ONLINE PEER CULTURE AND INTERPRETIVE REPRODUCTION
ON CHILDREN’S SOCIAL NETWORKING PROFILES 1

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Abstract

According to William Corsaro (1992) children create the first series of peer culture in interaction with peers. In the present day context these initial peer cultures are not only formed in play groups and nursery schools but also in the online world while communicating and playing together in different online environments. The present study is focused on analysing textual parts of the profiles of 11-12 year old users in the most popular social networking site (SNS) in Estonia called Rate (www.rate.ee). Content analysis was used to analyze 20 profiles of youngsters to find out what kind of communities children belonged to as well as what kind of hobbies interest and tastes they proclaim to have. The analysis of children’s online identity constructions contained various elements (humour, verbal chanting, and other types of collective fun) that Corsaro (1992) has named as typical for peer cultures. Children were often engaged in socio-dramatic role-play while compiling their self-presentations on the profiles. For instance, they often joined communities that could create the feeling of empowerment and control from taking up adult roles. Nevertheless, children did not only imitate the elements from the adult world directly in their identity performances. More so, children were involved in „interpretive reproduction”(Corsaro 1992:168) in order to appropriate the information gained from the adult culture in order to produce their own creative version of peer cultures that would meet the concerns of the peer world.

Keywords

Peer culture, social networking websites, interpretive reproduction, Estonia

1 INTRODUCTION

The new social landscape brought about by the new media technologies has generated a discussion about generational differences in new media use. The visible generational differences are not only connected to the amount of time spent using the new media [1] but also in terms of the main opportunities experienced by children and adults online. The main opportunities experienced by children online across Europe are connected to the use of Internet as an educational resource, for entertainment games and fun, for searching global information and for social networking whereas other online opportunities, for example, user-generated content creation or civic participation are much less often practiced [1]. Compared to the adults who value Internet mainly as an educational resource or an opportunity to gain access to global information; young people priorities the opportunities connected to various forms of online communication, entertainment and play [1]. Other online opportunities like user-generated content creation and civic participation, however, are less often used.

Mainly because of the early adoption of the new technology and the amount of time spent in front of the computer, the present day children have often been called the “digital generation” [1], the “Net generation” [2], the “digital natives” [3] or the “electronic generation” [4]. Nevertheless, theses classifications have not been unanimously accepted by all. For example, Susan Herring [5] has taken a critical stand about classifications of generational digital divide by suggesting that adults, especially journalist, researchers and new media produces, created the construct of an Internet Generation. She also problematizes the severe discrepancy in the adult constructions of this new generation. On the one hand, the mainstream media messages often create moral panics about the possible dangers and risks in the online environments. On the other hand, the majority of new media

1 The preparation of this article was supported by the research grant No. 6968 and also by the European Union through the European Regional Development Fund. The author is also thankful for the Archimedes Foundation for the European Social Fund’s scholarship DoRa which supported the preparation of the article during her research stay at the Masaryk University, the Czech Republic.
research as well as advertising campaigns of the new media production companies describe the new Internet generation as novel, powerful and transformative. Therefore for Herring [5] the various classifications for the new generation reflect the interpretation of a demographic that was not used to growing up with digital media, but not by the today’s youth themselves who take digital media for granted. Other theorists [cf. 7] have mainly criticized applying too-powerful role to technology and a particular medium as such.

Furthermore, the process of defining a concept like “generation”, however, is a complicated matter as it raises questions about the structure and agency [7]. Some researchers [e.g. 6] have been using the concept of generationing in order to differentiate between children and adults. These differentiations are done mainly on the grounds of age and therefore do not pay enough attention to the developmental differences of growing up. According to Mannheim [8] generations need not be formed strictly in terms of the biological age but it also depends on how people interpret their life chances and how do they see themselves as having a shared identity. Therefore, Buckingham [7] has claimed that although generations may just be natural phenomena which occur because of the passing of the time, they can also be formed because their members, and possibly non-members as well, have defined meanings of generational membership. Hence, it is possible that some generations may start to demand greater social significant as the members of these generations are more self-reflexive and self-conscious than others (cf. [7]). Hereby, I prefer to view the new generation of Internet users’ through the lenses of self-socialisation (cf. [9]). The members of the digital generation take active part in their socialisation process and do not rely entirely on the guidance of adults.

The present article analyzes the use of online social networks (SNS), one of the most popular means of communicating online, by 11-12 year olds. The author views these popular online platforms as new versions of peer culture that are used by the children both for the identity constructions as well as for “anticipatory socialisation” [10].

1.1 Peer Culture’s Influence on Identity constructions

Childhood sociologist William Corsaro [11] has stated that „childhood socialization must be understood also as a social and collective process” as the first series of peer culture, i.e. “a stable set of activities or routines, artefacts, values and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers” is produced collectively with the peers. Gaining control of one’s life and sharing this control with the others are the two basic themes in peer cultures. Children, however, appropriate the control through play and games that serve a crucial role in their peer cultures.

In the present day context these initial peer cultures are not only formed in play groups and nursery schools, as Corsaro proposed, but also in the online world while communicating and playing together in different online environments. As children do not fully grasp the social knowledge of the adult world, they try to “creatively appropriate information from the adult world to produce their own unique peer cultures”[11]. In this way children also become part of the adult culture as they reproduce the elements and information gained from the adult world in their own creative manner.

While communicating in offline as well as online worlds people are always trying to obtain information about each other, in order to be able to know in advance what to expect and what kind of response to give. Erving Goffman was the first to emphasize the importance of impression management i.e. people often engage in activities in order "to convey an impression to others which it is in his interests to convey" [12]. Furthermore, individuals tend to accentuate and suppress certain aspects of the self depending on the context of situation. Whenever other persons are present, people tend to accentuate these aspects of the self that typically correspond to norms and ideals of the group the person belongs to, or wishes to belong to. Therefore, in order to find out what kind of qualities and features are thought to be sought by potential partners a person may have to “perform” several acts before receiving the approval they were looking for. In case of communicating online the impression management is formulated into a constant worry of how to construct ones virtual identity so that it would be appreciated and accepted among one’s peer group.

Jay L. Lemke [13] also claims „our identities are the product of a life in a community“, because due to the interaction with various people we are „in the process building up a cumulative repertoire of roles we can play, and with them of identities we can assume“. He [13] proposes that people have two kinds of identity concepts: „identity-in practice“ and „identity-in-timescales“. The former of which is similar to the Goffman’s theory about the identity performances and is used to refer to identity constructions on the short timescales that take place as small-group activities (e.g. playing role-playing computer-games or participating in Internet communities). The latter is a more long-term identity that is not determined by a single identity performance in a single situation, but is made up of several actions and different types of situations we encounter and therefore connected to our
habitus. Both of these identity notions cannot exist without the other as the two different views upon the same concept are interchangeably linked together. It could be claimed that while constructing profiles for a social networking site, young people practice several identity performances that need not be taken up for a long period of time. Therefore, constructing online profiles could also be viewed as an "auxiliary ego" [14] which was created in psychodrama in order to allow the protagonist to see "oneself" from aside [14].

According to Marlen Charlotte Larsen, who used the identity notions proposed by Lemke to analyze the identity performances of youngsters in a Danish social networking site Arto, youngsters are using „many different identity performances which are all linked to the individual, social, and historical lives of Arto users“ [15]. Larsen claims that in the context of social networking websites youngsters use their friends and the feedback received from them as „mediational means“ in order to reconstruct one’s identity [15].

1.2 Social Networking Sites as Spaces for Peer Culture

Social networking websites have become one amongst many online playgrounds available for present day children in the Internet. These online environments are still quite new phenomena however their popularity and influence is constantly growing. Besides the millions of people who play on the virtual playgrounds like MySpace, Friendster, and FaceBook in order to present themselves, interact with friends or socialize with new people, there are also social networking sites which are meant to connect people with common language or nationality (Rate in Estonia, Lunastrom in Sweden, Arto in Denmark etc), common geographical background (Blacksburg Electronic Village), professional background (LinkedIn), etc. Nevertheless, the basic idea behind all of these websites is universal. Social networking websites not only offer a convergence among the previously separate activities of email, downloading videos or music, diaries, and photo albums; but through these means create an opportunity for self-expression, sociability and creativity for millions of people. Furthermore, according to Sonia Livingstone [16] “creating and networking online content is becoming an integral means of managing one’s identity, lifestyle and social relations”. Our interest in social networking sites is related to the fact that young people consider these new platforms as “their space, visible to the peer group more than to adult surveillance” [16]. Without the recognizable surveillance of adults, children not only start to “explore the social matrix of relating to others” but they also feel safer when trying out and displaying different constructions and reconstructions of their identity [17].

2 METHOD AND DATA

In the following sections I apply the theoretical framework to the analysis of data drawn from an empirical study analyzing the Rate profiles of 11-12 year old boys and girls. Children in this age usually step out of relatively peaceful developmental phase (in psychoanalytical tradition called latent phase) and enter a phase of pre-adolescence, where all the aspects of personal development (e.g. sexual development, social relations with peers, gaining independency from parents etc) are extremely vivid and rapid. My intention was to capture this borderline between “childish” and “adolescent” games.

The search engine in rate.ee was used for sampling. The age range and gender were inserted in the engine in order to find profiles of youngsters belonging to the 11-12 age group. The engine displayed only the first 300 girls or boys, depending on the search, who were currently online and whose age matched the search criteria. Search engine displayed 30 profiles on a page from which every first profile was selected for the analysis. My sample consisted of children who were active users of the website and were therefore well aware of the expectations and norms expected to be fulfilled in order to be fully accepted among the community of users. All in all 10 profiles of girls and 10 profiles of boys were selected. Six girls and five boys from the sample were 12 years old, four girls and five boys 11 years old.

Content analysis was used in order to analyze the data provided in the textual parts of the profiles. The main focus of the analysis was to find out how much personal information the children displayed on the profiles as well as what kind of hobbies, interest and tastes children proclaim to have. Furthermore, I also analyzed the communities children belonged to.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Socio-Dramatic Role-Play on the Profiles

The analysis of the textual profiles was made in order to analyze the interests the children proclaim to have. In case of the girls, 21 categories of interests were created based on the 179 different interests expressed by the
girls. In case of the boys, 19 categories included 160 interests enlisted on the profiles of young men. It must be added that all of the labels that stand for the interests are created by the users of Rate. Children can either use the search engine to search for the interests that they would like to include on their profile, or create a totally new label to express their particular interest.

One of the most popular category among the interests’ of children was named “Rebellious youth”. The labels belonging to the category were made up of different rebellious expressions that could be regarded as part of the socio-dramatic role-play suggested by Corsaro [18]. Children relish taking on and expressing power with the use of expressions like “Tell.it.straight.Up.To.My.Face.Not.Speak.Behind.My.Back.”, “schoolpetrolmatchesbomb”; “IamwhatIamIfYouDon’tLikeItThenPissOff”, or “Itsbettertorunmyyouthouthannottousetitall”, etc. These communities are created in order to develop the “strategies of resistance” [19] against the imposed restrictions, regulations and rules the children have to submit to in their life-worlds. While belonging to these communities children are performing the images of rebellious youngsters who are just trying to go past the rules created by their parents and teachers in the offline society as the online world gives them more freedom to test the boundaries between the right and wrong. The youngsters seem also very much aware of the freedom of expression the online world gives them, as they see these kinds of platforms only as a place for themselves without the restrictions made by the parents or teachers.

Furthermore, children had also joined in several communities that could be viewed as online spaces of socio-dramatic role-play. The majority of communities of this kind e.g. “Help, my parents won’t let me live!”, “We do not break the rules, we just make them ourselves”, “I just like forbidden things”, reflected the rebellious lifestyle of youngsters. By joining these communities, children seem “use the dramatic license of imaginative play to project to the future - a time when they will be in charge and in control of themselves and others” [18].

Corsaro [20] has also discussed the development of sub-groups and hierarchies inside the sub-groups of children which have formed due to the resistance to rules imposed by adults. Children organize these groups so as to govern themselves and maintain social order in the group. For instance, there were communities in Rate where children could take a role of authoritative figures in order to give advice and share their opinions and pieces of wisdom with others. Children’s agency is visible in communities like “Tough man does not smoke”, “All girls are worthy to be treated like princesses”, “Life is too short to waist it on people who do not care about you”, etc where children are seriously engaged in moral issues to influence their peers.

Besides the communities where children could practice the feeling of empowerment from taking up adult roles there were several communities where children represented different aspects related to being young and the lifestyle of youngsters. Communities like “Music is our freedom”, “MSN is our freedom” or “Thinking left and laughing all the time” were popular both among both of the sexes. In comparison to the communities where power and control are exhibited there were also communities which emphasized their young age and problems connected to being young (e.g. “Help, I’m a minor!”), “I hate math!”, “We are the ones who get the strange looks”).

In comparison to the communities and interests that emphasized being in control and empowerment, the communities where some of the girls had joined demonstrated clear evidence of struggles children have to face while growing up. These communities that were described by sayings like “I’m sorry I can’t be perfect”, “sorry that I exist” or “I am ugly” refer to the pressures girls feel in their everyday lives. Joining these kinds of communities can on the one hand be viewed as public declarations of low self-esteem which seem to be vivid result of the expectations of peers and family members as well as the existing beauty norms of the society. On the other hand, the interviews with young experts showed also other possibilities in decoding these communities.

3.2 Construction of the Gendered Self on the Profiles

Studies have referred to the “specialized relationship with friends” [21] that the children have inside their peer cultures. Therefore it was no surprise to find that the importance of friends was also stressed under the interests’ section of the profiles by both the girls and the boys. In some of the cases youngsters used expressions like “I think that friends are all that matters” or just mentioned being interested in “friends”. The importance of love and close relationships in the lives of the young is also visible in confessing their true feelings of devotion with different sayings like “if-you’d-only-knew-how-much-you-mean-to-me” or “When I say I care I really do” or just by including different emoticons that express love (L), or hugging (K) as their interests. Compared to the younger children, preadolescent children are said to have more stable concepts of friendships and therefore when

2 The sayings are translated from Estonian and spelled in a way as it was done by the youngsters.
founding “social alliances and secure friendship relations they also separate themselves from others” [22]. This kind of separation was also visible in case of Rate profiles where children enlisted the names (e.g. Karl, Sandra, Kertu) or nicknames (e.g. Ellu, Raku) of their friends in order to express the special role these friends have in their lives.

Typical heterosexual norm is represented on the profiles of both sexes as in all of the profiles that presented some kind of a romantic interest; it was expressed towards the opposite sex. For instance, boys were emphasizing their interest in girls, chicks and the opposite gender in general and girls declared being interested in boys. The sex-life and interests connected to the physical love-making are yet not extremely popular, however, already represented as interests in some of the profiles. For example, two of the girls had inserted a saying “fancyakiss?come&ask&I’llgiveyou” which would hint at a more physical relationship and two of the boys confirmed their interest in kissing and sex.

Gender differentiation in peer cultures is said to reach its peak also in the period of preadolescents [22]. Differences among genders on the SNS profiles were exhibited for instance when speaking about one’s likes and dislikes. Compared to the boys, girls more frequently enlisted the names of different movie stars, singers, rock-groups, and other celebrities in their interests section. Boys, however, showed more interest in naming their preferences in terms of music-styles, films, TV-shows, etc.

Gender-specific taste was also displayed while naming the things and objects the children liked. For example, girls are interested in more girly-stuff like chocolate, strawberries, photos, the sun, compared to the typically masculine tastes of boys which include things like computers, msn-messenger, Internet, money, bicycles, etc. In comparison to the girls boys also emphasized stereotypically masculine interests in motor vehicles and sports, the categories which were rarely mentioned by the girls. Furthermore, the favourite activities of girls differed greatly from that of the boys. When girls proclaimed to be interested in very feminine hobbies like drawing, singing, dancing, writing, etc., the boys preferred sleeping, jumping, watching TV or listening music.

4 DISCUSSION

In this paper I argued that children’s identity play on the social networking website profiles could be viewed as collective reproductions of childrens peer culture. I used the case-study of 11-12 year old users of rate.ee, the most popular social networking site in Estonia, in order to analyse how young children construct their virtual selves on the profiles. The instances of socio-dramatic role-play and gendered play found on the profiles allow me to postulate that social networking websites give children a much needed opportunity to experiment with their identity constructions. Furthermore, the elements made up of verbal chanting (e.g. types of self descriptions made upon the play between letters) and other types of collective fun and humour (e.g. belonging to certain communities) that Corsaro [11] has mentioned as aspects of the peer cultures are clearly visible on the textual parts of the profiles in Rate. The analysis of profiles also gives a reason to state that these identity performances of children are partly reproductions of the adult culture that are „generated spontaneously, produced routinely, and shared communally within the peer culture” [11]. Children seem to carefully monitor the profiles of other to see what kind of rules and norms should be met while making their own profile entries. In order to get acceptance by the whole community children consciously make use of common symbol system recognised by the peers. Thus, it could be stated that the children appropriate their online identity games „to fit with the values and concerns of their peer culture while simultaneously developing social, cognitive, and communicate skills” [23].

Children seem to be viewing the medium as a place of their own as they seem more relaxed and open about trying out various identities. The analysis of the textual profiles of 11-12 year olds’ give a reason to state that children are ready to explore and test the boundaries between the accepted and the unaccepted among the community of online peers. Although many adults may perceive some of the components of these online identities of young children as not suitable or even outrageous, children themselves just seem to appreciate the opportunity to experiment in order to be able to build up an identity-across-timescales.

Furthermore, according to Corsaro and Nelson [24] „children’s literacy abilities are often enhanced by social interaction with peers”. The influences of peer cultures’ style and netspeak are clearly visible on the textual parts of the profiles of rate users. It could be postulated that “young children actively contribute to their own literacy acquisition, as well as the literacy acquisition of their peers, by creatively using their skills and abilities to produce written and artistic artefacts that reflect their cultures” [24]. Hence, social networking websites could also be regarded as one of the favourite places for online content creation for young children. The language play taken up on the textual profiles of children is full of creativity however the entries does not necessarily be viewed in a positive way in terms of formal education. Rather than supporting the creative self-presentations of
children, I am afraid, the majority of the schools would just categorize the style and form of these online messages as perfect examples of deficient literary skills [25]. In order to at least slightly diminish the differences in understandings among the digital generation and others, reverse socialisation [26] is needed.

5. REFERENCES


