

Book Review

Growing up Online, Young People and Digital Technologies

Sandra Weber and Shanly Dixon (eds)

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan (2010) pp. 292 Pbk. £21.99

ISBN 978-0230620018

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Growing up Online, Young People and Digital Technologies edited by Sandra Weber and Shanly Dixon, explores the multidimensionality of online and digital experiences of young people, as they blur the dichotomies between virtual and real play, private and public identities and transgress given boundaries imposed by social reality, physical space and time. Echoed in the young protagonists' stories is the constructive, participatory, expansive and unregulated affordances created in the digital/online environment that shape personal identity and allow peer culture to emerge and flourish.

The work, as stated in the introduction, aims to examine technologies in use in a holistic way rather than particular aspects of digital culture (p.1) and comprises of fifteen individually authored chapters (the last being a review chapter) which deal with a range of digital technologies, online experiences and different stages of children and adolescents growing up online. The themes (which among others include video game playing, blogging and web page authoring), the children's ages (adolescents ranging from twelve to eighteen and children as young as three) and the online experiences reported in the research studies of this work are diverse but with a strong emphasis on girls' rather than boys' digital childhoods. Experiences of girls growing up online are mostly portrayed via ethnographic studies and qualitative research that involves observation and interviews with young children and their parents but in the majority of the chapters only a brief synopsis of data collection and analysis methods is offered.

The authors have written their work demonstrating awareness of the other contributions via citations to chapters (e.g. p. 219, p. 234) but cross-referencing could have been more systematic to allow intersections of key concepts and debate to clearly emerge. For example, one of the areas that appears to be in conflict in the accounts of children's online experiences is how gender roles emerge out of their engagement with the digital environment.

Some chapters deconstruct gender stereotypes, demonstrating intersections of what are perceived as feminine or masculine territories while others reinforce them. For example, in Chapter Nine, girls familiar with console game conventions were more likely to choose a male gender for their avatar, their self-created digital character. In Chapter One girls are presented as the new target market for video games and in Chapter Six the nature of girls' blogging activities overturns established expectations of masculinity and femininity, e.g. the notion that writing in the form of paper journals (i.e. the traditional equivalent of blogs) is a masculine activity whereas writing diaries recounting personal experiences and feelings is a feminine practice.

On the other hand, Chapter Five on the Pro Ana/Mia websites, discusses the Internet as a space that allows girls to 'escape from the traditional confines of their homes to the social and public arena of cyberspace' (p.85-86). In Chapter Eleven, Barbie, is found to be the favourite website of one of the 'digital girls', who points to the 'Happy Families', a baby-sitting game. The concept of multitasking while playing and planning video games is a phenomenon that is particularly highlighted in the video game playing activities of girls (Chapter One), while in other cases girls may have less interest in computer games and multitasking involves, among others,

“creating cards, writing original stories, poems and painting” (Chapter Three, p.57). What is also not explored to a great depth is the role of the family context and particularly the influence of male older siblings in girls' digital play and growing online experiences (except for Chapter Three that touches on sibling coaching).

Is it therefore an added value in the overall synthesis of this edited work? Undeniably, the final review chapter goes beyond reiterating the main conclusions made in the earlier individual contributions. One of the most important questions raised, for example, is “are we willing to trust young people and allow them more control over their own lives?” (p.250). What distinguishes traditional and 'online' forms of play is the lack of real parent supervision in the latter. Although unsupervised traditional play is rare these days, interaction in the online is in reality rarely monitored; for example, positioning the computer in a open family area creates a misplaced feeling of security for families. Chapter Four illustrates how conversations of teens were rarely monitored on the message board website unlike other activities (p.75). This realisation leads to one of the most important conclusions in this work; the need for “more in-depth digital literacy education” rather than “more regulation and control of children” to address the “subtle, subliminal influences of commercial interests” and not some much safety issues (p.251). This is also true in relation to the use of social networking websites, such as Facebook and MySpace, which is an underexplored area in the book (with exception to Chapter Fourteen), mainly due to the older research material that forms the basis of this work (e.g. a characteristic example is Chapter Twelve that reports on data collected in 2001-2002 with a less comprehensive study conducted in 2005).

Although most of the conclusions made are still significant and relevant, the work is lacking to a degree in its connection with how, not only young people, but also the 'online' is growing up, creating different forms of play (e.g. synchronous online video gaming), ways of communication, socialisation, interaction (via online social communication media) and subsequently new ways of learning and media literacy needs. With this thought the reader is left to wonder whether video gaming can still be considered as a “new way of learning” for girls (p.7), and if the definitions of “new media” in this work are still relevant in a rapidly changing online environment.