Internet, children and space: Revisiting generational attributes and boundaries

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* Social mediation
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## Sample

The analysis is based on a set of 158 semi-structured interviews carried out with children with Internet connections at home in Portugal, selected through a quota sampling method. Since the interview process was based on schools, only children attending the 4th, 6th and 9th grade in state and private schools were selected (aged between 8 and 17 years). The sample was designed to include some degree of regional and social diversity.

## Implications For Parents About

Parental practices / parental mediation

# Abstract

At the dawn of modernity, in the 18th century, space became a critical category in defining generational attributes and locations. However, borders that previously tightly isolated adults and children are nowadays continuously challenged and modified by a constant and ubiquitous use of new information and communication technologies, namely the Internet, blurring notions of ‘private’ and ‘public’, ‘outdoors’ and ‘indoors’, ‘real’ and ‘virtual’. Giving voice to children, this article explores qualitative empirical data from a research project carried out in Portugal. It focuses on children as subjects and actors of these processes, especially in the way they combine ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ space and place in a geography of their own.

# Outcome

"In the four domains considered – time spent online, favourite sites and activities, communication and social networking practices – we have illustrated how children combine and juxtapose the ‘real’ and the ‘virtual’ spheres, fabricating hybrid spaces of their own. One does not exclude the other. Through the use of the Internet, children import routines and schedules, activities and perceptions, people and networks from the ‘outside’ world into virtual domains they have appropriated on the Web. By doing so, they monitor, diversify and multiply them.
(...) Binary categorisations of generations in terms of space (Prout, 2005) are put into question, as well as representations of children as inner and private home members, opposed to their adult gatekeepers, freely circulating in the public outside world (Brannen and O’Brien, 1995; Rasmussen, 2004). Our study suggests that the erosion of generational territory markers is underway through children’s intense and ubiquitous use of the Internet. Much like other authors (Valentine and Holloway, 2002), we have sustained that the virtual is not simply opposed to or in competition with the real. (...)
The changing scope of space perimeter is the first dimension to consider. This outline was significantly enlarged: the Internet puts the child in contact with much larger and global domains, overcoming local physical settings and barriers. (...) The child makes incursions and navigates in the public sphere, formerly an attribute of adults (...)" (de Almeida, A.; Delicado, A.; de Almeida Alves, N.; Carvalho, T., 2015: 1449).

"Border crossing control is still a parental anxiety, as noticed in previous research (Stevenson, 2011) – even if its effects are, as we demonstrated, limited, especially in families in which parents have
lower levels of education (and are less digitally skilled than their children) or among older children (more autonomous and competent users than younger ones).
Second, borders between online and outline worlds are increasingly porous, permeable and discontinuous. As shown above, online time is also used to carry out offline activities; actors of the ‘virtual’ and ‘real’ spheres are combined and merged into particular arrangements, crafted by children. These are not single, rigid or unified blocks – as sometimes is implicit in essentialist narratives (Valentine and Holloway, 2002): ‘virtual’ and ‘real’ are themselves conjugated and fragmented by children’s agency in multiple parallel platforms or activities.
(...) Different children fabricate different combinations and arrangements. For instance, gender and age subtly shape favourite things to do or to play online. But each child experiences his or her own mixture of ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ elements in a permanent multitasking performance. Space is fragmented into co-existing planes, which structure variable and moving configurations.
Third, the nature of contemporary space, under children’s perspective, is another hallmark dimension. From a micro, limited and familial setting, nowadays their space accumulates macro, plural, anonymous and unforeseeable dimensions. While navigating online, children benefit from the experience of opening unlimited, varied windows, giving them cumulative insights into a close or to a more distant world. Their identity thus appears to be constructed not in relation to a single, one-dimensional place, but by means of migratory movements in, out and around multiple and co-existing spaces. Spatial mobility, the association of real/virtual space with movement promoted by technology use, is a main feature of contemporary childhood.

In conclusion, from a child’s standpoint, the distinctive line between ‘virtual’ and ‘real’ spaces is an artificial frontier, which mostly translates an adult’s perception of the historical crossing of a ‘pre’ towards a ‘post’ Internet era at home, typical of their generation. Applying this dichotomy to children’s experience is inaccurate and fails to clarify one of the contemporary features of childhood: its intense, permanent and fluid forms of de-territorialized mobility between ‘virtual’ and ‘real’ spaces. Rather than eroding social bonds, this articulation promotes their changing nature" (de Almeida, A.; Delicado, A.; de Almeida Alves, N.; Carvalho, T., 2015: 1450).