"Is There Anything Else You Would Like to Share?": Methods to Support Teen Agency

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Abstract

In this work, I argue that there are multiple opportunities to support and extend research examining teens' practices and experiences. Much work that examines youth focuses on supporting adult priorities and protecting young people. While some research engages with youth perspectives, there are areas where we can advance our approaches. This can involve adapting existing methods, including diary studies, to connect data collection processes to teens' everyday experiences, such as through mobile technology. This can also include allowing teens to engage in creative expression to purposefully contribute to the data collection process. These approaches can support youth agency by allowing them to influence what, when, and how data is contributed, giving researchers the opportunity for new insights into teens' practices and experiences.

Keywords

teenagers; qualitative methods; diary studies; creative/expressive methods.

Introduction

Researching diverse communities' use of and interactions with the internet and networked technologies is important in many domains. However, within many communities concerned with human experiences, research with youth is often seen as difficult or hard to conduct. This rises from multiple perceptions, including the difficulty of working with ethics review boards to achieve approval for study with youth (Rode, 2009), or as critiqued by Amato and Ochiltree (1987), the developmental, experiential, or communicative skills of youth participants. Because of these perceptions, research does not always engage with youth.

Within this understudied group are teens, whose experiences are sometimes studied via the reminiscence of adults. McMillan and Morrison conducted an engaging study examining how college students, who they argue are "close enough to childhood to remember it well," remember growing up with internet technologies (2006, p. 74). This is valuable, but it is also important to examine experiences of teens while they are actually experiencing them. When research does work directly with teens, it may not treat them as independent, self-aware participants. Hazel argues that research with youth "has traditionally neglected the views and voices of the young people themselves," treating them as "passive subjects whose opinions are peripheral to the understanding of the issues which fundamentally affect them" (1995, p. 2).

Gasser, Cortesi, Malik, and Lee describe research examining the concept of information quality from an adult perspective as "adult-normative," and note that these are studies in which "information quality is defined by what makes information valuable for adults" (2012, p. 31). Hazel frames this kind of work as "grounded in the socio-legal concerns of the adult researcher" and focused on the "'care' of children, rather than directly involving the active participation of young people in the fieldwork," which "mirrors" societal paternalistic attitudes to youth (1995, p. 2). The discourse around online risks and opportunities also follows this pattern and focuses on defining and identifying risk behaviors, then using this knowledge to protect young people. Williams and Merten's 2008 work examines youth blogs for risky behavior, and includes practices such as sharing full names or school affiliations, which may not be deemed as risky by teens. As Livingstone and Helsper highlight, "there is considerable scope for interpretation and contestation, both conceptually and between adults and

children, regarding the allocation of specific activities to the category of opportunities or risks" (2010, p. 310).

While existing research that emphasizes adult perspectives has its place, work that engages with youth perspectives is key. Ethnographic work like boyd's examination of youth and social media (2008), the extensive set of case studies reported on in *Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out* (Ito, Baumer, Bittanti, Cody, Herr-Stephenson, Horst...& Tripp, 2010), and Livingstone's examination of youth content creation (2008) serve as inspiring examples. Youth Participatory Action Research engages young people in developing and working towards shared goals in a collaborative and reciprocal manner (Cahill, 2007), though this approach is time-intensive. While these examples have been fruitful, there is value in continuing to develop methods for working with participants that can be employed in a variety of types of studies, in partnership with teens to inform, expand, and develop our research. As Best asks, "how can researchers develop more sensitive and empowering ways to study youth and children?"(2007, p. 19).

Extending Methods

Extending our methods is an integral step in addressing this question. By directly engaging teens in the process of data creation, we can work together to give youth more agency and make strides towards addressing the needs for sensitivity and empowerment. Ways to approach this extension of our methods include adapting existing methods and increasing use of uncommon approaches to better engage with and represent teens' experiences and allow teens the opportunities to discuss, engage with, and critique their experiences and practices.

Diary methods are one way to gain naturalistic data while also accommodating for privacy and self-reflection (Carter & Mankoff, 2005). By adapting the techniques we use to collect diary data, we can streamline the process for participants and enable construction of diary entries that better fit into teens' lives. Accommodating mobile technologies, and in particular smart phones, is one way to make these advances. This can manifest in multiple ways, including allowing for mobile entries in the voicemail based audio recording approach (Palen & Salzman, 2002), as well as supporting photo and SMS based diary entries (Plowman & Stevenson, 2012). Extending from this, using email and even smart-phone applications to collect diary entries can enable internet-based technologies to capture internet-based practices. Incorporating mobile technologies into diary studies promotes situated responses and lowers the difficulty of participation, allowing for diary keeping in many locations at many times and giving participants more control over the process. This approach can also ease the difficulty for researchers, allowing them to review data more quickly while easing the complexity of coordinating interviews or other interactions using diary entries as a prompt.

In addition to work extending methods, there is also value in using less common approaches intended to stimulate creativity and expression, or studies where "participants make things" (Gauntlett & Hozwarth, 2006, p. 82). These approaches, often rooted in artistic techniques, range from writing poetry and making photographs (Szto, Furman, & Langer, 2005) to creating characters with Lego building blocks (Gauntlett & Hozwarth, 2006). These approaches can be seen as ways to

> "[enable] people to communicate, in a meaningful way, about their identities and experiences, and their own thoughts about their identities and experiences, through creatively making things themselves, and then reflecting upon what they have made" (Gauntlett & Hozwarth, 2006, p. 82).

These techniques can result in reflective, contemplative, and composed data, which can be used to deepen our understanding of what is important to our participants. In contrast to diary studies, these techniques may be particularly well-suited to thinking about experiences over time, contributing to developing richer understandings of context and emotion.

Conclusion

As this work highlights, there are many opportunities to support the agency of teen participants. In order to develop a better understanding of how some of these methods may be effectively used with teens, this work is informing a pilot study to be conducted in summer 2013. This study, part of dissertation project, is designed to examine mobile diary study techniques, including audio-based and photo/email-based approaches. Additionally, the study will explore creative and expressive methods in research with teens, with participants developing a creative contribution of their choice that addresses their everyday life experiences with technology. This study is designed to allow participants to use familiar technologies to contribute to a deeper understanding of their internet and technology use. This pilot study will be completed by summer 2013.

Encouraging research that deeply engages with youth perspectives is an important goal. Connecting our methods with teens' experiences and skills and supporting the agency and empowerment of participants through creative expression are two steps that can help achieve this goal. By enabling participants' agency over their contributions, we can extend the sentiment behind the traditional end to an interview, "is there anything else you would like to share?," and gain new perspectives on the practices and experiences of participants.

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