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Adolescents' perspectives on the role of ICTs in everyday life: An ethnographic study on practices, representations, and emotions.

Presentation

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Adolescents' perspectives on the role of ICTs in everyday life: An ethnographic study on practices, representations, and emotions.

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Abstract
The present contribution builds upon the preliminary results of a research project funded by the European Commission, and aimed at documenting the role of ICTs in adolescent development and family communication. A transdisciplinary approach of developmental/social psychology and media studies, and mixed-method procedures, including innovative ethnographic methods, informed the research project. Twenty Italian adolescents (14-16 years) and their families were recruited through secondary schools and were involved in the research over a one-year period. For the purpose of this contribution, I discuss results concerning the practices, representations, and emotions of adolescents using ICTs', and illustrate child-centered ethnographic procedures, namely Subjective Evidence Based Ethnography (SEBE), i.e. first-person perspective data gathering via micro-cameras (subcam). The analyses of video-recordings, made by adolescents, leverage insights on the use of ICTs in everyday-life situations (homework, dinner, leisure time): (a) Adolescents showed a preference for a combination of old and new digital media (smartphones and TV), (b) smartphones afforded the extension of social and cognitive offline activities (c) negative emotions were associated with 'perpetual connection', i.e. full-time contact. Processes of smooth/rough domestication and strategies developed by adolescents to deal with the use of ICTs are discussed.

Summary of the contribution

Recent extensive research reports (e.g. www.eukidsonline.net) commenting upon research in the field of ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) impact on child development and family functioning, noted a prevalence of studies based on quantitative methods, and a neglect of focus on mobile, convergent and emerging technologies. They also identified a persistent focus on risks and harm rather than opportunities and benefits and the lack of information on the role of adults, safety mediation and their effectiveness. More empirical evidence is needed to overcome these gaps and provide a closer explanation of the role of ICTs in the lives of today's children and their parents.

The present contribution builds upon the preliminary results of a two-year research project, funded by the European Commission, and aimed at providing more evidences on the role of ICTs in adolescent development and family communication. Two research questions guided the research project: (1) What is the impact of communication through digital media on family interactions and child development during adolescence? (2) How can we gather and analyze data on the mediating role of digital devices in real life situations? Starting from these questions, three specific goals have been investigated:

(a) To capture the actual use of digital devices, i.e. all the technologies adolescents use to create, maintain, and transform communication in different situations in their everyday life: home, school, free time.

(b) To better understand the role of digital devices in parent-adolescent interaction, by understanding the mutually shaping processes of ICTs, child development and family communication.

(c) To clarify the opportunities and risks of ICTs in family communication and child development, documenting the good/bad practices (e.g., strategies, parenting styles, etc.) thereby providing parents, practitioners (educators, clinicians, social workers) and stakeholders (e.g., media providers) with operational advice.

The project relies on a transdisciplinary framework of developmental/social psychology and media and communications studies, and a mixed-method approach based on self-reports and innovative digital ethnography procedures. Twenty Italian adolescents (14-16 years) and their families were recruited through secondary schools in two cities of Northern Italy, and were involved in the research project over one year.

In the present contribution, I intend to discuss results concerning, in particular, (a) the use of ICTs by adolescents (the first goal of the project), and (b) child-centered ethnographic methods, namely Subjective Evidence Based Ethnography (SEBE) (Lahlou et al., 2015). SEBE consists of asking participants to wear the subcam, a miniature high-definition video-camera enabling first-person perspective video capture. The subcam was worn at eye-level by the adolescents themselves. It captures: (1) what the subject sees, (2) what s/he does, at least with their hands (actions in situ) and (3) what s/he hears and says, thus providing rich, highly situated ethnographic data. The resulting subfilms provide a good view of the action itself from the wearer's perspective, perfect for studying the use of digital technologies, especially mobile devices. Adolescents were provided with specific instructions on how to use the subcam and what to record, namely: "(1) You must wear the *subcam* four times in a ten-day time span; (2) Test the *subcam* on your glasses (or those given to you) wearing it during the weekend and at any time during the day and report any impressions; (3) Wear the *subcam* everyday (max 8 hours) on weekdays; (4) Wear the *subcam* on weekend days (max 8 hours); (4) Wear the *subcam* in at least a situation you consider free time (max 4 hours)". Once adolescents completed the recordings, an interview (Replay Interview) was held at school where each adolescent, together with the researcher, reviewed and commented on the video-clips (subfilms) thus allowing the analysis of adolescents' reasoning processes during the action. The visual cues triggered the recall of mental states and emotions associated to the use of the digital devices. In addition, adolescents collect data about their own activities and comment upon their behaviors, thereby becoming real collaborators in the research process.

Analyses of subfilms and replay interviews were supported by Nvivo software. A coding system for visual and textual material was devised. The codes were developed using principles of activity theory (Lahlou, 2011) and domestication theory (Haddon, 2011): For the analysis of adolescents' practices with ICTs, actions and operations were identified (e.g. what adolescents do during dinnertime, frequency of use, in which moment of the day a device is used, etc.), and the accomplishment of the domestication of the media, that is its incorporation in everyday routines and tasks, was examined. For the analysis of replay interviews, a content analysis was conducted focusing on the goals and motives that guided practices with ICTs, and the positive or negative emotions elicited by ICTs' use.

Preliminary results leverage insights on the role of ICTs in different situations of adolescents' everyday life (e.g. homework time, dinner, leisure time). The analysis of subfilms showed that adolescents privileged the combination of old and new media, specifically TV and smartphones, while the use of computers and tablets was limited. This result is in line with surveys on culture-specific use of digital media (Mascheroni & Vincent, 2016). Smartphones, in particular, afforded the 'extension' of several social and cognitive offline activities, such as doing homework, contacting friends, being entertained, etc. Consistently, most adolescents seemed to smoothly domesticate these devices developing specific strategies, such as monitoring the time spent on using their

smartphones or prioritizing answers to chat messages. A minority, instead, showed a 'rough' domestication, i.e. smartphones interfered with everyday life routines.

Interviews' content analysis accounted for the processes underlying adolescents' practices: Adolescents acknowledged the opportunities offered by smartphones for learning, entertainment, and social relations; however, they also reported negative aspects, especially concerning 'perpetual contact', i.e. full-time connection afforded by mobile devices. Mixed feelings emerged with respect to smartphones' use: Adolescents showing problems in the domestication process also reported anxiety and the feeling of being addicted to smartphones, while adolescents showing a smooth domestication process reported less emotional problems and better strategies.

In conclusion, adolescents take 'bittersweet' stances toward the use of ICTs, especially mobile multi-function technologies such as smartphones. The analysis of parental mediation practices and family communication could productively complement the understanding of the factors that contribute to smooth or rough domestication processes, and the emotions, and representations associated to them.

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