

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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Abstract

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) 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; tweens; identity; social networking sites

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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 (2009:633), “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 (Gauntlett 2007; Awan 2007; Lealand & Zanker 2006), and in studies concerned with issues of identity and meaning-making (Gauntlett 2007; Awan 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, Lego, 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 2007:182).

“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 2011:4). 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 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 above, 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 *opportunities* 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), shooting videos (Gauntlett 1997; Bloustein 1998; Downmunt 2001; Holliday 2004), making “scrapbooks” 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 either produced by 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 disempowered) subjects have the possibility of telling their story in a multimodal fashion 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 of all, that the fixation on verbal utterances that comes with interviews and other oral-based methods may not do justice to illustration of the experiences of the young. Secondly, 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; 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 2007:3).

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 (2007:125) 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, etc. produced by the participants, but follow the classic idea known from visual analysis that “a picture is a statement” (Arnheim 1969:137).

In social semiotics (sense making 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 (2010:69) writes:

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“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/artefact as a sign, the power balance between the participant and the researcher is considered as shifting into a more collaborative model (Toon 2008, Pink 2003).

In this respect as suggested by Harper (1998: 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 2008:22). Such mutually acknowledged co-operation between researcher and participants in producing new knowledge would “help [researchers] understand how participants see their worlds” (Gauntlett 2007:107). It is also believed that by giving participants the opportunity to take active part in the study they are able to communicate different kinds of information (Gauntlett 2007:182) through which the researchers can examine and probe “visible but unseen” everyday behaviour (Prosser 2007:16).

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 artefact 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 both for research in natural settings and in spaces specifically designed for research. The present study, as will be seen below, 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) ground-breaking Lego project.

the.GTO.project

The workshops were conducted within the framework of the.GTO.project.¹ 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. 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 10-14 year olds in both Sweden and in Estonia about their practices and thoughts concerning the Internet, gender, age, leisure, school, etc. 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*.

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The findings of these interviews and content analyses indicate that heteronormativity is a very strict norm that the tweens share and recreate amongst themselves on these networking sites (Hernwall & Siibak 2011). We also discovered that in identity construction, gender often is portrayed in a very stereotypically and formatted way, and that 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 sexualised (see Hernwall 2009; Hernwall & Siibak 2011; Siibak & Hernwall 2011; Abiala & Hernwall submitted).

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 on- 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 8th graders aged 14 (N=16, 9 girls and 7 boys). The second workshop was in Tartu, Estonia, with 7th graders aged 13 (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 centre and in Sweden in the local Community Centre.

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 in 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 (SNS) that their persona might use. These two stages were 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 persona and SNS. All the groups, both in Estonia and in Sweden, then decided to construct the 14 year-old persona on the Internet (blog, Facebook, etc.).

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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, e.g. exposure to alcohol, drugs, sex, etc.

In other words, as “the design rests on the possibility of choice” (Kress 2010:28), we can learn a lot “from the stories that are told and the *way* they are told” (Gauntlett 2007:103) 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 them 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 did not just shift 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 patronising term “*ffortish*” when talking about their characters. Although the term was originally used to refer to age (fourteen), 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 search 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: (i) the identities constructed were based in a joint reflexive process, and (ii) 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 (2007:96) 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 their 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 2007:125) on the drawings and SNS profile entries of the tweens, we asked each group to interpret their own work. In this respect, we relied on Harper’s (1998:35) 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 2008:22).

Reflections on using creative research methods

While some authors have criticized the creative research methods approach for its “naïve empiricism” and “naïve political arguments” (Buckingham 2009:635), others have pointed out a number of unique challenges offered by such methods (Bragg 2011; Piper & Frankham 2007). In line with this, we will end the article with some reflections on the challenges and opportunities that we encountered.

We would like to emphasise 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 (2011:4) characterises 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 not 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, as well as 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), cell-phones, 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

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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 2004:51, quoted in Gauntlett 2007:110). 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 2008:25). For instance, we could follow how comments, relations etc. evolved as they were made and how age and gender kept coming back as the central parameters.

The use of what is named 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 over 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.

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