COMMERCIALISATION OF MEDIA AS A CONDITION FOR YOUNG PEOPLE'S COMMUNITIES

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF DANISH YOUTHS' LOCAL COMMUNITIES IN RELATION TO NEW COMMERCIAL TECHNOLOGY

KATRINE K. PEDERSEN

COMMERCIALISATION OF MEDIA AS A CONDITION FOR YOUNG PEOPLE'S COMMUNITIES

- **A qualitative study of Danish youths' local communities in relation to new commercial technology**

INTRO

Young people's everyday lives are filled, to a large extent, with groupings and social interactions that require the ability to navigate between different community arenas, characterised by new technology and new forms of communication. In this context, there is a renewed interest within youth research regarding the impact of socio-cultural structures on organisational and socialisational processes among children and adolescents.[1] Here, the individualisation and commercialisation of media plays a crucial role in the way children and young people communicate and search for, for instance, news and entertainment. In conversation in the public domain, knowledge, information and enlightenment compete on an equal footing with advertisements, entertainment and updates from friends on social media. New technologies such as Big Data and AI have served as excellent tools for commercialising content, which has created a tendency for algorithmic enclaves where the fun-angle is preferred in favour of knowledge or information on complex issues such as the refugee crisis.[2] Responsibility is not rooted in a common knowledge; rather, it is the individual alone who bears the responsibility for choices, actions and life situation.[3] It contains, on the one hand, "strong freeing forces, but simultaneously creates extensive ambivalence, doubt, uncertainty and limitation within the individual".[4] One consequence is that a large number of young people have difficulty coping with the pressure, which accompanies the expectation of choosing the right identity project: "they feel that they stand out and are abnormal if they have problems dealing with teen life, because everyone else seems to have perfected it".[5] But whereas there has long been a tendency to look at individualisation and communities as each other's opposites, the perspective has changed so that individualisation does not necessarily exist in opposition to but as a prerequisite for a community.[6] The focus of this study is on new technology and the commercialisation of media as a prerequisite for contemporary child and youth communities.

---

[1] Bruselius-Jensen, M. & Sørensen, N.U. (2017), Brinkman & Jensen (2011).

[2] Ørmen, (2016).
[3] Giddens (1994, 1996), Bauman (2002).
[4] Bruselius-Jensen, M. & Sørensen, N.U. (2017).
[5] Ibid., Katznelson & Sørensen (2015).

[6] Bruselius-Jensen and Sørensen (2017), Brinkmann (2011).

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The present study is based on 14 qualitative group interviews with a total of 46 informants – 24 girls and 22 boys – aged 13 to 18 years from five different geographical locations in Denmark: Copenhagen, Vester Skerninge, Roslev, Aarhus and Esbjerg. We chose to categorise the young people's local, physical communities in accordance with their imagined communities.[7] However, it is not the categorisation, which is central, but rather the link between the young people's local communities and their media consumption and behaviour. We recruited and searched for subjects within their own local environment, with a view to meeting them in their daily lives, with an eye on the communities in which they, as individuals, participate. Group interviews were carried out in Copenhagen, Aarhus, Esbjerg, Vester Skerninge and the area around Skive.

A qualitative method and an exploratory approach lend us the opportunity to create a space for new perspectives and interfaces, concerning the link between young people's local communities and their media consumption and behaviour. This method allowed us to establish an improvisational approach, which opens up young people's perceptions of the world and the social contexts in which they find themselves. Thus, the study takes as its starting point the young people's own narratives about and understanding of the concept of community.[8] Each interview opens with questions aimed at gaining an insight into the informants' immediate perception of what a community is and concludes with the informants compiling a list – on paper – of the communities of which they are part.

---

[7] Anderson (2001).

[8] Ibid.

DEFINITION OF COMMUNITY

The young people's definition of a community begins in the close, physical relationships that arise from and unfold in the local environment. They describe community as something that creates security and a sense of belonging. A community does not start online, on digital platforms, but always has its starting point in a physical relation. The following two quotes describe the general idea of a community: "a community is a group of safety and unity" and "a community is a place where there is room to be different, and where you know there is someone who will listen". Three main communities are mentioned: family, class and free time.

The family as a community is mentioned, in most cases, in connection with leisure experiences relating to pleasure and relaxation. Only three informants have a different perception of the family community as being associated with leisure and relaxation. Three 15-year-olds all live on a farm. They describe the family as a working community, where the contribution of every family member to the practical tasks is necessary. We meet them while they are attending special Danish independent boarding schools and, therefore, they only rarely see their families. They mention that they miss the working community, which is associated with traditions such as the harvest. "I've always been at the harvest so it's weird not being part of it," a 15-year-old girl tells us. They also mention that they are updated, for example, via a phone call from the family: "then he [grandad] rings and tells me a little about it and then [I] can relax again".

Another community described is the class. It is considered a non-self-elected community, which despite being mandatory, facilitates an experience of belonging. The young people describe their classes as communities of which they are a part, and as something they – as a rule – do not question. Some are critical of the value concepts that characterise this community. As a boy aged 17 mentions: "it's mainly a matter of having expensive things". At this school, it is clear that material values are present. Several students from the same school mention a link between finances and social hierarchies, where those from a particular area of the city, where they wealthy live, are ranked highest within the hierarchy. Focus on material values is also expressed in the following two quotes concerning wishes and dreams: "if I can make a living from it" and "it's too expensive; unfortunately, I can't [afford it]".

Those communities, which exist in their free time, are most often anchored within the class or family community. The young people participate in leisure activities together with classmates, e.g., football, handball, swimming, piano, dance, theatre, music, golf, horse riding, parkour and so on. Part-time jobs are also described as a community, and can be associated with the family community as mentioned above. One mentions that he is part of a "drinking community" in which he meets with friends on Fridays, barbeques or plays football. Several mention partying as an important community. The same applies to groupings based on common interests such as humour, computer games or motor scooters. The physical meeting, that is coming together for an activity, is defined in this context as a community of which it is nice to be part.

MEDIA CONSUMPTION AND BEHAVIOUR

All subjects have a smartphone, social media, internet access, YouTube and streaming services such as Netflix.

The ruling story regarding social media is about communication. It is not perceived as a community, but as an audience structure (when the group becomes larger than an approximate class size) or a communication tool for communicating primarily within close relationships, and with friends and family. As a 15-year-old boy says, "I don't use social media as a community in itself. I use social media to talk to the friends I have in reality, and there we have a community".

The following media is used in particular: SnapChat (SnapStreaks and SnapMapping), Facebook (Messenger and closed/ private groups), Instagram (memes, looking at pictures, but they rarely share photographs themselves, primarily only through My story), YouTube (entertainment, passing the time, sharing content, film making). Their stories repeatedly emphasis that the preferred way of communicating is in closed, small groups (max. 30 – or the equivalent to a class size), "where you can share funny things with your friends", as one 15-year-old girl put it. The funny items shared are, for example, short videos or pictures where you look "funny and really ugly". The young people express a distance to social media such as Instagram: "it's false, we know exactly how the other person looks," states a 17-year-old girl.

Memes play a central role and are often comprise elements of their online communication. A meme can appear on social media as anything from a hash tag to a gif or a selfie. It is a kind of visual joke. Young people employ them as features that strengthen existing communities primarily via humour. For instance, a 15-year-old girl shares memes with her friends from a Koran school, which she attends at weekends. Makeup is the common interest here, and memes depicting funny make-up situations such as "eye brows gone wrong" are popular.

The vast majority of informants describe YouTube as a medium that is often used for passing the time or entertainment when they are alone: "I mostly watch YouTube on my own! It's often something you see on the go or on your way to and from school. There's nothing serious about it. For me, it's a fairly relaxing medium". Only a few subjects mention using YouTube to share content themselves. Few mention that they themselves have a YouTube channel with a single friend; a group of boys of five from the same class have a channel where they share video footage from private parties or other events concerning the entire class. Four 13-year-olds make short videos with improvised, funny content, but they are unanimous that they could never release it publically.

The majority of contributing young people know other young people who have YouTube channels. They describe YouTube as a medium where the tone can be hard. A 13-year-old girl describes it as follows: "I think it's a shame that some people watch YouTube to laugh at others. It's a pity for those affected by it. There are always hateful comments on everything that is posted".

The study also highlights that young people search for entertainment primarily through streaming services such as Netflix, HBO and so on. For the majority of the young people, this media consumption has its starting point in the family or class community. Three of the most popular genres are thrillers, comedies and action films/ series. They almost never watch TV or stream on dr.dk. Some have watched *Rita* with their families on TV 2 Play. And almost all informants describe the cinema as a form of community of which it is nice to be part. "It's a pleasure to go to the cinema where the whole gang is gathered," says a 15-year-old boy, and a 13-year-old girl says, "when you go to the cinema, it's something you've been looking forward to". They choose the cinema when the film experience is to be a communal experience, or if it is a film that defines a community of interest such as the *Harry Potter* films. In that context, the cinema is related to the

story of an event beyond the usual, something you look forward to, which you want to experience with an existing community, and here it is only the family or class community that is mentioned.

The young people's relationships to and experiences of the internet and social media are presented under the following headings:

• Dependence and distinctions

• Closed communities

• Self-regulating behaviour and self-censorship

Dependence and distinctions

Several of the young people are very concerned about the concept of addiction in connection with the use of social media. Some talk about addiction as something they fear, something they have heard about in "the news or from adults". As a 13-year-old girl mentions: "I use social media, but I have been deliberate about not wanting a smartphone because I'm trying not to be so dependent on social media". Others express how, over time, they have become tired of being subject to the demands laid upon them by social media. Some also voice concern at being misunderstood and what they post on social media being misused. Social media are described as a stage, which you enter and show yourself off on, and they are fundamentally aware that it is not without risk. They recount episodes where people have been teased or criticised on social media, which may be one of the reasons why the young people primarily move in small, closed groups, which they themselves have established. Thus, there is a strong distinction between the young people's private and public behaviour on social media. In this context, the young people are very aware of when they are private or public personas on social media. This is supported, for instance, by the following quote from a 16-year-old girl: "I've both a private and a public profile on Instagram. The public one is about projecting something perfect, whereas the private one has funnier and more imperfect images".

Closed communities

The study also provides insight into what can happen in the closed communities, which are established on social media (primarily Facebook/ Messenger and SnapChat). One example is the closed communities of humour that deal with phenomena such as 'offensive memes', also called 'dank memes' or 'edgy memes'. These memes contain communication, which makes fun of topics such as ethnicity, gender and religion. Popular topics are: 9/11, the Holocaust, mass shootings, terror and women's rights, oppression and gender-based violence, e.g., memes portaying the Prophet Muhammad having sex with a goat under the heading "Mohammed was a pedophile goat fucker". They find memes on websites such as offen.dk, memegenerator.net, knowyourmeme.com and in closed Facebook groups such as Landet. Some even create their own offensive memes, referring to individuals within the school community. Other examples of offensive memes from the offen.dk website (previously Offensimentum), which is highlighted as popular, is a picture of a very young blonde-haired girl snorting cocaine from a hairy penis, a picture of the Prophet Muhammad eating his own excrement and a picture of a pig (animated) dressed as a doctor with the text "I diagnose you with gay". A 16-year-old boy describes the phenomenon as follows: "I just think it's a new form of humour. It's really just a forum where you have fun at the expense of others". The majority of the young people think it is funny, but realise that it is not a kind humour you can share with everyone. "My mother shouldn't see this at all," says a 15-year-old boy. They have different explanatory models that they employ to defend this type of community of humour: "it's just for fun" is the most frequent explanation, "as long as it's only about groups" is another: "I can easily find racism funny. I don't have anything against black people or anything like that, but it's funny when people laugh at it. I don't have anything against gays or anyone either. You can make fun of that, too. But if there's one person, you're bullying... then I think it's a bit too much". Others point out that it is the temporal distance that determines whether or not it is acceptable to make fun of tragic events. You don't laugh at events that have just happened. As one subject explained: "[after the shooting in Las Vegas, ed.] Someone, for example, made a meme the following day, and maybe that was a little too early. There, I think you should wait. For example, it's many years now since 9/11 happened, so, therefore, I can easily find it funny".

Self-regulating behaviour and self-censorship

There are – especially among the girls – several occasions, which describe a tendency towards self-regulatory behaviour and self-censorship. They are very aware of how they share themselves, and the majority say that they only share in the small, closed groups and rarely share with a larger audience. Most of them reveal that they do not use social media such as Instagram and Facebook to share because they:

1. experience it as an artificial stage
2. do not want to make themselves the subject of valuation and judgement
3. are afraid that what they share will be misused.

They are also conscious of not evoking awareness in the physical world. They fear someone taking pictures of them without them seeing it, recording them if they say something stupid or something, which they were not aware could be used against them. They repeatedly talk about the fear of being shared without consent, highlighting groups such as Aarhus Gossip and Esbjerg Gossip, both of which are groups that share rumour. The girls, in particular, describe it as being a catastrophe if they were to end up on there. As a 14-year-old girl noted: "after these groups came – that you can easily make on Messenger and Snapchat – you don't know what people could write, because if I have some gossip and I can't face writing about it to all the people who'd like to know it, then I can just go in and create a group". A 17-year-old girl states: "some of us girls are sometimes misunderstood as being older than we are, and it's really scary, because sometimes when you're contacted, it's revealed that – 'I heard, for example, that xxx (anonymised, ed.) – she was writing to him', so that means xxx now dates Sugar Daddys and is with an old man. That's what I think our generation has been tormented by – hunted by everything that's out there and it's really scary..."

We have highlighted some quotes that reflect a tendency for self-censorship and self-regulatory behaviour:

- "You really can't do anything wrong there (on SnapChat, ed.)"
- "You also have to be really careful about what you write to each other"
- "It's not that you send the ugliest pictures – what if you just take a screenshot"

- "You never know – if there's e.g. a little conflict between them"

- "You never know if people are saying things like 'did you see the picture she sent yesterday?'"

- "I've heard loads and that's why I think, okay – that's never going to happen to me"

- "When I think about how I judge other people's pictures, I think wow – no one else is going to see my pictures, so all my profiles are private"

CONCLUDING SUMMARY

Regarding the young people's media consumption, it is clear that they communicate primarily in smaller communities with those people with whom they share an existing local community. They communicate primarily via SnapChat and Messenger in closed groups. Interestingly, they do not immediately experience online communities and social media as a community, which can stand-alone. Online communities and social media are perceived as audience structures when they exceed a maximum of individuals (equivalent to the approximate number of a class community) or as tools for communicating with an existing community. Thus, an online community can only exist as a community if it is a closed group with a maximum number of individuals, which is known in advance from a local community.

Social media is, therefore, primarily described as a communication tool that strengthens pre-existing relationships within school, free time and family communities. This occurs principally with the establishment of smaller groups, where communication often has a care-of-relationship function. The young people are fundamentally oriented towards close and local communities and navigate consciously and strategically between private and public stages on social media. In this regard, it is clear that there is an awareness of the commercialisation by social media of what they understand as a community. According to the young people, social media such as Instagram and SnapChat, only allow certain values and do not meet those values, which, in their eyes, define a community. Thus, they consciously choose paths that circumvent this commercial structure: the majority of them turn away from the 'stage', which, according to the young people, is about performing perfection, in favour of closed communities. Others use alternative networks such as TOR so as to be anonymous and to avoid, for instance, their data being collected.

Having said that, there are global trends on digital platforms, such as offensive humour that characterise the young people's communities. One girl mentions closed groups as the reason for a tendency towards self-censorship and self-regulatory behaviour. However, within the confines of this study, there is no evidence to conclude that there is a correlation between communication in the closed groups and a tendency towards self-censorship and self-regulatory behaviour, which the girls, in particular, articulate.

The young people utilise different media for the different communities in which they participate. They prefer YouTube when alone or with one or two friends in their leisure time. They choose to stream films, web series and cinema films as a social activity within leisure and family communities.

KEY FINDINGS:

1. Social media is not defined as a community if the number of individuals exceeds a maximum corresponding to a class community, but rather as an audience structure; a stage on which to present a staged version of yourself

2. Social media is utilised as a communication tool for communicating with individuals from local communities in groups corresponding to the number of individuals in a class community. This applies to whether they are interest communities, communities of humour or friendships, and the fewer in a group, the closer the relationships are and the more private the conversations.

3. There is a tendency towards self-regulatory behaviour and self-censorship. This is due to social control and a fear of:

   – being misunderstood

   – pictures, messages (also private ones) or Messenger groups being hacked and exploited for laughs or shaming

   – ending up on gossip websites such as Aarhus Gossip or Esbjerg Gossip

   – losing one's place within the community/ being excluded due to deviating from the norm.

4. It seems to be possible, within the closed online communities, to trace a counter-reaction to the social control described in point 3. It can be expressed either as:

   – using images, film and text (memes), which go far beyond the limits of the current norms and social control defining the young people's digital lives.

   – sharing and streaming of illegal content ranging from ISIS videos to films from Popcorn Time and selling fake Netflix user information

   – sharing funny, ugly pictures in contrast to Snap-filters, preferably as ugly and silly as possible

5. The informants consciously choose paths that circumvent the commercial structure of social media: the majority of them turn away from the 'stage', which, according to the young people, is about performing perfection, in favour of closed communities. Others use alternative networks such as TOR so as to be anonymous and to avoid, for instance, their data being collected.

6. The young people use YouTube for alone-time (seclusion) as a way to check out from school, free time and family communities, e.g., when the come home tired from school. Some go for a walk in nature instead, but most go onto YouTube or choose a movie or series on a streaming service: Netflix is the favourite.

7. They watch films together, even when streaming, mostly or almost only thrillers, comedies and action films about superheroes. In general, they are not concerned with where films come from. Some choose Danish films because they have difficulty understanding English. Three informants show a clear interest in film and different genres such as documentaries and art films.

8. They almost never watch TV.

9. They all choose the cinema as a community in which they like to partake and as another way of watching films: the experience plays a particular role within leisure and family communities.

REFERENCES:

Anderson, B. (2001). *Forestillede fællesskaber*, Roskilde Universitetsforlag.

Bauman, Z. (2002). *Fællesskab*. København: Hans Reitzels Forlag.

Bauman, Z. (2006). *Flydende Modernitet*. København: Hans Reitzels Forlag.

Bech-Danielsen, Anne (2016), "Den nye medieforbruger vil have det kort og hårdt," Poltiken (2016).

Bruselius-Jensen, M., & Sørensen, N. U. (2017). *Unges fællesskaber: Mellem selvfølgelighed og vedligeholdelse*, Aalborg: Aalborg Universitetsforlag (http://vbn.aau.dk/files/257823936/Unges_f_llesskaber_Online_version.pdf)

Giddens, A. (1996). *Modernitet og selvidentitet. Selvet og samfundet under sen-moderniteten*. Hans Reitzels Forlag

Jensen, E. & Brinkmann, S. (red.) (2011). *Fællesskaber i skolen–udfordringer og muligheder*. København: Akademisk Forlag.

Katznelson, N. & Sørensen, N. U. (2015). "Unges identitetsdannelse i forandring"*, Skole og Fritidspædagogik*. Akademisk Forlag.