Employing Creative Research Methods with Tweens in Estonia and Sweden: Reflections on a Case Study of Identity Construction on Social Networking Sites

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Employing Creative Research Methods with Tweens in Estonia and Sweden: Reflections on a Case Study of Identity Construction on Social Networking Sites

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In this article we discuss our experiences from setting up workshops, inspired by creative research methods (Gauntlett, 2005, 2007), on the theme of construction of online identities by young people (aged 13–14 years) in Estonia and in Sweden. Our primary focus is on the opportunities and possible challenges involved when using creative research methods to study the identity construction process of young people by engaging them in participatory, creative activities. Our experiences indicate that such an approach can be especially beneficial when working with young people, as it enabled us to observe the actual construction and usage of gender codes and norms, both in the offline peer group context and in an online setting.

KEYWORDS creative research methods, gender, identity, social networking sites, tweens
INTRODUCTION

In recent years, social researchers working with qualitative methods have shown a growing interest in “new creative methods” (Gauntlett, 2007), indicating, in the words of Buckingham (2009, p. 633), “a broader move towards ‘participatory’ research methods.” This approach is now being employed within a wide range of disciplines—sociology, psychology, social policy, education, and health—often in research involving children and young people (Awan, 2007; Gauntlett, 2007; Lealand & Zanker, 2006), and in studies concerned with issues of identity and meaning-making (Awan, 2007; Gauntlett, 2007).

Often, creative methods are synonymous with the production of visual material (drawings, photos, videos, and collages, but even three-dimensional artefacts made from clay, Legos, etc.). However, the very idea behind the usage of creative methods suggests that such methodology can help to provide knowledge about aspects of social life that may not be accessible with traditional qualitative research such as focus groups, interviews, or participatory observation techniques (Gauntlett, 2007, p. 182).

“Method” and “creative” are two central concepts in Gauntlett’s terminology, words that both are rich in connotation. In this context, “method” refers to the measurements and resources used in finding a systematic way to knowledge production, whereas “creative” should not be read as meaning artistic or tied to cultural evaluation, but rather as referring to making something that did not exist before the creative act. The “new” in Gauntlett’s discussion indicates novelty or a need for new impulses—particularly “an alternative to language-driven qualitative research methods” (Gauntlett, 2011, p. 4). This is closely connected to the transformation of our present day media culture into an increasingly multimodal environment with an emphasis on ubiquitous learning (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009) and growing demands for creative competence (Bamford, 2006). Here, school teaching in many countries is falling behind, as not only is it still dominated by analogous and monomedial techniques, but also it remains firm on typographic signs and verbal argumentation.

Simultaneously, in their leisure time and in their contacts with peers, children and young people act and learn within the framework of what Jenkins (2006) has termed participatory culture, where every user and consumer can also be a producer (Bruns, 2006). In fact, young people growing up in late modern societies have become accustomed to using media, social media in particular, in the creation, negotiation, and interpretation of their layers of identity such as gender and age, but also class and ethnicity. As Drotner (2008) puts it, “Leisure is hard work,” where various online platforms and social networking sites (SNS) are core spaces. Yet we still know relatively little about the actual practices of young people on the Net when “making gender” or negotiating age. Considering the preceding, we believe...
that creative research methods can generate new and other kinds of data and
offer other perspectives, and hence are a valuable tool for deepening our
understanding of young people’s online practices.

In this article we discuss our experiences from setting up workshops
with young people (13–14 years old) in Estonia and in Sweden, with the
research process framed and conducted in line with the ideas underlying
creative research methods. Our ambition was to study the construction of
online identities among tweens, paying special attention to how they express
gender and age in this culturally intense phase of life between childhood
and teenage proper. The aim of this article is to reflect upon the experiences
gained from the two workshops and to discuss the challenges and opportu-
nities arising from making use of the new creative research methods.

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF CREATIVE RESEARCH
METHODS

Creative research methods are not a totally new phenomenon within the
social sciences. In fact, there is a long tradition of using and experimenting
with different kinds of action or participatory research (even within the
framework of “positivistic” experimentation) in order to arrive at new insights
(Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). For instance, creative methods have been actively
used in media studies, where numerous researchers have asked children and
young people to engage in creative projects either by making drawings
(Lealand & Zanker, 2006; Young & Barretti, 2001), shooting videos (Bloustein,
1998; Downmunt, 2001; Gauntlett, 1997; Holliday, 2004), making “scrap-
books” that combine images with text (Bragg & Buckingham, 2008), or
mounting collages (Awan, 2007; Williams, 2002). Several researchers (e.g.,
Perkel & Yardi, 2006; Radley, Hodgetts, & Cullen, 2005) have also made use
of photo or video elicitation in which creative (visual) material produced by
either the participants or the researcher has been used as a basis for carrying
out interviews. Another prominent strand of research comprises studies
working with a form known as digital storytelling, where (often disempow-
ered) subjects have the possibility of telling their story in a multimodal fash-
on based on personal experience (Alexander, 2011; Lundby, 2008).

This latter method is particularly useful when engaging in research
involving children and young people. Multimodal or at least visual means
have often been used to pinpoint two important aspects that researchers
need to take into account when making qualitative studies with young
people. First is that the fixation on verbal utterances that comes with inter-
views and other oral-based methods may not do justice to illustration of the
experiences of the young. Second is the fact that the act of interpreting the
data gathered also includes a considerable amount of translation of often
complex and heterogeneous material into (what is possible to express by)
verbal statements; this is obviously a pressing issue, as the modes of communications are often multimodal (cf. Kress, 2010). The uniqueness of the kind of creative and participatory methods that Gauntlett presents, in comparison with other action-oriented and visual approaches, lies in requiring the participants “to spend time applying their playful or creative attention to the act of making something symbolic or metaphorical, and then reflecting on it” (Gauntlett, 2007, p. 3).

In the context of creative methods, it is important to note that the role and skills of the participants are made prominent. This is in strong contrast to more singular visual methods such as photos and drawings, where the visual assignments undertaken by research participants are usually “read” and interpreted by the researchers themselves. The intention of the creative research approach is to give “voice” to the young people participating in the study. In fact, Gauntlett (2007, p. 125) emphasizes that in analyzing the data gathered by means of creative research methods, researchers should not impose their meanings on the photos, drawings, videos, Lego constructions, and so on produced by the participants, but follow the classic idea known from visual analysis that “a picture is a statement” (Arnheim, 1969, p. 137).

In social semiotics (sensemaking as a social practice), the meaning of a sign does not reside in grammatical or linguistic structures, but in real-life social situations, where the rhetor (actor) (Kress, 2010) chooses signs from whatever semiotic resources are available in relation to communicative, social, and personal goals. Thus, signs are motivated. Kress (2010, p. 69) writes:

In signs, sign makers mediate their own social story, their present social position, their sense of their social environment in the process of communication; and this becomes tangible in the reshaping of the cultural resources used in representation and communication. The makers of signs stamp present social conditions into the signs they make and make these signs into the bearers of social histories.

When taking each picture/artifact as a sign, the power balance between the participant and the researcher is considered as shifting into a more collaborative model (Pink, 2003; Toon, 2008).

In this respect, as suggested by Harper (1998, p. 35), “the researcher becomes a listener” whose intention should be to keep “a consequent interest in and acknowledgment of the co-construction of knowledge between participant and researcher” (Toon, 2008, p. 22). Such mutually acknowledged cooperation between researcher and participants in producing new knowledge would “help [researchers] understand how participants see their worlds” (Gauntlett, 2007, p. 107). It is also believed that when participants are given the opportunity to take active part in the study they are able to communicate different kinds of information (Gauntlett, 2007, p. 182) through
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which the researchers can examine and probe “visible but unseen” everyday behavior (Prosser, 2007, p. 16).

The latter opportunity arises due to the fact that the usage of creative methods implies bodily engagement, as research participants are asked to do something. However, the process of physically creating something—taking photos; making a drawing or forming something out of clay—cannot be separated from the mental processes necessary for creating the artifact or visual expression. This physical and mental involvement is also important since the participants often are asked to orally interpret and comment upon their own work.

One further quality of creative research methods is that they can be used for research both in natural settings and in spaces specifically designed for research. The present study, as shown in the following, is of the latter kind. The arrangements and settings for research of this kind should offer space for flow and enjoyment, and maybe one could speak here of something like a “playful turn” in social research, bearing in mind Gauntlett’s (2007) groundbreaking Lego project.

the.GTO.project

The workshops were conducted within the framework of the.GTO.project. Before going on to describe the creative method we used and our reflections upon it, some words on the context in which this study was conducted are therefore appropriate. What we have studied within the.GTO.project are the practices of online interaction among tweens—defined as children aged 10 to 14 years. The main focus of this research is on how societal power structures such as gender and age are constructed in peer cultures on social networking sites (SNS). A central premise for the.GTO.project is that in young people’s creation of their life-world of today the online world of social interaction is inextricably intertwined with the offline world.

the.GTO.project (2009–2012) consists of three parts. In the first two parts of the project we used traditional research methods. First we interviewed 10- to 14-year-olds in both Sweden and in Estonia about their practices and thoughts concerning the Internet, gender, age, leisure, school, and so on. In the second and partly parallel phase, we did a form of content analysis with particular focus on visual codes, such as norms for the self-portraits and images of friends that were uploaded. Here the focus was on image sharing sites, such as Swedish dayviews.se and the Estonian counterpart, rate.ee.

The findings of these interviews and content analyses indicate that heteronormativity is a very strict norm that the tweens share and recreate among themselves on these networking sites (Hernwall & Siibak 2011; Siibak & Hernwall, 2011). We also discovered that in identity construction, gender
often is portrayed in a very stereotypically and formatted way, and age is an important marker. Furthermore, our studies indicate that girls tend to be more advanced in their online self-portrayal, as they could play with the male gaze and other visual gender norms. In comparison with the girls, the appearance of boys in the photos seems to be less sexualized (Hernwall, 2009; Hernwall & Siibak, 2011; Siibak & Hernwall, 2011).

It was in the third and final part of the GTO project that we decided to make use of the new creative methods as a way of getting closer to the young people at the centre of attention. This also gave us the opportunity of testing some tentative hypotheses evolving from the project (such as age being just as important an intersecting power structure as gender; the flow between online and offline; etc.), while at the same time getting not only new empirical data, but also new kinds of empirical data. It was furthermore the ambition of these workshops to support the young people's reflections on gender norms and gender values.

In the fall of 2011 we hosted two workshops with junior high school students. The first workshop took place in Stockholm, Sweden, with eighth graders, aged 14 years (n=16, 9 girls and 7 boys). The second workshop was in Tartu, Estonia, with seventh graders, aged 13 years (n=19, 10 girls and 9 boys). In both cases we had rented space outside the school setting for the workshops: in Estonia in an activity center and in Sweden in the local community center.

One dimension of using creative methods is being open about the framing and mission of the research. We therefore visited the young people in their classes before the workshop to present ourselves and the project, and also to introduce the workshop and its theme. We also made sure to have the parents' permission and we were explicit about the fact that the material produced would be used for academic purposes only and that the participants would be made anonymous in our presentations. In both Estonia and Sweden the workshop consisted of students from the same school classes, who therefore knew each other well.

THE TWO WORKSHOPS: MAKING NET PERSONAS

In the first part of the workshop the participants were introduced to the theme: “Construct an online character, aged 10.” They were then asked, in groups of four, to make up characteristics for their persona by making drawings, accompanied by written statements/characterizations. Supplied on each group's table to be used freely were paper, pens, crayons, and Post-It notes. We gave no particular instructions; nor did we mention the gender of the persona the students were to construct. All in all, two girl and two boy characters were developed in the Estonian and the Swedish workshops, respectively.
In the next stage of the workshop, the students were to draw and describe the possible social media platforms (social network sites, SNS) that their persona might use. These two stages where then repeated, but with instructions to make the persona 12 and eventually 14 years old, coupled with written statements. After having drawn and written about the 12-year-old persona, the young people were handed laptops with Internet access and asked to continue working on constructing the persona and SNS. All the groups, in both Estonia and Sweden, then decided to construct the 14-year-old persona on the Internet (blog, Facebook, etc.).

All the assignments during the workshops were based on the assumption that sketches drawn and multimodal content produced by the participants are indications of virtual identity constructions and online practices among the young that have caught their attention and have in turn framed particular aspects of the overall (design) message. Therefore, as the participants in our study could delete, add to, or modify all the content they produced during the workshop, we believe that their creative and playful explorations of (online) tween identities contain a mixture of on- as well as offline opinions (e.g., interests from [pop] culture, celebrities they refer to, etc.) and feelings and challenges they associate to and encounter in their everyday lives as tweens. For instance, the drawings and descriptions of imaginary “Net personas” often referred to a number of issues that those on the threshold of adulthood might be facing, for example, exposure to alcohol, drugs, sex, and so on.

In other words, as “the design rests on the possibility of choice” (Kress, 2010, p. 28), we can learn a lot “from the stories that are told and the way they are told” (Gauntlett, 2007, p. 103) through such creative processes. In this respect, the “stories” told of these “Net personas” could be “read” almost as a narrative of growing up: starting from seeking one’s role and place in life and being expressive about it (skipping school, taking drugs, drinking alcohol), to being more mature and “adult” in one’s decisions and choices (earning good grades at school, having a loving relationship with one’s girlfriend, etc.).

In fact, when starting off with the hand-drawn sketches we did encourage the participants to take as point of departure their everyday life experiences and associations of online identity work. This proved to be a good strategy. When we handed out the laptops at a later stage of the workshop the focus shifted not just from the collectively created character to fascination with findings on the Internet, but also from the group conversation to interactions with and on the screen. The first phase of the workshop thus gave us an opportunity to witness how peer culture with all its expectations, norms, and values shapes the creation of these imaginary Net personas. For instance, the participants in the Swedish workshop often made use of a patronizing term “fjortish” when talking about their characters. Although the term was originally used to refer to age (14), in tween-speak it currently is mainly used to
describe the specific way of looking, dressing, and behaving of a person who is considered to be a childish wannabe.

In the later phase of the workshop we could witness how the tweens made use of the content found online as a source of inspiration for developing the characters they had created. A group of Estonian students, for example, made use of Google photo searching and decided that some public photos of Prince Harry would best suit their aims of representing the redheaded boy character called Karl-Mark that they had created. Also among the Swedish students, there were examples of using photos that they already knew about and that were part of their cultural frame of reference.

The Internet was not the only source of inspiration, though. Interaction between the groups increased as the workshops developed. This can perhaps best be illustrated by how the participants became increasingly relaxed and actively took possession of the physical space in the room by moving around more. In fact, as we were interested in exploring the ways in which tweens construct identities in online settings rather than the individual identity process, asking the tweens to work in groups gave us two advantages: (a) The identities constructed were based in a joint reflexive process, and (b) we could take part in this process by talking with the groups, as well as recording their group activities both on video and in audio. Furthermore, we considered it to be important to have the students work in groups, following Gauntlett’s (2007, p. 96) argument that group engagement in creative processes has “parallels with how we come to form understandings in everyday life, through interactions with peers.”

In the final phase of the workshop we asked each group to present and explain its work to all the others, and a more general discussion on the theme of online identity creation followed. So as not to impose our own adult, researcher interpretations and meanings (see Gauntlett, 2007, p. 125) on the drawings and SNS profile entries of the tweens, we asked each group to interpret its own work. In this respect, we relied on Harper’s (1998, p. 35) emphasis on becoming a listener, with intention to keep “the consequent interest in and acknowledgment of the co-construction of knowledge between participant and researcher” (Toon, 2008, p. 22).

REFLECTIONS ON USING CREATIVE RESEARCH METHODS

While some authors have criticized the creative research methods approach for its “naive empiricism” and “naive political arguments” (Buckingham, 2009, p. 635), others have pointed out a number of unique challenges offered by such methods (Bragg, 2011; Piper & Frankham, 2007). In line with this, we end the article with some reflections on the challenges and opportunities that we encountered.
We would like to emphasize that collecting empirical material is just one dimension of the methodology. Another is the reflexivity that ought to follow for both participants and researchers. These two general methodological arguments seem to be of particular importance when it comes to the usage of creative methods. Gauntlett (2011, p. 4) characterizes one of the prime qualities of creative research methods as an “unusual experience (that) gets the brain firing in different ways, and can generate insights which would most likely not have emerged through directed conversation.” This obviously does put special demands on the research process, as the results are of another kind than usually captured by qualitative methods. It is not possible to state beforehand what kind of data will be produced and hence what kind of data would prove most fruitful and/or informative. There arises a need to weave webs of significance, as Geertz (1973) expressed it in relation to ethnographic studies. Without a doubt, the researcher needs to be present both in the literal sense of the word (being there), to be able to get a feeling of what is happening during the creative experiment, and in terms of mental awareness; one needs to be ready to interact with the participants and the situation as it unfolds, and be ready to update and make changes in the plan. For instance, the students’ active and enthusiastic participation in our two workshops led us to ponder the question of whether our young participants were fully aware of the fact that what they were doing, saying, and producing during the workshops was actually part of a research project, and that these kinds of traces were to be scrutinized, discussed, and theorized upon.

We decided to make use of creative methods because we wanted to offer the students an opportunity to reflect upon their own perceptions and practices concerning gender in both off- and online contexts. Furthermore, we wanted to give them the opportunity to take on the role of expert, which is what they are as the first persons growing up online (Weber & Dixon, 2010). For these digital natives (Prensky, 2001), cellphones, cam-phones, laptops, the Internet, and SNS are almost seamlessly integrated in their everyday culture (i.e., Buckingham, 2009, Kress, 2010). In fact, we argue that thanks to creative research methods we were able to follow the actual digital-literacy practices of our workshop participants as they happened (e.g., through their sampling and mashing of images). We were also able to study the flow and liveliness of their online interactions in a way that would otherwise not have been possible.

As creative research methods allow the participants to be in control over their self-expression, we were able to create a more equitable partnership between the participants and ourselves as researcher-moderators. Compared with interview studies, where one’s answers are more immediate, creative research methods give young people greater “'editorial control' over the material disclosed” (Holliday, 2004, p. 51, quoted in Gauntlett, 2007, p. 110). In fact, we believe that the group discussion of the works produced during the workshops helped us to establish a “community within which meaning was
negotiated and constructed" (Toon, 2008, p. 25). For instance, we could follow how comments, relations, and so on evolved as they were made and how age and gender kept coming back as the central parameters.

The use of what is termed creative research methods, seen in relation to more traditional “word based research,” shows that the creative approach can open up spaces for experiences and knowledge otherwise not available, which might prove especially interesting when the informants are young people with other kinds of verbal and written competencies. Our pondering of our experiences of using creative research methods is not to be read as a statement of its qualities in comparison with other methods or traditions, however. Nevertheless, considering the fact that the new media have changed, on a more general level, the way that author, text, and audience relate to each other (and are mutually inspired), creative research methods, which build upon the agency and creativity of the participant, offer an interesting alternative to traditional research methods for studying social media.

NOTE

1. This material is part of a larger empirical study on tweens constructing and normalising gendered identities online in Estonia and Sweden in the research project the.GTO.project (http://mt.sh.se/gto).

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