Chapter 19

Research Using the Methods of Digital Ethnography:
Creative and Participatory Techniques – Understanding the Digital Culture of Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes three research techniques used within the field of digital ethnography aimed at understanding the digital culture of adolescents from qualitative and participatory perspectives. The authors carry out a theoretical review of some of the underlying principles of digital ethnography and creative and participatory research techniques. The authors then describe three research techniques based on the following methodological approaches: the mirror method, participant field notes, and digital visual cartographies. The mirror method technique analyses how adolescents construct their subjectivity through the images they use in social networks. Participant field notes are designed to facilitate the involvement of the young people in the field notes taken by the researchers, thus breaking with their private nature and providing opportunities for enhanced reflexivity. Digital visual cartographies aim to help understand, among other issues, the spatial dimension associated with the use of digital devices by young people.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, we have witnessed profound transformations resulting from the rapid expansion and growth of digital technologies. Digital devices have, to a greater or lesser extent, revolutionised fields as diverse as the economy, education, leisure or personal relationships. The degree to which technologies have penetrated the daily lives of young people has grown exponentially and is affecting the way they construct their identities, their interpersonal relationships and their understanding of reality. Research focused on the description of the relationships that young people and adolescents establish with technology have highlighted the enormous capacity they have both for operating these devices and taking advantage of the various forms of recreational, experiential or interactive learning provided by many digital tools. Some terms have been generalized, such as net generation or digital natives, which convert young people into an intensely homogeneous group whose defining characteristic is that they are considered to be experts at managing technology (Thompson, 2015). It is understood that being born in this moment in time makes them highly competent to respond to the demands of an increasingly complex society in which technology (essentially digital) plays a central role. However, some research suggests that adolescents are less digitally competent than initially expected and the types of activities they carry out using technology are often limited or routine. Furthermore, some studies on the impact of technology use on the identities of adolescents focuses on the analysis of the so called dangers of the internet (Garmendia, Jiménez, Casado, & Mascheroni, 2016). From this point of view, it is necessary to strengthen identity protection, limit access to inappropriate content or prevent virtual harassment situations. This perspective places the opportunities that young people have to increase their agency through the use of technology in second place, without taking into consideration the new challenges or potential it offers. At the same time, the expansion of digital technologies has been accompanied by other perspectives that complicate the multiple participation possibilities that technologies provide in relation to the production of content or the opportunities they offer for developing the agency of the people who use them (Buckingham, 2017).

It has been suggested that in order to be able to understand the complex relationships that adolescents establish with digital technologies it is necessary to design qualitative research techniques that take into account what is produced by young people using these technologies, their interactions and their active presence in the virtual world. This provides us with a conception of young people as active agents in virtual communities and the internet. The selection of this research paradigm follows the same lines as other works that have already highlighted its potential when studying adolescent digital culture through digital productions, types of online relationships or forms of self-representation through technologies, etc. In this regard, it is considered that while quantitative research seeks to explain the causes of the phenomena studied through the control of variables, qualitative research aims to understand the realities under study. In this chapter, the authors describe three research techniques framed within the tradition of digital ethnography: the mirror method; participant field notes and digital visual cartographies.

Digital Ethnography and Creative and Participatory Techniques

Several authors have sought to establish the premises for developing research processes inspired by what has come to be known as digital ethnography (for example, Hine, 2000; Møller & Robards, 2019). It is regarded as a methodology "that seeks to understand digitally mediated communication, communities, identities, and norms, while acknowledging the complex liminal relationship between offline and on-

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