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EVEN MORE COMPLICATED: THE NETWORKED LIVES OF TEENAGERS IN A CONTEXT OF EXCLUSION IN BRAZIL

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Introduction

This paper addresses the social media practices of teenagers living in institutional care in Brazil, colloquially known as shelters, and how these practices relate to the particularly unique set of experiences they are undergoing. I refer to this set of experiences as a “context of exclusion,” an amalgamation of several layers of hardships, such as stigmatization (Goffman, 1963) and oppression (Freire, 2000) that intersect (Crenshaw, 2017). The title of the paper is inspired by boyd’s (2014) book “It’s Complicated - The Social Lives of Networked Teens,” while emphasizing that for teenagers living in shelters, the question of their access and activities is even more complicated.

To illustrate a common scenario, the complication arises from potentially dangerous uses, such as connecting with drug cartels or strangers, leading most institutions to forbid access. However, the complexity also lies in the nuance: a way of describing how their mundane uses of selfies or hashtags reveal an appropriation of technological affordances that complicates any interpretation of these actions beyond simplistic associations with danger, vanity, or simple pastime.

Background: Teenagers living in institutional care in Brazil

Shelters serve as safe havens for vulnerable children. Under Brazil's Statute of the Child and Adolescent (SCA, 1990), child rights violations necessitate state intervention in cases of abuse, neglect, orphanhood, and various forms of threat or violence. In extreme cases, children or teenagers are removed from their families and communities, becoming shelter residents under state guardianship. This placement, while protective, can also be a source of trauma.

The exclusion these children face is multi-layered. Beyond the reasons for their removal from family, which include poverty, homelessness, illness, educational deficits, and

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discrimination based on origin, skin color, or sexual orientation, they often face challenges linked to drug cartels. Additionally, the shelters themselves experience exclusion through petitions, invasion attempts, and threats. This multifaceted exclusion creates a complex dynamic within the shelter, where individual issues of a teenager can affect the collective interactions among residents and staff in the institution.

It is in this background that access and practices within social media becomes even more complicated, and to that we must not forget that adolescence is a critical stage of life for the development of one's personality and sense of identity (Erikson, 1959; Adams et al., 1992) and it is most likely that teenager will spend the whole period inside institutions because of the dim chances of being returned or adopted¹.

Methodology

I employed a qualitative methodology that included semi-directed interviews, on-site observations, and online observation of behaviors across three platforms: Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook. In 2022, I interviewed 61 teenagers and 27 staff members across 14 different institutions in 7 cities in Brazil. The approach to data collection was inspired by Grounded Theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) and Situational Analysis (Clarke, 2003). Of the teenagers interviewed, 27 were engaged in a conversational format focusing specifically on their activities on these platforms.

Theory

Data is analyzed through the lenses of the Script approach by Akrich (1992), which deems that technology has embedded a series of prescriptions that push users to act in certain ways: "Like a film script, technical objects define a framework of action together with the actors and the space in which they are supposed to act." (Akrich, 1992). In addition to that, I refer to the works of van Dijck (2013) who was inspired by the concept of Script to analyze the logics of social media, which push users to share everything about their lives and with everyone, through the activities of sharing, liking and befriending.

Contested access: a foreign body.

Shelters predominantly view social media negatively: nine of the 14 impose strict limitations on access, perceiving these platforms as complicating factors. Social media is often seen as a problem. For instance, Catia from shelter Tucandeira advocated for banning access after teenagers used it to plot an attack on a rival. Similarly, Shelter Guara imposed restrictions following incidents where a teenager engaged in sexual activity with an adult stranger and another reconnected with their estranged mother without permission. Other institutions reported less severe issues, such as online crushes, exposure to pornography, and gaming, indicating a generally negative stance towards technology, a sentiment boyd (2014) observed among parents.

¹ The Brazilian National System of Adoption divulged in 2020 that only 3% of potential adoptive parents seek to adopt children over 10 years old.

Conversely, five out of the 14 institutions view social media positively. Notably, some encourage residents to seek support and opportunities through these platforms. Shelter Tucunaré, for instance, helped black teenagers connect with a black empowerment movement, while Shelter Uacari developed personalized digital dossiers akin to social media profiles and engaged professionals from cinema and other arts to assist teenagers in crafting their digital personas.

It is more complicated than risks and opportunities: what do teenagers really do

Like all teenagers, they post selfies full of effects in Instagram, share with they did in the stories, try some cool moves in reels, celebrate birthdays in Facebook, dance, lip-sync and follow fun trends in TikTok. If most of their use is mundane, the extraordinariness doesn't come from putting themselves in dangerous situations. What deserves further observation is that their activities (when they are allowed to access) reflect an intention to find stability in a context of high uncertainty, which goes much further than risks and opportunities.

As mentioned, it is likely that will spend their adolescence in shelters, and when adults they will need to look for themselves. The search of stability, or in Giddens sense, "ontological security" (1991), bring us a perspective to acknowledge influence of the prescriptions to share, befriend and like, all while they appropriate the affordances of platforms to make sense of their narratives. Teenagers like Lila appropriated Instagram's functionalities that push users to curate themselves (Márquez, Lanzeni & Masanet, 2022) to empower her self-acceptance following episodes of racism and bodyshaming in the school. Valeria found in Facebook ubiquitous the only place to to connect with the memories of her deceased parents, especially her grandmother that passed away with Covid. Teenagers also used TikTok to connect with a subculture of the youth from the peripheries of Brazil that find commonalities and identification with Funk music.

Conclusion: the way ahead

These results demonstrate that although social media may blur the lines between private and public spaces and potentially act as a catalyst for danger, it's crucial to recognize and comprehend that teenagers' engagement with social media is part of a broader generational habitus. It is essential for institutions to acknowledge that the ways in which teenagers use these platforms can offer valuable insights into their realities and challenges, thereby enabling the provision of more effective care and support.

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