



**TEENS,  
MEDIA AND  
COLLABORATIVE  
CULTURES.**  
EXPLOITING  
TEENS'  
TRANSMEDIA  
SKILLS IN THE  
CLASSROOM

Carlos A. Scolari (Ed.)

TRANSLITERACY  
H2020 Research and Innovation Actions

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## 2.2 Wattpad

Simona Tirocchi

UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI TORINO  
Italy

Following the broader framework of the netnographic phase of the research, the Italian team analysed the social and digital platform Wattpad. It was chosen from among other apps and websites because it is a community with a lot of educational implications and provides numerous opportunities to reflect on young people's consumption practices.

Wattpad was co-founded in 2006 by the two Canadian engineers and co-workers Allen Lau and Ivan Yuen as an online community of writers and readers, "a platform for aspiring and experienced authors, allowing them to publish their work, get feedback and connect with other writers and readers" (Bold, 2016:4). Wattpad is thus based on user-generated contents and has also been described as the "YouTube for stories (without video)" (Bold, 2016:4). Furthermore, it combines all the affordances of both social networks and publishing platforms.

What can teens (and users in general) do on this platform? They can both read and write books or short stories and comment and review the works

of other people in a collaborative and participatory way. The members of the community, known as 'Wattpaders', serialize their stories, uploading one or two chapters at a time inviting comments and advice on each chapter or part of their works. The users can also award "stars" (positive votes) to the works, follow each other's profiles and join thematic "clubs" (discussion forums) that focus on particular genres or other aspects of reading and writing.

Wattpad is thus progressively reinventing the industry of cultural products, subverting the traditional roles of author and reader and the laws of marketing, as here the success of a work is decreed solely by its readers.

At the time of writing, registration to Wattpad is free of charge, it has more than 60 million monthly users and more than 400 million story uploads (Wattpad, 2018). 90% of all activity is undertaken on mobile technologies (Wattpad, 2018) because most fans, especially teens, use mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets.

Below we have summarized some of the features that

have ensured the success of this platform, especially among teens:

- **THE IMPORTANCE OF STORYTELLING**  
Wattpad perfectly interprets our society's need to rediscover the pleasure of storytelling. Stories that are, on one hand, an expression of people's identities, while on the other hand, the platform offers a way to re-read, reinterpret and reinvent narrations, starting with existing and well-known materials. Finally, stories are a tool through which to share emotions and to connect with others.
- **THE TRANSMEDIA PERSPECTIVE**  
Wattpad has the capability to represent the evolution of cultural consumption towards a transmedia experience. It has recently also become a multiplatform entertainment venture boasting millions of visitors to its site. Its popular stories have been transformed into other formats, becoming blockbuster movies, TV series, web series and bestselling books, constructing a comprehensive and truly engaging experience. In relation to this purpose, Wattpad is currently establishing partnerships with important names such as Turner, Universal Cable Productions, Paramount Pictures, Simon and Schuster, to name but a few. One of the company's future goals is to build theme parks in many important cities (Wattpad, 2018).
- **THE GLOBAL DIMENSION AND THE MARKETING VISION**  
Wattpad's vision is to entertain and connect people all over the world through stories that are written in more than 50 languages. Through data mining techniques and the construction of a large database, together with the use of machine learning (a kind of artificial intelligence) the platform tries to interpret the tastes and expectations of its users (Wattpad, 2018).

## Teens and the Wattpad world

The netnography of Wattpad was undertaken on a weekly basis between 1 May and 1 July 2017. Starting from suggestions drawn from the questionnaires, the 39 in-depth interviews and the workshops, we analysed authors' profiles (profiles of famous authors or those of teenagers) and original works (the most famous ones as well as teenagers' original productions).

According to our research data, Wattpad users tend to be girls from lower secondary school (in the majority) and upper secondary school level. These young writers show a great passion for literature, are generally keen readers of other works on Wattpad and show that they want to imitate the most famous writers while adding their own originality.

Teenagers demonstrate two main uses of Wattpad. On one hand, they search for well-known stories that are often recommended by their friends. These stories – often written by “hybrid authors”: authors who have been published due to their popularity on Wattpad (Bold, 2016) – represent an important common ground for sharing generational values, lifestyles and worlds of symbols and meanings.

On the other hand, we found a more creative use of the platform, based on the creation of original stories, aimed at expressing emotions, joys, discomfort or inner needs. In this perspective students act as *digital media creators* (Ito et al., 2008), because writing on Wattpad is part of the process of Online Content Creation (OCC).

One of the “famous” books most cited by teens is *After*, the first of a series of novels written by Anna Todd, a former reader. Her *After* series generated more than 5 million comments, more than 11 million likes and over one billion online readers. The series came to the library, in a new version, unpublished and expanded. *After* is also one of the first examples of user-generated stories that we can categorize as “fanfiction” (a fiction

about characters or settings from an original work of fiction, created by fans) and which are strictly related to a female-dominated fandom (Korobkova, 2014). This aspect is also linked to the concept of “Fangirl”, “an identity category that refers to engaging deeply and emotionally with the object of a fandom, including involuntarily voicing excitement when a particular song comes on or feeling compelled to write, discuss, and create for the sake of being a fan” (Korobkova, 2014:4). *After*, such as many other fanfictions, was inspired by *One*

*Direction* (commonly abbreviated as 1D), a British-Irish boyband<sup>1</sup> which is hugely popular among young people. One of the girls interviewed during the research has a Wattpad profile, *Solaconlametta*. Here she writes novels on adolescence and anxiety, expressing her own personal unease that she feels compelled to share with her peer group. One of her works is called *Self-harm - Anorexia - Bulimia - Depression - Love* and is a work that expresses the desire to get in touch with her peer group and seek support.

## Giulia

16 YEARS OLD - FEMALE

Italy

*So this is already the fifth book I have written on Wattpad. I don't know... I try to do as many chapters as possible because I do not really like sequels... so I try to put as many chapters as possible into the same book... let's say between 100 and 150 chapters [...]*

*I have not finished it yet.*

*The first comment I got was “nice idea but the verbs are wrong”, but in any case they said “it's cute and the punctuation is okay”.*

*Regarding the contents [...] one girl wrote to me “... basically here you only speak about what anorexia and bulimia are... But an anorexic girl is not just a girl who skips meals; she is a girl who feels insulted about her own weight [...].”*

*This girl told me “this chapter is far better than the first one” [...] and then she told me “you expressed the concepts so well that I really felt the emotion...this time you deserved the star”. [...]. And I answered: “thank you so much”.*

Another novel, *Non ci resta che gridare*, by dezy462 (another female student) deals with the topic of bullying, while *Shadowhunters - Città delle mezze verità*, by waffle\_02, finds its place in the fantasy genre. This latter novel is very popular (especially when compared to that of the other “invisible” authors). She has received 2,300 views and 266 stars. *Shadowhunters* was inspired by the supernatural drama television series developed by Ed Decter, based on the popular book series *The Mortal Instruments* written by Cassandra Clare.

Another girl involved in the research, *Wildvolcano*, wrote a book, *Challenging the Boys*, in collaboration with a friend. The book was written in English because her friend is a native English speaker and so it was quite easy for them to write in a foreign language. During the workshops, the girl told us something about the book and also about how the cover had been chosen by the app itself. In this case, the novel is about the love story between a boy and a girl, in which the girl's best friend begins to fall in love with her. The story starts with an almost autobiographical experience.

<sup>1</sup> *One Direction* are based in London and are composed of Niall Horan, Liam Payne, Harry Styles, Louis Tomlinson, and previously, Zayn Malik until his departure from the band on 25 March 2015.

The trends reported by Wattpad (2018) help us to understand which genres or contents are most popular among young people. For example, the rise in *K-Pop* (abbreviation of Korean pop) is evident. K-pop stories are inspired by a music genre originating in South Korea characterized by a wide variety of audiovisual elements. Most of the stories are related to the Korean band BTS (Bangtan Boys or Beyond The Scene). An example of these works is *Roomies* (a Jungkook ff, which has generated more than 180,000 readings), a fanfiction about Jeon *Jungkook*, the youngest member of the K-Pop group BTS.

Other top Wattpad trends in 2017 included fan stories inspired by TV franchises, such as *Riverdale*, *Game of Thrones* and *Stranger Things*. Other important issues span bullying or LGBTQ+ issues and, more in general, an increase in *diversity and inclusion in every genre*. Other trends include the boy band *Why don't we?*, and the horror strand: *Cannibals*, *Killer Clowns*, *Zombies* and *Lycanthropy* or, finally, *genre mashups*, for example the combination of romance and action.



## Final remarks

Wattpad is a very interesting digital environment with a huge amount of potential for schools and learning. First of all, Wattpad provides the opportunity to reflect on the value of reading for young people, in a historical moment in which much is said about the death of reading. For these reasons, the main potential of the platform from the educational point of view is, in our opinion, that Wattpad brings students closer to the world of reading and writing through a purely informal channel based on peer-to-peer relationships. For example, the creation and experimentation of new literary genres stimulates reflection on traditional genres and on the ability to transform them or put them to the test. Books (often written in English) are categorized according to different genres: some of them are quite classical, such as Romance, Action/Adventure, Horror, Fantasy, but others, such as Teen Fiction, Chick Lit, Werewolf, Random, are new forms of categorization established according to the bottom-up activities of tagging undertaken by users. Furthermore, in Wattpad we can also find a Classics section, where users transcribe famous works (e.g. *Wuthering Heights*) in the Wattpad interface.

Genres are very important in Wattpad, especially to emphasize the creative works produced by the writers. For example, there are metanarrative works solely dedicated to the characteristics of Wattpad that contain specific chapters on genres (*Welcome Home! A Newcomer's Guide to Wattpad*). Another example is the "Wattpad Guide. How Wattpad works" written by *Ambasciatori Wattpad*, a group that aims to give suggestions to readers and writers on the platform. This profile and many others show how groups of influencers can arise on Wattpad, giving advice and decreeing the success and visibility of the works.



Another interesting aspect is the so-called “Wattpad challenge”, where young writers are sometimes tagged by other Wattpad users. Occasionally they consist of answering a series of questions; at other times the challenge is to write chapters using a specific number of words. Challenges have well-defined, routinely set rules.

In conclusion, and in order to contextualize the research evidence emerging from the analysis, a few considerations should be made. Wattpad is an interesting environment from an educational point of view, for at least two reasons:

- it is a *socialization environment* in which young people experience peer support and share tastes, interests, values and emotions. Wattpad is a space for confrontation and growth in which teens can reflect on aspects of everyday life, constantly comparing reality and fantasy;
- if we analyse Wattpad in a broader perspective, we notice that it can also be conveyed to the *school learning environment*.

So, while taking into account the ethical limits associated with the use of social media at school (especially in the Italian context) and parents’ concerns, we can affirm that Wattpad can be used to aid in connecting school and out-of-school environments, using the activity of writing as a mediator between the two worlds. The writing experience, if it happens in non-formal content worlds (e.g., fandom communities), may prove to be a positive contribution to classroom literacy practices. Comparing their works in Wattpad (thereby favouring peer feedback and discussion) rather than dealing solely with the teacher, entails an enrichment of the writing experience. According to Korobkova (2014), young people can develop writing, editing and new media skills, expand their vocabulary and reinforce positive attitudes toward print and media literacies; however, teenagers often consider that the skills and practices they use within fandom are not relatable to the world of school, that the school environment is still completely alien to that of these non-formal worlds.

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