BEING AND NOT BEING
‘Digital Tweens’ in a Hybrid Culture

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Introduction

In Latin America, Brazil has the greatest number of children and adolescents aged 9–16 who access social networks (Pavez, 2014). Around 24.3 million Brazilian children (9–17) are part of the connected generation (CGI, 2017). By interacting with digital devices, they experience mobility, connectivity, and privatised access to communication, in line with international studies such as EU Kids Online (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig & Ólafsson, 2011), Net Children Go Mobile (Mascheroni & Cuman, 2014), and Global Kids Online (Byrne, Kardefelt-Winther, Livingstone & Stoilova, 2016). Focussed on pre-teens, this chapter adopts an equivalent theoretical position as those international studies, considering children’s and adolescents’ rights as well as the opportunities and risks offered by Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for children’s wellbeing.

Following a sociology of childhood perspective (Corsaro & Eder, 1990; Pasquier, 2008; Sarmento, 2004), children and adolescents are constructed as active agents in the configuration of digital culture, its dynamics and trajectories. They participate within this culture through acts of liking, disliking, posting, and sharing. They are involved through interactive processes which connect and disconnect people and groups, invigorating and/or challenging beliefs, rituals, symbols, values, preferences, etc. In their daily dialogue with adults and peers, either close or distant, entangled in online and offline relationships, children and adolescents learn how to negotiate concepts and practices, permissions and prohibitions, gains and losses. All this makes the experience of living in a digital culture both fascinating and frightening. In the words of Clarissa, aged 11: “the internet is dangerous, but it’s nice” (Sampaio & Ponte, 2017).

For those who are transitioning from childhood to adolescence, often referred to as tweens, this online universe is especially attractive. The concept of tweens is generally applied to children aged between 8 and 12 years, and has emerged as a marketing tool, as postulated by Abiala and Hernwall (2013). It is understood as a cultural age in which identity issues are intensified, such as who a child is and/or who a child wants to be. This implies an exploratory process of children discovering who they are through their relationships with others and the world around them. The two European surveys, EU Kids Online (2010) and Net Children Go Mobile (2013–2014), confirm this trend: in comparison with the younger age group (9–10 years old), children aged 11–12 years clearly climb a ‘ladder of opportunities’ as defined by Livingstone and Helsper (2008). According to Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt and Runnel (2012), they add communication-based
activities (using messages, visiting social networking sites, playing games with others) to the content-based activities they used to do, thus enlarging their experiences of communication with peers and their sources of entertainment.

This chapter discusses how children aged 11–12 participate (or not) within this digital culture, in a country marked by high social inequality and cultural hybridity. After considering the Brazilian tweens that are digitally excluded, it explores how factors such as social inequality affect children participating within digital culture. Reflecting upon the impact of cultural context, the following sections analyse children’s digital practices, focussing on their modes of access and on their main activities, especially in relation to message-based social media interactions and YouTube.

### Being and Not Being a ‘Digital Tween’ in Brazil

In the words of poet Tom Jobim, “Brazil is not a country for beginners” (Silva, 2014). The population of Brazil is approximately 208.7 million people, while the country as a whole is divided into five geographical regions (North, Northeast, Midwest, Southeast, and South) (IBGE, 2010, 2018). More than 80% of the population live in urban areas, and the majority identify themselves as Christians (IBGE, 2010, 2018). For many, Brazil is merely associated with Carnival and soccer. However, this “tropical country, blessed by God and beautiful by nature” – words from a song by Jorge Ben Jor (1969) – is also one of the most socially unequal countries in the world. Mestizos, Brazilians who are part-white, part-black, and part-Indian, have in their genetic and cultural formation the mark of being mixed, reflecting the genuine encounters and/or the violence that has accompanied the colonising process. Contrary to classifications that try to define the country, Brazil and its people recreate themselves daily in order to survive amid both the advances and backwardness that have marked its history.

In recent years, Brazil has gone from celebrating being a “country for all” – the slogan of the government led by Luís Inácio da Silva – advancing towards a culture that was both inclusive and plural, including in ICT use to a country that was impelled to maintain “order and progress” – the slogan of Michel Temer, who took over the presidency after the coup of 2016; to being seduced by the 2018 presidential campaign slogan of “Brazil above everything, God above all”, used by the current president, Jair Messias Bolsonaro. This political change has occurred at the expense of constitutional rights and social protection policies, such as public investments in education and in the Bolsa Família Program – two measures that have directly impacted the daily life of Brazilian children and adolescents.

In such an unequal, culturally diverse, and politically unstable country, it is worth noting that 5.2 million children and adolescents are not internet users (CGI, 2017). Of these, the 2.9 million children who have never accessed the web are especially drawn from rural areas in the North and Northeast regions, as well as being of low socioeconomic status (SES). Among this group, 18% of children aged 11–12 are disconnected, and 29% of these have never accessed the web.

Before experiencing the condition of digital exclusion, these children and adolescents were first and foremost excluded from citizenship. Many have been exposed to child labour and/or sexual exploitation, being deprived of access not only to school but also to safe living conditions with basic sanitation and electricity. Some were already living in the streets of the country’s cities, as reported by CONANDA (2018), the National Council for Children and Adolescents’ Rights. If the ‘tween times’ are understood as a search for autonomy, in which children still rely on parents to secure survival (Abiala & Hernwall, 2013), being a ‘tween’ becomes an abstract idea which does not translate to the lived experiences of children who, alone and fending for themselves, have to be accountable for their own survival. With these critical issues in mind, this chapter now considers digitally connected children and adolescents in Brazil.
The adult gaze categorises contemporary children as ‘digital natives’, in consonance with global marketing discourses that reverberate in Brazilian media, which celebrate children’s positioning as ‘experts’ in technology. Research has suggested, though, that the relation of children and adolescents to digital culture is much more complex, being also contingent on factors such as SES, gender, religion, region, interest groups and/or belonging (Livingstone & Haddon, 2009). Such factors engender different forms of access and appropriation of ICTs by children, challenging the notion that ‘digital natives’ know how to use them competently and critically in an intuitive way. By highlighting social inequalities and cultural trends, this chapter explores and analyses how these disparities are present in Brazilian adolescents’ online practices concerning both digital access and use.

**Methodological Procedures**

Since 2012, the ICT historical series *ICT Kids Online Brazil*, overseen by the Brazilian Internet Steering Committee (CGI.Br), has offered a robust statistical database. The depth and breadth of this resource allows a longitudinal analysis of ICT access by children aged 9 to 17 years. The quantitative research follows the conceptual and methodological models of the European network EU Kids Online (Livingstone, Mascheroni, & Staksrud, 2015), which has the goal of identifying the risks and opportunities represented by the relationship between children and the internet. As with other CGI studies, the *ICT Kids Online Brazil* reports are available online.

The analysis presented here is based on two kinds of data:

1. Statistical data from the historical series of *ICT Kids Online Brazil*, particularly the results collected in 2016, which involved 2,999 children. According to the data collection procedures, children’s answers were collected through two structured questionnaires; one was interviewer-administered and the other, which included sensitive questions, was self-completed. The five economic strata classifications (classes A, B, C, D, and E) were here combined into high SES (A and B), middle SES (C), and low SES (D and E) for data analysis and cross-country comparability.

2. Recent qualitative studies that investigate Brazilian pre-teens and digital culture (Ferreira, 2018; Máximo, 2017; Monteiro, 2018; Rezende, 2017; Sampaio & Ponte, 2017; Tomaz, 2017). These studies use and combine distinct approaches: ethnographic observation of children’s environments of media use, focus groups and interviews. The authors of this chapter conducted some of these studies, while others were identified through databases of Brazilian academic research. Qualitative data were explored through thematic axes that considered children’s practices and reports on their digital experience. Children’s testimonials were extracted from these studies.

This dialogue between two different kinds of data is productive: the qualitative approach not only contributes to identifying contextual issues that affect children’s access to and use of the internet; it is also important to account for process and cultural aspects hidden in the quantitative results produced through the historical series and statistically controlled procedures.

**Ways of Accessing the Internet**

This section demonstrates what quantitative data can show, and also what it can hide. More issues regarding internet access are visible than the ones revealed in statistics. In addition,
qualitative data also show children’s strategies for participating in and shaping digital culture in the context of inequality.

As the historical series of *ICT Kids Online* reveal, the smartphone has become the main device used by children and adolescents to access the internet, increasing from 21% in 2012 to 91% in 2016. In contrast, use of other devices for accessing the internet decreases as a child’s age increases. Among the age group ranging from 11 to 12 years, 87% use the smartphone to access the internet, compared with 83% of children aged 9 and 10. When considering the use of smartphones by children aged 11 to 12, the data associated with family income do not suggest significant differences: 91% of high SES, 86% of medium SES, and 86% of low SES children use this digital device. The income variable negatively impacted children’s and adolescents’ access to other devices such as tablets and desktop computers, however.

While quantitative data reveals little difference in children’s access to smartphones, qualitative research suggests singularities in such access. Shared use of smartphones is associated with low SES children in this age group. Given that mobility trends identified in European studies such as Net Children Go Mobile (2014) suggest a more individualised use of the smartphone and greater autonomy by children and adolescents (Vincent, 2015), Brazilian studies from Monteiro (2018), Ferreira (2018), Rezende (2017), and Máximo (2017) indicate a shared use of devices by children living in marginalised contexts. Reflecting the low purchasing power of families who are unable to provide individual devices for their children, children aged 11–12 from low SES families share smartphones with their parents or siblings. This aspect has not been adequately investigated in quantitative research.

The shared use of smartphones has implications for children’s digital access and use. One is the reduction of privacy, since parents can access the content shared by their children. To deal with this situation, some children use strategies like deleting messages. Monalisa, aged 12, reported: “I delete the conversations so she [the mother] can’t see”. This situation may also have implications for parental mediation practices. Since parents can easily access children’s digital content, they may engage in more direct mediation. Melody, aged 11, shares the smartphone with her mother and reported: “sometimes she tells me to take down some pictures” (Máximo, 2017).

Just as parents can access the content generated by their children, children can also view content exchanged by parents or older siblings, at times leading to situations in which they have viewed inappropriate content. A seven-year-old boy, for example, saw pornography when he accessed his mother’s smartphone since she had an account designated for adults over 18 years (Ferreira, 2018). Children’s limited access to and use of smartphones was also reported. Lis, aged 11, stated that she shares her smartphone and Facebook account with her 15-year-old sister. However, Lis is not allowed to post online, she can only see her sister’s profile (Máximo, 2017).

Mobility trends associated with the use of smartphones are also representative of SES in Brazil. Although the smartphone is the main device used by children aged 11 and 12, their mobile access to the internet (24%) is significantly lower than access from other people’s places (79%) and from their own homes (77%). Indeed, children’s access to the internet is predominantly via wi-fi (80%), which demands a broadband connection, something still inaccessible to many poorer families. Access to the internet at home is common for those from high SES (98%), while those from low SES typically access the internet from other people’s places (82%). Mirela, from the outskirts of Fortaleza (a Northeast region), aged 12, said “Sometimes I use my uncle’s wi-fi” (Máximo, 2017).

Since access to a high-bandwidth connection is not a reality for many Brazilian households and public schools, children report a particular strategy for accessing the network: they discover other people’s wi-fi passwords. In the words of Emilia, aged 11: “my cousin spent all day trying to figure out the password from our neighbour. He discovered it and gave it to us. But the neighbour didn’t know” (Sampaio & Ponte, 2017). This conduct, in which the child circumvents
adult rules and may experience risky situations, reflects contextual conditions of social inequality affecting children. It also reveals how children of this age may feel pressured to achieve connectivity, a phenomenon increasingly reported by children and adolescents around the world (Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2014).

In an environment where ‘connectivity imperative’ is increasingly important, 62% of Brazilians aged 11 to 12 access the internet more than once per day. Some children mentioned their difficulty in controlling the time they spend online, signalling the risk of excessive use. Mateus, a middle-class boy aged 11, says: “you spend too much time on your cell phone, then you can’t have control between cell phone and study” (Sampaio & Ponte, 2017). In this regard, when analysed in terms of SES, results indicate a greater proportion of tweens from high SES accessing the internet more than once a day (77%) in comparison with tweens from low SES (42%).

Considering the balance between opportunity and risk, children from low-income families are theoretically less exposed to the risk of internet overuse but may have fewer opportunities due to their limited access. Neymar, aged 11, reports:

I have to work with my father to make money for me. If I do not win, there’s no way I can see YouTube. I did not pay the guy there when I played [at the LAN (local area network) house], but I’m going to pay. I owe [him].

(Monteiro, 2018)

However, some lower SES children may also be at risk of internet overuse, as factors other than income influence this process: “I spend 90% of my time on the internet”, said a boy from a low SES family (Sampaio & Cavalcante, 2016).

While it is difficult to measure accurately how much time children and adolescents spend on the internet, it is possible to identify the main online activities, as discussed in the following section.

**Children’s Digital Experiences**

**Contacting and Curating**

According to *ICT Kids Online* 2016, the most frequent online activities of Brazilian children aged 11 to 12 were instant messaging (39%), using social media (35%), and watching videos (27%), followed by researching topics of their interest (18%), playing games (15%), and doing school activities (10%). Activities related to content creation and civic participation are present in low or even residual values. Thus, communication stands out as the most prevalent daily online practice for Brazilian children, surpassing activities related to entertainment which is the trend in other countries, as shown by Haddon and Vincent (2014).

Six out of ten Brazilian children aged 11 to 12 use instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp, one of the most popular applications used in the country. With this app, children can usually interact more freely with peers and keep the messages exchanged private, i.e., away from adults’ surveillance: “because those are my conversations with my friends, I don’t like her [mother] to see them”, says Melody, aged 12 (Máximo, 2017). As considered previously, this is not always possible for children from low SES families who have to share their phone use.

Connected with their peers through WhatsApp, children collaborate on processes of self-discovery and of finding out about the world, negotiating identities and belongings. The application can be integrated with social networking sites, thus facilitating content sharing, especially of visual material. For tweens, the impacts of body changes of adolescence are intensified with media use, with significant implications for identity processes. The act of sharing self-images in peer groups becomes a recurring practice in this age group (Abiala & Hernwall, 2013). The
exposition of the ‘perfect body’ is reinforced by both colonial and patriarchal traditions in Brazil, which are actualised in the objectification of the feminine body through advertising or Carnival pictures that circulate around the world.

Tween girls especially report the practice of digitally curating their appearance through media representations. That is, they use strategies such as sharing, evaluating, and selecting previous photos through WhatsApp. Those images are then exposed in wider groups and on social media such as Facebook. “Sometimes I show it to my friends, then they tell me to post that one”, says Mirela, aged 12 (Máximo, 2017). Thus, WhatsApp is used for the performance of being digitally curated by peers, aimed at achieving peer recognition – that is, receiving likes in Facebook.

Since being accepted by friends is a key part of peer culture (Corsaro, 2011; Pasquier, 2008), the process of curating their appearance, especially for tween-aged girls, is in line with the centrality of body culture in Brazil. From a contextual point of view, it also reveals the unequal pressure experienced by Brazilian girls to conform to certain body models that do not reflect their mestizo and diverse constitutions. In some situations, body exposure becomes a bargaining chip to get likes on posts and followers on channels such as Gemesas.com where, for example, teenagers dance and sing funk music with appealing lyrics (Monteiro, 2018). Mirela, aged 11, indicates the type of photos that are most appreciated: “it is the ones with bikini because people give more likes and enjoy them more” (Máximo, 2017).

In line with Brazilian digital users in general, children at this age are active users of social media (76%). Their participation on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram is performed mainly through photos and/or videos posted about daily situations. While some are curated, others are often published instantly. Such continuous exposition tends to contribute to the maintenance of peer relationships (boyd, 2014).

As previously considered, while sharing online content through their profiles on social media, young people are not always aware of who is watching their online performances. Depending on the privacy configuration selected, their self-presentation may be accessible to the broader public. Many times, tweens deal with what is, effectively, an invisible audience, since not all users are visible when they post their online information. In this type of self-exposition, malicious comments posted on the network may cause harm and embarrassment, due to harassment, regardless of any physical contact with strangers. Gabi, 11 years old, says: “once a guy posted it like this . . . I’m ashamed to say [it] . . . he said so ‘this one should be very good in bed’” (Máximo, 2017). Malicious comments are prevalent on public profiles, which is the largest group of profiles used by Brazilian children aged 11–12 (42%). Even when configuring their profiles to be private (33%) or partially private (6%), tweens still connect with a high number of friends on social media. National data indicates that one out of five children in this age group has between 101 and 300 friends on their contact lists on social media, a high amount when compared with other countries (CGI, 2017; Sozio et al., 2015).

Generalised narratives about Brazilian people are multiplied through numerous binomials: ‘feminist and antifeminist’, ‘catholics and protestants’, ‘southern and north-eastern’, ‘white and black’, ‘fascist and revolutionary’, among many others. In dialogue with such terms, collectivities, communities, and movements are formed, either conforming to the established order or promoting resistance. On the internet, social networking sites, particularly WhatsApp, are active vehicles for circulating such information. These general tensions and conflicting messages become manifest in children’s experience of the digital world. As such, having access to the internet, Brazilian children also have access to hate speech and intolerance. In 2016 41% of Brazilian children reported having seen, at some point in the previous twelve months, someone suffering discrimination as a result of skin colour and race (24%), physical appearance (16%), or sexual orientation (13%). Body image and homophobia stand out as important cultural elements around which othering and discrimination processes take place.
By contrast, it is worth highlighting that Brazilian children use social networks within ‘communities of belonging’, ‘movements’ and/or ‘collectivities’ which are structured not only in terms of personal interests and affinities, but also around shared projects. The experiences of boys and girls from Fundação Casa Grande, in Ceará (Barbalho, 2010), and Movimento Sem Terrinha, affiliated with Movimento Sem Terra (Ravena, 2015), are examples of these communities. To a lesser extent, these forms of social media have also allowed the emergence of a counterpoint to the hegemonic discourses of mainstream media.

**Producing Popularity and Audiences around Consumption**

Besides accessing social networking sites, many Brazilian children aged 11–12 mentioned watching online videos on platforms such as YouTube. Though this has not yet been explored through quantitative audience research, videos from YouTubers have stood out as important digital products in qualitative research on children’s media consumption (Tomaz, 2017). Entertainment videos, such as music, movies, and YouTubers’ videos, was the content most likely to be accessed (Rezende, 2017; Sampaio & Ponte, 2017). According to the mapping made by the ESPM Lab of the 100 channels most viewed on YouTube in Brazil, 48 offered content for children (Corrêa, 2016). The data also revealed that in 2016 230 national channels targeting children had more than 52 billion views.

In a country of *mestizos*, the most popular YouTuber children are white, southeastern pre-adolescents (8–14 years old) from middle-income families (Tomaz, 2017). Often, the production of their videos is sophisticated, with the use of editing, lighting, and other professional techniques contributing to their channels’ popularity and dissemination (Marôpo, Sampaio & Miranda, 2017). Famous YouTubers are usually managed by specialised agencies and maintain a close – but not always transparent – connection with the brands they advertise. In their videos, some child YouTubers display expensive products, trips abroad, glamorous and luxurious rooms, and, in a number of cases, the celebration of ostentation (Rezende, 2017). For the millions of Brazilian children living in poverty (61% of this age group, according to the UNICEF report, 2018), engaging with such videos is to face the evidence of social inequality and disparity. Yet YouTubers’ products also provide a platform for the possibility of ascending to a higher social position in the symbolic sphere. While some poor children entertain themselves by consuming videos of countless products, others are amused by watching others’ consumption of such products (Monteiro, 2018). Thus, disadvantaged tweens virtually exploit a world that is, in fact, inaccessible to them.

There is a contrast between the more homely productions of children from the periphery and the glamorous productions of more privileged children who have already achieved celebrity status (Miranda, 2017). Celebrities offer guidance to their followers on ‘How to become a successful YouTuber’, encouraging them not to give up on that dream through the courses, books, and videos that celebrities package and sell. The most common recipe for success that guides the performance of children in these two different worlds is, however, the same: the construction of narratives around consumption.

By watching these videos, children and young people are exposed to a form of marketing communication, which is present both in the advertising that precedes the video and in the video itself, disguised in the YouTubers’ testimonies, unboxings, reviews, and so on. In 2016, 69% of the ICT Kids Online respondents aged 11 to 17 reported having seen advertising on video-sharing websites. This figure is 63% for children aged 11 and 12 (CGI, 2017). As a young boy from São Paulo said, advertising is everywhere on the internet, “on every website; on almost all of them, [advertising] appears” (Sampaio & Cavalcante, 2016). This situation happens despite the Brazilian legal framework which defines marketing communication directed at children as abusive and, in effect, illegal (Nunes Junior & Souza, 2016).

Finally, it is worth noting that some videos presented on child YouTuber channels promote and justify widespread discrimination as being merely a ‘joke’. This is the case of the *Rich versus
Poor YouTuber Kid playlists cited by Monteiro (2018), in which children are encouraged to trivialise social inequality and even laugh at the differences it creates.

Conclusion

As evidenced by quantitative data, many findings from the Global North, such as the trends towards connectivity, mobility, and privacy (Mascheroni & Cuman, 2014), are also confirmed in the Brazilian context. However, this superficial equivalence is challenged by the nuance offered in qualitative studies and it is further complicated by factors associated with social inequality. Although the majority of the 11–12 age group is connected, as in the Global North, children from low SES families are more likely to suffer precarious connections, via smartphone use without data support, dependence on wi-fi, and through sharing devices with family members. For many children, intermittent connection is the only option. Such restrictions have implications for children’s experiences of mobility and for their right to privacy. Brazilian children’s access to the internet is often impacted by restricted connectivity within their own household, while their use of a smartphone is frequently shared with others. This type of shared use, associated with social inequality, may provide opportunities for direct parental mediation. Even so, it also increases the likelihood of children’s access to inappropriate content, affecting their privacy and limiting their online experiences, via time restrictions, limited access to platforms, freedom to post, etc. Undoubtedly the dynamics of shared use require further investigation.

Within the market logic of global digital culture, Brazilian children find new possibilities for self-expression in digital space, and these opportunities are evident in studies that discuss the digital participation of child YouTubers. Despite a legal prohibition on marketing to children, Brazilian tweens – including those from very low SES families – watch videos that celebrate the consumption of brands, products, and lifestyles produced by rich middle-class children. Framed as entertainment and treated as jokes, class and gender biases are also disseminated through digital content. Children are exposed to hate speech which targets, above all, body characteristics (colour and race), and appearance. In this context, digitally curating one’s self-representation, especially among girls, reveals the unequal social pressures manifest by girls when compared with boys. These imperatives to conform to certain body types do not reflect the mestizo reality. Instead, they are aligned with the emphasis upon the body within Brazilian culture, and tweens risk using their bodies as bargaining chips to get likes in posts and to attract followers on YouTuber channels.

In sum, apart from the high number of Brazilian children that are still digitally excluded, pre-teens with internet access in different conditions experiment, play, circumvent rules, and trust each other to deal with market and societal pressures, such as the imperative to be beautiful, rich, famous, intelligent, and competitive. While these values conform to the dominant market logic, pressures to live up to these unrealistic expectations are exacerbated by the high levels of inequality characterising Brazil as a South-American country that identifies with the Global South. The challenges faced by Brazilian children in terms of digital risks and opportunities highlight the relevance of specific cultural processes associated with reducing the impact of social inequality in promoting children’s rights in digital contexts.

References


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