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Young People's Use of Leisure Time Playing Video Games and Social Networking: A Case Study Report

**La ocupación del tiempo libre de jóvenes en el uso de videojuegos y redes:
un estudio de caso**

Abstract

The aim of this article is to understand the behaviour of secondary school (compulsory secondary education) students in the use of different virtual spaces during their leisure time. The study was carried out at a community centre offering training and leisure services for young people. The range of technology-based, leisure activities available at the Centre enabled us to analyse and consider the attitudes and motivations of young people regarding the use of virtual environments, their understanding and thoughts in respect of personal relationships and models of co-existence. The study provides an overview of how young people conceive the relationship between virtual spaces and real spaces, and focuses on how they construct interactions experientially. Data were collected from observations, conversations, documentary analysis, and interviews. Special emphasis was given to the analysis of the meanings attributed by young people to their experiences with media and civic processes in their leisure time. Our findings help us to understand respondents' attitudes, motivations and behaviour in their forms of online socializing, and specifically, aspects relating to the search for pleasure, entertainment, maintaining social ties and the constant stimulation to use these media.

Resumen

Este artículo tiene como finalidad comprender los comportamientos de jóvenes de Educación Secundaria Obligatoria durante el tiempo libre en el uso de diferentes entornos virtuales. Presenta un estudio realizado en un centro de servicios comunitarios, formativos y de ocio orientado a la juventud. Debido a la oferta de actividades lúdicas de carácter tecnológico que en este lugar se realiza, el estudio abre vías de análisis y reflexión sobre los planteamientos y las motivaciones en el uso de los entornos virtuales, sobre las interpretaciones y reflexiones de los jóvenes en cuanto a relaciones personales y modelos de convivencia. En el trabajo se realiza una aproximación a la relación que establece la juventud entre el escenario presencial y virtual, centrandó la atención en la construcción de interacciones de un modo vivencial. Para la recogida de información se realizaron observaciones, conversaciones, análisis de documentos y entrevistas. Se han analizado con especial interés los sentidos que se atribuían a las experiencias en relación con los procesos mediáticos y cívicos en la ocupación del tiempo libre. Los resultados del trabajo ayudan a conocer los planteamientos, las motivaciones y las conductas que los jóvenes de este estudio tienen sobre sus formas de socialización en red. Concretamente, los aspectos relacionados con la búsqueda del placer, el entretenimiento, el mantenimiento de lazos sociales, y la estimulación continua en los usos.

Keywords / Palabras clave

Competencia mediática, socialización, juventud, ciudadanía, videojuegos, redes sociales, estudio de casos, tiempo libre.

Keywords: media competence, socializing, young people, citizenship, video games, social networks, case study, leisure time.

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1. Introduction and review of background material

1.1. Connecting media competence with civic competence

The European Union has tried by means of different recommendations and communications to promote media literacy as a pre-requisite for full, active citizenship, thereby implying a reciprocal influence between media and citizenship¹. In line with recent contributions from Aguaded et al., (2011), and Ferrés and Piscitelli (2012), institutional approaches and findings from different studies increasingly coincide on the significant role of media competence in the development of citizenship. The aforementioned authors advocate that media competence should contribute to citizens' personal autonomy, and to their social and cultural engagement. Their proposals focus on dimensions encompassing different aspects of knowledge and behaviour: languages; technology; reception and audience; production and programming processes; ideology and values; and the aesthetic dimension (Aguaded et al., 2011). Ferrés and Piscitelli (2012, 77-78) claimed that «a person has to develop his media competence by critically interacting with messages produced by others, and by being capable of producing and disseminating his own messages in an active, participatory, play-based way». In this sense, Jenkins (2009) and Tucho (2005) underline that media competence should combine the potentiality for both participatory culture and the development of critical capacity. A media- and politically-literate society can contribute to building fairer societies, through the study, and particularly, through the exercise of citizenship.

1.2. Meanings attributed to the use of video games and social networks by young people

In keeping with the relationship between media and civic competences, recent contributions present virtual environments as influential scenarios in social, educational, and cultural development. The contexts in which young people develop and build citizenship through the use of these environments show how models are articulated for coexistence, based on the regulation and generation of specific behaviours. They provide images of how people behave, reflect, and deliberate on shared democratic responsibilities (Gozálvez, 2011). The virtual scenario may become a space for conflicts and clashes of interests, but it can also be a place to cultivate narratives for play, education, and personal communication.

If we focus on the use of video games and social networks, the dramatic increase in their use by young people has unquestionably led us to look more closely at their possible contribution to social and civic development. We are talking here of multidisciplinary training, in diverse spaces, with no formal set times, and with a broad spectrum of uses and possibilities for individual and group participation. The civic processes that emerge from the use of these environments are currently topics of interest in research and pedagogical literature.

In the case of video games, studies by Haste (2010), and Aragón (2011) enable us to learn about some of their potential uses for educational purposes: video games can foster development of organizational capacities, contribute to the development of content, and enhance skills and abilities. A reorientation of their use to address social contact, and the development of critical and analytical capacities, would seem to be a way to advance in their educational input. When their use is programmed for educational purposes, they can be considered learning nodes (Salen, 2008). The findings of studies by Díez (2004), for example, also provide information about their possible contribution to social and educational fields. An aspect relating to the content of the study described in this article, and which is identified by the aforementioned author, is the differentiated use of video games by gender. The author shows, for example, that dominant roles are usually to be found in the games chosen by males, and passive roles in the games chosen by females.

From the perspective of video-gaming for fun and evasion, other studies point out the possibilities of creating groups, activities, and games that foster social relationships. In most cases, these readings reflect the fact that people mainly play video games purely for fun, without giving consideration to any other aspect. The notion of evasion also emerges as one of the main motivations for

their use. In this respect, studies have been published on the implicit disconnection from the real world. (Marqués, 2009; Ito & Bittanti, 2010; Huizinga, 2000). This relationship between real life and virtual life in the use of video games also appears in other studies on the power of transferring virtual behaviour to real behaviour (Stevens, Satwicz & McCarthy, 2008). In other words, the possibility that what is happening on the video console screen might have a direct influence in the real space. Other studies deal with the differences in behaviour in each of the two spaces. (Selwyn, 2011).

Furthermore, in the use of social networks, there are also relationships between the aforementioned competences. In this sense, the main aspects that are considered relevant in the case of this study are the socializing and interactions that take place and facilitate identity building. Hampton and Wellman (2001), and Reid (2011) show how these can contribute to developing a sense of belonging to a group with a 'common culture', common aims, and shared learning. Following this line of research, an important contribution is that video-gaming can enhance cognitive and emotional reciprocity; in other words, how certain personal interests of individuals belonging to these networks can be satisfied through a common space (Hayes & Gee, 2009).

If we again relate their use to fun and entertainment, there are studies and contributions – the ONTSI (Spanish National Observatory for Telecommunications and the Information Society) reports, (2011 and 2012), and Fuentes (2011), which report that social networks are mainly used by young people to keep in touch with their friends, and very often, to create social ties and friendships ('hanging out') (Horst, Herr-Stephenson & Robinson, L., 2010), for gossiping or 'flirting' (Livingstone, 2008; Pascoe, 2010; Boyd, 2010), or to keep in touch with other young people whom they have previously met in person (Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008).

2. Material and methods

The research reported in this manuscript is based on ethnographic methods in order to understand the meanings established by young people relating to civic use of certain technological media. The case is presented as an example of a theory that was selected to provide findings for the research project in which it is enframed². In line with the proposals put forward by Stake (1995), and Simons (2009), it would be described as an illustrative case study that has been selected to enable better understanding of a reality. The setting is a community centre that offers community, training and leisure services, focussing on educational and leisure-time activities for young people.

The unique aspect of this centre lies in the rules, codes, and languages that develop around the range of technology-based, recreational activities available. The strategic, social and educational significance of the centre, at a local level, and the existence of technological resources, make it an ideal place to carry out research on the use of social networks and online video-gaming.

The data-collection instruments and strategies were justified by the aim to achieve a greater degree of understanding of the processes and relationships emerging on a day-to-day basis at the centre. The methodological approach was based on recent contributions to the study of ethnography and virtual environments (Hine, 2004; Mosquera, 2008; Álvarez, 2009). Data was gathered as follows:

- Documentary data collection and analysis. We analysed the centre's documentation in order to understand its functional and organizational structure. The documentary data collection and analysis revealed the ideas held by the young people attending the centre regarding the development of media competence. For this purpose, six of the centre's documents were classified and indexed under the following headings: video games; social networks; and co-existence.
- Conversations. During the study, conversations were held with young people, and staff at the centre. This encouraged more familiarity between the research team and the people at the centre, and also provided important data for researchers' field logs. During the first phase, these conversations also helped to focus the research and define the issues for content analysis.
- Observations. These helped to define the rest of the strategies and instruments for data collection once the study was underway. Our observations were made over a period of two-and-a-half months, and enabled us to obtain knowledge about the spaces, and the way in which people used them.

- Semi-structured one-to-one interviews. Young secondary students (five interviews), and staff (three interviews) were interviewed. The interviews were used to collect respondents' points of view, assumptions, perceptions, analysis, and opinions, and contributed to obtaining a deeper understanding of the different issues identified during observations and which were not self-revealing. Based on these interviews, an analysis of theme content was made. Transcriptions were used to identify the codes established in the deductive classification process, and the codes obtained from actual data during the study were inductively added; the data was subsequently grouped for interpretation.

The dynamic used to break the ice, and foster familiarity between the study group and the research team comprised play-based technology. Bearing in mind that the group of young people who attended the centre where the majority of the technological activities took place, was large and varied throughout the centre's opening times, tasks were prepared using the LIM (multimedia interactive books) environment, to be implemented on the computer equipment at the centre by participants in the study. The activity was given the name of «Technological Gymkhana», and enabled interrelational approaches to be established among the group of young people and the research team.

3. Results

3.1. Use of Tuenti and social relationships

Social networks were the main focus of interest in this study. Based on the information obtained from the interviews, it can be assumed that Tuenti is the social network most-used by participants. Frequency of use (media diet, Ferrés & Piscitelli, 2012) is usually two hours per week, provided that friends are connected.

All of the young people in the study began using this social network at an early age, through a friend, and because they identified with the «logic» established by the network, i.e. young teenagers, between 12 and 16 years of age, sharing information with people in their environment. This aspect is important, as they do not consider that they use the network to forge new friendships. Furthermore, there exists a form of filter or shield to avoid strangers entering the group, whose members are considered friends and personal acquaintances by respondents. According to the results, the purpose of using Tuenti is the underlying fun and entertainment to be found in speaking to close friends. Nonetheless, this use is defined in different ways: sometimes, as point-less fun for fun's sake – as a form of evasion and escape, or «to pass the time before going to bed», as Carlos ⁴ or Germán told us; sometimes, as entertainment for the purpose of learning information about their friends, making themselves known through photographs, etc., and for forging affective ties with other people. Occasionally, their conversations are focussed on sharing information about photographs – usually group photographs. Juana says, «For example, you post some photos, you make comments about them; the chat is there and you can go on the chat and speak to people... I don't know, they notify you too – in Tuenti, they notify you about birthdays and stuff». Thus, for young people, it's a way of keeping themselves informed (dates for activities, birthdays, etc.), and also of keeping in touch with friends and/or relatives living elsewhere. Manuel said, «Well, yes, that's it... it's for communicating from your own home with other people out there... like my cousins, who live in Badajoz – well, I can talk to them». What is important is that the participants feel the need to use the network, to be 'connected' in order to know what is happening around them.

In other cases, Tuenti is used by both boys and girls to flirt. Juana summarizes this, saying, «Maybe you like (someone), and if you are on Tuenti, you usually don't feel as shy as you would if you were face-to-face. Then, maybe you feel too shy to speak to them. But if you are talking on Tuenti, well, maybe...». Furthermore, respondents considered that it encouraged disinhibition, albeit with limitations: «It's good for talking to other people, but it also inhibits you from talking in person. Because you talk a lot here and there, but then you don't know what to say because you don't have the person in front of you» (Germán). And risks: «Maybe they'll say that a girl is a prude; then again, maybe they'll say, 'come here, I'm going to take you and smash you into tiny pieces». And other things that are not very nice either, like, 'I'm going to beat you up...» (Germán). If we look further into the risks that young people think about, they mention lack of privacy and the possibility that users might adopt a false online identity. The main problem they describe is

that, as they are minors, there could be adults who, in some cases, might try to take advantage of the situation and pretend to be young people in order to establish online contact. For whatever reason, some of the respondents have developed their own safety mechanisms to try and avoid the risk of their being misled by someone using a false identity, e.g. asking questions that only they know the answer to (colour of the t-shirt that he/she was wearing at school that morning; what they spoke about the previous evening, etc.), or checking out photographs of the person, and accepting their friend request depending on whether they know the person, etc. Similarly, they establish measures for self-regulation of their own identity in the network (Op. cit.). For example, Celia says: «When your Tuenti is closed, only the people you have on your Tuenti can see it. Yes, but strangers can only send you private messages». Lastly, when asked about media leisure as an opportunity for learning (Op. cit), young people do not consider that frequent use affects their academic performance. Some of the respondents pointed out that it affects them insofar as the use of abbreviations is concerned, and the lack of spelling and grammar rules. As Juana points out, «For example, the fact that you write (...) You don't write correctly. You shorten words when you write and then... Well, that does affect us».

They also sporadically agree that it can help them do school activities. This was pointed out by Juana and Manuel who said, «Well, I don't know. Look – lots of times I don't know what homework I have to do, and I ask on Tuenti. And then I know what homework there is. I ask a classmate and all that».

3.2. The use of video games and interactions – from the video console to personal relationships

Another aspect of this project was the study of the use of video games and their interaction with social relationships (in the case of a media diet of between 1 and 4 hours). Respondents preferred sports-related video games ('FIFA', mainly), and war games ('Metal Gear Solid', 'Assassin's Creeds'), the latter having a high content of risk and violence. This may be a matter of fun through action, represented on the one hand by football and the predominance of physical attributes (strength, speed, agility, etc.), and on the other hand, by violence (here again, the predominance of physical capacity). In both cases, a common denominator is the feeling of adrenalin release inherent to the tense situations caused by the strategies for play. Germán says, «I like the type of 'rah-tah-tah' action better».

On the contrary, other types of games, e.g. games of logic, puzzles, or table games are rejected because they are considered to be for 'freaks'. The reason for this, in Germán's opinion, is «because you have to think more, you have to search for more things». It seems to be a matter of 'playing simply for the sake of playing', without having to think, and finding entertainment in the search for action.

Online games seem to find great acceptance among respondents. They are more fun because «you're talking and listening» (Germán) while you are playing. Furthermore, this increases the possibilities of actually feeling the risk and fun, because «you are being told to 'make your way to such-and-such a place' or 'go to this meeting-point'» (Germán). «You show the other guy's screen, you show where he is, and your companion will kill him...» (Manuel).

Nevertheless, although Juana believes that the violent attitudes in these video games may lead to this behaviour being reproduced, the rest of the respondents didn't agree. They distinguish perfectly well between «violent action and fun». What is more, according to Manuel, the reason they like this type of game is not because of the actual violence, but more «because you go online, we all go online together, and it's fun. If they invented a different game that didn't involve shooting, and it was a good game... well, we would like it too». In any case, the respondents said that they were aware of the PEGI regulation code: «For example, if it shows a fist, that means violence. If it shows a syringe, that's... that's drugs. If it shows –I think– three people, that means discrimination. If it shows two symbols for people –a man and a woman– that means sex. And I think if it shows a speech bubble, that means inappropriate language». (Juana).

On the contrary, the girls who were interviewed prefer video games like 'Sing Star' or 'Sims'. In the latter case, their reading is that the game fosters behaviours that will influence their future models for action. Furthermore, the perception of some of the male respondents seems to associate the use of individual games with boys, and group games with girls. Germán told us: «I think so.

From what I've seen, I would say so. Maybe there are some games where it's not the case, but in the majority, it is. A game I've seen girls playing, and which I've played with them, is Guitar Hero. But it's because it's a game to play in a group. But I have never seen any girls playing a game like this; it wouldn't be something 'normal'. Germán added, «But girls never play alone. They're in another world. (...). They have a different way of thinking (...) as if they think they are more grown up (...). They are tougher mentally». According to Carlos, «Girls don't like FIFA. When they come (to the centre), they only like Tuenti, and meantime, we play computer games. They do their own thing».

Regarding respondents' awareness of the «body image values projected by video game characters», young people clearly identify the main characters –mainly male– as heroes who have the following physical features: «tall, strong, handsome, or weird» (Germán); and related with «certain» social success: «the good guys, the superheroes, the great guys, the champions» (Carlos). In the case of the main female characters: «Maybe they are very thin, or they make them very pretty and... they show them as superperfect» (Juana) Respondents also mentioned other specific attributes, i.e. «they are unpretentious, because they are kind and because they help people» (Juana)

Finally, games are usually swapped around among friends. There is a 'certain' degree of organization in swapping video games that are available on the market. We are looking at loyalty codes among those who accept each other as 'players'. Germán tells us, «That way, we all get to play. Very often, when a new game is about to come out, we even tell each other, I'll buy this game, and you buy that one and we'll swap' (...). And then we swap with each other». These known and shared codes mean that everyone is part of the community created by the actual video games (digital niches; Gozávez, 2011). Video games, in fact, become the focus of social relationships among colleagues, acquaintances, etc., as they enable players to compete on line. There are frequent online conversations and discussions that are parallel to the game, and the importance of this lies in the fact that they share a specific language, which they identify as their own.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Perhaps the main conclusion reached from our study is that young people use Tuenti and video games for fun – for entertainment. It's a simple matter of 'talking for the sake of talking', or 'playing for the sake of playing', with no further complication involved. As our findings show, respondents feel the desire to satisfy their needs for pleasure and communication by using these environments (which coincides with the findings of studies and reports from different governmental and non-governmental organizations, e.g. those mentioned in the review made by Fuentes, 2011); at least, that is how Germán or Carlos see it.

There could be a problem if the pursuit of pleasure were to become endless and remain unfulfilled. In this sense, the fact that they are unaware of their daily media diet, and likewise, of their need to be constantly online, leads us to think that the limits to the use of social networks and video games are not clear (particularly, if we take WiFi connections into consideration).

On the one hand, if we look at the search for pleasure, we would need to look at the means employed in its attainment. In our study, the means are the actual Tuenti network, and video games. In the case of the latter, boys' preferences (football and war) do lead to some controversy, from a humane point of view. To obtain pleasure–fun from violence, from the abuse of strength, from suffering, would be contrary to common sense, and to humankind's very existence (macro level). However, there is another possible reading: on a micro level (individual), to justify fun in a hedonistic fashion (referring to the person) may contribute to their well-being, i.e. as a way of escaping from certain situations, everyday stressful experiences, anxiety, exhaustion, etc. Fun –in a hedonistic sense– can become an everyday experience that creates the harmony necessary for our happiness. Here again, it is a matter of learning the weight and the importance of each of these activities in our daily life.

Furthermore, the need for constant stimulation leads respondents to search for adrenalin release, perhaps motivated by the subsequent feelings of euphoria, energy, and subsequent relaxation. Sedentary lives in urban populations, and everyday stress encourage people to search for stimuli that will make them feel 'alive' and 'fulfilled'. Because of their immediacy, the constant urgency (live or die, score a goal or miss), and unpredictability, video games (whether war games or sports games) can foster an addiction to adrenalin release.

Similarly, as the contributions of Lenhart and Madden (2007), and Subrahmanyam and Greenfield (2008) show, another notable aspect is respondents' readiness to share information, photographs, and to stay up-to-date on what others are doing, as a way of maintaining social ties and previously existing relationships ('hanging out')... There is a certain obligation to show a part of ourselves, a part of our lives. This 'sort' of exhibitionism takes the form of projecting a self-image of the participants, in which other people's opinions are valued and taken into consideration (even if they are people in our own environment). We are talking about a relative return to childhood where the child, through his actions, strives to gain the attention of adults, the people from whom he demands affection, in order to be the centre of their attention. Thus, we wonder whether respondents feel the need to ratify their own role within their group of friends.

Using Tuenti to flirt (Livingstone, 2008; Pascoe, 2010; Boyd, 2010), to talk about their lives, and play certain video games (leaving aside those that require 'thinking') has become quite a fad among participants – a reference point for young people, «something to follow». From this perspective, the fad becomes a powerful socializing agent among young people. A new fashion of online socializing (Castells, 2003) that builds on the relationships between friends, relatives, etc. They like it and imitate it; they reproduce languages (e.g. languages proper to video games), behavioural codes, attitudes (greater disinhibition), lifestyles (usage routines), which make them feel as if they belong to the social group (digital niches) that represents their age group. And although, for some, the fad might be a superficial factor of social integration (Téramo, 2006), its power to form judgments and meanings should not be underestimated, particularly during the construction stage of our individuality, of our identity (our online self), as shown by the contributions of Muros (2011). Nonetheless, if a fad exists –an example to follow– it is because there is a market behind it that offers these possibilities; a marketing structure that 'sells' these models, but which also reflects the preferences in the sector. It is a vicious circle which can only be broken by educational dynamics targeting themes, usage times, etc., and by fostering critical capacity in respect of the body image and the different values projected by the main players in video games, i.e. broadly speaking, strength, roughness, assignment of dominant, active roles, in the case of males, compared to the delicate nature, coordination, and aesthetic sense of passive, submissive females, at the service of the community (Diez, 2004; Aragón, 2011). In other words, the classic, stereotypical view of gender applied to video games, in the form of their main characters. Nonetheless, although most respondents recognized these clichés, this is not the only image symbolized in video games. Occasionally, we find a female with manly attributes, characterizing an androgynous woman, who would be in line with postmodernist visions, where what is hybrid and relative becomes relevant. Nowadays, despite having reached levels of equality in social terms, and despite the existence of alternatives, there still remains a dualistic vision of the values and roles inherent to each gender – at least among the young people who participated in the study. This leads us to think that, in some cases, we still have a long way to go.

Similarly, we find it interesting to look at respondents' opinions regarding the scarcity or non-existence of parental control of content. All respondents coincided in that they themselves regulated their use, and time employed online. This situation reflects their capacity to act autonomously and independently. Social networks and video games are no different to any other area of young people's lives, precisely because of their everyday nature; this implies that they can foster the development of media competence. Young people should know what information is harmful or illegal, what implications it might have, and take decisions accordingly (e.g. self-regulation, online/offline identity, control of own and others' private information, discriminatory content, etc.). It is not a question of censoring use and time, but rather of building critical capacity and fostering a participatory culture, both online and offline, that is based on freedom of expression and is conducive to values such as equality, respect and dignity.

What seems to be obvious throughout these pages is that social networks and video games open a gateway to a symbolical world, to new systems of representation that define a reality, at times non-face-to-face, at times face-to-face, but real nonetheless. Accordingly, we definitely advocate the learning of online civility (Castells, 2003), based on social and play-based experiences that reinforce social and cultural engagement.

Notes

¹ In this respect, see the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, of 20 December 2007 – A European approach to media literacy in the digital environment; and the Commission Recommendation 2009/625/EC, of 20 August 2009, on media literacy in the digital environment for a more competitive audiovisual and content industry and an inclusive knowledge society.

² RDI Project, «Civic experience of secondary students (compulsory secondary education) in the new virtual and school environments: relationships and implications» (EDU2010-18585).

³ This is an environment indicated for the creation of school activities. It is free-of-cost, and has unrestricted distribution and few technical requirements. The technology used is Macromedia Flash. It is easily accessible on Internet. Different activities can be played, e.g. alphabet soup, dictation, hidden words, operations, image classification, etc.

⁴ The names of the respondents shown in this article are fictitious.

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