



Gay teenagers in the digital age: orientations for educators

Adolescentes gays en la era digital: orientaciones para la educación

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Abstract

Internet offers multiple opportunities to access quickly and easily to information and interactions with other people. This article presents the results of a research on the processes of self-identification and socialization as gay of a group of twelve teenagers between 14 and 19 y. o. in this digital age. Here their experiences and practices are analysed based on their testimonies in which we find the need for connection with their peers, and at the same time, the fear of homophobic bullying. In coherence, Internet is perceived as a place of hope and also of uncertainty, hence it is used with caution and anonymity. Moreover, there are evidences on how these Internet practices are more common during a period of confusion about the consequences of their homosexuality, and also on how their decline once the teenagers' socializations as gay in real life are more widespread. The methodology of this research is based on the analysis of the content of the individual in-depth interviews of a sample elaborated during two years, while taking into account the contributions of the narrative research and its interest on storytelling and the anecdote as approximations to lived experience. The article ends proposing educational implications based on the results of the study, and putting them in relation with other authors' materials and reflections.

Keywords: Adolescence, identity, homosexuality, interviews, Internet, content analysis.

Resumen

Internet ofrece múltiples oportunidades de acceso a información e interacciones con distintas personas de manera rápida y fácil. Este artículo presenta los resultados de una investigación sobre los procesos de auto-identificación y socialización como gays de doce jóvenes entre los 14 y los 19 años en dicha era digital. En él se analizan experiencias y prácticas a partir de sus testimonios en los que aparece la necesidad de conexión con sus iguales, y al mismo tiempo, el miedo subyacente a la homofobia. En coherencia, Internet es percibido como un lugar de esperanza y también de incertidumbre, y por lo tanto, es utilizado con cautela desde el anonimato. También se evidencia cómo este tipo de prácticas en Internet son más comunes durante un periodo de confusión sobre las consecuencias de su homosexualidad, y es así que decaen una vez su socialización como gays en la vida real está más extendida. La metodología de esta investigación se basa en el análisis del contenido de entrevistas individuales y en profundidad de la muestra elaborada durante dos años, al mismo tiempo que bebe de las aportaciones de la investigación narrativa por su interés por el relato y la anécdota como aproximaciones a la experiencia vivida. Finaliza proponiendo una serie de

orientaciones educativas basadas en los resultados del estudio a la vez que las pone en relación con diferentes materiales y reflexiones de otros autores.

Descriptores: Adolescencia, identidad, homosexuales, entrevista, internet, análisis de contenido.

1. Introduction

The Spanish researches whose object of study are the experiences of adolescents who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, transsexual and bisexual (LGTB) are as recent as they are scarce (Generelo, Pichardo & Galofré, 2008, Coll-Planas, Bustamante & Missé, 2009) in comparison, for example, with the USA and Australia that have more than 30 years of tradition (Savin-Williams, 2009; Robinson *et al.*, 2014). This situation contrasts with two phenomena: (i) the considerable visibility of the figure of the gay teenager in the media since the late 1990s, especially in the television series (*Al salir de clase*, *Física o Química* and *Aída*, as Spanish productions, or *Glee*, *Misfits*, *Shameless*, North American, but also issued in Spanish). And (ii), with the interest in education in affective-sexual diversity and gender (DASyG) developed since the early 2000s in the same country, coinciding with the approval of the Organic Law of Education of 2006, the first in the history of Spain in naming this type of diversity (Royal Decree 1631/2006). This interest has materialized in the publication of numerous guides and educational materials (Generelo & Moreno Cabrera, 2007, Platero & Gómez, 2007), as well as monographs in specialized journals (Ferriols, 2011, Huerta, 2014). Given this contrast, this article comes to share part of the results of a research funded by the Ministry of Science and Innovation. Its first objective is to offer the analysis of a series of practices and experiences in the field of Internet, described by twelve adolescents between 14 and 19 years of age around their self-identification and socialization as gays. At the same time, the second objective is to point out a series of educational orientations that are born from these results.

Regarding the theoretical issues that frame this article, it is necessary to develop several key concepts and their relationships among themselves. Following the work of Foucault (2008)

and D'Emilio (1994), homosexuality and its gay correlate can be understood as historical phenomena resulting from the development of what is known as the welfare society. According to Weeks (2003), gay identity is a necessary fiction, a product of the need to find comfort and community; while Butler (2010) links it with the need to become intelligible subjects in societies that grant great power to questions of gender, sex and sexuality. These issues would be regulated by the fear of embodying the abject, that is, to be the object of inter/trans/homophobic abuse (Coll-Planas, 2010). Hence the importance of gender roles, not only between men and women, also in endo-group relationships, in this case among homosexuals themselves.

From this perspective, gay identity is understood as a cultural identity (Hall, 2005), and therefore, in constant negotiation and learning process. Already the work of Troiden (1989) provides evidence on how, prior to self-identification and gay socialization, every person must know the existence of this identity and its main characteristics, in order to evaluate whether it shares or resembles more than differs. In turn, said person must know that there are others who, previous and/or contemporaneously, embody this gay identity. In this sense, Troiden presents an identity learning process through different stages and concepts of which we highlight: (i) the phases of confusion and acceptance, since they represent the turning point of this process; and (ii), the concept of "disembodied affiliation", the affiliation to homosexuality without having met someone openly gay in person, in this case due to the environment that occupies us, Internet.

According to several studies, young people learn what it means to be gay in areas such as school (Epstein & Johnson, 2000, Renold, 2005), in the media (Riggle, Ellis & Crawford, 1996, Bond-Raacke *et al.*, 2007, Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011),



and more recently on the Internet (Laukkanen, 2007, Alexander & Losh, 2010, de Abreu, 2017). In the article by Szulc & Dhoest (2013), the idea already presented by Hillier *et al.* (1998) on how the internet is a place of learning/rehearsal for lesbians, gays and bisexuals (LGB). It is also concluded that the use of the Internet in relation to sexual identity is significantly greater before and around the first socializations or coming out of the closet. Specifically, the visits to web p.s considered LGB as well as the searches for contact with other LGB people increase, at the same time as the consumption of pornography begins. All this generally from the anonymity and with the objective of breaking what Kielwasser & Wolf (1992) denominate like the “pluralistic ignorance”, the ignorance of which exist other people with their same sexual attraction.

Reviewing these studies, in the background of all of them appears what Barnhurst names as “the queer paradox of technology”, that is, the coexistence of hope and danger that the Internet generates among gay teenagers (2007, p.13). In the case of the works carried out by Laukkanen (2007) and Alexander & Losh (2010), both conclude that the Internet is far from offering a “sexual/gender liberation”, since the uses of the web are mediated by three main issues:

- The characteristics of the web spaces themselves, for example, if it is a social network aimed specifically at gays or not.
- The “readings” that people online make of representations/communications of the rest. That is, the factor of the audiences, the possible audiences and their management (Boyd, 2014).
- And finally, what Lipton (2008) calls “queer reading practices”, readings between lines made in a homosexual key.

2. Methodology

This article is part of a qualitative research that tries to account for a phenomenon and, at the

same time, interpret it from the meaning that its protagonists give it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). To do this, twelve semi-structured and individual interviews were conducted following a thematic script of open questions (Heath *et al.*, 2009) to boys between 14 and 19 who self-identified as gay. Several researches on this type of adolescents have reflected and demonstrated the importance of selection, organization and communication with the participants and, especially, the difficulties of accessing them (Savin-Williams, 2009, Generelo, Pichardo & Galofré, 2008 Kielwasser & Wolf, 1992).

Consequently, the present investigation also took care of such aspects, so much so that the configuration of its sample involved the work of two years in physical spaces (municipal youth centers, associative spaces and high school institutes) and virtual ones, creating a blog and an account in the social network Tuenti. During the 2011-2012 academic year, this profile reached more than 300 friendships, and, through it, some 30 young people received the invitation to participate in the research, although only one of them accepted it. It was through that first collaborator that a butterfly effect was initiated, and the rest would follow. Thus, the sample of the research was laboriously formed due to its minority characteristics, and finally consists of twelve adolescents with different trajectories: different types of educational centers (public, private and private, both Catholic and non-Catholic), and different places and types of family (a young man from Central America, another from Eastern Europe, another from a large family and two from single-parent families), thus giving a concentrated representation.

During the year 2013 the interviews were carried out with an average duration of one and a half hours each. Following the reflections of Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli (2003) on the importance of localization, participants were asked to choose a place to their liking and a time of day, considering the estimated duration. They were also informed of the need for the site not to



be very noisy, since the conversation was going to be recorded, assuring them that nobody but the person responsible for the investigation would have access to the audios. In general, the young people did not suggest any place and they were invited to take advantage of one of the meeting rooms of the university, and most accepted. At the beginning of each meeting they were asked if they wanted to know more about the research, they were reminded of the confidentiality and the possibility of using pseudonyms while maintaining the data of age, country of origin and city of residence.

It is necessary to remember that interviewing is a method with a long tradition in research on personal experiences and processes of meaning (Anderson & Jack, 1991, Kvale, 2007). As Kvale points out, interviews are events in which the person interviewed, and the researcher collaborate in mutual understanding, and therefore part of the willingness to listen, understand and share. In this line it is also necessary to indicate that the present investigation drinks in equal parts of: (i) the narrative research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), to value the anecdote and the story as elements that bring us closer to the experiences (Van Manen, 2003), and (ii) the thematic analysis, for its organizational quality for the study of content (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Ryan & Bernard, 2000).

Thus, after the detailed transcription of the interviews and the validation by each collaborator, the work continued by screening all the material in search of extracts that could be grouped under different epigraphs. These groups were outlined during an intense process guided by the research questions and informed by their theoretical framework. As explained by Wetherell & Potter (1996), the first step was to select a manageable subgroup of data among the hundreds of p.s, followed by repeated re-searches in search of increasingly specific recurring patterns and organizations.

It is very important to finish this section emphasizing that the goal of this research is to

learn from the experiences of the young people interviewed with respect and honesty. Like Coll-Planas, Bustamante & Missé (2009), this article understands and attends to the discomforts of its collaborators, but it does not fall into possible victimizations. Similarly, following Heath *et al.* (2009), here we give an account of their resilience and successes, but we do not intend to overstate them as imposing heroes.

3. Results

In a first approach to the interviews it is evident that most of the collaborators turned to the Internet in search of contents and interactions related to homosexuality and, as it develops next, those experiences played a relevant role in their self-identification processes and socialization as gays. At the same time, such experiences were marked by what is known as “the queer paradox of technology” (Barnhurst, 2007), that is, by the hopeful/liberating and limited/dangerous Internet and were especially in the phases indicated above: between the confusion about their sexual orientation and the acceptance of it.

3.1. On the hopeful experiences: “Anonymous Cyber Gay Affiliations” in the virtual security space

Most of the adolescents interviewed said that they had searched the Internet for testimonies of other boys, data in the form of images and texts that informed them of the existence of gay teenagers, both in their locality and in other places. Their main objective was to break with the feelings of loneliness and isolation caused by a “pluralistic ignorance” (Kielwasser & Wolf, 1992), that is, by the ignorance of equals in offline life. The majority did it from anonymous profiles in social networks, chats and forums, so we are facing what in this research is called as “Anonymous Cyber Gay Affiliations”, following the work of Troiden (1989):



I was talking to a boy for a long time. It was one of my supports to come out of the closet. I met him in a forum [where] people told their stories, there were themes of games, themes of books, movies, a lot of things ... [But I] mostly [watched] the stories of coming out, which was what worried me the most at that moment ... (Mario, 18 years old).

I made a fake Tuenti and a Messenger where I had people I did not know, other gay guys that I supposed ... Well, it was to have them without more. I like to see their photos, just for that, not to talk. I like to gossip, to find out. [...] It was not for hooking up, I have not gone out with people or anything, it was to find out and see if there were people here or not. (Alain, 16 years old)

Well, at the beginning of last summer, the end of 2nd [of ESO] I started looking for information. I searched "gay teen blogs", or "gay teen" ... [...]. I wanted to know about people. I know I'm not the only one but I'm a little lonely (Marco, 14 years old).

In these processes of indirect affiliations, a good number of adolescents showed signs of evaluating the data they obtained from their possible peers, especially from their photographs. As they indicated, they wanted to verify the veracity of the profiles, if they really belonged other gay guys, and their location:

[In the fake profile of a guy who knew he was gay] I could see his friendships with other profiles and he had a lot of guys and I assumed they were homosexuals who had known them. So, it was that I began to see that there were more people here, that it was not me alone (Nicolás, 18 years old).

I also did not visit [the forum/chat] much [...]. I read that they upload and looked at their photos to see if they were real, because that must be taken into account (Eneko, 17 years old).

At the same time, the Internet was not only a source of information, but a place for pre-

vious, and/or parallel, practices to an offline gay socialization (Hillier *et al.*, 1998), which shows that there is no single coming out the closet, various "degrees of outness" (Harry, 1993). In fact, several adolescents described the Internet as a security space, which in some cases was accentuated by contrasting with the danger or uncertainty they felt in their schools and families:

In this forum I saw as you entered, and you met with friends and that's it. You could say anything that nobody was going to you ... In everything I read I think I never felt disrespected, it seemed that it was quite controlled by the moderators (Mario, 18 years old).

At the beginning I was super addict [and] I was quite hooked [to Tuenti]. I talked in chat [with a lot of people] and I told them my story and they told me not to worry, that it was normal [to be gay]. That's how I told my story to unknown people, but I did not dare tell the people I knew. [...] Not knowing them gave me confidence, I do not know. Since they were far away, if they did not accept me, I just had to delete them (Jesus, 17 years old).

Therefore, if these uses of the Internet were related to the need to meet peers and socialize as gay anonymously in security spaces, it makes sense that many will stop doing this type of practice as they develop their lives outside the closet, in the offline world, as also observed by Szulc and Dhoest (2014):

You meet nice people; how could you not connect if you did not have anything else to do? And so ... Now I do not connect so much, to be honest ... (Mario, 18 years old).

Now I do not give much importance [to Tuenti]. Now in Zaragoza all my group of friends, I trust a lot in them, because we do have a lot of confidence already. (Jesus, 17 years old)



Before finishing this sub-section, it is important to return promptly to the so-called “pluralistic ignorance” (Kielwasser & Wolf, 1992), as the search and interactions engine on the Internet. Reading carefully the testimonies of the collaborators we found that this ignorance of possible equals in the offline life was not totally true. And the fact is that, in the same way that they claimed to want to meet other gay young people, they also confessed their refusal to approach and interact with those kids who said, or were said to be gay in their schools:

They told about a boy I do not know what course, but I was very afraid to talk about it, it made me very nervous and took the option to keep quiet so as not to screw up [and] they discover me (Jesus, 17 years old).

Now I only know one, and I do not know him, but he [...] is the friend of my best friend and one day in the hall this guy told a teacher “Hey Ines, I’m gay”. [And] I do not know [if I want to talk to him] he seems nice, but I do not know ... I do not know him at all (Alain, 16 years old).

Given this contradiction can be interpreted that the fundamental reason why the collaborators did not develop direct affiliations and used the Internet and anonymity to interact with their peers, was the fear of inter/trans/homophobic insult/stigma. In other words, it was not only the ignorance of the existence of equals, but the fear of the consequences that in the offline world they were associated with children with potential to be insulted/stigmatized and, therefore, be themselves.

3.2. On the limits and dangers: The fear of the forced coming out of the closet and endo-group mistrust on the Internet

As it develops next, the main dangers that emerged and regulated the practices in Internet of the adolescents interviewed were the fears about:

- The possibility that different social circles, on and offline, were accidentally found (Boyd, 2014), and such a collapse would take them out of the closet without their control.
- The possibility that between the invisible audiences with which they interacted on the Internet, they found the figure of the perverted homosexual, the one who still relates homosexuality to pathology (Foucault, 2008).

In the first place, most of the adolescents informed us of practices on the Internet whose main objective was to keep their activities related to homosexuality a secret, especially when they were younger and hiding their homosexuality:

I have two [Tuenti profiles, one real and one false] and I use them depending on the case (Óscar, 18 years old).

There is a channel dedicated to this topic [of homosexuality on YouTube]. [...] I do not [share it because] on Tuenti I have too many people from the institute; I put it on GooglePlus and on Twitter (Gael, 15 years old).

Such practices and experiences on the Internet were part of the learning to manage their own self-identification and socialization as gays. According to their testimonies, many knew that their online lives could inform those who observed them, and/or those who interacted with them, of their orientation. That is, they had developed the awareness that their searches and uses on the Internet were extensions of their self-identification as gays, and therefore they needed strategic management due to their potential for abuse/stigma (Orne, 2011). Moreover, despite the care given, some told anecdotes in which information or practices on the Internet regarding homosexuality were detected by their relatives, which led them out of the closet indirectly and involuntarily:



My father once told me that I had forgotten to erase the Internet history. [...] I thought I was not looking at it and it caught me by surprise, in fact I did not know you could look at the history. And well, he made some comment like “we have to talk” and they always sounded like very fatal (Nicolás, 18 years old).

I erase the history ... Well now, in my father’s house yes and, in fact, I left my mail, one day, open and my father discovered the messages of [the LGTB association]. Well I did not say anything, I closed my mail and the thing stayed there (Marco, 14 years old).

Secondly, for many of the interviewees, taking care of themselves on the Internet was not only about hiding information from family and friends, but also about the complex endo-group relationships among gays, mainly due to the historical and pathological link of homosexuality with the theories of degeneration (Foucault, 2008):

I never got to talk to anyone [in the chat], I do not like it because they talked almost only perv-stuff (Eneko, 17 years old).

I got into Google and searched for “Gay Chat” and that’s it. I tried several and until I found one that was great for me [and] I was talking to people who helped me and supported me. Well, with one boy only, because the others wanted to fuck (Iñigo, 16 años).

It seems too risky. If you are not sure that the profiles are real or that they want to fool you ... If you have confidence, I do not know, but I do not trust much (Marco, 14 years).

This section closes underlining that the Internet has stood out as the setting and fundamental means of self-identification and socialization as gays of the interviewees by offering them a virtual space of learning about themselves and the world. Although far from being a real security space, the internet enabled them valuable affiliations and anonymous practices

in which they learned to manage their own gay identity and their fear of potential for abuse.

4. Discussion and conclusion: Orientations for education

Taking into account the results of the research, the question to be discussed from the educational field could be formulated as follows: “Yes the ignorance of their peers, and the fear of being treated in an abusive way, led the adolescents interviewed to perform certain practices on the Internet during their self-identification and early socializations as gays, how could the teachers help so that such processes were developed without such ignorance and fear?”

In the first place, before getting into answer, it is worth highlighting how:

In less than fifteen years we have gone from the total absence of specific materials [on affective-sexual and gender diversity (DASyG)] to counting, not only with materials aimed at students of all educational levels, but with texts for the teacher training and families (Platero, 2013, p 185).

Certainly, never before in the history of Spanish education has there been so much interest in this type of diversity and, therefore, never before has the teaching staff had such materials at hand that would facilitate both terminology and teaching experiences. At present we have numerous guides (Generelo & Moreno Cabrera, 2007, Platero & Gómez, 2007, STEILAS, 2015, Xente Gai Astur, 2002), compilations (Generelo & Pichardo, 2006, Simonis, 2005, Sánchez Sáinz, 2009, 2010) and monographic publications (Ferriols, 2011; Huerta, 2014) that offer ample resources to publicize the DASyG, mainly trusting that its recognition and history entails its social respect and dignity.

It should be noted favorably how this type of work opts for accessibility, clarity and synthesis, but at the same time we must insist that, in general terms, obviate questions about the



perspective and the epistemological positioning, that is, about the characteristics of the knowledge that they spread. Hence, alternative voices have emerged from critical perspectives that promote sophisticated forms of analysis on the concepts of sex, gender and education (Britzman, 2002, Berná, Cascone & Platero, 2012, Planellas & Pié, 2012); in this case, trusting that such analyzes entail a deconstruction of the old patterns.

Second, based on the results of this research, it should be noted that the need for affiliation with their peers and the fear of being treated in an abusive manner, present a different dimension to: (i) the knowledge of the DASyG through classifications about sexuality, sex and gender; (ii) the study of historical and relevant LGBT characters; and (iii) critical analysis of these issues. Therefore, perhaps in a complementary way to the previous proposals, here we venture to present three aspects that can indirectly accompany the identification processes of adolescents, specifically gays, but not exclusively:

Favoring the construction of an analog social network

We invite teachers to promote interaction among all students within the same educational centers, creating spaces of security and linking the educational and recreational. This issue can be developed through projects that collaborate and coexist with students of different ages, and even from different centers in the same neighborhood or municipality. The objective is to promote an analogue social network in which the students can get to know each other and create networks of learning, friendship and mutual help that do not give rise to the feeling of isolation, ignorance and mistrust among equals of any diversity. For example, this type of experience has been widely developed in the “learning communities” (Elboj *et al.*, 2005) due to its commitment to social transformation and dialogical learning beyond the classrooms and walls of schools.

Promoting “living experiences” to be individually and collectively

Returning to the testimonies of the interviewees, we find recurrent thoughts of a negative nature that, together with the attempts to manage and control their practices on the Internet (so as not to be discovered but in turn discover their peers), lead us to consider opportune and sensitive to encourage teachers to favor experiences in which the development of intellectual skills, such as analysis and the projection of concepts, move to the background. Remember the words of Stoll, Fink & Earl (2004) inviting us to expand the Cartesian paradigm, “I think, therefore I am”, towards “learning to know, to do, to live together and to be”. Similar to Planellas & Pié (2012), although without the concern to subvert, we also propose to encourage “living experiences” to be individual and as a group. As Greene writes:

In every defensible social vision, happiness is as important as clarity and consensus, or, as others have said, love is as important as logic. [...] Obviously, I am not saying that it is enough simply to dance and laugh. What I do say is that I think it is important to let the energy that allows a family contact with everything and everyone [...] [and thus] lay the foundations for coexistence within the community (Greene, 2005, pp. 102-103).

Using the arts in favor of the emancipation of all students

There are several experiences that have linked artistic practices with the development of resilience among LGBT youth, (Boyd Acuff, 2011, Shelton, 2008), but the fact that they were carried out only with this youth group limits the scope of what is promoted here. While projects such as Respira (Varanda, 2012) and Five Days to Dance (Andreu & Moles, 2014), which did take place in formal education, and therefore with heterogeneous groups, they connect better with Greene’s previous appointment. This is illustrated by the



testimony of one of the teachers participating in Five Days to Dance:

I was very excited to see two students who are really water and oil. They are in the same classroom (sic) and do not interact at all, and see them having to team up, holding hands to hold another partner who was falling back, I found it beautiful. [In fact] I trust that [after] this project, then, for once they relax, let go and enjoy a little because there is a lot of tension [in the classroom]. [...] I think it's an opportunity, not only for those who have suffered the laughter of classmates, but even for those who have not behaved well. [...] It will be equally difficult for all [to leave] those roles they have taken, and that they express themselves, and share, and see that we are equal, different but equal. [...] I hope that this project is a start, a start to work other things that are not only with the mind (Andreu & Moles, 2014).

End this article with the same hope. As professionals of education we can work in a holistic way, helping to round up the edges, to dilute the fears and mistrust that are limiting many young people, not only gays, leading them to search the Internet for what they do not know, and do not dare to know in their lives offline beyond the digital.

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