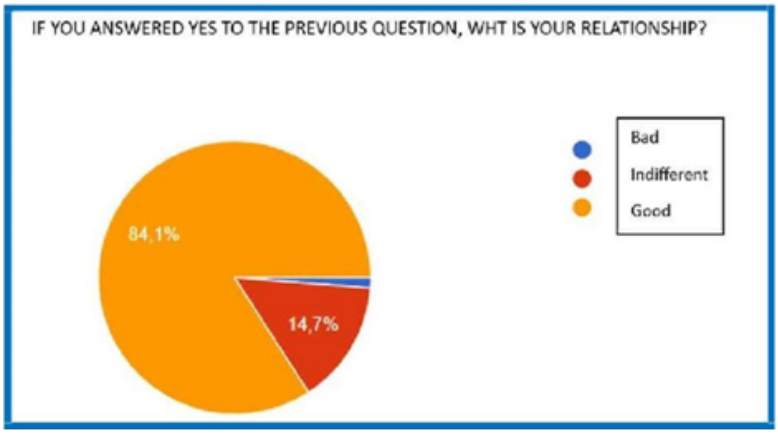


Figure 13: Relationship with brothers and sisters.

Values

Regarding the values scale, the responses highlighted very strong prosocial values, such as respect (86.1%), friendship (76.5%), honour (75.8%), loyalty (71.3%), love (69.7%), family (66.5%), fairness (60.3%) and justice (54.8%); (Figure 14).

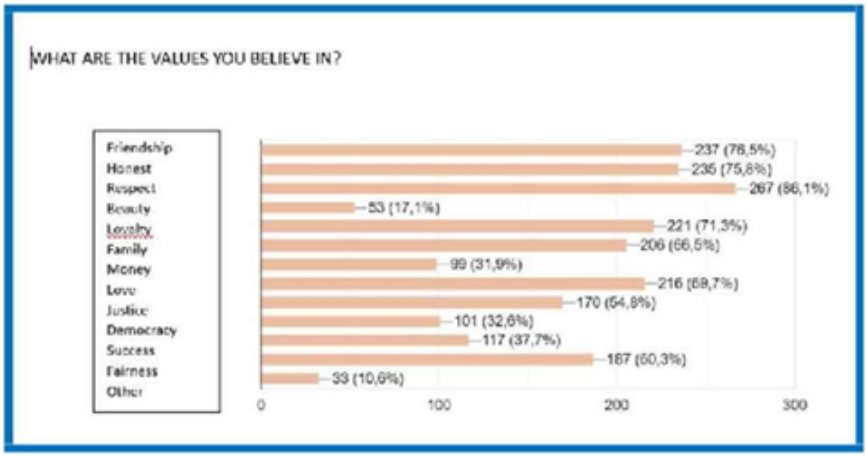


Figure 14: Values.

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Experiences and Emotions

Emotions

When it comes to the emotions experienced on a daily basis, the most common are joy (57.6%), empathy (49.7%), anxiety (49.7%), anger (42.4%), enthusiasm (40.1%), boredom (35.1%), sadness (33.8%), guilt (31.8%), adrenaline and confusion (30.8%) (Figure 15).

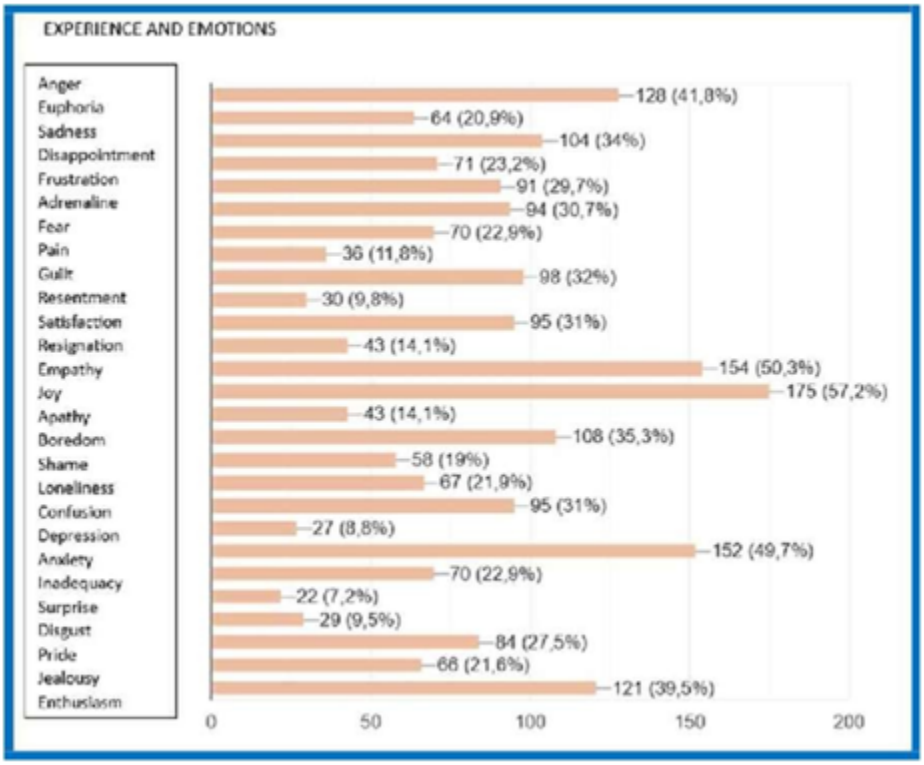


Figure 15: Daily emotion.

The values most frequently cited are friendship, respect, family and love; thus, we have very strong prosocial values but fragile emotional experiences, highlighting an internal misalignment because young people report good relationships and hold positive values yet experience anxiety, loneliness and frustration. This suggests an unexpressed and unacknowledged distress [27,28].

One of the most interesting findings to emerge from the research concerns the discrepancy between reported relationships and actual emotional well-being. Most participants report having a stable network of friends (95.4%), taking part in sporting activities (76.6%) and maintaining good or very good family relationships (over 80%). The most widely shared values are respect, friendship, honesty, love and family.

However, alongside these positive indicators, numerous signs of emotional distress emerge.

The emotions most frequently experienced are:

- Joy (57.6%)
- Anxiety (49.7%)
- Empathy (49.7%)
- Anger (42.4%)
- Boredom (35.1%)
- Sadness (33.8%)
- Guilt (31.8%)
- Confusion (30.8%).

The data show a significant coexistence of positive and negative emotions, suggesting a state of emotional ambivalence. Young people appear to be doing well in terms of their relationships, but at the same time they experience anxiety, frustration and a sense of inadequacy [29,31]. This apparent contradiction highlights the existence of underlying psychological distress, which is often neither recognised nor verbalised. Indicators of withdrawal, such as confusion, inadequacy and shame, are evident, suggesting difficulties in

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self-definition and a possible widespread insecurity. Thus, this sample shows apparent good social interaction but significant emotional fragility, intermittent loneliness and a need to be listened to.

Gender differences in the expression of distress

The analysis revealed significant differences between males and females. Girls display greater emotional intensity and report the following more frequently:

- Anxiety
- Sadness
- Loneliness
- Shame
- Guilt
- Inadequacy.

This distress therefore tends to be internalised.

In boys, however, emotions such as the following prevail:

- Anger
- Indifference
- Adrenaline
- Boredom
- Pride.

In this case, distress most frequently takes externalising forms, manifesting itself through impulsivity, aggression and oppositional behaviour.

The difference does not lie in the amount of distress experienced, but rather in the ways in which it is expressed. Females display internalising emotions, greater emotional awareness and a greater ability to name emotions, with greater emotional vulnerability, whilst males display more externalising emotions, a smaller range of expressed emotions and greater difficulty in recognising complex emotions.

Life Experiences

With regard to personal experiences, the study examined feelings of loneliness, boredom, a sense of belonging, support, feelings of exclusion, appreciation and being listened to. With regard to the experience of loneliness, this is experienced sometimes (44.3%) and often (15.2%; Figure 16); boredom is experienced sometimes (46.1%) and often (28.1%; Figure 17); a sense of belonging is present often (48.2%) and sometimes (35%; Figure 18); support is present often (52.4%) and sometimes (33.4%) amongst friends, often (59.1%) and occasionally (25%) within the family, rarely (27.6%) and occasionally (39.8%) amongst colleagues and peers (Figure 19); the experience of exclusion is absent in 35.4% and rare in 32.1% of cases amongst friends, absent in 54.3% and rare in 19.6% of cases within the family, and rare in 32.1% and sometimes in 29.3% of cases amongst colleagues and peers (Figure 20); feeling appreciated is present often and sometimes (52.4% and 33.1%) amongst friends, often and sometimes (50.5% and 30.8%) within the family, and sometimes (43%) amongst colleagues and peers (Figure 21); Finally, being listened to is present often and sometimes (52.4% and 33.1%) amongst friends, often and sometimes (50.5% and 30.8%) within the family, whilst sometimes (43%) amongst colleagues and peers (Figure 22).

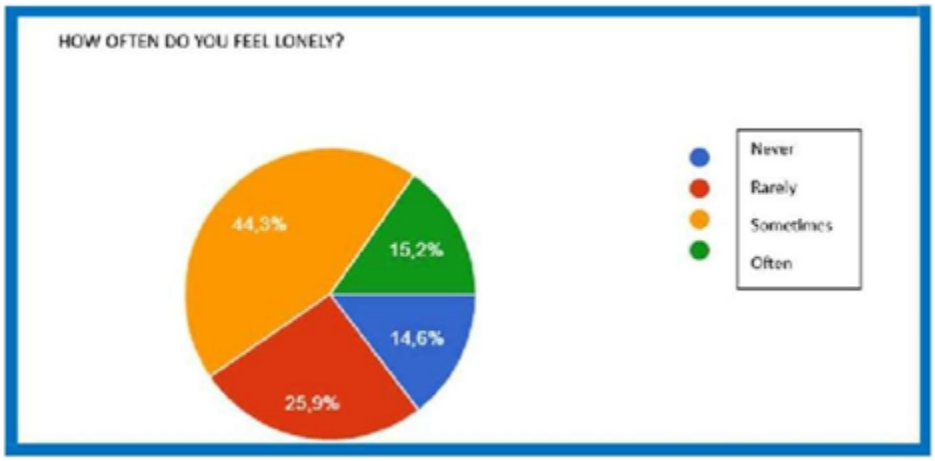


Figure 16: Loneliness.

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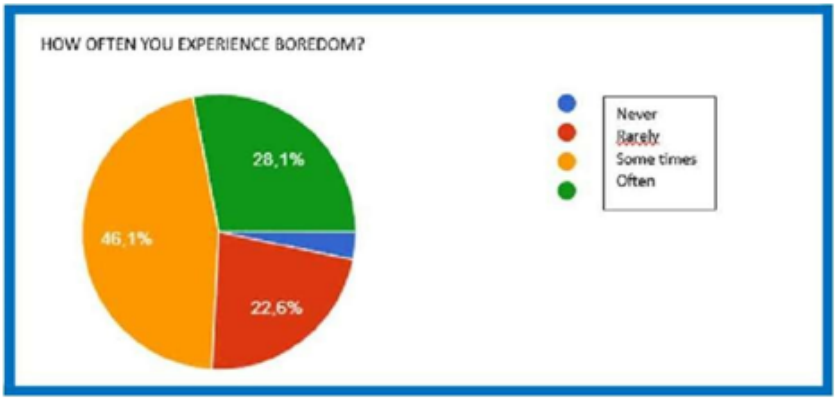


Figure 17: Experience of boredom.

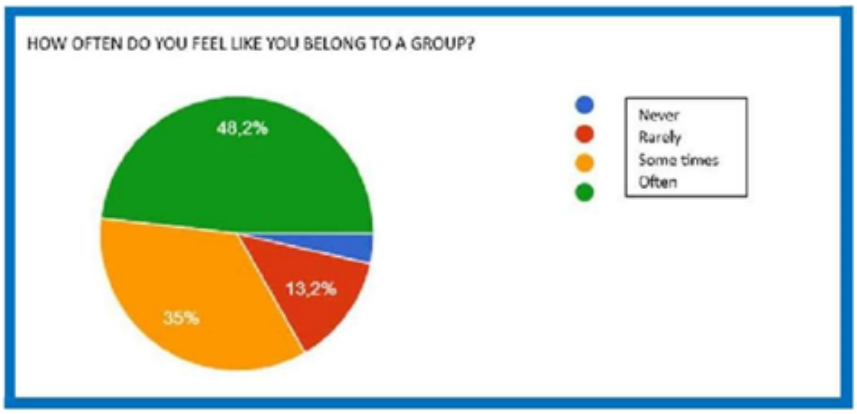


Figure 18: Sense of belonging.

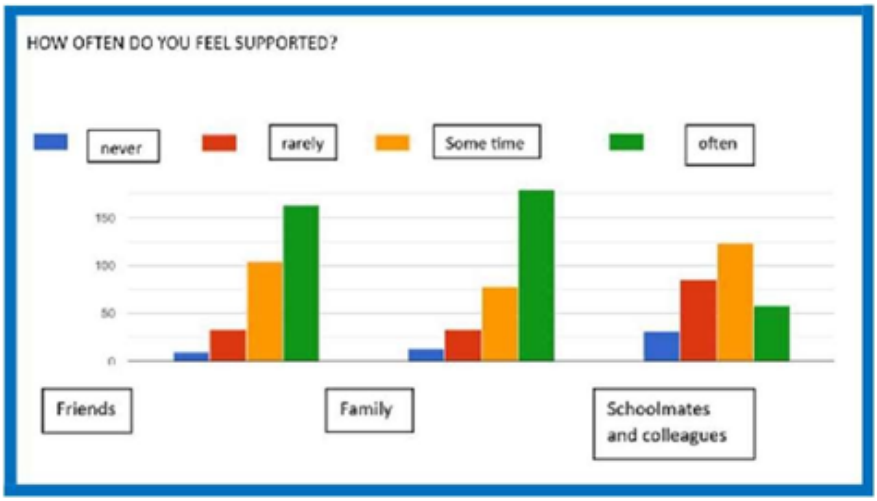


Figure 19: Support.

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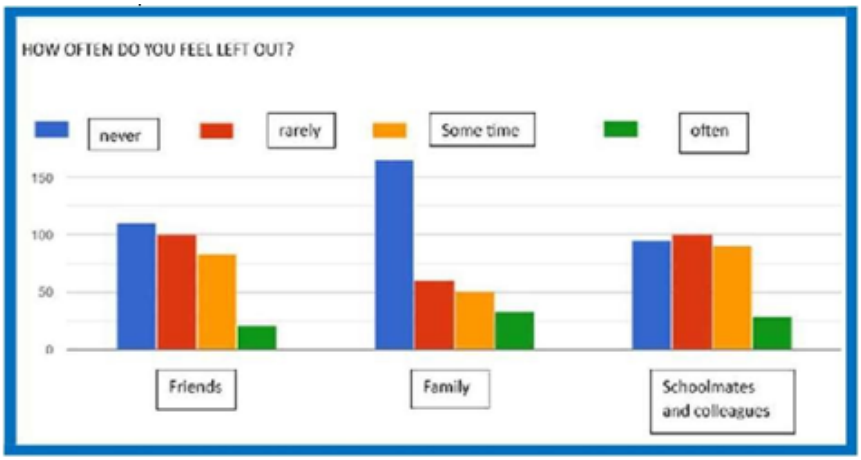


Figure 20: Experience of exclusion.

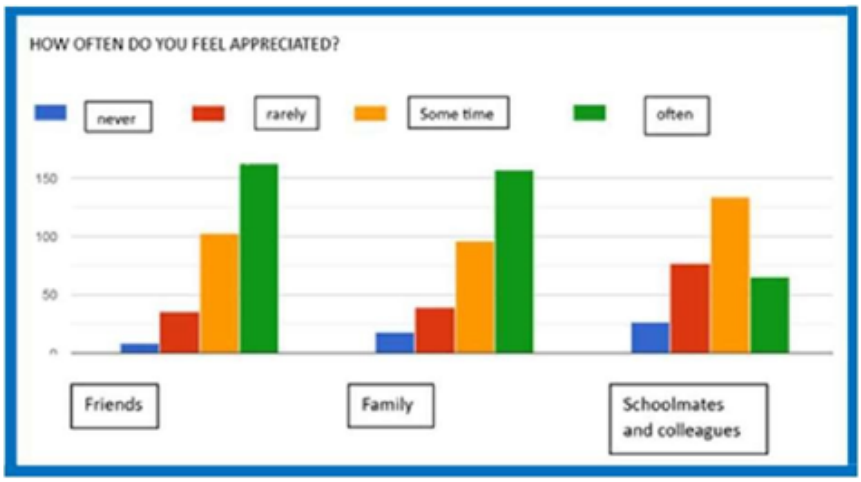


Figure 21: Experience of appreciation.

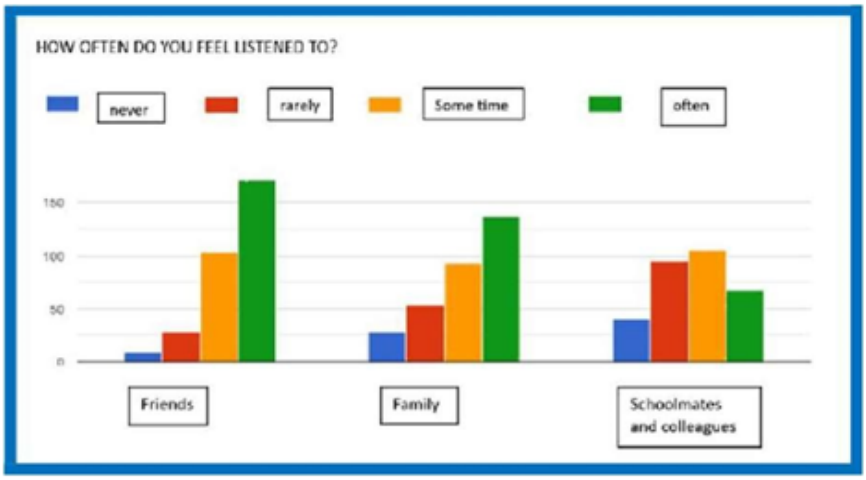


Figure 22: Feeling listened to.

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Belonging: high in all contexts (especially within the family) Feeling listened to: very high with friends, lower with colleagues, variable with family Support: highest within the family, good amongst friends, much lower in formal contexts Exclusion: very low within the family and amongst friends

Close relationships (friends/family) work well, formal ones (school/work) much less so.

Friends listen, family supports, but no one does everything together (Figure 23).

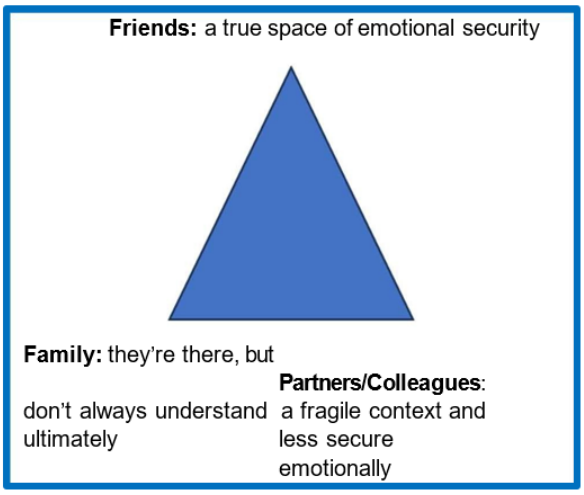


Figure 23: Friends, Family and partners/colleagues.

Loneliness and Boredom: the Paradox of Connection

Another particularly significant finding concerns the relationship between social belonging, loneliness and boredom. Although almost half of the sample reports a strong sense of belonging to their reference groups, 59% say they frequently experience moments of loneliness and over 70% report recurring episodes of boredom [32].

If we bring these three data points together:

- High sense of belonging
- Moderate loneliness
- Very high boredom

Paradox: people are part of groups and relationships but are not necessarily engaged or satisfied, so there is a discrepancy between 'being connected' and 'being truly engaged'. This finding suggests a phenomenon typical of the younger generations: being constantly connected does not necessarily mean feeling involved or understood.

Relationships work, but not all in the same way: The research highlights a substantial difference between social presence and the quality of relationships. Young people are part of extensive social networks, but often feel a lack of authentic and meaningful connections.

Perception of one's own body and ways of reacting to suffering: With regard to body image, 48.7% say they have an ambivalent relationship with their body, whilst 18.1% say they have a positive relationship and 33.2% a negative relationship (Figure 24).

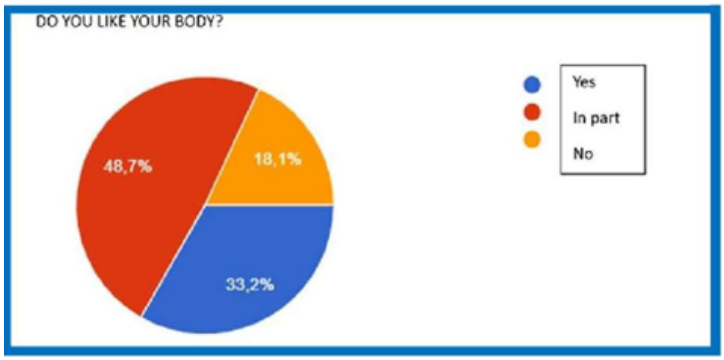


Figure 24: Perception of one's own body.

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With regard to behavioural responses to suffering, 50.2% of the sample say they isolate themselves, 39.5% talk about it with friends, 32.2% talk about it with family, 26% adopt other behaviours and 8.4% engage in aggressive or self-harming behaviours (Figure 25). Thus, the most common response to suffering is isolation; 1 in 2 withdraws into themselves. The figure of 8.4% for aggressive or self-harming behaviour is a minority, but it is nonetheless a warning sign. Only 1 in 3 talk to their family; this tells us that the family remains a difficult place in which to feel supported when suffering.

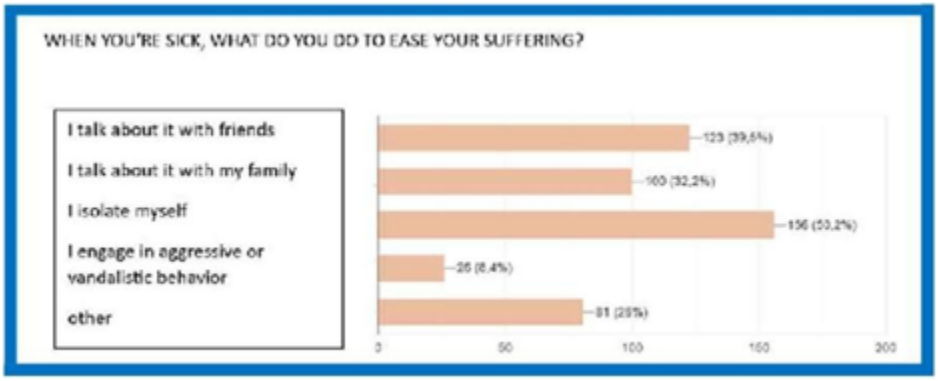


Figure 25: Who do I talk to when I'm feeling bad?.

Sociocriminological Area

Awareness of the various types of violence

With regard to the types of violence they are aware of, 93% mention verbal violence, 85.7% psychological violence, 83.7% physical violence, 82.7% bullying, 76.1% digital violence and 73.1% cyberbullying (Figure 26).

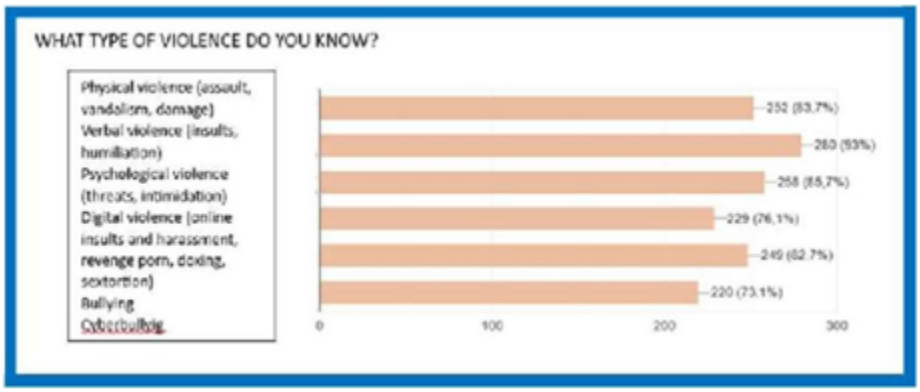


Figure 26: Knowledge of the various types of violence

Violence Perpetrated, Experienced and Witnessed

With regard to perpetrated violence, 67.2% of the sample state that they have never perpetrated violence, whilst 32.8% of those who have perpetrated violence (Figure 27) state that they have perpetrated verbal violence in 84.8% of cases, physical violence in 37.1%, psychological violence in 24.8%, bullying in 9.5%, digital violence in 6.7% and cyberbullying in 5.7% of cases (Figure 28). In 43% of cases, the victim was a friend; in 29.8% of cases, a family member; and in 26.3% of cases, a stranger (Figure 29).

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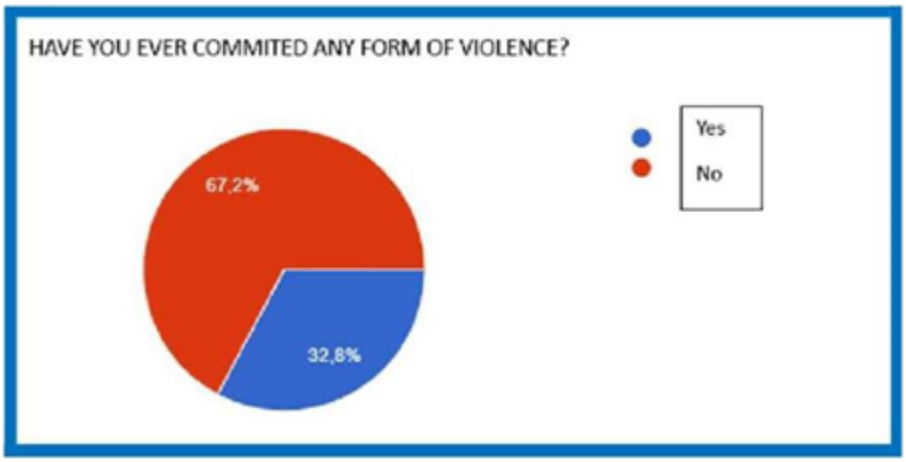


Figure 27: Frequency of violence

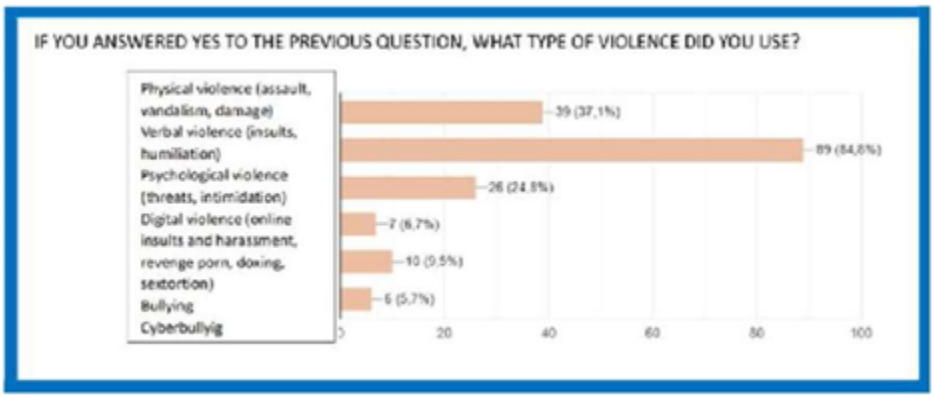


Figure 28: Type of violence enacted.

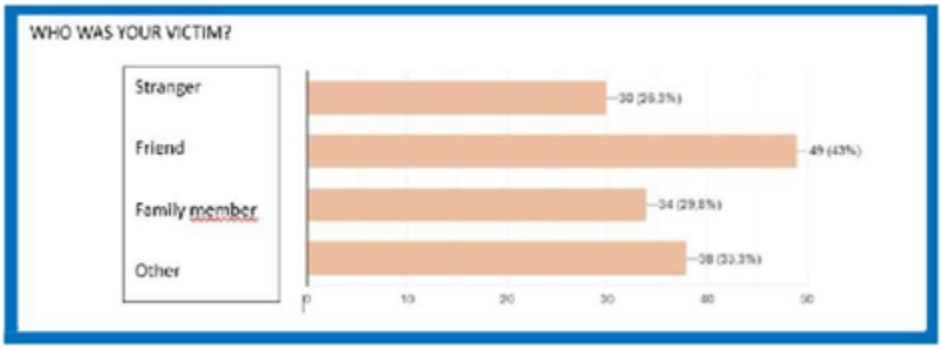


Figure 29: Victim of violence.

With regard to violence suffered, 59.3% of the sample stated that they had suffered some form of violence (Figure 30), in 77.7% of cases verbal, psychological in 54.3%, bullying in 41%, physical in 32.4%, digital in 17%, and cyberbullying in 9% of cases (Figure 31). The perpetrator in this case was a friend (47.6%), a family member in 22% of cases, or a stranger (16.9%; Figure 32).

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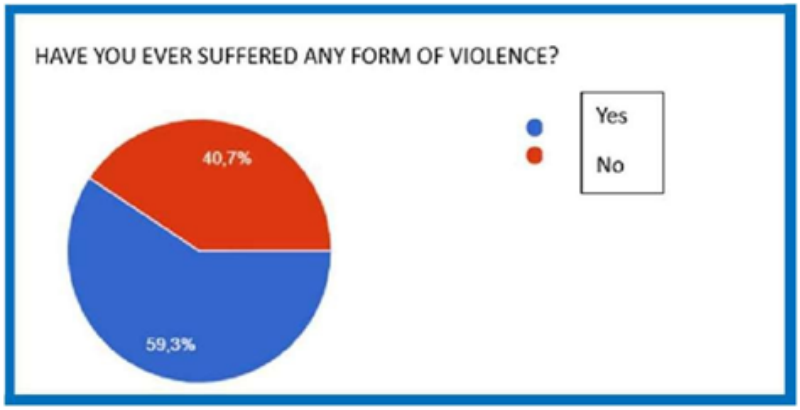


Figure 30: Frequency of violence suffered.

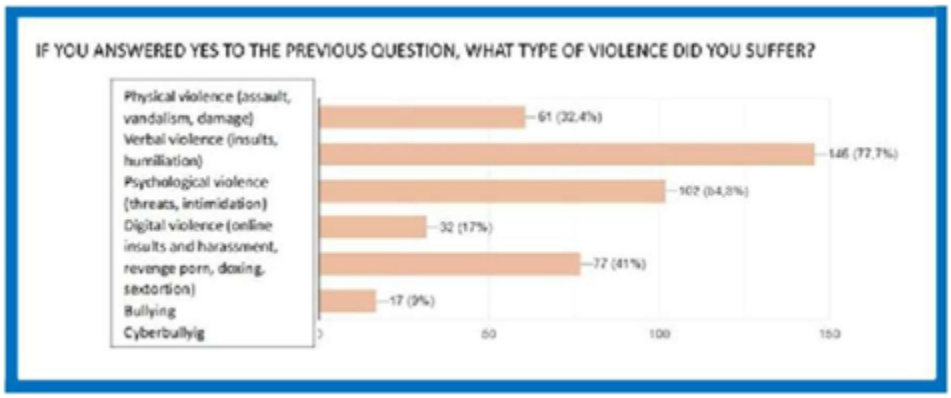


Figure 31: Type of violence suffered.

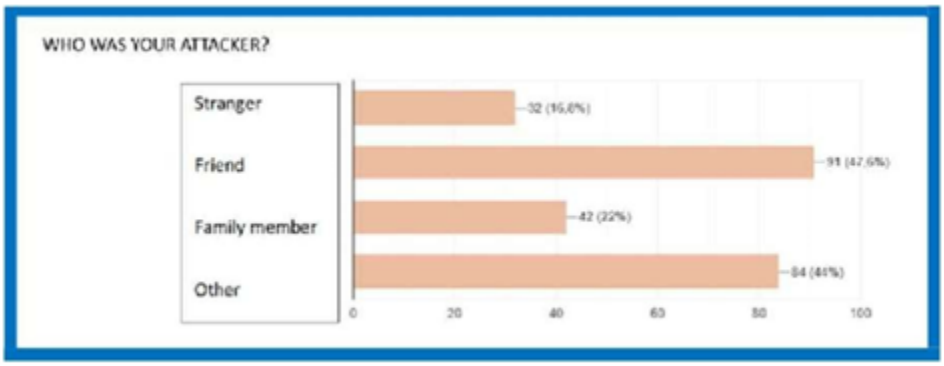


Figure 32: Perpetrator.

Almost 6 in 10 young people have experienced some form of violence, and the most disturbing finding is that the perpetrator is almost always someone they know, a friend or a family member. This explains why predominantly shame, inadequacy and loneliness emerge as the dominant emotions among victims: it is much harder to report or speak out when the perpetrator is a loved one. Verbal and psychological violence predominate, often invisible but devastating in the long term (Figure 33). Verbal violence dominates in both cases; it is the most widespread form and

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probably the most underestimated. The fact that the victim is often a friend or family member, whether as the victim or the perpetrator, confirms that violence almost always occurs within relationships, not between strangers (Figure 34).

FORMA	CONOSCIUTA	SUBITA	AGITA
Verbale	92,9%	78%	84,8%
Psicologica	85,5%	53,8%	24,8%
Fisica	83,5%	32,3%	37,1%
Bullismo	82,5%	41,4%	9,5%

Figure 33: Violence enacted, suffered and witnessed.

	SUBITA	AGITA
Ha coinvolto	59,5%	33,2%
Verbale	78%	84,8%
Vittima aggressore/amico	47,1%	43%

Figure 34: Violence enacted and suffered, and victim and aggressor.

Emotions Associated with the Various Types of Violence

With regard to the emotions experienced in relation to violence, we note that during the perpetration of violence, the emotions most commonly experienced are anger (79%), disappointment and frustration (38.7%), guilt and adrenaline (36.1%), pain (26.9%), confusion (26.1%), fear and sadness (21%; Figure 35).

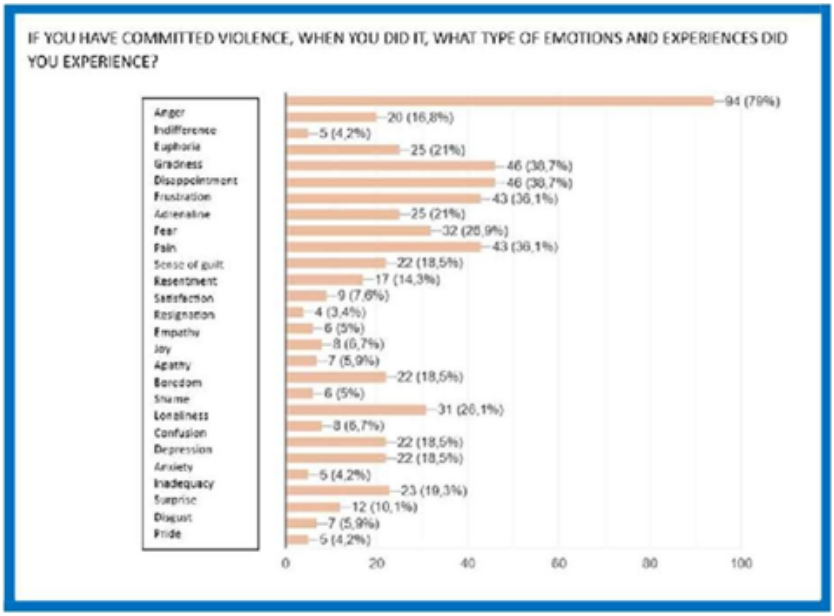


Figure 35: Emotions experienced during the act of violence.

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During the experience of violence, the emotions most commonly experienced are sadness (61.2%), anger (54.3%), disappointment (50.5%), inadequacy (45.2%), frustration (41%), pain (40.4%), shame (39.4%), loneliness and fear (37.2%; Figure 36). Those who commit violence mainly feel anger and adrenaline; it is a 'hot' and reactive act. Victims bear a heavier, internalised burden: shame, feelings of inadequacy, loneliness – emotions that remain bottled up inside, eroding self-esteem and leading to isolation. The shame felt by the victim is the most alarming factor: the victim feels guilty for what they have suffered. This is the mechanism that prevents them from asking for help.

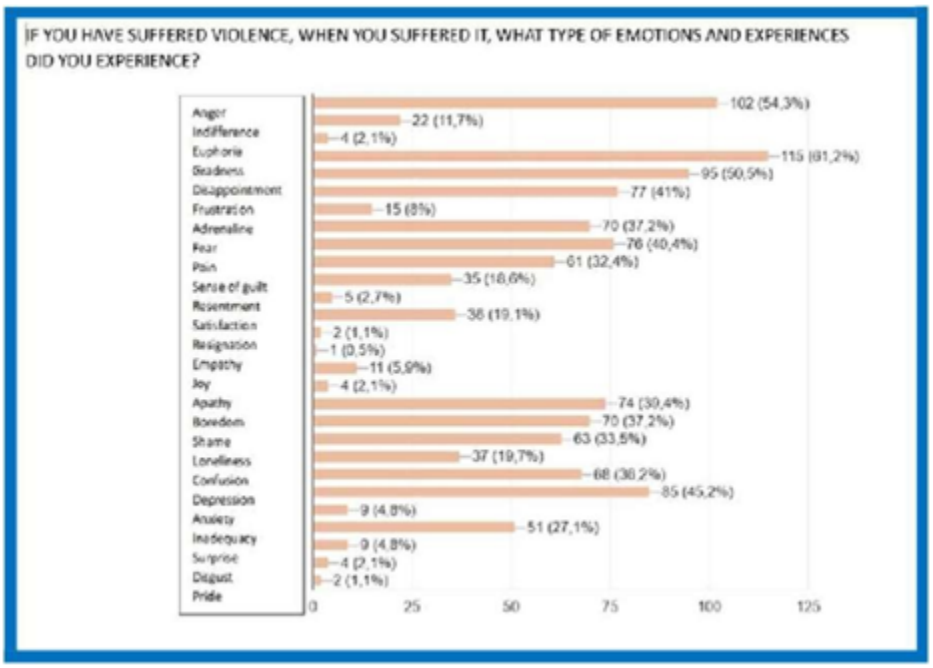


Figure 36: Emotions experienced during the violence suffered.

With regard to witnessing some form of violence, 17.3% of the sample stated that they had sometimes witnessed scenes of domestic violence and 6% often (Figure 37).

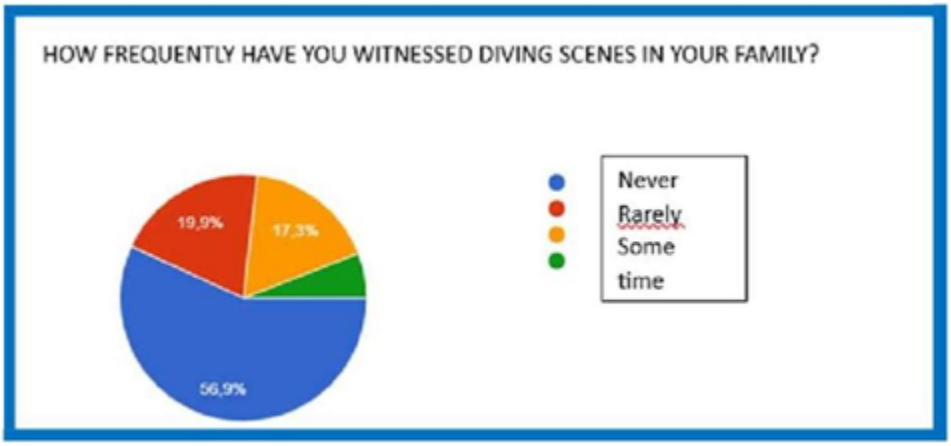


Figure 37: Frequency of having witnessed scenes of domestic violence.

With regard to the emotions experienced in relation to witnessing some form of violence, witnessing scenes of domestic violence provoked anger (56.1%), sadness (53.2%), disappointment (44.6%), fear (39.6%), pain (38.8%), confusion (36.7%; Figure 38).

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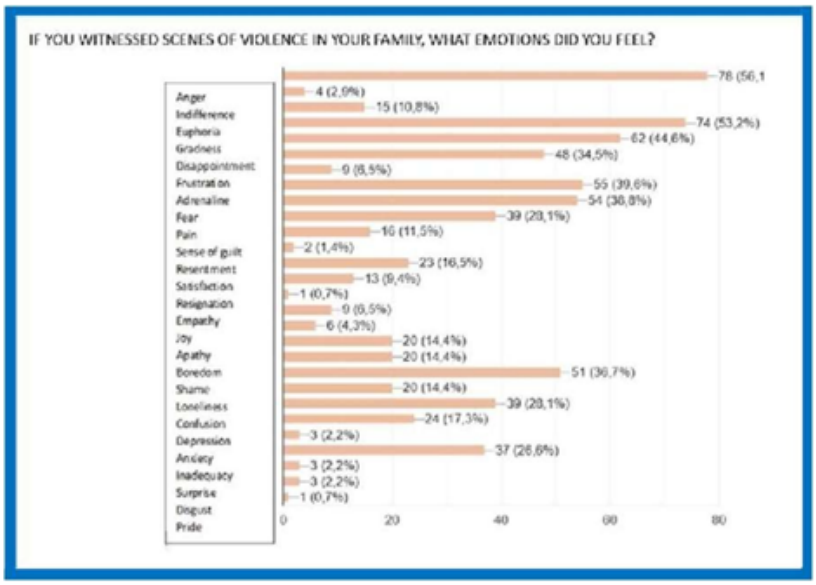


Figure 38: Emotions experienced when witnessing scenes of domestic violence.

With regard to scenes of violence at school, 26.2% of the sample had witnessed them occasionally and 4.7% frequently (Figure 39). With regard to scenes of violence in the workplace, 4.9% had witnessed them occasionally and 1.9% frequently (Figure 40). Finally, regarding witnessing scenes of violence on the street, 33.9% had witnessed them sometimes and 9.2% often (Figure 41).

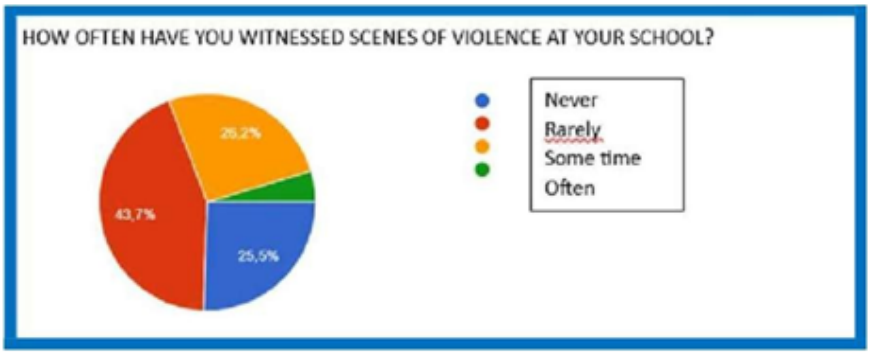


Figure 39: Frequency of witnessing violence at school.

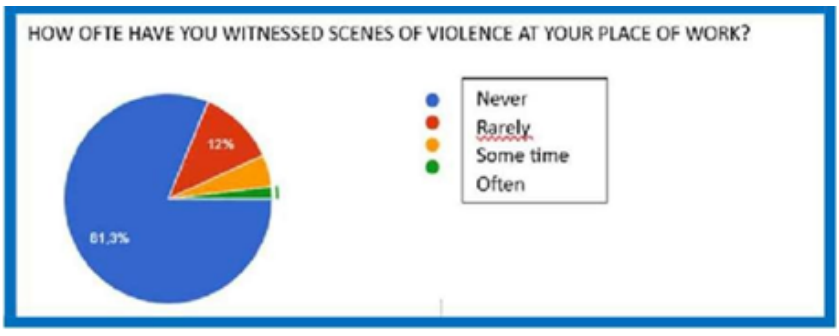


Figure 40: Frequency of witnessed violence at work.

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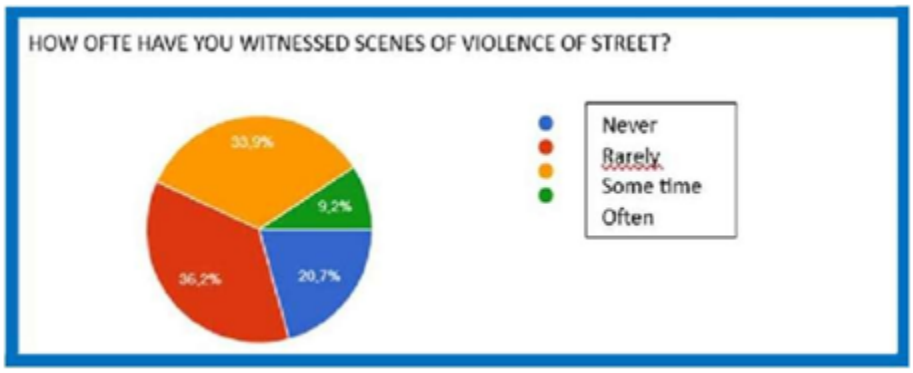


Figure 41: Frequency of witnessed violence on the street.

Witnessing scenes of violence at school, at work or on the street caused anger (36.4%), fear (35.2%), disappointment (32.2%), disgust (29.9%), sadness (25.8%) and frustration (20.8%; Figure 42).

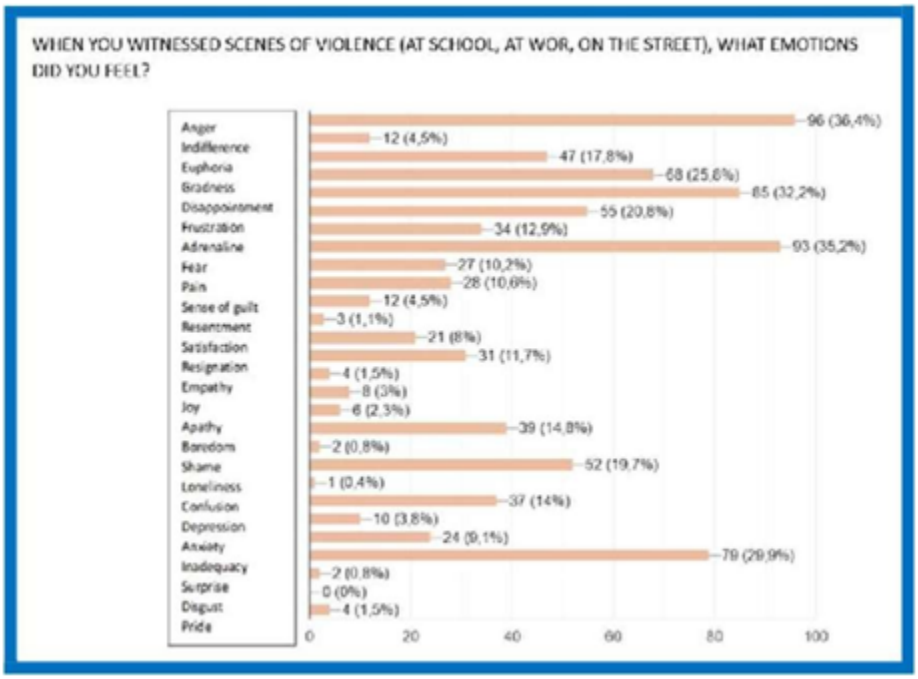


Figure 42: Emotions experienced when witnessing scenes of violence at school, at work or on the street.

Domestic violence generates more intense and internalised emotions (pain, confusion), a sign that those who experience it at home feel it deeply, feel involved and often feel guilty. Violence outside the home generates more external anger and disgust, a more detached but nonetheless strong response.

Compared to the confusion associated with domestic violence, this experience suggests that those who witness violence within the family often do not know how to interpret or react to what they see.

Violence on the street and at school is the most frequently witnessed. Violence within the family is the least reported, probably due to modesty or denial (Figure 43).

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CONTESTO	QUALCHE VOLTA	SPESSO
In famiglia	17,5%	6%
A scuola	26,4%	4,7%
Sul lavoro	4,9%	1,9%
Per strada	33,7%	9,3%

Figure 43: Frequency of contexts in which violence is witnessed.

Ways of reacting to violence

But how did people react to scenes of violence? In 34.3% of cases, the person intervened to defend the victim; in 29.1% of cases, they called for help; in 26.8% of cases, they walked away; in 19.7% of cases, they watched without intervening; and in 3.1% of cases, they took photos or videos (Figure 44).

With regard to reactions to violence, it is worth noting that almost 50% did not take direct action (they walked away or did nothing). The fact that 3.2% filmed instead of helping is a small figure but symbolically very serious, as it reflects a culture of spectacle even in the face of real suffering. The fact that 1 in 3 intervened is, however, a positive sign of civic courage, especially among young people.

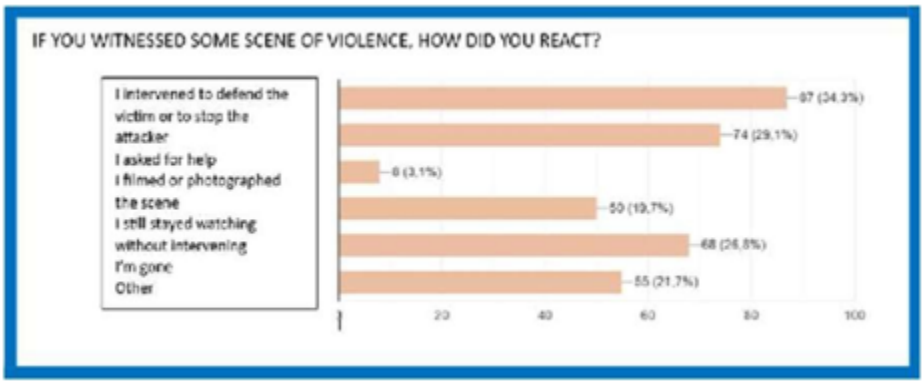


Figure 44: Reaction modes when witnessing a scene of violence.

Violence: A Phenomenon that Arises in Relationships

One of the most significant aspects of the research concerns young people's relationship with violence.
Almost 60% of the sample report having experienced at least one form of violence during their lifetime. The most common forms are:

- Verbal violence (78%);
- Psychological violence (53.8%);
- Bullying (41.4%);
- Physical violence (32.3%).

It is particularly significant that the perpetrators are often people known to the victim: friends or family members. Violence perpetrated by young people follows the same pattern. Among those who reported aggressive behaviour, the majority directed such behaviour towards friends or relatives [33]. This suggests that youth violence does not primarily occur between strangers, but within close relationships. The emotions associated with the violence experienced are particularly intense: sadness, anger, shame, inadequacy and loneliness. Shame emerges as one of the most critical factors, as it often prevents victims from seeking help.
From a criminological perspective, violence stems from:

- Inability to mentalise pain
- A need for recognition
- Failure of emotional regulation
- Emotional dysregulation

and the gender difference lies not in the pain, but in the way it is expressed.

Digital Addictions

Social Media

With regard to social media, 80.5% of the sample stated they use them often, 12.7% sometimes, and 6.6% rarely (Figure 45). The most widely used platforms are sharing platforms

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(Instagram, YouTube and TikTok) in 96.4% of cases and messaging platforms (WhatsApp, Telegram, Messenger) in 77.6% of cases (Figure 46). With regard to time spent on social media, 69.6% of the sample spend between 2 and 5 hours on social media, 16.2% spend over 6 hours and 14.2% spend less than two hours (Figure 47).

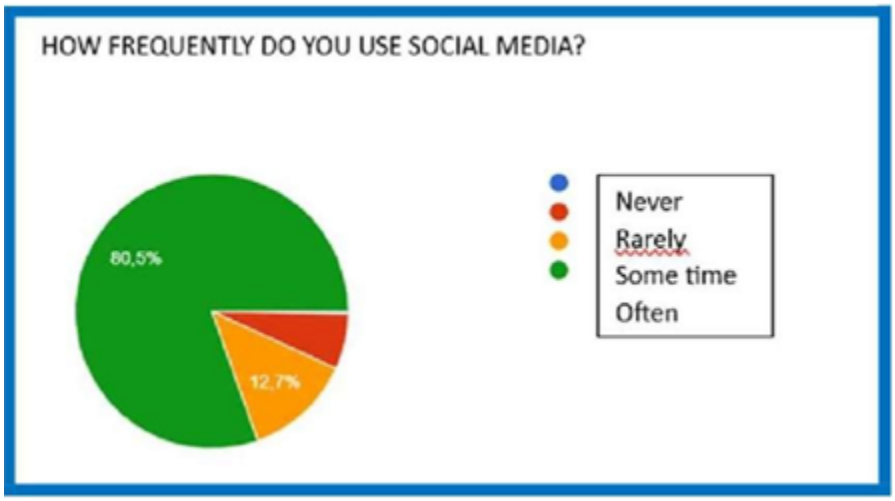


Figure 45: Frequency of social media use.

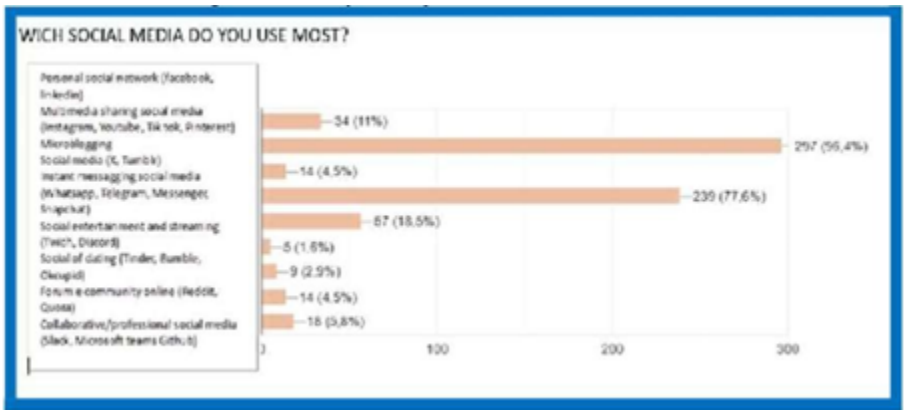


Figure 46: Most used social networks.

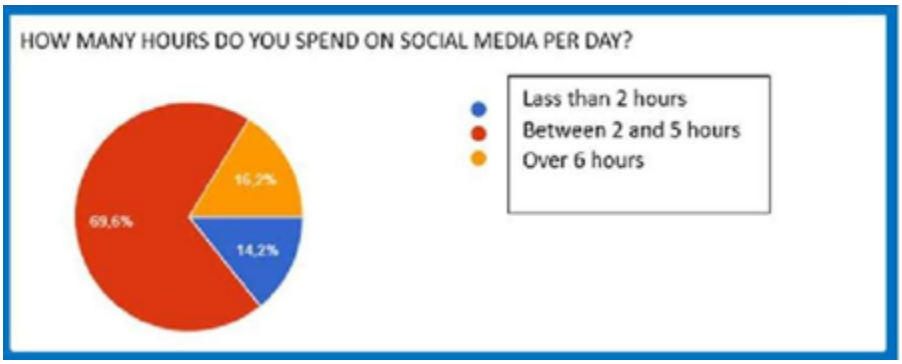


Figure 47: Frequency of social media use.

With regard to the emotions experienced whilst using social media, the most commonly experienced emotions are indifference (53.4%), joy (36.4%), boredom (27.9%), enthusiasm (22.1%), satisfaction (17,3%), empathy (12,6%), surprise (11,2%), loneliness (9,5%), apathy (8,5%) and frustration (8,8%; Figure 48).

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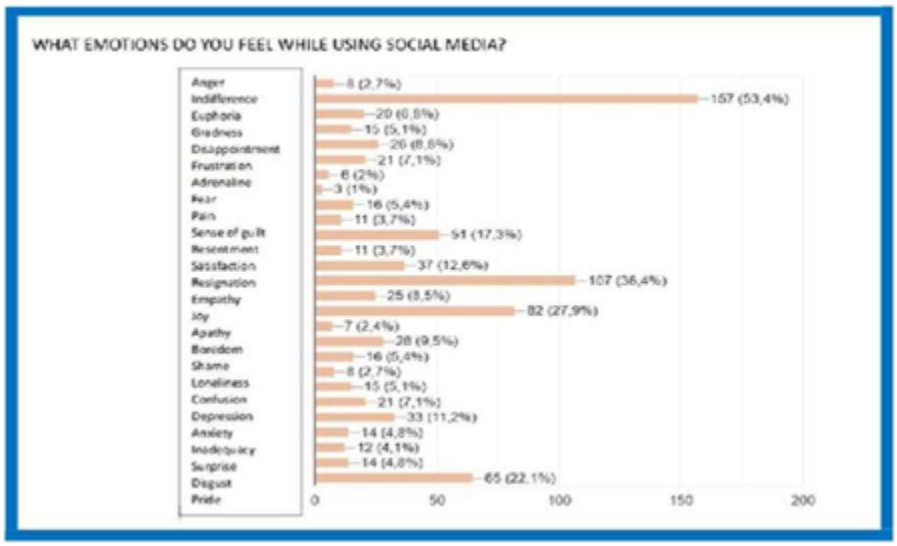


Figure 48: Emotions experienced whilst using social media.

With regard to the emotions experienced whilst using social media, the following prevail:

Negative emotions:

- Indifference
- Boredom
- Frustration

Positive emotions:

- Joy
- Enthusiasm
- Empathy
- Satisfaction
- Surprise

The most common emotion is indifference: which is paradoxical: we use social media but for the most part it leaves us indifferent … There is joy, but it coexists with boredom and frustration. This suggests that social media is often used automatically and passively, more out of habit than for genuine connection or pleasure… a bit like scrolling without really knowing why [34].

Video Games

As for video games, 42.7% of the sample say they do not use them, 21.5% sometimes, 22.1% rarely and 13.7% often (Figure 49). The most popular video games are action games (49.7%), sandbox/open-world games (40.3%), sports games (37.2%), simulation games (28.8%), adventure games (27.7%) and racing games (26.7%; Figure 50). As regards time spent playing video games, in 73% of cases it is less than 2 hours, in 23.5% of cases between 2 and 5 hours, and in 3.5% of cases more than 6 hours (Figure 51).

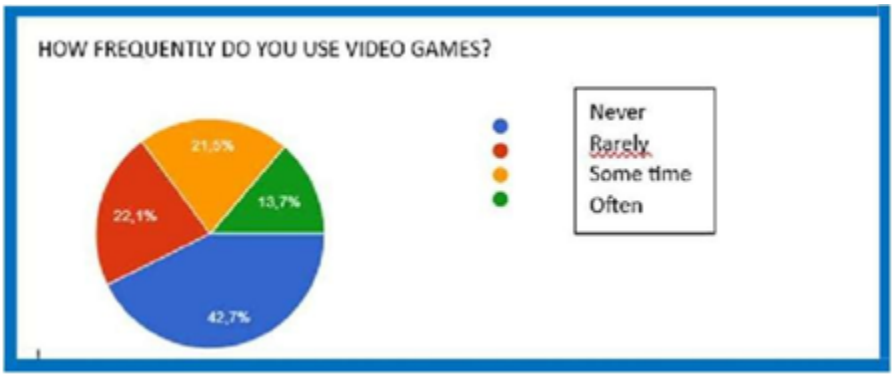


Figure 49: Frequency of video game use.

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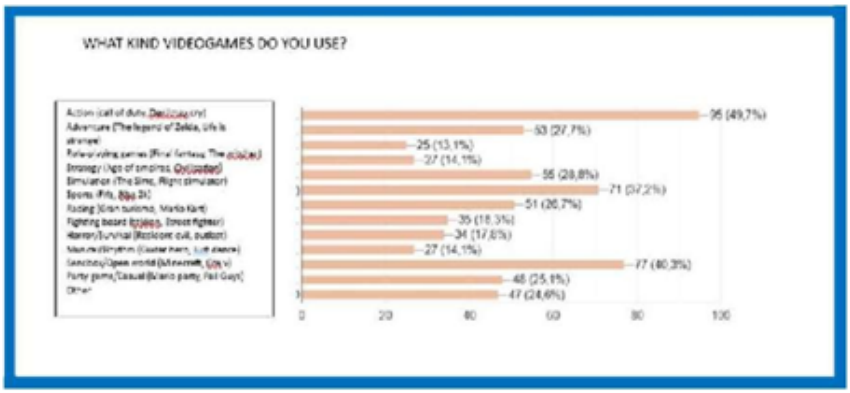


Figure 50: Most frequently played video games.

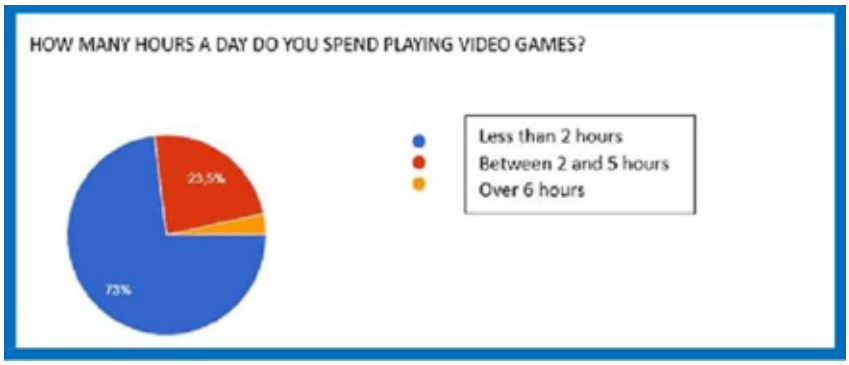


Figure 51: Frequency of video game use.

With regard to the emotions experienced whilst playing video games, the most commonly experienced emotions are joy (54.6%), adrenaline (40.5%), enthusiasm (38.4%), satisfaction (30.3%), indifference (27.6%), anger (16.2%), surprise (14.6%), frustration and pride (11.9%), boredom (8.6%) and sadness (4.9%; Figure 52).

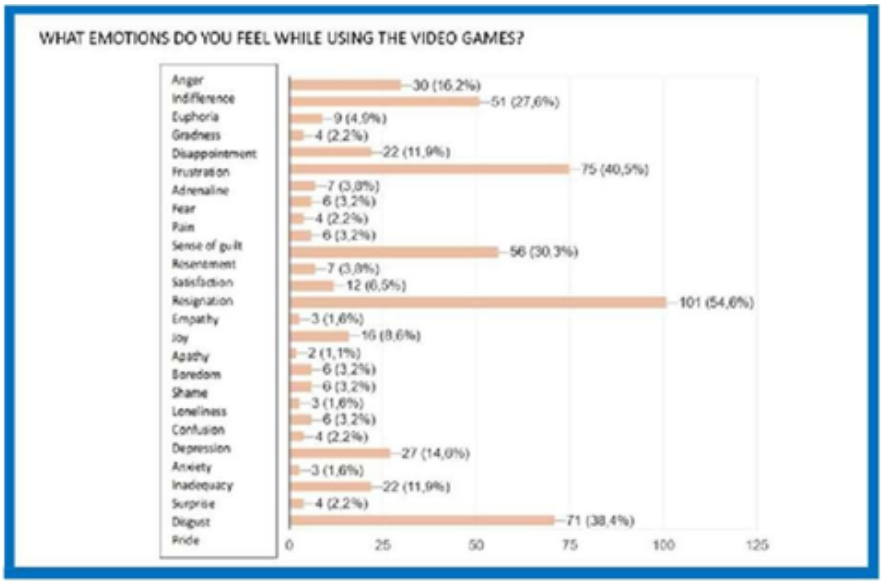


Figure 52: Emotions experienced whilst playing video games.

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Social games are played more frequently and for longer periods, but generate fewer positive emotions (Figure 53).

	SOCIAL	VIDEOGAMES
Uso frequente	80,2%	13,9%
Oltre 2 ore al giorno	85,6%	27,4%
Emozione prevalente	Indifferenza	Gioia

Figure 53: Social media compared to video games.

Social media therefore seems to function as a social mirror that amplifies comparison with others, profoundly affecting adolescent identity formation. Video games involve fewer people but offer a much richer emotional experience.
Emotions unique to social media:

- Empathy: connection with others
- Apathy: total detachment

Emotions exclusive to video games:

- Adrenaline: intense excitement
- Anger: strong strong emotional
- Pride: sense of achievement (Figure 54)

EMOZIONI	SOCIAL	VIDEOGAMES
GIOIA	36,6%	54,3%
ENTUSIASMO	22,1%	38%
INDIFFERENZA	53,8%	27,7%
NOIA	27,6%	8,7%
RABBIA	2,8%	16,3%

Figure 54: Emotions experienced whilst using social media and video games.

Social media touches on more relational (empathy) but also more passive (apathy) aspects, whilst video games trigger more visceral emotions linked to performance. The difference is clear: video games generate much more intense and engaging emotions (adrenaline, joy, enthusiasm), whilst social media mainly produce indifference and boredom, highlighting a more passive and hollow use. Video games, albeit with more anger, seem to offer a more vivid and engaging emotional experience [35]. It is as if social media were a social mirror (we compare ourselves, we connect but often switch off), whilst video games are an emotional training ground where you win, you lose, and you really get worked up. The data on apathy in social media is the most worrying, especially among young people.

Video Games and Emotional Regulation

The research nevertheless highlights a fundamental point: video games do not directly cause violence.
They can, however, amplify vulnerabilities that are already present when they are used in contexts characterised by:

- Pre-existing emotional fragility
- Poor emotional regulation
- Dysfunctional family environments
- Traumatic experiences
- Loneliness.

In such cases, video games can become a coping strategy, a form of escape from distress or loneliness, or an attempt at emotional self-regulation, in some instances replacing real-life relationships. Taken together, these factors can increase the risk of aggressive or antisocial behaviour.

Project-Based Approach

When it comes to future plans, concerns about the future relate in 73.4% of cases to achieving one's goals, in 57.2% to finding a job, in 54.6% to being successful, in 51.6% to starting a family, in 46.1% to earning a lot, and in 30.9% of cases, having friends (Figure 55). With regard to personal goals, 58.7% wish to gain greater self-confidence, 57.7% to acquire new skills, 56.1% to improve their well-being, 51.3% to manage stress better, 36.5% to strengthen relationships and 31% to change their lifestyle (Figure 56). With regard to professional goals, 59% would like to find a stable job, 51.9% to attend or complete university, 32.9% to obtain a qualification, 31% to improve their professional skills, 27.1% to start their own business, and 7.2% have no goals (Figure 57).

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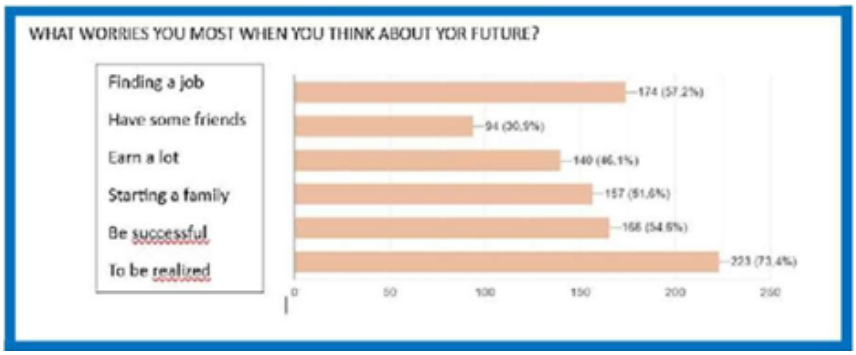


Figure 55: Concerns about the future.

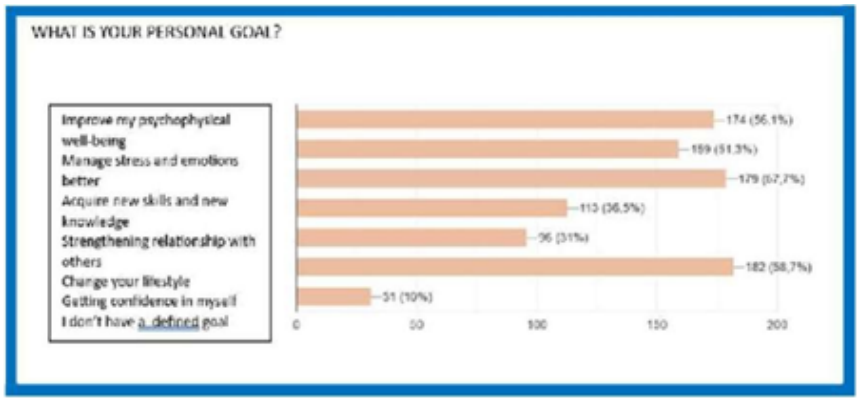


Figure 56: Personal goals.

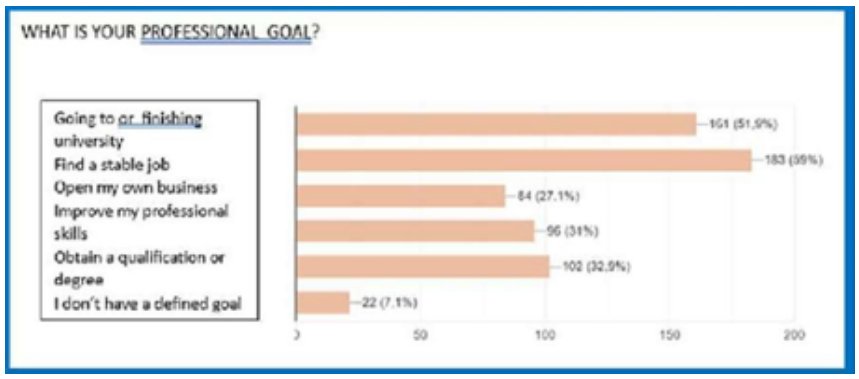


Figure 57: Professional goals.

Reflections

Self-perception "Never be ashamed of who you are, make your own choices regardless of others, and don't be afraid to speak up when there are problems" Account of experiences "I started being bullied and cyberbullied at the age of 11, by the boy who was like a brother to me (we were neighbours, and in primary school we were together every day), and then by the whole class (29 pupils in total). For three years I was subjected to insults, humiliation, verbal abuse and death threats [36]. They prayed that 'God would take me to hell and remove me from their sight'. This, combined with other situations at home, had a profound impact on my life. At that age you're fragile; perhaps if they'd taken me to a psychologist, I wouldn't be the way I am today."

Reflections on the social context "It has to start with a family upbringing, but when that's lacking, the school has to make up for it. All too often, however, neither is present"; "I don't know if I was born into the wrong environment, but I don't feel understood in many ways; I often feel alienated" Reflections on violence "To those who are victims of violence, I say seek help. To those who perpetrate violence, I say seek help, because in some way they too are victims (of the system,

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of their upbringing, of society)."

Reflections on emotions "If/when your emotions become too strong to manage on your own, it's very helpful to seek help from professionals, regardless of your age – you're never too old," "Always believe in yourself, don't let be brought down by others, and believe in your dreams", "be more empathetic". Reflections on social media "Every time I open social media or try to face reality, I feel overwhelmed by something I can't explain; I live with anxiety and fears every day for so many reasons: at the slightest failure,

Everything is thrown in my face; at the slightest uncertainty, people are ready to undermine my mental stability; at the slightest insecurity, everyone walks away...I've spent 20 years of my life being told 'you won't manage anyway', 'you're fat', 'look at those spots', 'you won't get it, you're stupid' Reflections on oneself "Honestly? I'm fed up with constantly feeling left behind, fed up with having to justify every choice I make, fed up with feeling so alone in the world; I don't want to be ashamed of myself anymore. Sometimes all you need is for someone to really listen, without judging. I think we young people need understanding more than we need advice. And amongst ourselves, we should learn to really get to know one another, to listen to our hearts and not be afraid to be ourselves."

Discussion

The analysis of the scientific literature and the information gathered through the anonymous online questionnaire allow us to reflect on the complexity of the relationship between emotional distress and adolescent deviance. The results confirm that deviance cannot be interpreted solely as a simple violation of social norms, but must be considered within a broader developmental, psychological and relational framework. The theoretical evidence examined show, in fact, that aggressive, oppositional or transgressive behaviours often represent dysfunctional ways through which adolescents express unmet emotional needs, experiences of exclusion, relational difficulties or issues related to the construction of their own identity [37].

A particularly significant finding emerging from the literature concerns the role of emotional regulation. The studies analysed highlight how difficulties in managing emotions-particularly anger, frustration, shame and a sense of loneliness-can increase the likelihood of engaging in risky or deviant behaviour. From this perspective, deviance often takes on a communicative function, becoming an attempt to gain recognition, a sense of belonging or attention from the social environment.

Neuroscience further contributes to our understanding of the phenomenon. The incomplete maturation of the prefrontal cortex, combined with the heightened reactivity of the limbic system, makes adolescents more prone to impulsivity, the pursuit of intense sensations and the influence of their peer group. These characteristics should not be interpreted as indicators of inevitable deviance, but as typical aspects of a developmental phase that requires adequate educational and relational support [38].

A further point for consideration concerns the role of digital technologies. The spread of social media and the increasingly intensive use of digital tools have profoundly altered the ways in which adolescents socialize. The scientific literature highlights that phenomena such as social media addiction, gaming disorder, fear of missing out (FOMO) and nomophobia may be associated with higher levels of anxiety, social isolation and psychological vulnerability. Whilst these conditions do not automatically constitute forms of deviance, they can contribute to the onset or persistence of problematic behaviours, particularly when accompanied by pre-existing emotional fragility.

Particular attention should also be paid to the phenomenon of cyberbullying, which represents one of the most significant expressions of deviance in the digital environment. Anonymity, physical distance and a reduced perception of the consequences of one's actions can facilitate aggressive behaviour that would be unlikely to occur in face-to-face interactions. This highlights the need to promote a culture of responsible and informed digital citizenship.

The overall analysis suggests that risk factors do not operate in isolation, but through a complex interplay between individual characteristics, family relationships, the school environment, peer groups and the digital environment [39]. Similarly, the presence of protective factors such as positive emotional relationships, educational support, social-emotional skills and social inclusion can significantly reduce the risk of distress and deviance.

In light of these considerations, it appears essential to move beyond exclusively repressive or stigmatising approaches. Preventive interventions based on enhancing emotional skills, supporting families, promoting psychological well-being and educating young people in the mindful use of technology are more effective in fostering the healthy and harmonious development of adolescents.

Finally, it should be emphasised that the present study has certain limitations. The predominantly theoretical nature of the analysis and the use of an anonymous online questionnaire do not allow for the establishment of causal

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relationships between the variables considered. Future research could explore the phenomenon in greater depth through longitudinal studies and larger samples, in order to better understand the evolution of emotional distress and deviant behaviour during adolescent development.

Conclusion

The literature review highlights how juvenile deviance is the result of a complex interplay of biological, psychological, relational and social factors. Emotions play a central role in understanding deviant trajectories, as they influence the adolescent's ability to cope with developmental challenges and build meaningful relationships. Incomplete neurobiological development, emotional vulnerabilities, peer group influence and new forms of digital addiction are factors that may contribute to the emergence of problematic behaviours. However, the presence of adequate protective factors can significantly reduce these risks.



Figure 58: Literature review.

Understanding deviance as an expression of deeper distress means moving beyond exclusively punitive interpretations and promoting educational, preventive and psychological support strategies capable of fostering the well-being and inclusion of the younger generation. The research findings highlight how contemporary adolescent distress cannot be interpreted solely through the lens of transgression or deviance. Behind many problematic behaviours lies a silent emotional distress characterised by anxiety, loneliness, shame, a sense of inadequacy and relationship difficulties. Deviance therefore appears not so much as a behavioural problem, but as a language through which some young people express suffering they are unable to verbalise.

Effective prevention cannot be limited to the suppression of risky behaviours or the mere transmission of information. It is necessary to promote emotional education programmes, strengthen relational skills and support the role of adults as figures capable of listening and providing support. In this sense, the research suggests a fundamental shift in perspective: moving from the adult as judge to the adult as mirror. An adult capable not only of correcting behaviour, but of recognising and acknowledging the pain that often lies behind it. Because, as the testimonies collected show, what many young people need most is not advice or punishment, but someone who truly sees them.

Consent to Publication

By signing the informed consent form and the data processing consent, the study participants consented to the publication of the data in anonymous and aggregated form. Aurida Pardini, together with the Forensic Science Academy and Dr Domenico Piccininno, was responsible for the collection and maintenance of the data, but the management was

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carried out by Dr Pardini. The authors, in accordance with current legislation, consent to the publication of this clinical study. Availability of data and materials: the subjects who participated in the study requested and obtained that the facility managers be the sole examiners and that the authors of this pilot study be made aware of the participants' data in an exclusively anonymous form. The authors are willing, upon formal request to be assessed on a case-by-case basis, to disclose the research data and materials, exclusively in aggregated and anonymous form, in accordance with current legislation and the informed consent and data processing agreement signed by the participants, subject to authorisation from the managers of the facilities involved.

Authors' Contributions

Aurida Pardini designed the study; Dr Francesca Lissandrello contributed to the drafting of the article and the supervision of the data and this manuscript; Dr Domenico Piccininno contributed to its dissemination, the supervision of the data and this manuscript, and oversaw the review and publication process.

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