Digital and Social Ethography: The Case of Youth Digital Platforms

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INTRODUCTION & AIM

This research paper explores the growing need to understand how young people engage with digital platforms in an era where online interaction shapes socialization, learning and civic participation. Despite the rapid expansion of youth-oriented digital environments, there remains limited empirical insight into how these spaces influence behavior, identity, and social values. This study adopts a digital and social ethography approach—derived from the ancient Greek term "ethos" (custom) and graphy (to write). This approach systematically observes and interprets the customs, behaviors and interactions of users in digital environments. This methodological lens allows for the examination of both the constructive and potentially addictive patterns of engagement that characterize contemporary youth participation online. The analysis focuses on globally recognized youth platforms (Global Youth Action, UNICEF Youth Participation, World Youth Forum) and European-level initiatives (European Youth Portal, EPALE, SALTO-YOUTH, Lifelong Learning Platform, Digital Skills & Jobs Platform, EURES, Europass). This study investigates how young users aged 15–35 use these platforms for personal, educational, and social development.

Findings reveal that adolescents aged 15–25 primarily use these platforms to develop cognitive and social skills, express emotions and opinions, share content and seek entertainment. Within this group, approximately 30% also participate in quality-of-life improvement campaigns, seek employment, access informational resources and form stable friendships. Gender differences were observed: young women tend to engage more frequently in content-sharing and emotional expression, while young men are more active in skill-building and employment-related activities. In contrast, young adults aged 26–35 mainly utilize these platforms to participate in social improvement initiatives, seek job opportunities, acquire new skills and establish long-term networks. Gender differences are not substantially significant within this age group. Overall, the findings highlight how digital youth platforms function as key notes for understanding generational habits and the evolving social ethos of young people in digital contexts.

METHOD

In the present study, the method of content analysis was employed. Specifically, the content of youth digital platforms was analyzed, as well as their digital presence on social media, with particular emphasis on the most popular platforms, Facebook and Instagram. Content analysis served as an initial research approach aimed at identifying relevant material, acquiring new knowledge, examining interactions, and enriching existing information. The present analysis was based on the systematic search, interpretation, recording, and coding of data derived from digital platforms (Baker, 2016: 1389; Fink, 2019:2). According to Weber (1984: 127), content analysis is a research method that relies on a set of structured procedures and leads to the production of valid and replicable findings. Kyriazi (1999:283) argues that content analysis constitutes a method of secondary analysis of qualitative material, which can be applied to data originating from mass media—such as newspapers, magazines, television and radio programs—as well as from texts, interviews, letters, and personal documents.The methodology of content analysis comprises five stages. The first stage involves the formulation of research questions, the second stage concerns the precise definition of the material to be studied, the third stage focuses on the recording and analysis of part or the entirety of the texts, depending on the research objectives, the fourth stage includes the categorization of the data, and the fifth stage involves their coding. Riffe et al. (2005) emphasize that content analysis is a particularly important method for generating valid and replicable research results. This research method can be used either independently or in combination with other methods, as was the case in the present study.

In addition to the content analysis of digital platforms, an online questionnaire was distributed to two groups of young people: 100 participants aged 15–25 and 100 participants aged 26–35. The aim was to investigate their awareness of the specific digital platforms, the ways in which they interact with them, and the amount of time they devote to their use. Through these two research approaches, the navigation habits of young people on digital platforms at both the international and European levels were identified and documented within the framework of digital and social ethography. The relatively small sample size was due to time constraints and the inability to engage with the present study as a primary and standalone research project.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study indicate that all the digital youth platforms examined—both in terms of their content and their overall digital presence—provide rich, up-to-date, and reliable information. Moreover, they demonstrate a strong digital presence, particularly on Facebook and Instagram. The content of these platforms primarily focuses on career and training opportunities for young people, the exchange of ideas and opinions, and the sharing of multimedia material, such as videos and photographs. A strong emphasis is placed on youth interaction, either to facilitate the exchange of best practices or to function as a space for self-expression.

Following the online survey, which included 200 participants—100 young people aged 15–25 and 100 aged 26–35—it was observed that the most popular platforms at the international level were UNICEF Youth Participation and the World Youth Forum. At the European level, the most frequently reported platforms were the European Youth Portal, EPALE, SALTO-YOUTH, the Digital Skills & Jobs Platform, EURES, and Europass. The sample size was limited to 200 participants due to time constraints, while the selected age groups were based on the European definition of youth, which ranges from 15 to 35 years. Regarding the 26–35 age group, the findings showed that 30 participants held a doctoral degree, 60 had completed tertiary education, and 10 were graduates of compulsory education. The gender distribution included 60 women and 40 men, with no statistically significant differences observed between genders. Participants in this age group primarily used digital platforms to search for employment opportunities, followed by professional development and training. Additional motivations included participation in community initiatives, social networking, and the expression of emotions and opinions. Notably, engagement with these platforms for job-seeking purposes was particularly intensive, as many participants reported spending more than 20 hours per week navigating employment-related content.

For the 15–25 age group, which also consisted of 100 participants, the results indicated that while young people were generally aware of the existence of these digital platforms, they were not fully familiar with the full range of opportunities they offer. This group primarily used the platforms to develop cognitive and social skills, express emotions and opinions, share content, and seek entertainment. Approximately 30% of participants also reported engaging in quality-of-life improvement campaigns, seeking employment, accessing informational resources, and forming stable social relationships. Gender-related differences were observed: young women tended to engage more frequently in content sharing and emotional expression, whereas young men were more actively involved in skill development and employment-related activities.

CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that youth digital platforms offer high-quality, up-to-date, and reliable content, supported by a strong presence on social media, particularly Facebook and Instagram. These platforms primarily promote career development, lifelong learning, and youth interaction through the exchange of ideas and multimedia content. The findings highlight that young adults aged 26–35 use these platforms mainly for employment-related purposes, often engaging intensively with job-seeking content. In contrast, younger users aged 15–25 tend to use the platforms for skill development, self-expression, content sharing, and entertainment. Although awareness of these platforms is relatively high among younger users, in-depth knowledge of their full potential remains limited. Gender differences were observed mainly in usage patterns rather than in overall engagement levels. Overall, the results underline the significant role of digital youth platforms in supporting professional, social, and personal development.

FUTURE WORK / REFERENCES

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