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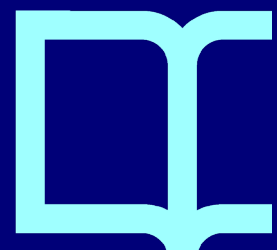
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Research note: Messenger and social network sites as tools for sociability, leisure and informal learning for Spanish young people

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Abstract

Today's youth are the first generation to have grown up in an environment characterized by the widespread use of the Internet, especially in the form of instant messaging services (such as Messenger) and social network sites (SNSs), which are part of their everyday life and constitute essential tools to communicate, share, participate and create. This research note discusses qualitative information obtained from various discussion groups about the actual use of the Internet, messaging services and SNSs. In addition, quantitative data obtained through a survey of the Spanish population between 12 and 18 years old are provided as a general context to position the discussion. The data show that young people have mainly learnt to use the Internet in informal spaces. For them, these technologies are primarily tools for leisure and sociability. Moreover, youth perceptions about their own use of digital technologies show characteristic forms of management of their social needs related to being a teenager, as well as the construction of their own codes and communication protocols.

Keywords

children and media, entertainment, Internet use, learning

Introduction

Young people have become a privileged object of study in the reflection on social and cultural impact of the use and consumption of information and communication technologies. They are the digital generation, the vanguard that represents the future, but

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also the most vulnerable group to the risks posed by these technologies. Children and adolescents tend to be regarded as a singular object of study, as a homogeneous entity with the ability to appropriate digital technologies in more innovative ways than their elders (Aranda et al., 2009; Livingstone, 2003, 2007, 2008; Taberero et al., 2008). The metaphors implicit in these approaches have led to theoretical categories like the digital native (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008; Prensky, 2001), the Net Generation (Tapscott, 1996), the digital generation (Rubio Gil, 2010) or the Interactive Generation (Bringué and Sábada, 2008, 2009). The other side is represented by the 'needy' young who lack the skills required to make the most of these technologies (Selwyn, 2003). In this regard it is interesting to study how the tools that the young use are becoming instruments for social relationships (Antheunis et al., 2009) and identity management (boyd, 2007; Valkenburg and Peter, 2008, 2011) and how the differences in use can lead to the existence of digital divides (Notten et al., 2009).

The goal of the present research is to tackle the study of digital practices related to spare time and sociability in the case of Spanish young people. This article presents a general context based on quantitative data and discusses qualitative information obtained from various discussion groups about the actual use of the Internet, messaging services and SNSs.

Method

The data obtained in the present study are both quantitative and qualitative. To obtain the quantitative data a telephone survey was conducted between 16 March and 1 April 2009 with a sample of Spanish teenagers aged between 12 and 18 years old. All in all, the final theoretical sample added up to 2054 consultations with a margin of error of +2.16% for $P = Q = 50.0\%$ and under the supposition of maximum uncertainty. The number of consultations conducted follows a distribution that is proportional to the Spanish population in terms of both sex and age. Following this premise, 51.7% of the sample were male and 48.3% female. Likewise, 53.9% of the young people were between 12 and 15 years old and 46.1% were between 16 and 18 years old. Additionally, these segmentations have been applied to be proportional to the size of each town and region (*comunidad autónoma*).

The qualitative data were obtained by organizing a series of discussion groups intended to thoroughly study the opinions of a group of young people. The groups were drawn from eight secondary schools, with eight youngsters of both sexes in each group selected according to the school heads' criteria. The sample of secondary schools was made applying several criteria: the centres had to be in four Spanish cities of four regions that had been chosen regarding their level of Internet penetration as established by two sources: EGM (Estudio General de Medios, 2008) and INE (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2008). The four regions selected were Catalonia and Madrid (high Internet penetration according to those sources) and Andalusia and Galicia (low penetration according to those same sources). Within the regions, the cities of Barcelona, Madrid, Tarifa, Algeciras and Santiago de Compostela were selected, and one or two public secondary schools were picked in each of them. Two groups were organized in each school, one with ESO students (up to 16 years old) and the other comprising bachillerato students (between 16 and 18 years old). The discussion groups were conducted between April and May 2009.

The content of these group discussions was audio recorded, supported with video recording only to have further reference to identify all the young people involved. All the recordings were transcribed to be treated with the qualitative analysis support tool ATLAS.ti. The transcripts were encoded into ATLAS.ti according to criteria established by the researchers after a first reading of the transcribed material. To graduate the level of precision of the comments made by these young people, two code levels were established: primary and secondary. Primary codes were related to a mention, statement, perception or opinion about any of the following technologies: the Internet, social networks or instant messaging. The secondary codes were related to a mention, statement, declaration, perception or opinion about any of the following aspects: competence, collaboration, sociability, risks, benefits, interest, control, privacy, school, creativity and status. The codes were cross-referenced to allow a thorough analysis of the participants' opinions in relation to the technologies used and the specific uses of these technologies. To quote the comments and opinions of the participants while safeguarding their anonymity, an identification format has been adopted in the following pages that characterize the source by three data only: gender (boy/girl), age and city of residence.

Results and discussion

General considerations about the Internet

A first relevant fact is that almost all of the Spanish students claim to have connected to the Internet some time in their lives (96.7%). Besides, most of them connect regularly (53% of them connect, on average, one hour a day; it is also significant that 13.6% of them claim to be almost always online).

In this context, and in relation to the place, frequency and intensity of the Internet use by teenage boys and girls, as well as to the effective parental control over this use, it is important to highlight in the first place that the majority of teenagers (94.5%) mainly connect to the Internet at home, with 59.2% of them claiming to have a connection in their own bedroom. Internet availability in private or personal spaces increases with age (it is more frequent among those between 16 and 18 years old than among those between 12 and 15 years old). The same happens, in parallel, with the time they devote to it, which is slightly greater among the older teenagers interviewed, who also gradually migrate their main hours of use, from afternoons to nights or to connect at any time. All these data together suggest an established pattern of Internet use for teenagers in their households which becomes more flexible and diverse as they grow up, which is in principle a natural development of habitual dynamics between generations that often translate into discussions and negotiations regarding the use and consumption of technology and media (see, for example, Hagen, 2007; Livingstone and Bovill, 2001; McMillan and Morrison, 2006; Taberner et al., 2008).

On the other hand, the data corresponding to how the Internet has been introduced are particularly interesting. Among all of the users, 53.6% claim to have learnt to use it by themselves, whereas 21.8% have learnt with the help of some relative (parents, uncles or aunts, brothers or sisters, cousins). Nevertheless, all in all, the data reveal that most teenagers learn to use the Internet in informal contexts, either on their own, with their

families or with friends, and therefore in contexts unrelated to formal education (barely 19.9% of the interviewees claim to have learnt at school or in academies).

Actually, what clearly emerges is that, for teenagers, the Internet is a leisure space, which is clearly separated from formal and daily educational contexts. The following extracts are typical of the young people's responses to such questions as 'Do you use the Internet to study or to look for information?' and 'Do they recommend you web pages at your secondary school?':

- Girl, 14, Santiago de Compostela:* The educational [pages] are not very interesting.
Researcher: Why?
Girl, 14, Santiago de Compostela: Because they don't bring any entertainment, which is what we're looking for.
 ...
Researcher: You only use it for entertainment?
Boy, 14, Santiago de Compostela: Man, you go to a place to give you education for six, eight hours, and then you go home and get into the Internet supposedly to disconnect

The comparison of the effective uses of the Internet with how it is perceived by young people reveals some fundamental characteristics related to how they introduce digital technologies into their daily lives. Although entertainment (95.1%) and information (80.2%) are still two of the main functions attributed to the Internet, so is participation ('The Internet allows me to share the pictures I take, the videos I make') (81.9%). Nonetheless, in this respect, to 'share' particularly suggests that teenagers have highly integrated the Internet into their daily lives, as an online extension of their offline lives.

Instant messaging

It is noteworthy that 94.5% of teenagers that use the Internet have one or more email accounts; but only 4.6% use email as their main tool of online communication, whereas 89.9% have one or more instant messaging accounts (Messenger, Skype, Jabber), which are the main tools for socialization and entertainment.

The characteristics of use of instant messaging accounts corroborate that the activity articulated through Internet tools and services is primarily supported by friendship or interest relationships (see Ito et al., 2008). Thus, the principal uses (of a lot) of these accounts are to talk to friends (89.3%) and about what interests these young people or what they like (71.3%), which far exceed the uses involving relationships with people not related to their daily social circle, or to family or teachers (talk to people they do not often see, 48.5%; talk to relatives, 36.7%; talk to teachers or monitors, 3.1%). This also exceeds practical uses, such as solving problems regarding their studies (44.2%).

In terms of language, this communication that is clearly associated to sociability reveals some noteworthy strategies. Young people openly express certain preferences in communicating through the Messenger. Concision, for instance, to 'get to the point', is particularly highlighted. Monotonous conversations or conversational tags that are so prominent in interpersonal verbal communication are not regarded positively. It is OK to

say 'hello', but a conversation full of tags related to the phatic function of language is of no interest to them at all:

Girl, 17, Barcelona: I believe that in Messenger many people have created a kind of monotonous conversation, which is: Hi, hi, how are you? Fine and you, too, what can you tell me? Nothing, and you, me neither . . . Some conversations clearly don't take you anywhere . . . If we start with 'Hello', it won't really work.

In conversations with young people, it is clear that they concede a lot of importance to the exchange of sentences that might be thought to fulfil a clear referential function (that is to say, those containing relevant information) or an expressive function (icons or sentences reflecting specific states of mind), according to the well-known model of the functions of language introduced by the Russian-American linguist Roman Jakobson (1960). The fact that someone is available suffices to start a conversation, which is bound to be oriented to 'explain something interesting'. Thus, it is possible to claim the existence of something we could call an MSM Code, a code that is built on technological competence and the cultural capital involved in the use of the tool (Valenzuela et al., 2009).

Regarding this MSM Code, and in relation to the observations made by the different groups, a series of good communicative practices aiming at socializing through instant messaging can be detected. These practices include:

1. It is better to give the Messenger contact than the telephone number. Instant messaging offers more options to manage availability to establish a conversation, and it is easier to ignore an unwanted conversation on Messenger than on the telephone. In other words, instant messaging offers more possibilities to avoid intrusions.
2. It is advisable to make contacts lists. Some young people order their contacts in lists with tags such as 'Don't know him/her', 'Secondary school', 'Friends of friends'. Many others, although they do not do it, consider it a good strategy to be able to accept many contacts without losing control of the group they mostly engage in conversation with.
3. It is advisable to prepare automatic messages. An automatic message such as 'I'm having dinner' might fulfil a double function. On the one hand, it avoids the tension that might arise from the fact of having a lot of unanswered messages after being away from the computer for a more or less prolonged period of time. On the other hand, it does not interrupt communication, since it indicates to the contacts that someone is away from the computer but is planning to come back at some time.
4. Do not say it if it is not better than silence. Young people value the exchange of messages with specific contents, messages regarding useful information or expressing opinions or states of mind.

These communication protocols and practices show the foundations of a digital competence orientated to manage their social capital, their opportunities to socialize and their identity.

SNSs and photologs

Regarding the level and type of contribution of young people to the construction of ways of participatory culture (see Jenkins et al., 2008), it is remarkable that 31.6% of the Spanish teenagers do not use SNSs, blogs or photologs. This information is particularly significant insofar as this kind of tools and services on the Internet are applications that are precisely built around relations of friendship and/or interest, and whose technical characteristics have a direct relation to the social and/or cultural competences on which new models of participatory and collaborative culture are founded (Ito et al., 2008; Jenkins et al., 2008).

The most commonly used social networks are Tuenti (68.5% of SNSs users) and Fotolog (18.4%), both exceeding Facebook (10.1%). On the other hand, the use of blogs among teenagers in Spain is insignificant (only 0.4% of all Internet users within this population group). In this context, the reasons to use these tools and services among young people reveal the importance of them with respect to their social life. Thus, the main uses (of a lot) of social networks in general are to talk to friends (79.5% of the users) and to look at what the contacts in their friends list are doing or talking about (66.6%).

Beyond the importance of social networks, relations of interest and participation (although not necessarily separated from friendship relations) are also fundamental. Other main reasons why the Spanish youth use social networks on the Internet are to talk about what interests they have (63.8%), to give an opinion (61.2%), to send pictures, videos or texts made by themselves (59.8%) and to send/receive pictures, videos or funny material found on the Internet (59.5%). In the case of Fotolog, participation linked to friendship relationships is revealed as the most significant function. Thus, the personal reasons to use Fotolog are, in order of importance, to write or comment on the Fotologs of friends (67.7%), to publish pictures, videos or texts made by oneself (59.8%), to communicate with friends (53.8%) and to write about what interests me/what I like (51.4%).

Another noteworthy aspect is related to the fear that adults express with respect to the possibility that teenagers establish unwanted contacts through the Internet. Regarding this issue, it is important to remember that only 32.9% of the teenagers claim to have some kind of rule imposed by their fathers and mothers about the use of the Internet in general, although, among these rules, the restriction on the type of people to get in touch with is the most important. On the other hand, a minority of 17.3% claims to have friends they only know online. In this context, and considering that 63.7% of social network users frequently update the information on their online profiles, it is essential to pay attention to the most recurrent type of data in those profiles. Thus, the most common data are those providing a more general description of the user (sex, age, photograph, name and surnames, in more than 90% of the cases), than those that allow direct contact (Messenger, email or Fotolog address: under 40%; postal address, mobile telephone number or home number: under 10%).

The different conversations among the teenager discussion groups ratify the data obtained in the quantitative study: the social networks to which teenagers connect are mainly used to establish relationships with pre-existent offline groups of friends. These online relationships are used as an extension of their daily sociability and allow them

to widen their social worlds beyond specific spatial limits. So, these users define social networks as places where they can express themselves with a certain freedom about their problems, about daily situations affecting them individually or within a group. For example:

- Girl, 14, Santiago de Compostela:* It's like my personal diary, a way to vent [my feelings].
Girl, 14, Santiago de Compostela: For everybody to read it, super personal.
Researcher: What do you upload?
Girl, 14, Santiago de Compostela: What I do everyday.
Girl, 14, Santiago de Compostela: Yes, and if for example something happens and you can't tell someone but you need to tell it, you put it there so the people who understand just understand . . .

The more the contacts or friends are included, the greater is the chance for interaction, and possibilities of acquiring sociability, support, information and feeling of belonging. Thus, being a member of one or another social network will mainly depend on the amount of contacts young people can add to their profiles (contacts that, as previously commented, already exist in their offline daily life).

The teenagers interviewed not only connect to their network with the purpose of participating with comments or information in their profile or those of others, but frequently, they use their contacts profiles in a passive way, as mere spectators. This attitude of being mere spectators, in a group or individually, devoting their time to looking at things and prying into the interventions and photos of their friends' profiles is not an activity to be underestimated by associating it to mere gossip. Studies about gossip activity among women (Jones, 1980), or about the activity of fans of television shows (Jenkins, 1992), have shown that gossip allows all of the participants to talk about themselves, their tastes, their opinions or values through a third party that appears in gossip magazines and TV shows. By gossiping on SNSs, teenagers do not waste time, but exchange opinions, discuss tastes, points of view and ways of thinking or doing things related to their identity (see Tufekci, 2008). By gossiping about their friends' profiles, teenagers work on aspects related to their social and cultural identity without having to talk in the first person about their values, tastes, attitudes, etc. In other words, we can understand gossip as a way to talk about oneself by evoking the actions of third parties. All in all, the active participation on SNSs as a gossip activity shows that teenagers use these tools as social and emotional experimentation laboratories that are mainly oriented towards entertainment. By using social networks, teenagers place part of their knowledge and states of mind into the Internet, thereby acquiring greater amounts of knowledge and sociability opportunities in return (Rheingold, 2002).

Conclusions

This research note reveals some noteworthy aspects and some that would require further investigation. In the first place, the study corroborates that the main way of introduction to the use of digital technologies is the family/domestic environment, so that learning is made in informal contexts (mainly self-taught or with the help of relatives). This research

note illustrates the characteristics of appropriation of these technologies as related to the needs and interests of teenagers. Thus, their use of the Internet, and social networks in particular, revolves around their daily and closest social circles outside their families (their friends and schoolmates), which means that their high level of integration of these technologies into their daily life essentially translates into an online extension of their offline life. Thus, the technical characteristics of these technologies turn them into essential tools related to their sociability, becoming at the same time a test field on how to manage their identity which is typical of their age. Without forgetting the fact that teenagers mainly relate these technologies to leisure and not to learning, the analysed data reveal that, through the use of these technologies, young people generate support, sociability and recognition spaces which are also collaborative learning spaces, undoubtedly informal and supported by their close social circle, wherein there is ample opportunity to develop very diverse abilities at a social, cultural, professional or technical level. As previously mentioned, this is how young people acquire an important network capital. To share their experiences, worries and opinions through alternative leisure and participation spaces constitutes an important vector of learning, no matter that the people concerned do not perceive it as such. In any case, this perception probably stems from the informal nature of this learning, which is openly collaborative (horizontal and egalitarian, as opposed to a traditional flow of transmission of vertical information, from expert adults to profane minors), and is mainly supported by social relationships beyond their family, that is to say, not focused on the practical function of the use of digital technologies.

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