Digital Makings of the Cosmopolitan City? Young People’s Urban Imaginaries of London

# Details

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## Sample

84 young people (41 young men and 43 young women aged 12 to 21) of different class and racial backgrounds living in three London neighbourhoods

# Abstract

This article focuses on young Londoners’ everyday digital connectedness in the global
city and examines the urban imaginaries their connections generate and regulate. Young
people engage with many mobilities, networks, and technologies to find their places in a
city that is only selectively hospitable to them. Offline and online connections also shape
urban imaginaries that direct their moral and practical positions toward others living
close by and at a distance. We draw from a two-year study with 84 young people of
different class and racial backgrounds living in three London neighborhoods. The study
reveals the divergence of youths’ urban imaginaries that result from uneven access to
material and symbolic resources in the city. It also shows the convergence of their urban
imaginaries, resulting especially from widespread practices of diversified connectedness.
More often than not, young participants reveal a cosmopolitan and positive disposition
toward difference. Cosmopolitanism becomes a common discursive tool urban youth
differently use, to narrate and regulate belonging in an interconnected world and an
unequal city.

# Outcome

"young Londoners’ digital practices reveal paradoxical engagements with online and offline hierarchical urban life. Functioning as moral registers of classification, their imaginaries revolve around dominant exclusionary narratives, resistance, transnational communication and travel, perceptions of (im)mobility, banal encounters with difference, and global orientations. Informants from working-class environments are deeply aware of their limited physical mobility and the symbolic and material marginality of their neighborhoods. Their sedentary experiences contrast starkly with the perceptions of nomadic unboundedness and limitless opportunities of those living in (upper-)middle-class settings. The engagement of informants from working-class environments with difference is a naturalized lived reality coupled with an ordinary sense of solidarity that is inevitable and less about choice than about pragmatic coexistence, intercultural learning, and inevitable cultural translation. Against that practice-driven cosmopolitanism, those from (upper-)middle-class families assert a discursive, ideological, postracial cosmopolitan imaginary. Their taken-for-granted mobility enables them to explore difference in London and abroad, but their digital connections enable them to retreat and sustain familiarities, an indication of a globally transferable parochialism. Largely disengaged from the local diverse spatial context they perceived as hostile, they are sheltered and feel at home in elective global and digitally networked bubbles of similarly privileged subjects. Ambiguities do surface among some informants who voice guilt and regret when realizing that their narrow social media friendship networks contradict their cosmopolitan ideals and that their dominant narrative is one of elite, individualistic, unemphatic tolerance and unobstructed mobility." (Leurs and Georgiou, 2016: 3704).