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Thème Numérique et lien social

Children, internet cultures and online social networks

Introduction

The internet currently occupies a core role in cultural practices by children. It has replaced TV as the main purveyor of mass culture to younger generations, with the added-value of allowing not just cultural consumption but also cultural production.

Giving voice to the children, this article will look specifically at the use of the internet by children as an instrument of both cultural consumption and cultural production. By focusing on online activities and preferred websites, it aims at understanding not just the cultural practices of children but also how those, in turn, help building peer cultures. Online Social Networks play a particular role in this issue and children and young people are among their most intensive users. They are multidimensional tools that bring together different assets from other pre-existing services: they can be used both for communication, for sociability, for self-expression, as well as for entertainment and leisure or for educational aims. They allow maintaining, re-kindling or forging new social ties. These sites feed and strengthen pre-existing sociability ties from the real world, becoming structural building blocks of a peer culture increasingly shaped by technological innovations. To be or not to be in these networks, where online and offline realms nourish each other, means belonging or being excluded from a shared condition of childhood, where the values of communication, self-disclosure, autonomy and experimentalism have acquired an extraordinary relevance.

Under analysis will be issues such as how children use these sites, what sort of material they use to build their profiles (images, texts, videos, audio recordings), with whom are they connected to in the virtual world and how does that relate to 'real world' networks and whether these sites help build communities of shared interest in cultural products (films, music, books, etc.). Online social networks will be examined within wider configurations of uses, attitudes and representations regarding the internet by children.

Framework

The classical essay by Isaiah Berlin¹ has put forward the notion that there are two main definitions of culture, emanating from the French and the German traditions. The first, commonly used in social anthropology, concerns «some kind of mode of living, some kind of general pattern of existence or life which a particular body of persons suppose themselves to possess, to which they attach a certain value, and which they feel that they express in their lives, in their actions, in their thoughts, in their feelings»; the second, mostly connected to the consumption of goods and leisure activities (art, music, literature, film, sports, fashion, design), is defined as «culture in the sense of *haute culture*, culture as principally concerned with what might be called the expressions of the spirit in the realm of art, in the realm of thought, perhaps in the realm of the sciences as well».

The two definitions are actually linked, in the sense that cultural consumption also contributes to engendering communities. According to Cardon and Granjon², «Many social relations are constructed, in different ways, around cultural and recreational activities, without for

¹ Isaiah BERLIN, *The origins of cultural history*, Gauss Seminars, Princeton, <http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/nachlass/>, 1973, p. 3.

² Dominique CARDON and Fabien GRANJON, «Social networks and cultural practices A case study of young avid screen users in France», *Social Networks* 27, 2005, p. 302.

all that being limited to them. The reasons are multiple: these activities are often performed in a group, they provide subject matter for conversations, they are the objects of common tastes, and, finally, related objects are exchanged (books, magazines, CDs, audio or video tapes, etc.).».

This article will also strive to combine the two definitions, by examining childhood peer cultures and consumption of culture by children, against the background of information and communication technologies.

Very few studies have dealt with cultural consumption by young children, focusing instead mainly on adolescents and adults. One of the most notable exceptions is the work of S. Octobre³, who, through a large scale questionnaire survey, inquired into the leisure and cultural practices of French children aged from 6 to 14 years old. From hobbies to sport, from reading to attending cultural facilities, it not only gives a detailed picture of cultural consumption by children, but also connects it to socialisation processes by family, school, media and peer group. No similar research has been done regarding Portuguese children⁴, other than study on the uses of time by adults and children⁵.

Corsaro⁶ is one of the first researchers that has taken an interest in children's peer cultures, defined as «a stable set of activities or routines, artefacts, values, and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers». By mainly carrying out ethnographic research in playgrounds and nursery schools and paying particular attention to games, the author coined the concept of «interpretative reproduction» that sums up the idea that «Children produce and participate in their own unique peer cultures by creatively appropriating information from the adult world to address their own peer concerns. (...) children are not simply internalising society and culture, but are also actively contributing to cultural production and change.». However, nowadays peer cultures are not just formed in the «real world» of classmates and friends, «but also in the online world while communicating and playing together in different online environments»⁷. In the past few years we have witnessed the emergence of a «Net Generation»⁸ of «Digital Natives»⁹, children who grew up surrounded by technological devices which have changed the way they play, learn or generally think and behave. As some authors¹⁰ put it, «new digital media pervade the lives of young people» and statistical data seems to confirm it. According to the latest Eurostat data (2009), 79 percent of European (EU27) households with dependent children have internet access at home. That figure rises above 95 per cent in the Nordic countries, Germany, and the Netherlands and descends to under 70 per cent in the Southern countries (Italy, Spain, Greece) and is even lower (under 60 per cent) in the newest member states. Portugal is close to the European average at 72 per cent. In what regards social network sites, according to the Flash Eurobarometer 2008, 56 percent of internet users aged between 15 and 24 had a profile or sent messages in one of these sites; the Pew Project (2009) revealed that 73 percent of American teenagers are users, 55 percent in the 12 to 13 years group and 82 percent in the 14 to 17 years. Meanwhile, the EU Kids on line project found that among the surveyed children (9-16 years old), in 2010, 60% had visited a social networking profile, 59% sent/received emails or 61% used instant messaging in the previous month¹¹.

³ Sylvie OCTOBRE, *Les Loisirs culturels des 6-14 ans*, Paris, DEP-ministère de la Culture et de la Communication/La Documentation française, 2004.

⁴ See Ana Nunes de ALMEIDA, *Para uma sociologia da infância*, Lisbon, Imprensa de Ciências Sociais, 2009.

⁵ Maria Guilhermina Calado LOPES and Edviges Coelho, «Diferenças e semelhanças no uso do tempo das crianças e dos adultos em Portugal», *International Association of Time Use Researchers Conference*, Lisbon, 2002.

⁶ William A. CORSARO «Early childhood education, children's peer cultures, and the future of childhood», *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 8: 2, 2000, p. 92.

⁷ Andra SIIBAK, «Online peer culture and interpretative reproduction in children's social networking profiles, ICT and generations», *The Good, the Bad and the Challenging Conference, COST 298 Conference*, Copenhagen, <http://miha2.ef.uni-lj.si/cost298/gbc2009-proceedings/papers/P184.pdf>, 2009, p. 2.

⁸ Don TAPSCOTT, *Growing up digital: The rise of the Net Generation*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1996.

⁹ Mark PRENSKY, «Digital natives, digital immigrants», *On the Horizon*, 9 (5), 2001.

¹⁰ Katie DAVIS et al, *Social Development in the Era of New Digital Media*, Research Paper n. 60, Good Work Project, <http://www.goodworkproject.org/research/devminds.htm>, 2009, p. 2.

¹¹ Sonia LIVINGSTONE, Leslie HADDON, Anke GÖRZING and Kjartan ÓLAFSSON, *Risks and safety on the internet: the perspective of European children survey of 9-16 year olds and their parents*. London: LSE, 2010, p.38.

Social network sites, along with instant messaging and email, play a major role in maintaining connections and peer relationships in the everyday life of children. And they also build a sense of community: in the words of boyd¹², «Through these imagined egocentric communities, participants are able to express who they are and locate themselves culturally».

Methodology

This paper is based on an ongoing research project, carried out at the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon, funded by the Gulbenkian Foundation and coordinated by Ana Nunes de Almeida. The project aims to characterise the uses and representations of the internet by children.

The data presented here comes from two main sources, a quantitative survey and qualitative interviews with children. The survey was carried out in the Spring of 2008 and was applied to 3049 children (aged 8-17 years old) in the final years of each level of compulsory education (4th, 6th and 9th grades) at Portuguese public and private schools located in contrasting areas of the country. Self-completed by the children, the questionnaire focused on computers and internet use, at home and at school.

The interviews with 158 children were carried out between October 2009 and March 2010. The children, aged between 8 and 16, were also students in the final years of each level of compulsory education (4th, 6th and 9th grades) at Portuguese public and private schools located in three areas of the country (the two main metropolitan areas, Lisbon and Oporto, and one mid-sized town inland, Viseu). The interview script followed a similar structure to that of the survey, but some issues were dealt with in more depth, namely how children use the internet¹³.

Cultural consumption by children on the internet

Nowadays, family homes are full of technological devices, emerging as «technological homes»: 90 percent of the surveyed children have one computer at home, 48 percent have more than one computer; there are also very significant proportions of children that with a TV set in their own room (62 percent), a video-game console (73 percent), a MP3 player (79 percent) and a mobile phone (83 percent)¹⁴. At the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the internet is a familiar tool for the majority of children in the western world.

The internet has an enormous potential to enhance user's access to cultural production through diverse ways and processes, reducing geographical, temporal, informational and relational constraints to artistic manifestation¹⁵. Major institutions of fine arts display and performance (Museums, Art Centres, Philharmonic Orchestras, Theatres and Operas) are nowadays present in the World Wide Web, where their production and services rendered may be accessed and purchased by consumers all over the world. However, the Internet is a considerably greater conveyor of popular culture in its massive manifestations (pop music, rock and roll, cinema and television) and probably the strongest disseminator of specific subcultures and fringes.

Children are a special kind of producers and consumers of digital cultural artefacts transported by the internet. Their cultural tastes are specially oriented to pop culture products, conveyed by entertainment media (particularly music, television, cinema and videogames – or even an amalgamated by-product of all these). According to survey data, 84.8 per cent of children usually visit video websites, 47.4 per cent websites dedicated to arts and entertainment and 27.1 per cent

¹² danah BOYD, «Friends, Friendsters, and MySpace Top 8: Writing Community Into Being on Social Network Sites.» *First Monday* 11:12, http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue11_12/boyd/index.html, December 2006, p. 2.

¹³ We are grateful to Tiago Carvalho, who has done a remarkable work of content analysis on the transcribed interviews.

¹⁴ Ana Nunes de ALMEIDA, Ana DELICADO and Nuno de Almeida ALVES, *Crianças e Internet: Usos e Representações, a Família e a Escola* (Relatório do Inquérito), Lisbon: ICS/Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, http://www.criinternet.ics.ul.pt/icscriancas/content/documents/relat_cr_int.pdf 2008, 2008, p. 33.

¹⁵ Fabrice ROCHELANDET and Mohamed El Hedi AROURI, «Les technologies de l'information et de la communication: Vecteurs de diversification des pratiques culturelles?», HAL Working Papers, Version 1, http://halshs.archivesouvertes.fr/docs/00/28/15/26/PDF/Rochelandet_Arouri_pratiques_2008.pdf, 22 May 2008, p. 6.

radio stations and podcasts. Regarding activities performed through the internet, 73.3 per cent of children say they usually make downloads of music, films, games or other programmes. The internet can also be used to buy cultural products (music, books, cinema tickets), but only 21 per cent of children say they do so.

There is a classical and close relationship between listening to music and personal identity construction in youth studies¹⁶. If music can be interpreted as the soundtrack of adolescents' creation and evolution of cultural biographies¹⁷, then YouTube is certainly their jukebox: over half the interviewed children stated they used the internet to listen to music. For some children it is the first choice when they go online and by far the most frequently mentioned webpage in the interviews:

«I open iTunes to see if there's anything new or something that interests me (...) then it's YouTube, it's YouTube right away» (boy, 9th grade)

«YouTube [is my favourite site] (...) Because you can do more things, in my view. (...) You can listen to music, which is what I like best (...) You can watch videos (...) Funny stuff» (girl, 9th grade)

«we are the YouTube generation» (boy, 9th grade)

Some show a proficient use of the available services:

«I often use YouTube to watch videos, I use e-mule to download songs and i-tunes to convert them to mp3» (girl, 9th grade).

Many children pay little attention to the video clips, since they usually listen to music while they are doing other things, such as playing computer games, doing their homework, chatting online, carrying out internet searches, in a clear multitasking way of using electronic devices:

«It's all at the same time. I turn on the music and then I'm in Messenger listening to music» (girl, 6th grade).

Unlike other ways of consuming music (on TV, radio or CD), YouTube gives more freedom to the listener (what to listen, when to listen) and widens the field of possibilities, since it allows searching for other songs and artists:

«I also go often to YouTube, I like listening to some songs on YouTube (...) I can listen to new songs that I had never heard before, you can search for lyrics, you get a long list of things, you sometimes look for just one word and you get a lot of songs or several videos» (girl, 9th grade).

Children also visit their favourite artists' websites, looking not just for music but also for information and photos:

«I always go to a blog of my favourite singers, I love them, my mother says I'm addicted to them, I have over twelve hundred pictures of them, I have their photos all over my bedroom walls. My mother is astonished that I like them so much. I usually visit their blog, to see if it has something new.» (girl, 9th grade).

Illegal practices such as downloading music are far less frequent (or less frequently acknowledged):

¹⁶ S. OCTOBRE, *Les loisirs...*, *op cit*, p. 148; Sian LINCOLN, «Feeling the noise: Teenagers, bedrooms and Music», *Leisure Studies* Vol. 24 N. ° 4, 399-414, 2005; Andy BENNETT, «Subcultures or neo-tribes? Rethinking the relationship between youth, style and musical taste», *Sociology*, Vol. 33, n° 3, 1999.

¹⁷Tia DENORA, *Music and Everyday Life*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

«I download from the net. (...) I always use the same site because it's easier, I know it well (...) It's always open in the task panel (...) I click on it, I write the name of the song, I download it and in 5 seconds it saves it in my music. (...) it's fast.» (boy, 9th grade).

However, some children are aware of the dangers of illegal downloads:

«Not to do illegal downloads because they almost always bring viruses. It's not necessary (...) A child that doesn't know how to use the internet can download illegal stuff and create a lot of trouble» (boy, 9th grade).

Another very common online cultural practice performed by children is watching videos. Besides music videos, YouTube gives access to a wealth of audiovisual material, from short humorous clips to whole films and television programmes:

«My favourite site is YouTube, because YouTube is almost a whole world on itself, I search for something and extraordinary things appear. I can watch almost everything on YouTube. (...) I watch very old movies, because I like old movies, or if I miss an episode and go on YouTube and watch it» (girl, 9th grade)

Some websites visited by children give access to full-length movies and TV series, either by downloading or online streaming:

«I go to a website, I don't remember the name, it has videos, almost like television but only better because it doesn't have advertisements and it has more recent episodes, it has all the series and I watch it as if I was watching television» (girl, 9th grade).

Traditional media are being much affected by competition from the internet and children seem to prefer the freedom and control awarded by new media, although there is no statistical data to confirm whether the internet has already dethroned television as the premier form of occupying leisure time¹⁸. However, there is also complementarity between old and new media: children visit the websites of TV channels, look online for TV schedules, perform internet searches on issues they have seen mentioned on TV.

«I sometimes visit the History Channel or the Discovery Channel websites» (boy, 6th grade);

«I usually look for the schedules of TV programmes» (girl, 9th grade).

«When it's necessary I do searches (...) Sometimes I'm watching TV and they talk about something that I don't know very well what it is and even if someone explains it to me, I may be curious» (girl, 6th grade).

Reading is a less common leisure pursuit¹⁹ in children than listening to music or watching audiovisual media²⁰ (although books are relatively common in the surveyed children's houses, more than that was initially expected). However, some children also show an interest in literature that can be nourished through the internet:

«I love reading books so I usually look for what's new from my favourite authors, what's available» (girl, 9th grade).

¹⁸ S. OCTOBRE, *Les loisirs...*, *op cit*, p. 130; M. G. LOPES and E. COELHO, «Diferenças e semelhanças...», *op cit*, p. 12.

¹⁹ Although books are relatively common in the surveyed children's houses, more than that was initially expected.

²⁰ S. OCTOBRE, *Les loisirs...*, *op cit*, p. 212; M. G. LOPES and E. COELHO, «Diferenças e semelhanças...», *op cit*, p. 12.

The internet is a remarkable tool for democratising the access to art. Museum websites, high quality reproductions of paintings, live performances streamed online can be more accessible, both geographically and financially, than their «real world» counterparts. And indeed it was found that a small minority of children declare art pages as their favourite or perform web searches about art, both visual and performing arts:

«[I search for] a lot of photos, because next year I'm choosing Arts as my secondary education area, so I'm looking at Renaissance paintings all the time and I sometimes write biographies on art» (girl, 9th grade);

«I go to Google and write something like Edvard Munch and then look at some of his paintings, like 'The scream' or 'The vampire'» (boy, 4th grade);

«what I search for is things about dance, I'm compiling a dossier on dance so I search for news about classical ballet, contemporary ballet» (girl, 9th grade).

Using the internet may be a vast media experience for children and adolescents. It can be well articulated with other media as television or books, as a reference guide or information resource. Sometimes, when used simultaneously with other resources, it may contribute to the emergence of a multitasked media saturated environment. But the internet can also be an all-encompassing media experience, absorbing all others at children's convenience. YouTube is not only a proficiently used «jukebox» that adjusts the ideal «soundtrack» to the specific moments of children and adolescents' identity construction but it may also integrate other fundamental elements of the media landscape in the self-development of their cultural biographies (namely cinema, television shows, cartoons and videos shows like «candid-camera» or «jackass», along with private production and uploading of «funny videos»). To a much lesser extent, Internet can also be used as a search engine and product retrieval for consuming other art manifestations, such as literature, photography and dance.

Peer cultures on the internet

Kyratzis's review article²¹ on children's peer cultures allocates a central role to communication. Peer talk is shown to be a key element in constructing identities, organising the social structures of groups and resisting adult culture. The internet is a powerful instrument for generating and maintaining communication between children. At a time when the outside public world is increasingly seen as filled with danger and risks²², parents encourage children to stay home and use electronic media to stay in touch with friends. Thus it comes as no surprise the high levels of communication tools use in children. According to survey data, 77.5 per cent of children usually send and receive emails, 75.3 use instant messaging and 50.4 make voice calls via the internet. Less frequent is the use of chat services: only 27.2 per cent.

Both online and offline, children frequently share information about their favourite sites, especially concerning music and films, via email and instant messaging:

«my friends usually say that there's a cool film on YouTube or a cool song for me to watch. It's normally them because they know more than me about it. A friend of mine taught me all I know about ipods. (...) I have more or less the same tastes in music and films and we also share articles about some actor that we like or about a film.» (girl, 9th grade)

²¹ Amy KYRATZIS, «Talk and interaction among children and the co-construction of peer groups and peer culture», *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 33, 2004.

²² Sara HOLLOWAY and Gill VALENTINE (2004), *Cyberkids – children in the information age*, London, Routledge; Daniel BUCKINGHAM (2006), *After the death of childhood – growing up in the age of digital media*, Cambridge, Polity Press

Or through blogs:

«I created a blog in the 8th grade (...) it was about dolphins and about a musical film that I liked» (girl, 9th grade).

However, social network sites are probably now the most powerful instrument for building an online children peer culture: «Online spaces such as Facebook, *World of Warcraft*, and YouTube provide adolescents with new contexts to explore their identities and evaluate others' responses»²³. According to Siibak²⁴, «Social networking websites have become one amongst many online playgrounds available for present day children in the Internet (...) 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». Livingstone²⁵ emphasises that is the possibility of content creation that will «facilitate an innovative peer culture among young people locally and globally».

61.8 per cent of surveyed children declared that they usually visit social network sites. That figure is slightly lower in interviewed children: around half the sample (this can be explained by the age discrepancy between samples). However, interviews give a more detailed picture of how social networks are used.

The most frequently used social networks are Hi5 and Facebook and some children even use both. Younger children tend to favour other sites that combine the functions of games and social networks, such as Habbo Hotel (this multiplayer virtual world requires the creation of an online identity or avatar and allows communication between players). Some children start using social networks following suggestions from family and friends or because of the games, but the majority are motivated by their function of maintaining contact and communication with friends: «Social network sites have emerged as hubs of adolescent interpersonal communication. (...) Adolescents communicate with each other in different ways on these sites. They can choose to write a short, public message directly on a friend's profile page, or they can send a longer message through a private messaging system analogous to email. Both types of messages might be used to carry on a conversation with a friend or to make plans for an offline activity»²⁶. Children's interviews corroborate this:

«[I like] Hi5 because I can look at my friends' photos, what they have been doing and we can share things that have happened to us and that are funny (...) when we go out, when we go to the movies and something funny happens. (...) [I write] comments or I comment on my friends' photos» (boy, 9th grade).

«There are lots of things you can do on Hi5. (...) When a friend of mine tells me 'when you get home go and see that' it stays on my head all day. (...) I can't live without it, it's a full blown dependency. Once I wanted to delete my profile, I did something bad in school and my mother took my computer for a week. It was driving me crazy, hell, I couldn't go on Hi5!» (girl, 9th grade)

One of the core features of social networks sites are the profiles that users build themselves²⁷. Profiles are a privileged medium for enacting identity, since users choose what

²³ K. DAVIS *et al*, *Social development...*, *op cit*, p. 6.

²⁴ A. SIIBAK, «Online peer culture...», *op cit*, p. 3.

²⁵ Sonia LIVINGSTONE, «Taking Risky Opportunities in Youthful Content Creation: Teenagers' Use of Social Networking Sites for Intimacy, Privacy and Self-Expression», *New Media & Society*, vol. 10, n° 3, 2008, p. 393.

²⁶ K. DAVIS *et al*, *Social development...*, *op cit*, p. 16-17.

²⁷ D. BOYD, «Friends, Friendsters...», *op cit*.

information is shown and even how it is visually displayed: «for younger teenagers, self-attention is enacted through constructing an elaborate, highly stylised statement of identity as display. Thus a visually ambitious, 'pick and mix' profile, that frequently remixes borrowed images and other content to express continually shifting tastes offers for some a satisfactorily 'successful' self, liked and admired by peers»²⁸. The core elements of these profiles are personal data (name, age, location) and a photo, but they usually contain as well other information about the children's interests, that contribute to the creation of an online identity (that usually has close connections to the offline identity): «The act of creating and customizing a public profile gives individuals the opportunity to test out aspects of themselves and receive feedback on their self-expressions. By posting lists of favourite music, books, television shows, and movies, as well as personality quizzes, poems, relationship status, and political leanings, adolescents construct a specific identity to which others may respond»²⁹.

This construction of identity via social networks profiles can be likened to several offline activities. According to some researchers, «Uploading pictures and poems on one's Facebook profile is similar to decorating a school locker or binder. Inserting a playlist of favorite songs might be considered the online equivalent of making a mix tape»³⁰. Hodgkinson and Lincoln compare the customization of blogs and social network profiles to the personal decoration of bedrooms as forms of identity building, of adaptation to the sense of self of young people: «users typically spend considerable time creating a unique overall look for their online journal, through the use of a range of images, symbols and background designs symbolic of different facets of their identity. And as in the case of bedroom decoration, affiliations to particular types of music or to subcultures may be clearly discernable in some cases (...) The mixture of colours, styles and images which form the semi-permanent look of the journal are supplemented by additional features such as the 'user info' page, which on LiveJournal provides a mostly text-based outline of the personality in question, including a biography, a list of 'user interests' and a 'friends list'»³¹. Livingstone³² also observed the central role music occupies in young people's social network profiles.

«I fill in my interests and stuff (...) I put my favourite friends, my favourite films, books and that stuff. Since I like very much that New Moon story, I put that I live in Forks, which is where she lives, and I put Twilight as my religion» (girl, 6th grade)

«I put the music I like best, the book I most enjoyed reading, my favourite quotations» (girl, 9th grade)

«[My profile] also has videos. I upload videos, songs» (girl, 9th grade)

Boyd³³ considers that the real difference between social network sites and other forms of communication via the internet is the display of a network of friends. Although the vast majority of children restrict their circle of «online friends» to their actual acquaintances (family, «offline friends»), by only accepting into their networks people they personally know (although in different degrees of proximity)³⁴ and keeping their profiles private, social network sites have the possibility of bringing together children with similar interests and tastes and «spreading the word» about new films, books or musical groups. Cultural producers have realised the marketing potential of social networks, especially among the young, so besides «official» websites they are also creating social network profiles about their products. Myspace is very influential in the music scene, many artists have profiles on it, but Hi5 and Facebook are also increasingly used. This helps create interest-based communities online: «adolescents converge online around favorite TV shows, books, and

²⁸ S. LIVINGSTONE, «Taking Risky...», *op cit*, p. 396.

²⁹ K. DAVIS *et al*, *Social development...*, *op cit*, p. 6.

³⁰ K. DAVIS *et al*, *Social development...*, *op cit*, p. 7.

³¹ Paul HODKINSON and Sian LINCOLN, «Online journals as virtual bedrooms?: Young people, identity and personal space», *Young* 16; 2008, p. 35.

³² S. LIVINGSTONE, «Taking Risky...», *op cit*.

³³ D. BOYD, «Friends, Friendsters...», *op cit*, p. 5.

³⁴ S. LIVINGSTONE, «Taking Risky...», *op cit*.

music groups. Yet, while crowd membership cannot always be chosen offline, adolescents can self-select into online crowds. Interest-based online communities are also distinguished by their breadth. It seems no interest is too obscure to be the basis of an online group»³⁵.

As an example, the *Twilight* film series have a large following among children from all over the world:

«I like a lot a film that is called *Twilight* and they created a Hi5 for it, so I asked to be friends with it» (girl, 9th grade)

The internet also plays a major role in promoting the dominance of the English language and culture all over the world. Although many of the most popular websites among children (such as social networks, YouTube, Wikipedia) already have Portuguese versions, many others do not, so children are pushed to develop language skills in order to access its content. Furthermore, not only social networks but also other sites, like games, allow communication with peers from other parts of the world, that must be carried out in the *lingua franca* of the internet.

Cultural production by children

Enlarging user's access to cultural heritage was not the only feature that the internet brought to the cultural realm. Web 2.0 increased the possibility of transforming internet users from simple receptors of digital content in potential massive producers and distributors of cultural artefacts, through a vast array of digital platforms available on the Web (websites, weblogs, social network sites, wikis and video uploading). The vast potential outcome of internet use, considering cultural consumption and production, is still heavily dependent on user's characteristics, particularly educational and cultural backgrounds.

Children are not just passive consumers of culture via the internet, they also create and share electronic content, by uploading their own material to websites, blogs and social networks: «From the user's viewpoint, more than ever before using media means creating as well as receiving, with user-control extending far beyond selecting ready-made, mass produced content»³⁶. 65.6 per cent of surveyed children declared that they upload texts, images, music or videos in a blog or personal webpage in a social network. The interviews made possible to obtain more detailed information about these practices.

Approximately one quarter of interviewed children declared that they maintained a blog. Although some blogs are closely connected to school work (they were created by teachers or at the instigation of teachers, they contain largely information about school, classes or schoolwork), other blogs function mainly as a means of self-expression: «Blogs give adolescents a space online to write about and reflect on their emerging beliefs, values, goals, and desired role in society»³⁷.

Some children use it mainly for writing

«I'm thinking of creating one [a blog]. Since I wrote a story, I wanted to create one (...) Just to put this story» (girl, 6th grade)

«I had a blog, now I have another. (...) For instance, for texts that I write, reflections, more seldom poems and such» (girl, 9th grade)

Other for showing photos or drawings

«I go on holidays and my mother takes photos of us [...] When I arrive I put the photos online» (girl, 4th grade)

«[we put] drawings that we made» (girl, 6th grade)

³⁵ K. DAVIS *et al*, *Social development...*, *op cit*, p. 23.

³⁶ S. LIVINGSTONE, «Taking Risky...», *op cit*, p. 393.

³⁷ K. DAVIS *et al*, *Social development...*, *op cit*, p. 6.

Others their own music

«in my band's blog I usually put 'Our name is Dare Devils, hi, we are going to put new videos'³⁸. So we put new videos, practically nothing else, some photos of us, of the band and the instruments, of us playing but we never show our faces, we use masks (...) We use stage names, for instance mine is John Davis» (boy, 6th grade)

YouTube is also a means for self-expression, since it allows the creation of user accounts, on which videos are uploaded and shared: «It is also possible to experiment with one's self-presentation on video-sharing sites like YouTube. (...) individuals can nevertheless create an array of selves with the use of creative camera work, costumes, and editing. By uploading their personal videos to YouTube, they can share these selves with a potentially large audience. Some adolescents might receive comments from viewers and use this feedback to shape future self-representations»³⁹. Some of the interviewed children upload videos to YouTube:

«YouTube is my favourite thing, I have an account of my band and two accounts of doll videos, one is claymotion, those plasticine stopmotion videos, and the other with dolls (...) We talk through YouTube, someone says that he has bought a new figurine and I say that I can customize, I get a similar one and say "I can paint in acrylic"⁴⁰, so I paint the doll in acrylic, I upload the video of the doll to YouTube and show it, he goes there and places a comment, he sends a personal message and I reply» (boy, 6th grade)

«I created a profile on YouTube (...) I sometimes tape a videogame and select the best parts to upload (...) they sometimes place comments about the game and I talk to them, to say thank you» (boy, 9th grade)

Social network profiles also allow children an opportunity for self-expression and exerting their creativity: «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»⁴¹. Some children manipulate their profile image

«I do masks for my profile, I love one that came out that is to create an avatar» (boy, 6th grade)

«I usually put photos that I like, I go to Motorize or to Photoshop, I create photos of my own, for instance, I'm standing with my hands like this, I put myself in a parallel dimension, with special effects (...) then I make videos, with my hand like this, with special effects like they use in the movies, it's easy, it's a professional software, it's easy, you change the angle, all photos like this» (boy, 6th grade)

Other write texts about themselves

«I only have Hi5 (...) I go to my diary, I write stuff there (...) I write about what I'm doing» (boy, 6th grade)

«My Hi5 is private and they tell us to describe ourselves, so me and some friends of mine, we wrote similar things, we are a group, so we described ourselves and our friends (...) I describe myself (...) [I say] that I'm tall and things like that» (girl, 6th grade)

³⁸ In English in the original interview.

³⁹ K. DAVIS *et al*, *Social development...*, *op cit*, p. 7.

⁴⁰ In English in the original interview.

⁴¹ A. SHIBAK, «Online peer culture...», *op cit*, p. 5.

Or even upload music they create

«In Hi5 I don't usually write a lot about me, I just put my photos and don't write a lot about me. But Myspace is more professional, so I write there that I would like to be a singer and I put my songs there» (girl, 9th grade)

The web 2.0 is a trend that converted mainstream internet users from passive recipients of contents (generated mainly by social institutions, such as media, universities, business companies, government agencies) into creators and transformers. Children have not been bypassed by this trend. They are among the most creative and innovative users of information and communication technologies. By manipulating photos and other types of images, sharing online the written thoughts, poems and stories that used to be confined to personal journals, uploading songs and videos they made themselves, they are part of the movement that empowered internet users.

Final remarks

This article has striven to analyse how the use of the internet by children can be intertwined with the two notions of culture. On the one hand, children are cultural consumers (and producers) via electronic means; on the other, they use the internet to build and share their own peer culture.

It brings the added value of giving voice to children, often ignored in favour of teenagers in most studies, and eliciting their views on their own activities in the internet. It highlights the international or even global dimension of children's peer cultures. It pinpoints the complex intertwining between "real" and "virtual" worlds and the fluidity of the frontiers between them. And it stresses the overwhelming role technologies play in the everyday life of children and in constructing contemporary childhoods.

However, there are two main limitations in this article. Firstly, cultural heterogeneity has not been addressed. Although it can be said that the internet is playing a considerable role in creating a fairly extended child and youth culture and that practices of use (and cultural consumption) are rather similar (even in different national contexts), children are not an uniform group. Social variables, such as gender, age, social class, play a significant role in differentiating both peer cultures⁴² and cultural consumption⁴³. The data collected through both the survey and the interviews supports this assertion. Secondly, it would be interesting to complement the surveys and interviews with other research methods. Techniques such as ethnographic observation or the visual analysis of children's profiles and uploaded material could have provided a more detailed picture of how children use the internet to create and consume culture.

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⁴² See W. CORSARO «Early childhood education...», p. 91; and A. KYRATZIS, «Talk and interaction...», p. 627

⁴³ See S. OCTOBRE, *Les loisirs...*, *op cit*.