

# Platformization of Third Digital Spaces During the COVID-19 Emergency: A Research in Higher Education in Italy\*

Adamoli Matteo, Piccioni Tiziana

IUSVE (Salesian University Institute of Venice), Venice, Italy

Masiero Jacopo

MED (Italian Association of Media Education), Venice, Italy

Communication in the interactive environments of digital platforms can enable informal exchanges between faculty and students that go beyond teaching activities. The online contacts through G-Meet, Teams, Zoom, or WhatsApp, and Telegram profiles between faculty and students that became widespread during the pandemic are now considered to be common social practice, promoted by the high usability of these platforms. However, the design and operation of digital platforms are not neutral and influence teaching activities by creating what are called third spaces. 16 university lecturers were involved in the research through in-depth interviews, while 12 of them were involved through focus groups. Moreover, we also interviewed 32 students. Our participants were from different Italian universities. We investigated what kind of relationships can be established on digital platforms, based on our participants' experiences. The results of this research show that these third digital spaces are used as an alternative to physical spaces, but they present some differences. In addition, it emerges that the communicative style remains formal within an open dialectic between technological affordances and forms of resistance requiring separation between personal and professional dimensions.

*Keywords:* platformization, third spaces, post pandemic university, critical pedagogies, education

## Introduction

The evolution of the media has led to what Colombo (2020) called the fourth wave of the media ecosystem, which is characterised by the dominant presence of digital platforms. The digitalization of the media system is the result of a mediamorphosis (Fiedler, 1997), which tends to encompass and converge the great media of the twentieth century (i.e., radio, print, and television) towards a transition to a digital format that also involves content and its fruition. Digital platforms are central to this transition and their use has spread among millions of

---

\* The contribution is the result of shared work between the authors. In particular, they contributed to the writing of following paragraphs: Matteo Adamoli: Introduction, Methodology, Potential of digital platforms; Jacopo Masiero: Perceived criticalities in the use of platforms and active user input; Tiziana Piccioni: Third spaces between tension towards the human side and rejection of intimidation; Conclusion.

Adamoli Matteo, Ph.D., works on research in the fields of media education, education technology and faculty development. He is an adjunct lecturer at the Salesian University Institute in Venice, Italy.

Piccioni Tiziana, Ph.D., has worked on sociological research on innovation in consumption, the use of mobile devices, social representations of violence against women, visual communication in politics and digital third spaces in higher education. She is an adjunct lecturer at the Salesian University Institute in Venice, Italy.

Jacopo Masiero, a consultant in digital education projects. He participated in the research of the Salesian University Institute of Venice "The relationship between teacher and student in the Third Spaces" and in the research "Girls, children, digital media and everyday life" of the University of Padua.

users, conditioning their behaviour (Cusumano, Gawer, & Yoffie, 2019). With their algorithmic mode of operation, these platforms can change entire sectors of society to such an extent that it has been referred to as platform society (Van Dijck, Poell, & De Waal, 2018). This term refers not only to the technological architecture of the dominant digital platforms but also to their potential to redefine established principles and practices of use within domains such as information, entertainment, transport, healthcare, and education.

The digitalisation of education, which is also underway at university level, is introducing radical transformations, not least in the emergence of new spaces for interaction between teachers and students in everyday communication practices and processes (Williamson, 2019). Starting from the first months of 2020, these transformations (which are not new in the world of business and entertainment) have taken on considerable importance thanks to the particular circumstances under which digital technologies were deployed and adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic (Beetham et al., 2022). During this phase, which was later referred to as emergency teaching, most universities significantly increased their use of digital platforms to support online learning. Video conferencing platforms such as Google Meet, Zoom, Microsoft Teams were employed by universities and lecturers as spaces for teaching activities. Their use was justified by the possibility of continuing to deliver lectures and courses, even during the period of physical distancing and confinement (Williamson, Eynon, & Potter, 2020). This inevitably led to an increase in the use of digital spaces to deliver distance education, and consequently create third spaces of a hybrid nature in which distance and presence connect by offering new possibilities for interaction (Potter & McDougall, 2017).

The platforms themselves play a central role in these processes, which as digital infrastructures are endowed with specific affordances (e.g., usability, multimodality, high interactivity, and the possibility of ubiquitous use). Translated to education, this offers the possibility of tracking and monitoring student activity in the logic of education as performance and achievement of educational goals. This process is becoming increasingly popular, along with the possibility of automating entire educational practices, particularly repetitive actions and routines (Selwyn et al., 2022).

A conception of the university in which academics and students are seen as abstract and disembodied subjects, who are distant from a participatory social life and locked into their role as stakeholders in education (Gourlay, 2021) is related to the critical issues that accompany the platformization of education: first of all the tendency towards datafication and automation.

This vision of the university as a closed ecosystem that focuses on improving learning processes thanks to digital platforms seems to contradict the dominant narrative with which the opportunities of digital learning are presented; that is, the possibility of permanent connection, continuous interaction, hybridisation of the dimension of the private sphere with the public sphere, storage of, and access to shared materials, and application of formal and informal communication styles. This article attempts to highlight this contradiction in educational communication by linking it with the closure of university institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the consequent spread of the use of digital platforms to ensure the provision of the lectures, turning attention to the level of relationships between teachers and students, in accordance with an idea of education as a dimension of meaningful interpersonal relationships that develop around collaborative processes, as well as around the development of knowledge (Biesta, 2017; Margiotta 2009).

To this purpose, we analysed data from a qualitative research which involved faculty and students from different Italian universities. In particular, we carried out 47 in-depth interviews with lecturers and students and two focus groups involving 12 lecturers.

The research project was developed by the Salesian University Institute of Venice in collaboration with the University of Padua between March 2021 and March 2022. The main aim of this research, which was realized during the COVID-19 pandemic, was to investigate how the teaching relationship changes within third digital spaces. This research also investigated the types of digital platforms that are used, their affordances, and the criteria of choice during emergent teaching, which in most cases was the result of policies that were imposed by institutions and universities (Sum & Oancea, 2022).

The survey was carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic. This favoured research of how digital platforms, in which many of these third spaces<sup>1</sup> have spread, have been perceived and used by lecturers and students. It also allowed us to address the issue of the hybridisation between public and private spaces. We asked whether the university, which was born as a place of universal confrontation and openness (from the Latin, *universitas*), is taking the risk of instead enclosing itself within increasingly high-performance enclosures under the control and monitoring of the large corporations that are directing its development and evolution.

### Methodology

This research was conducted in collaboration between the Salesian University Institute of Venice and the University of Padua, and had the general objective of investigating the relationship between university lecturers and students within the Third Spaces that distance teaching has made increasingly digital. In addition to investigating the communication tools and practices through which teaching was articulated in the emergency, attention was paid to the relationship between teacher and student, and therefore to the role of the teacher in the increasingly hybrid context that is characterised by the various online platforms. Consequently, we took on board both the student's and the teacher's points of view.

This research concentrates on the Italian context. The data collection phase taking place between March 2021 and March 2022, involved 32 university students and 28 university lecturers totally. All of the participants were identified based on contacts made through the researchers' network of relations and by exploiting the cascade effect of the reports received from the interviewees themselves. Therefore, selection was made on the basis of certain criteria. In particular, the students were recruited by taking into consideration the following criteria: gender, undergraduate or graduate degree course, geographical location of the university of reference (e.g., North-West, North-East, Centre, South, and Islands), and course attended (following the ERC subdivision: social sciences and humanities, life sciences, physical sciences, and engineering). The criteria for the lecturers were as follows: gender, academic rank (i.e., RTDa, RTDb, associate, or full), and (as for the students) geographical location of the university, and teaching field. The student data were collected through discursive interviews, while the faculty data were collected through discursive interviews and two focus groups.

In addition to constraints and resources, these aspects of field selection are closely linked to an initial phase of exploration of the scholarly debate around the general theme of the relationship between lecturers and students, the relative role of third spaces and the changes related to the management of the COVID-19 pandemic emergency. For the in-depth interviews with the lecturers and students, and also for the focus groups, we made use of a map (Gobo, 1998) that was constructed on the basis of themes that were pre-selected through relevance criteria that emerged in the research design process. Above all, the recent nature of the significant evolutions of

---

<sup>1</sup> According to Potter & McDougall's (2017) definition, these third spaces are informal, virtual/digital, metaphorical and physical environments, or a combination of all of these, in which relationships between subjects are exercised in an intersecting area that crosses the dimensions of digital media, education, and culture.

the phenomenon of our interest, which had not yet been debated in depth, directed us towards the choice of very flexible instruments that would also allow for the emergence of unforeseen contents. Flexibility consisted not only in the open-ended character of the questions but also in the lack of a pre-definition of the wording, the sequence of the topics dealt with and the contents themselves, with the awareness that the respondent's experience has a specific organisation in their memory that does not correspond to how the researchers conceive and formulate survey questions and problems (Cicourel, 1997). Therefore, in the interview phase, topics that were not previously considered were also explored in depth, following exploratory itineraries that were linked to the development of the interaction between researcher and respondent, thus obtaining a narrated reality through the joint action of respondents and researchers (Silverman, 2013).

The conceptual declination of these thematic areas was identified a priori, which constituted a useful map for the researchers to orient themselves in the interviews and not to leave out basic questions, which consisted of the following points:

1. Didactic experiences during the pandemic: the subjects involved in the research were asked to recount the experiences with which they dealt with didactics during the pandemic from the point of view of content, and technical and relational aspects;
2. Tools and platforms used: the interviewees were given the opportunity to present the tools that they used, focusing on specific functionalities and any criticalities;
3. Modalities of teacher and student communication: in the light of what emerged in the previous point, the participants in the research listed the different modalities with which they came into contact with teachers or students;
4. Communication style in third spaces: some platforms favour informal language, in this respect the interviewees shared the communication approach that was used with teachers or students in third spaces;
5. Communication topics in the third spaces: in addition to teaching-related topics, the participants mentioned the topics that they discussed with lecturers or students online;
6. Private dimension or public dimension: in this dimension, the respondents expressed their views, especially in the differences in the roles.

As far as the focus group was concerned, the instrument was used to deepen the emergencies of the interviews with the teachers and enrich the qualitative data that had already been collected through a comparison (Zammuner, 2003) between the actors who had had experience in the field under investigation, maturing a certain degree of self-reflexivity on the various issues that had opened up in the interviews. The map that guided the conduct of the two focuses was defined as follows:

1. The context of teaching during the pandemic: the teachers shared their experience of distance or mixed teaching;
2. Experiences of using third spaces: the participants indicated their experiences within the third digital spaces;
3. Modalities and style of teacher or student communication in third spaces: in the light of the reflections shared in the previous points, good communication practices within third spaces were reflected upon.
4. Role and authority of the teacher in third spaces: the focus group participants questioned how communication in third spaces can influence the role of the teacher.

In summary, the data collection process mainly took into account the following aspects: cognitive objectives; different types of participants, and in particular the macro-categories expected to be found (i.e., users and non-

users); and necessary flexibility of the instrument. Due to the health restrictions that were in place during the data collection phase, interviews and focus groups were exclusively conducted at a distance. This mode did not present any particular criticalities but it did allow for greater availability on the part of the interviewees and enabled the meetings to be easily video-recorded. The duration of the interviews varied between one hour and one and a half hours, while that of the focus groups was around two hours. From the video recordings, we moved on to transcription, with annotations that also related to non-verbal communication when necessary. The empirical basis that was thus constructed then went through a process of analysis that aimed to seek answers to questions on certain thematic aspects, and to identify common themes and elements in the collected experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In particular, the texts of the interviews and focuses were organised with the help of a classic content analysis form (Losito, 2007) to formalise a multi-level coding process of the topics dealt with, which had in fact already begun after the first interviews, in a data collection-interpretation circuit that drew heavily on the principles of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1999; Charmaz, 2006).

Finally, we would like to point out that the materials were collected and analysed along precise ethical lines, while paying attention to aspects such as the voluntary nature of participation and the confidentiality of the content collected, protecting participants from harm, and building a relationship of mutual trust between the participants and the researchers (Silverman, 2013).

### **Potential of Digital Platforms**

The data collected testify that during the pandemic period, the academic community experienced a strong change in terms of teaching and the teacher-student relationship. In particular, the choice of digital platforms was a key aspect in determining the effectiveness of learning or communication (Gaggioli, Gabbi, & Ranieri, 2021). Starting from this premise, this section will highlight the results that emerged from the research in terms of usability, fluidity, effectiveness, and platform design.

From the interviews and focus groups, it emerged that the platforms that were used for conducting the video lectures were among the most prominent features of the relationship during the pandemic. The platforms that were most used by students and teachers for video lectures were Zoom, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams. Other platforms such as Cisco Webex and Skype were only marginally mentioned.

The functionality that all platforms have in common is the possibility of scheduling, creating, and recording teleconferences between several participants. From the results of the research, it was found that the type of platform significantly shaped not only the type of teaching but also the relationship between teacher and student. In particular, certain functions and tools differing from platform to platform generated dynamics that differed substantially in terms of teaching and relationship.

A first division can be made between platforms where the user logs in exclusively to participate in the video lesson in a synchronous mode and platforms that were created to be a single working environment, unifying persistent chat, teleconferencing, archiving content, and other tools. The first group includes Zoom and Google Meet (the latter offering users other services but dissociated from individual teleconferences), while the second group includes Microsoft Teams.

The use of chat during lectures was found to be the most cited tool, with 19 students stating that they used this function with the aim of intervening during the lecture without disturbing the lecturer, avoiding embarrassing situations or technical problems caused by the microphone. With regard to chat, a distinction must be made

between chat within the single video lesson and asynchronous chat. Zoom and Google Meet offer their messaging tool in synchronous mode, in which case at the end of the connection the chat is no longer visible or usable. In contrast, chats on Microsoft Teams remain visible and usable even after the connection has been closed. These are not only two different technical aspects but also represent two different approaches, which (as mentioned earlier) also affected teaching and the teacher-student relationship. In concrete terms, this possibility offered by Microsoft Teams has generated opportunities for discussion between students and lecturers, even outside class time. One teacher told us about that:

Students use it (Microsoft Teams) as if it were WhatsApp, and they write at all hours of the day and night, I tell you that even when I receive notifications I clearly reply at decent hours, because they completely lose control. (Interview 02/09/22: lecturer in sociology of interior design)

The “raise your hand” tool is another function that was nominated by the students concerning active participation in the video lectures. This allows participants to book their intervention without intervening directly with the microphone. As mentioned earlier, one of the critical issues that emerged during the video lectures is related to the difficulty of intervening and communicating verbally with the lecturer. Therefore, this tool allowed the students to signal and book any questions to be addressed verbally to the lecturers. However, although the lecturers cite this tool, they reported some problems in that during the sharing of a presentation some platforms do not allow the presenter to view the complete platform interface, and thus do not necessarily see any raised hands or chat messages.

In addition to lecture-related platforms, the interviewees also mentioned other platforms used at the discretion and choice of individual lecturers. In this regard, it must be emphasised that the various lecturers mainly conformed to the guidelines and tools offered by the university. Nevertheless, the precariousness of distance learning—especially at first—meant that different tools were also experimented with according to the needs. Some platforms were already in use beforehand, Moodle being a case in point, while others were mainly used to make lectures more interactive or to carry out group activities, such as shared writing or archiving tools for teaching materials.

Moodle is a platform that was created before the pandemic for the delivery and use of e-learning courses. The lecturers and students stated that they used Moodle during the pandemic mainly as it was used in the past (i.e., for archiving materials, to which they added the archiving of links to lecture recordings). Therefore, although some open-source platforms were available and already being used, the concrete needs dictated by the pandemic led all universities to opt for the use of commercial platforms that had been created for other work areas and had only been converted into platforms for learning during the pandemic. In particular, while no critical issues have so far emerged for the other platforms mentioned, except for technical connection problems, the students emphasised that Moodle was difficult to use due to a difficult design and user experience that are not intuitive, as the following excerpt shows:

Moodle still has the forum setting, and the forum and correct me if I'm wrong, but I really see it as the labour of the Internet no the first one, the interaction of the very first Internet and the era of forums has also been surpassed so in my opinion it's a somewhat unsuitable tool, confusing. (Interview 05/07/2021: graduate student, primary education sciences)

Instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp and Telegram were added to the list of platforms used by the interviewees with the aim of communicating more quickly and immediately. In particular, the WhatsApp

platform was only used as a means of student-teacher communication in special cases, such as for thesis students, trainees, or course representatives. In addition, with the aim of communicating in an immediate way, Telegram was found to be the most used instant messaging platform for communication between lecturers and students, mainly due to the level of privacy guaranteed by the platform itself, which does not make the telephone numbers of individual members of a group visible.

In summary, the use of different platforms, in addition to traditional emails, facilitated the learning and communication process, making it more fluid and effective. At the same time, some lecturers and students reported that the excessive number of communication channels was a critical problem, which also varied from course to course. This often led to potential disorientation because, as a teacher explained to us: “you create, in my opinion, then a kind of noise, right? That ends up being disorientating” (interview 19/10/22: lecturer in sociology and social research).

### **Perceived Criticalities in Platform Use and Active User Input**

The use of the platforms that have been mentioned so far has generated a form of hybridisation between informal and formal spaces, and between private and public spaces (Rapanta et al., 2020). As already reported, the platforms used during distance learning were not developed with the objective of a didactic relationship. Therefore, the users, students, and teachers, have had to adapt their communicative and relational style to the characteristics of these tools (Risi, 2022). The most obvious case concerns the writing style with which chat is communicated, which is very different from the writing style of a traditional e-mail. In addition, the time of day when communication can take place was often a problem. Consequently, many students and teachers found themselves communicating in third spaces, such as social networks or instant messaging applications, which were originally intended for private life. Tools and modes that were mainly used to communicate with the peer group have thus also been experimented within teacher-student communication, offering a set of relational dynamics that are partly unprecedented.

Most direct communication flows during the pandemic period were interrupted and the co-presence relationships between people were considerably reduced (Fuchs, 2021). The complex of activities associated with university life also relied on a type of communication and relationship that were characterised by a high degree of mediation. A large part of the activities through which universities are articulated benefitted, as we have seen, from the contribution of various digital platforms. On the one hand, these activities are directly and indirectly related to teaching, which are in any case important for the students’ educational experience. On the other hand, we are talking about that part of the teacher’s working dimension of which teaching is only one aspect, which must be added to student reception activities, participation in working and research groups, involvement in dissemination and awareness-raising activities in the area.

Thus, a substantial part of what was done before the pandemic now leaves new kinds of traces, which are made up of data of different kinds. They are therefore susceptible to that rational control which, on the one hand, is exercised through algorithms capable of aggregating and interpreting vast quantities of information, and on the other hand falls within that process of exasperated rationalisation that Weber (1991) theorised.

This type of control, which the world of digital communication makes possible, emerges in our corpus of data as being linked primarily to two aspects. First, our interviewees call into question the recording function, and therefore the fixation for a potentially unlimited time of a situation that is instead contingent. Second, the

question emerges of the exposure of personal and private lives. Regarding the first aspect, there are several interviews with students in which reference is made to the contrasting positions of lecturers and students regarding the opportunity to record lectures. For example, a student told us that: “There is a black market, there was a black market, of lecture recordings, because many lecturers unfortunately did not want lectures to be recorded, because the university did not impose it.” (Interview 01/12/2021: bachelor student, education and training sciences).

More than a few students highlight the positive effects of having recorded lessons, also in terms of organising other aspects of daily life, as can be seen from this excerpt:

The fact of obtaining in some way, whether authorised or not, recordings of lectures, has somewhat put student workers in a position to prioritise work over lectures, and so rightly one organised oneself on the basis of work no longer on the basis of lectures, something that perhaps with traditional didactics [...] you cannot work. With distance learning, with lecture recording, with everything available when you want it like a Netflix TV series, then there you prioritise work. (Interview 01/12/2021: bachelor student, education and training sciences)

Therefore, the students highlight both the importance of having recorded lectures and the resistance of teachers to adopting this practice. Meanwhile, the teachers address this issue in smaller numbers than the students and often in an incidental manner. They tend to emphasise the difficulty of managing a communicative performance that is destined to remain. Some lecturers point out that they never watch the video lectures that they have recorded and, if they ever do, they are extremely critical of their own performance. In general:

Being a lecturer at this time also altered the relationship we had with the perception of ourselves: I look at myself, I can hear myself again—tragedy!—I hear the sound of my own voice [...] this thing of being monitored—you have the feeling of being monitored—at least for me, especially at the beginning, it had given me a lot of difficulties. (Interview 02/09/22: lecturer sociology of interior design)

The forms of protection that some universities have adopted with regard to video-recorded material, while expressing an attention to the aspects of copyright and privacy, also build a minimum of protection to the risk of permanence and dissemination on the web of content that is strictly contingent.

The need to move teaching activities onto these platforms, although initially a compulsory choice and linked to an emergency, has thus prompted a reflective and self-reflective process on the part of the actors involved regarding the effects of the platformization of teaching. In the context of our analysis, this process is focused on the critical issues for the professional dimension of the relationships involved. In this regard, many of the participants in our research often emphasised the need for a separation between the public and private spheres, and in particular between the role of the teacher as a teaching professional and a professional in their speciality, and in the roles associated with the personal sphere.

### **Third Spaces Between Tension to the Human Side and Rejection of Intimisation**

We know that through social platforms the personal and private sphere of users generally has the possibility of being exposed to an audience. The theme of the rearticulation of the dualities that are typical of modernity is very much present in the debate around social media, which promote the blurring of boundaries between (for example) leisure time and work time, consumption and production, private life and public life (Fuchs, 2008; 2014). In particular, the relationship between the dimensions of public and private becomes, in the digital communicative space, something complex and fluid (Dobson, Carah, & Robards, 2018). This aspect is connected



to a process of intimacy of communication, which, through social platforms, is developing in an increasingly important way and also affects professional spheres.

Although the sense of intimacy associated with the interactions that take shape in the context of social networking services is one of the first factors that foster the attitude towards the use of such services (Al-Ghaith, 2015), in the context of relations between lecturers and university students, this is exactly what is intentionally sought to be avoided. Digital spaces are not the only dimension in which public and private lives can easily intertwine. One student, among our interviewees, points out that during a traditional face-to-face lecture the lecturer may receive a phone call from home, and thereby opens a window, for the students present, into their own universe of family relationships (for example). Similarly, a lecturer during a lesson may refer to some aspect of their personal life, perhaps to illustrate content with a concrete example.

In the lectures during the pandemic period, in which lecturers and students connected synchronously, generally from their homes via an Internet-connected device and a videoconferencing platform, another student recounts how unexpected elements, visual or aural, can appear on the lecture scene, such as a cat jumping on the back of a chair or a voice coming from another room. These everyday distractions helped to situate the lecturer outside of the professional and impersonal aura that a university classroom usually confers.

When our interviewees talked about aspects of the teachers' private lives that were shared in some way with the students, they evoked communicative exchanges that go beyond didactic content, which they often refer to an unspecified human side. A somewhat direct contact, a moment of rupture from the usual mode of interaction gravitating on teaching, an even minimal element of personalisation of the relationship between teacher and student, these are aspects that are considered after all positive, as evidenced by an engineering student: "The student can also approach the image of the professor by seeing his private life, because he says: 'Ah then he is human!'" (Interview 01/12/2021: bachelor student, mechanical engineering).

Thus, informal situations in traditional third spaces, although rarely experienced (especially by our youngest students), are occasions for a kind of sociability that is free from any didactic situation and where, although the asymmetry between the two roles is maintained, the teacher-student relationship can be configured as more favourable to learning.

The positive effect of exchanges that, although linked to the teaching moment, are not strictly focused on the course content but (for example) on topical issues, as well as on topics related to the students' professional future, was often emphasised in the interviews. However, when explicitly solicited to give an opinion on the possibility of a greater informality, or even confidentiality, in the relationship between teacher and student, the interviewees often stated that, at least until the student has passed the examination or even until they had graduated, it would be better not to establish a friendly relationship not to jeopardise the objectivity of the assessment process and preserve the teacher's authority. For example, an interviewee told us that situations of this type should be avoided:

Especially if in the course phase or when the course is about to end—and then [there are] exams and things like that, at least in the phase when you find yourself, as a lecturer, in a position of relative power in relation to a student, [you] maybe have to avoid: to maintain a certain authority. (Interview 22/12/21: lecturer in cognitive neuroscience)

Of course, there is no shortage of students among those interviewed who would not disdain a relationship with their lecturers that went beyond teaching, and that was particularly articulated on a social platform. An interesting element of difference emerges between these students and those who instead not only do not consider

it useful to extend the type of relationship with their lecturers but on the contrary highlight its disadvantages—the students who enter, or would like to enter, into social contact with their lecturers consider their profile, with its contents and links, as a bridge to a specific professional field<sup>2</sup>. For example, an architecture student told us that following a teacher on social media:

It also depends on the type of course, for example, the design course, or [...] history of architecture, which have more... I don't know... which interfaces more with reality [...]: people who talk about their courses, because maybe there is a conference on a topic that interests them. (Interview 28/08/2021: graduate student, engineering and architecture)

This professional dimension is what students generally wish to emerge from the lecturer's activity on these platforms. They openly express a disinterest in those representations of the self that may refer to the lecturer's family or couple's life, their leisure and recreational activities, unless they have a professional implication. A recurring example of this aspect comes from interviews with students of disciplines such as architecture and engineering. They tell of posts by their lecturers whose contents refer to trips highlighting aspects of the artistic, architectural, or urban heritage of the place visited. The same is true for disciplinary fields that characterise the course of study, as underlined by a student of environmental sciences:

The teacher I mentioned before, who has the dunes project, he sometimes publishes on his Facebook profile interesting articles on environmental issues that I, personally, am also interested in going to see, so... that is, this person does not publish anything about politics, about what this famous person did yesterday, but maybe he publishes personal photos clearly, or during his work, but... in this case maybe it could be OK, but the cases are quite limited. (Interview 26/07/2021: bachelor student, environmental sciences)

Basically, our survey reveals third digital spaces that are available in the relationship between teachers and students that are not used because of the peculiarity of hybridisation between private and public, of sharing representations of personal daily life that characterises social platforms. In contrast, they are used because of their ability to offer long networks of weak ties (Granovetter, 1973; 1995): people who are not part of our social circle can facilitate our access to information that we would never have found around us, which is especially useful in the job search. Among the students that we interviewed, those who follow the profile of some lecturer in this spirit on Facebook or more rarely on Instagram not only point out the informational or emotional benefits, as studies on social capital point out (Burt, 1992; Granovetter, 1973; Putnam, 2000), but also speak of a formative dimension of the benefits of being in contact with a lecturer on social media.

Ultimately, digital third spaces, when present in the relationship between teachers and students, do not rely on the intimacy that characterises the use of social platforms by channelling the expectations, bonds, and affections of the public (Raun, 2018). The peculiarity of the relationship between teachers and students, which is characterised by asymmetry and a resistance to the separation of the professional and personal dimensions (Adamoli, Piccioni, & Masiero, 2022), together with the particular configuration of certain disciplinary fields, favours a process of domestication (Silverstone & Hirsch, 1992) of social platforms that detaches them from the most widespread modes of use and bends them to specific needs—safeguarding the neutrality of the assessment process and opening a window on a specific professional field, first and foremost. Third digital spaces are in discontinuity with third physical spaces and are characterised by the appreciation of human side that can emerge when interactions between teacher and student are not focused on teaching. However, the third spaces pay the

---

<sup>2</sup> And, more precisely, towards the professional field most directly characterising the educational pathway of the specific degree course, participation in which constitutes the desired outcome of that pathway.

price for the rejection of the use of social media, within the teacher-student relationship, as a staging of the private and as a place of intimate communication. However, it is precisely through this rejection that an active use of the medium is configured, which can be interpreted as a form of resistance to that platformization of existence of which critical approaches highlight many shadows by interpreting social platforms primarily as means through which identity and good life models are articulated and rearticulated, represented, and disseminated, thus maintaining and reinforcing their dominant character (Bucher, 2012; van Dijk, 2013; Duffy & Hund, 2015).

### Conclusion

Platforms that in some way intervene in the relationship between teachers and students, whether those more directly and formally embedded in teaching activities, such as videoconferencing, or those more external to it, such as social networks, are appreciated or criticised by the participants in our research in relation to aspects strictly related to the professional dimension.

If dependence on digital infrastructures has grown in the pandemic period due to the need to cope with compulsory distancing, as the literature highlights (European Commission, 2021), then the field of education has been massively involved in this process (Risi, 2022; Pronzato & Risi, 2022). The rapidity with which one had to adapt to a new way of teaching, through tools with which one was unfamiliar, in many cases meant that one accepted this new way of operating without problematising its deeper aspects. Most of the resources were employed in coping with the immediate difficulties that were associated with usage practices whose primary meaning was, for teachers as well as students, to bring the teaching process to completion as smoothly as possible. The available tools capable of meeting these needs were proprietary platforms.

In this emergent situation, the transposition of a precise and prioritised goal into an environment that was no longer structured by the rigid physical space and time of the pre-pandemic university organisation but rather into a fluid environment in which the boundaries between dimensions that were formerly sharply separated from each other were changing constituted an opportunity for naturalisation and neutralisation of hegemonic relations based on algorithmic power (Pronzato & Markham, 2023; Risi & Pronzato, 2021; Gillespie, 2016; 2015; Smicek, 2016; Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

In other ways, in this phase of accelerated adoption and invisibilisation of infrastructures, in the constitution of new routinised practices (Warde, 2005) influenced by hegemonic interests, our research has highlighted how, in the use of digital technologies within educational processes, the space of relationships between teachers and students constitutes an area in which the subjects exercise an active role in relation to the drives to adopt precise practices on the part of the platforms understood both as bearers of precise affordances, and as implicated in a type of use that has been effectively shared and over time stabilised. More concretely, the active role of the stakeholders was related to the need to fit the new practices into their own stabilised universe of routines and values and, in particular, in contexts where the relationship between teachers and students is characterised by role distance and makes use of formal communicative styles (Adamoli et al., 2022), where the teaching relationship and the academic world in general are conceived as something separate from other fields of the social world (Gourlay, 2021).

If the processes of educational communication during the pandemic can present at least one common and shared trait, then it is that they have made clear the data-driven operating structures of digital platforms and the uncritical choice on the part of most university institutions which favoured in this way a process of platformisation of education and the automation of common educational activities, including educational

relations (Selwyn, Hillman, Bergviken Rensfeldt, & Perrotta, 2023). The very closure of the university ecosystem, which we referred to in the introduction, constitutes an important element of resistance to the process of platformisation. However, it is important to consider that where intimated communication between faculty and students, which was generally fostered by social networks, is clearly rejected by our respondents for the stated purpose of preserving the professional character of the relationship, another issue emerges that realigns this choice to the thrusts of the contemporary digitised universe. This element, in fact, makes it manifest the push towards the rationalisation of relationships (Bandinelli & Gandini, 2022) to which platformisation has gradually socialised us and which marginalises the dimension of Simmelian sociability, where the relationship is free from any goal other than the pleasure that can be derived from making society (Simmel, 2011). Indeed, communication through digital third spaces, beyond the function of private messaging, cannot take into account the specificity of the recipient, of the relationship or the situation: a possibility available instead in a physical third space, where communication can be one-to-one, despite its public character. In short, the sociality that third digital spaces foster implies a generalised exposure, which requires control in terms of the appropriateness of content communicated to audiences that, however selected and divided through the setting of privacy filters, are not individuals (i.e., they always maintain a degree of publicity).

The particularity of our case highlights how certain relationships, whose elective space is the digital space, and which are linked to opportunities typical of weak ties networks, require a negotiation between users and the constraints imposed by the platform where a high degree of control over self-representation is activated. In essence, the deep mediatization of social life (Couldry & Hepp, 2017) implies a degree of rationalisation of relationships that is not conducive to sociability.

In conclusion, we can say that from this research emerges a further dark side of platformization (Risi & Pronzato, 2021) that makes it necessary for young generations to rediscover unified agency in claiming the right to a voice and a future (Aroldi & Colombo, 2020). Although this is a possible future prospect for research, there emerges the need from the outset, on the part of teachers, to introduce tools of critical awareness towards this performance-based model of education and the increasingly central role that private digital platforms are playing to recover the idea of a university that is based on autonomy and independence, starting with concrete teaching practices and personal and collective choices.

## References

- Adamoli, M., Piccioni, T., & Masiero, J. (2022). La fiducia nella relazione educativa tra docenti e studenti universitari nei terzi spazi digitali. *Qtimes, Ottobre 2022, Anno, 14*(4), 444-459.
- Al-Ghaith, W. (2015). Understanding social network usage: Impact of co-presence, intimacy, and immediacy. *International Journal of Advanced Computer Science and Applications (IJACSA)*, 6(8), 99-111. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.14569/IJACSA.2015.060813>
- Aroldi, P., & Colombo, F. (2020). Media, generations, and the platform society. In *Human aspects of IT for the aged population. Healthy and active aging: 6th international conference, ITAP 2020, held as part of the 22nd HCI international conference, HCII 2020, Copenhagen, Denmark, July 19-24, 2020, Proceedings, Part II* 22 (pp. 567-578). Berlin: Springer International Publishing.
- Bandinelli, C., & Gandini, A. (2022). Sesso, amore e dating. *Il Mulino, Rivista trimestrale di cultura e di politica*, 3, 127-135. doi:10.1402/104779
- Beetham, H., Collier, A., Czerniewicz, L., Lamb, B., Lin, Y., Ross, J., ... Wilson, A. (2022). Surveillance practices, risks and responses in the post pandemic university. *Digital Culture & Education*, 14(1), 16-37.
- Biesta. (2017). *The rediscovery of teaching*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.

- Bucher, T. (2012). Want to be on the top? Algorithmic power and the threat of invisibility on Facebook. *New Media & Society*, 14(7), 1164-1180. doi:10.1177/1461444812440159
- Burt, R. S. (1992). *Structural holes: The social structure of competition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. London: Sage.
- Cicourel, A. (1997). L'elicitazione come problema del discorso. In F. Neresini (Ed.), *Interpretazione e ricerca sociologica* (pp. 83-87). Palermo: QuattroVenti.
- Colombo, F. (2020). *Ecologia dei media. Manifesto per una comunicazione gentile*. Milano: Vita e pensiero.
- Couldry, N., & Hepp, A. (2013). Conceptualizing mediatization: Contexts, traditions, arguments. *Communication Theory*, 23, 191-202.
- Couldry, N., & Hepp, A. (2017). *The mediated construction of reality*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Couldry, N., & Mejias, U. A. (2019). Data colonialism: Rethinking big data's relation to the contemporary subject. *Television & New Media*, 20(4), 336-349.
- Cusumano, M. A., Gawer, A., & Yoffie, D. B. (2019). *The business of platforms: Strategy in the age of digital competition, innovation, and power* (Vol. 320). New York: Harper Business.
- Dobson, A. S., Carah, N., & Robards, B. (2018). Digital intimate publics and social media: Towards theorising public lives on private platforms. In A. S. Dobson, B. Robards & N. Carah (Eds.), *Digital intimate publics and social media* (pp. 3-28). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Duffy, B. E., & Hund, E. (2015). "Having it all" on social media: Entrepreneurial femininity and self-branding among fashion bloggers. *Social Media+ Society*, 1(2), 1-11.
- Farnell, T., Skledar Matijević, A., & Šćukanec Schmidt, N. (2021). *The impact of COVID-19 on higher education: A review of emerging evidence: Analytical report*. Brussels: Publications Office.
- Fidler, R. F. (1997). *Mediamorphosis: Understanding new media*. Newbury Park: Pine Forge Press.
- Fuchs, C. (2008). *Internet and society. Social theory in the information age*. London: Routledge.
- Fuchs, C. (2014). *Social media. A critical introduction*. London: Sage.
- Fuchs, C. (2021). *Communicating COVID-19: Everyday life, digital capitalism, and conspiracy theories in pandemic times*. Bingley: Emerald Publishing.
- Gaggioli, C., Gabbi, E., & Ranieri, M. (2021). The work of the educator at the time of Covid-19. A study on the impact of the health emergency and the role of technologies. *Form@re—Open Journal Per La Formazione in Rete*, 21(3), 230-249.
- Gillespie, T. (2015). Platforms intervene. *Social Media+ Society*, 1(1), 1-2.
- Gillespie, T. (2016). Algorithm. In B. Peters (ed.), *Digital keywords: A vocabulary of information society and culture* (pp. 18-30). Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1999). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. London: Routledge.
- Gobo, G. (1998). Il disegno della ricerca nelle indagini qualitative. In A. Melucci (Ed.), *Verso una sociologia riflessiva. Ricerca qualitativa e cultura* (pp. 79-102). New York: il Mulino.
- Gourlay, L. (2021). There is no "virtual learning": The materiality of digital education. *Journal of New Approaches in Educational Research*, 10(1), 57-66.
- Gourlay, L. (2022). Surveillance and datafication in higher education: Documentation of the human. *Postdigital Science and Education*, 2022, 1-10.
- Granovetter, M. (1973). The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology*, 78(6), 1360-1380.
- Granovetter, M. (1995). *Getting a job: A study on contacts and careers*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lsito, G. (2007). *L'analisi del contenuto nella ricerca sociale*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Margiotta, U. (2009). Interdisciplinarity: An idea of university in the 21st century. *Formazione e insegnamento*, 3, 151-174.
- Potter, J., & McDougall, J. (2017). *Digital media, culture & education. Theorising third space literacies*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pronzato, R., & Markham, A. N. (2023). Returning to critical pedagogy in a world of datafication. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 29(1), 97-115. doi:10.1177/13548565221148108
- Pronzato, R., & Risi, E. (2022). Reframing everyday life. Implications of social distancing in Italy. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 42(3/4), 348-368.
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Rapanta, C., Botturi, L., Goodyear, P., Guàrdia, L., & Koole, M. (2020). Online university teaching during and after the Covid-19 crisis: Refocusing teacher presence and learning activity. *Postdigital science and education*, 2, 923-945.
- Raun, T. (2018). Capitalizing intimacy: New subcultural forms of micro-celebrity strategies and affective labour on YouTube.

- Convergence*, 24(1), 99-113. doi:10.1177/1354856517736983
- Risi, E. (2022). Expériences et reconfigurations du travail pédagogique par les plateformes. *Cahiers du GRM. publiés par le Groupe de Recherches Matérialistes*, 20, 1-14.
- Risi, E., & Pronzato, R. (2021). Smartworking is not so smart. Always-on lives and the dark side of platformization. *Work Organisation, Labour and Globalisation*, 15(1), 107-125.
- Selwyn, N., Hillman, T., Bergviken Rensfeldt, A., & Perrotta, C. (2023). Digital technologies and the automation of education—Key questions and concerns. *Postdigital Science and Education*, 5, 15-24.
- Selwyn, N., Hillman, T., Bergviken-Rensfeldt, A., & Perrotta, C. (2022). Making sense of the digital automation of education. *Postdigital Science and Education*, 5(1), 1-14.
- Silverman, D. (2013). *Doing qualitative research*. London: Sage.
- Silverstone, R., & Hirsch, E. (Eds.) (1992). *Consuming technologies: Media and information in domestic spaces*. London: Routledge.
- Simmel, G. (2011). *La sociologia*. G. Turnaturi (Ed.). Roma: Armando Editore.
- Srnicek, N. (2016). *Platform capitalism*. London: Polity Press.
- Stanyer, J. (2013). *Intimate politics*. London: Polity Press.
- Sum, M., & Oancea, A. (2022). The use of technology in higher education teaching by academics during the COVID-19 emergency remote teaching period: A systematic review. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, 19(1), 1-39.
- Van Aelst, P., Sheaffer, T., & Stanyer, J. (2012). The personalization of mediated political communication. A review of concepts, operationalizations and key findings. *Journalism*, 13(2), 203-220.
- Van Dijck, J. (2013). *The culture of connectivity: A critical history of social media*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Van Dijck, J., Poell, T., & De Waal, M. (2018). *The platform society: Public values in a connective world*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Warde, A. (2005). Consumption and theories of practice. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 5(2), 131-153.
- Weber, M. (1991). *L'etica protestante e lo spirito del capitalismo*. (A. M. Marietti, Trans.). Rizzoli, BUR.
- Williamson, B. (2019). Datafication of education: A critical approach to emerging analytics technologies and practices. In H. Beetham & R. Sharpe (Eds.), *Rethinking pedagogy for a digital age: Principles and practices of design* (pp. 212-226). London: Routledge.
- Williamson, B., Eynon, R., & Potter, J. (2020). Pandemic politics, pedagogies and practices: Digital technologies and distance education during the coronavirus emergency. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 45(2), 107-114.
- Witschge, T., Anderson, C. W., Domingo, D., & Hermida, A. (Eds.). (2016). *The SAGE handbook of digital journalism*. London: Sage.
- Zammuner, V. L. (2003). *I focus group*. New York: Il Mulino.