When keys speak, the words stay silent - the use of mobile phone and Messenger service by children of 5th and 6th grade in the district of Braga (North of Portugal)

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Abstract: It is true that from the origins of humanity we are dependent on the technologies, but today that happens more than ever. The mobile phone and the Messenger, two of the most recent and popular information and communication technologies of the contemporary society are an example of that. They fascinate children and, therefore, it is not strange the way they use and manipulate in everyday life these technologies that value writing. While social actors, children assume a pioneer role concerning the technological tendencies of nowadays globalized consumption society. Nevertheless, the way children use these technologies in the management of day to day communicational and relational life is still not very well scientifically documented in national studies. There is a new generation where everyday life is subordinated to the new technologies, with its own characteristics of mobility and interactivity and a way of communicating, relating and living, still unknown for us. This quantitative research aims to study how children of the 5th and 6th grade from two schools on the district of Braga use the mobile phone and the Messenger; to check if they are dependants of these media; and verify if social-demographic characteristics influence the use of these technologies.

Keywords: Technologies, children, mobile phone, messenger.
1. Context and importance of the study

According to Sarmento and Barra (2002), most of the studies that include Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and children try to demonstrate the potential benefits of ICT for children, however, that subject, children and technologies, is much less documented in national research. In addition to this, and in this line of investigation, Cristina Ponte and Cátia Candeias (2006) document that in Portugal there is still not sufficient research on the relationship between children/young people under 18 years and how they use digital technologies, despite the leadership they seem to have with regard to access and use of diverse media such as Internet or mobile phone. Despite the positive potential of these resources, particularly in the construction of their identities and cultures, very little is known about the "private" use of these technologies at home, when the children are alone or with friends…

In this research we aimed to understand a) the importance, frequency and methods of use; b) the relationship of dependency that two of the most popular information and communication technologies - mobile phone and Messenger - engage the lives of children of 5th and 6th grade..

With regard to children who grow up with today's digital culture and cyberspace, we could not foresee what kind of adults how they will be in the future; how the will conduct their social relations; we only know today that it is undeniable that they are respected and fluent teachers in the use of digital technologies; they know more than adults and they create bonds of friendship through the network with new people, building bonds of the real world in the virtual world. In the network they meet their friends and meet new friends, with whom they chat, date, play and occupy their time of leisure and school work.

2. The empirical study

This research, took place between May 2007 and May 2008 with two groups of schools (EB2, 3 of Lamaçães and EB 2.3 Amares) in the district of Braga (North of Portugal).
2.1 The sample

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<tr>
<th>Table 1 Credits</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Target audience</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social-geographical area</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Schools</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Population (N)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Sample (n)</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Sampling rate</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The students surveyed are aged between 10 and 14 years. The highest percentage of students who attend the 5th and 6th grade is between 10 to 11 years (35.1% and 41.6% respectively). The distribution of respondents by gender is almost equivalent, with a greater presence of male students verifiable in both schools. Based on the total sample, it appears that the highest percentage of students is from the city (54.8%).

2.2 Results

It is a fact that the use of mobile phone and the Messenger is democratized among younger children. The age at which individuals acquire the first mobile phone usually coincides with the entry to school, when starting the process of greater emancipation, independence and socialization, escaping the family control. Mobile phone use is increasing among young people because it is economic and functions as an umbilical link between parents and children, Messenger better suits the older group of children observed.

2.2.1 About the significance, frequency and uses of mobile phone and the Messenger

Respondents value, particularly, the mobile phone as mediator between the user, family and friends (as a mean of contact or as a mean of communication in emergency situations). Although, the phone is given to children to maintain family control, there are other uses that they make from the device. Thus, they also appreciate the extra communication features such as: calendar, clock, mp3, camera, Internet.

Most people switch off the phone or the sound in situations like being in class, to sleep, places and situations where it is not allowed to attend (such as the church,
the doctor, cinema, among others ...); others, only a very small percentage of respondents, under any circumstances, strip off the sound to the mobile phone.

While the Messenger proves to be a tool widely used in conversation, among the younger generation it does have as many fans as the mobile phone. However, about 70% of individuals who use this service use it regularly. This service is important to users because it is cheaper than telephoning and is useful to ask questions about homework. The fact that Messenger enables chatting with several people at the same time, simulating real conversation, enables the carrying out of multiple tasks or sharing files, it is very important to the respondents.

On average, each individual has 52 contacts in Messenger but speaks only with an average of 18 users. Nearly 20% of respondents talk with people they know in the Internet. But when they do not like the attitude of a person in Messenger, over 40% replied that blocking the contact is a solution.

According to respondents, they ‘never’ feel that parents control the time they use the mobile phone or the Messenger.

2.2.2 Relationship of dependency between mobile phone and Messenger in the lives of 5th and 6th grade children

For more than 40% respondents, the temporary situation of being without the mobile phone offers no inconvenience. But if we look with further attention we’ll find out that there is significant incidence on three negative feelings such as ‘sadness’, ‘despair’ and ‘boredom’. Then, we are able to conclude that for most respondents being without the mobile phone alters his/her state of mind.

According to respondents, they ‘never’ feel that parents control the time they use the mobile phone or the Messenger.

About 50% of the respondents claim to be dependent on the mobile phone, and only 35% states Messenger dependency. Given these figures, we can conclude that in both cases, the number of dependents is not higher than non dependents however comparatively there is a greater degree of dependence on the mobile phone than on the Messenger.

Individuals have the opinion that boys and girls are also dependent on the mobile phone and the Messenger. However, they consider that boys are more fluent in the use of the functions of the mobile phone and that both boys and girls are fluent in the use of Messenger functions.

When they meet someone, the first contact they provide is the mobile phone number.

5. Final Reflexions

It is undeniable that technology competes against family and school in the children socialization process. The information and communication technologies influence and change the social structure, customs and daily life. There is a literate generation that has a way of being in the world independent of the adult world, whose configuration is based in new ways to communicate, relate and live of
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which very little is known to us. We don't know how these children of today who
grow up with the personal computer culture of ubiquity and interactive
communication will be as adults, but we have proved today that they use wisely
technologies such as mobile phone and Messenger to maintain and expand
affection and friendship ties. In the past we made friends on the face-to-face
relation among neighbours, friends of friends or colleagues from school. These
days, we sustain friendships and may have a "second life" on the network.

The child develops a close relationship with these devices, connecting to the
family, school, friends, and they use them from an early age, providing them a
sense of companionship, security and management of day-to-day. You can reach
anywhere or anyone pressing a button, the same button they use to communicate
through pages and pages of text to send to an invisible person, whom, seconds
later, meets your digital dispatches. Not surprisingly, therefore, that this
relationship becomes an addiction and no surprise when children feel confused
and unhappy when they are without mobile phone nor Internet. New devices are
daily announced, most revolutions are anticipated in the near future, such as the
Portable Playstation (PSP) which functions as a phone via Internet in cooperation
with Skype, the ultra small mobile phones and personal computers, or the
announced GRID that make the Internet obsolete. Young people absorb all this
news in information and communication technologies that defy their natural
curiosity. At the same time, children build a culture with codes, signs and rites,
sometimes hidden, silent and indecipherable. Thus, in this evolving context, it is
the role of parents and adults in general, to monitor and understand the preferences
of the child in the building of their own culture, as when keys speak, the words
stay silent...

"A message on the screen shines in search of another. His fingers are always
busy: press the keys, entering new numbers to respond to calls or composing their
own messages. Remains are connected - even in constant motion, even if the
senders or recipients of invisible messages received and sent are also in motion,
each following their own paths. Mobile phones are for people in motion.

Never lose sight of your phone. Their clothing has a pocket of jogging special
for it, and he never leaves with empty pockets, the same way that will not run
without its pair of tennis. Actually, I never would go anywhere without a mobile
phone ( 'anywhere' is, after all, the area without a mobile phone with a mobile
phone network with or without battery). When you are with your phone, it is never
far away. It is always in - but never in a locked place. Cloistered in a web of calls
and messages, is invulnerable. People around you can not reject, and even
attempted to, nothing of what it would really change. " (Bauman, 2003: 82-83)¹.

¹ My translation.
References

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