Book Review - Researching Young People's Experiences of Digital Technologies

Jayashree Vispute*

Author - Shanly Dixon & Sandra Weber (Ed.), Publisher - Palgrave Macmillan

The digital world that we engage with has evolved rapidly, from the public release of the Mosaic web browser fifteen years ago to a sophisticated, integrated system of connections, networks and online information. The impact of new digital media (NDM) – digitally-driven hardware and software, computers and cell phones, video games, social networking applications, as well as the internet is hotly contested. Youth today still engage in many of the same tendencies to form communities and play, though the forms they assume have changed to some extent. The internet is a great space for adolescent experimentation -- one can assume a separate identity or no identity at all, and try on different voices, with limited risks for the experimenter.

Researching Young People's Experiences of Digital Technologies is an edited book contributed by 15 distinguished writers and organized into 15 chapters. It is edited by Sandra Weber and Shanly Dixon, both of who together, have also authored three chapters of the book. The profiles of the contributors are interesting and range from doctoral candidates, to a graduate student in sociology, a computer games theorist, senior lecturer in digital media and critical theory, professors, researchers, associate professors and a specialist in historical children's literature to describe a few.

The book opens with the chapter, where the researchers using the observation method, conclude that the way young people play in virtual space is similar in many respects to their play in other spaces. (Shanly Dixon, Sandra Weber, chapter 1).

The book is a joint effort of talented and collaborative researchers who have used primarily qualitative research methods for their case studies. Interview methods, observation methods and ethnographic studies are some of the majorly used techniques. Sandra Weber conducted an in depth longitudinal ethnographical study for a span of 10 years which forms the case study in chapter 3. Here she illustrates that how age, gender, friendship, popular culture and play opportunities contribute to the technologies in use.

The young people in most of the chapters are active users and producers of new media. In different locations, girls and boys exhibit a genuine interest and desire to participate in cyber culture. This forms the base for the case study in chapter 5 titled "I think we must be normal.. There are too many of us for this to be abnormal!! - Girls creating identity and forming community in pro Ana/Mia websites" by Mitchell Polak.

On websites such as YouTube, Facebook and similar networking sites, young people have growing online presence and power. Weblogs by girls are becoming popular. Their blogs are popular too. Brandi Bell in her research which is chapter 6 has raised questions concerning the potential significance of these blogs where girls make their voices heard. Rebekah Willett in chapter 7 highlights how girls are conscious about how they are positioned. Furthermore she writes how media and fashion industry have exploited girls, but these are also agents of "girl power". Fashion and media have made the girls confident and opinionated. Describing adolescent girls' expression on their web home page and the web's potential as a new "safe space" for girls self-expression is chapter 10 titled "Adolescent girls expression on web home pages: spirited somber and self-conscious sites" by Susannah R Stern, chapter 10.

Historical children's literature specialist, Jacqueline Reid-Walsh in chapter 11, is of the opinion that children see commercial sites as "information" sites or as a space for free online play. Associate Professor, Leslie Regan Shade, chapter 14, endorses various other studies which site that the young girls definitely need to be given guidance on how to cope with online risks rather than be banned. It is important to give youth the opportunity to design their own safety programs. Young people need to be addressed as citizens and active media producers rather than as mere consumers of entertainment products.

The book has cases from Canada, Britain, the United States, Nigeria and South Africa that offer new insights into digital childhoods. There are chapters about girls with virtually no access and chapters where girls who grew up in digital surrounding. The researchers describe and analyze a wide range of young peoples' experiences in cyberspace, highlighting the imaginative and multi tasking ways in which digital technologies are being incorporated into contemporary childhood. Collectively, the chapters cross geographical space, race and social class, moving from a group of French speaking girls who created their won webspace in which to hang out, to a group of working class girls in London who research, discus and design websites aimed at "tweens" to a

* The author is Assistant Professor, Vishwakarma Institute of Management, Pune and can be reached at jayashreevispute @vim.ac.in

group of girls in Nigeria who visit a cyber café for the first time. The ages of the young people we read about in the chapters range from two to twenty with a special focus on the so called tween years where identity and worldviews are fluctuating and irregular.

The book is well written and explains the concepts with illustrative case studies. It can become a tool for researchers and would be extremely useful to the research scholars and faculty members who are studying behavior of young adults and digital media. The authors offer key insights not only into girls' voices and experiences but also into more general questions of how to research and conceptualize childhood, play, and young people's relationships to technology.

The plus point of the book is that each chapter is followed by an exhaustive list of references. The wealth of references makes it a good starting point for readers who wish to gain added or in depth knowledge on any of the referenced/referred work.

By all standards, the book has been overwhelmingly successful in throwing light on the way young adults interact and engage with digital media in today's context. The readers would find the work of the contributors immensely useful and thought provoking. It may also inspire many to think afresh on how to use these digital technologies creatively and effectively. I recommend this book especially for doctoral students doing research in investigating attitude and behavior of young adult towards digital media.