Early school leavers' attitudes towards online self-presentation and explicit participation

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ABSTRACT

Active participation in economic and social settings increasingly demands social–communicative skills, i.e., interactive and interpersonal skills, as well as the networking skills to access and use resources provided by online social networks. The development of these skills both depends upon and determines the proficient and strategic use of social media and explicit participation in different types of formal or informal networks and communities. Low-educated early school leavers typically lack the access, awareness and attitude required to develop these skills, suggesting a widening digital divide or participation gap. This study presents results regarding low-educated early school leavers' attitudes towards social media and social networks as a factor that can influence the conditions and opportunities that determine or enhance their economic and social mobility and improvement. The data were analyzed by means of 12 cases. Looking beneath the surface of a complex compound problem involving cultural, social and attitudinal factors, we found signs of ambivalence or even conflict in attitudes, stemming from personal doubts and insecurities or contextual fears and restraints. These attitudinal thresholds should be overcome by aiding and supporting these young people as much as possible in gaining leverage in the online world of 'haves and have nots'.

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1. Introduction

The massive uptake of the internet and social media by young people and participation in online networks in order to find and express one's voice, form friendships and socialize and participate in social and cultural settings of exchange and construction can be seen as a reaction to demands and successive expectations with regard to the self, due to modernization.

Modernization can be characterized as a process of increasing interconnection between globalizing influences and the human condition. This human condition encompasses life course transitions in both everyday private life and career life and extends from social to economic participation. An individual nowadays can and sometimes needs to shift from one social position to another (Bauman, 2000), constitutively altering his or her personal dispositions and preferences (Giddens, 1991) in moving from one pragmatic regime to another (Thévenot, 2001) as a result of this interconnectedness. Social order arises from the sharing of pragmatic regimes. Pragmatic regimes signal the human desire for certainty, i.e. the agreement on action and adjustment of resources to action. These regimes are characterized by 'investments of form'. The notion of 'form' refers to the relationship between objects, e.g., modern technology, upon which actors rely and the role of these objects in the co-ordination of actions. The emergence of 'form' depends on the human investment in coordinated actions that shape the world by forging likeness, contribute to homogenization across contexts and help maintain a certain level of generality (Thévenot, 2001).

Modernization comes with heightened self-responsibility, as this depiction of contemporary society brings with it an individualization hypothesis specific to our late modern era. The hypothesis is that the significance and role of traditional socioeconomic factors, pathways and choices concerning life-style and life-course, have weakened due to the eroding influence of public institutions, and the values, believes and norms they represent (Houtman, 2004). The 'late modern' human condition is furthermore characterized by the constant reflexive reform of social practice (Giddens, 1991)

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and restructuring of public space (Wellman, 2001; Wittel, 2001). Choices and successive pathways are no longer linear and irreversible, and forward planning must be backed up constantly by contingency plans (Stauber & Walther, 2006).

1.1. Modern youth's responsibility: a turn for interactivity and reflexivity

The human condition previously discussed requires a certain agency on the part of modern youth in order to cope with social and economic transitions. Pohl, Stauber and Walther conceptualize the agency of modern youth in the context of social change, e.g., transitions to adulthood and work, and define it as:

> the capacity of an individual to act, (...), while action refers to a single activity influenced or resulting from agentic processes (2007, p. 7).

In order to stress the interactionist and dynamic character of the concept, they speak of 'agency within structure', with subjective motivation as the central aspect of the relation between individual agency and social structure. They see learning and culture as key intermediate dimensions of agency, which can involve altering one's personal disposition in a reaction to or in anticipation of circumstances, shifting one's social position, and subsequently reforming one's social practices (Pohl, Stauber, & Walther, 2007).

Learning, i.e., the agentic process of internalization and understanding of experience, is characterized as non-formal, experiential and explorative. This conceptualization of learning indicates the 'reflexivity' through which individuals internalize experiences in informal, social and cultural contexts and transform these experiences into practical skills, thereby laying the groundwork for future action. Culture, i.e. the agentic process of negotiation, development and sharing of practice, is characterized as a dynamic system of both meaning and a repertoire of actions through which individuals share values, principles and norms. This conceptualization of culture indicates the 'interactivity' through which individuals individually and collectively express, interpret, contest, negotiate, understand and share the meanings of different choices and practices, thereby outlining the playing field of structures or social formations, such as relations, networks and communities, that agents act within and upon (Pohl et al., 2007).

The highly reflexive and interactive shifting and shaping in everyday situations and transitions exemplify what can be seen as 'dilemmas of the self' (Giddens, 1991). These dilemmas are often related to either a demand imposed by structural limitations or contextual constraints, or a desire to exert free will on the part of the human agent. Active participation of the self in social and economic transitions resulting from change, e.g., late modern destandardization of pathways, or resulting in change, e.g., collectively agreed-upon practice and patterns, becomes increasingly decisive for young people when tackling issues concerning sociability and employability (Stauber & Walther, 2006). Activation policies devised on the basis of the individualization hypothesis should acknowledge the disengagement of modern youth with formal support, the regular transition system and its regulators, should recognize informal learning and informal support as complementary and should fully integrate subjective factors related to motivational change (Walther, Stauber, & Pohl, 2005).

1.2. Early school leavers: conditions that affect disengagement

Early school leavers (ESL) are a group that accounts for a large share of disengaged low-educated youth in the Netherlands. In this section we focus on a sub-category, labeled as 'quitters', and present data and research on ESL in order to describe early signs of disengagement.

Reducing youth unemployment is an important goal of Dutch youth policy. These efforts are combined with a specific educational policy that aims to decrease the annual number of ESL, because an impressive number of students still drop out of school on a yearly basis. Dutch youth are identified and officially labeled as ESL when they leave school without a basic qualification and are 12–23 years old. A basic qualification is a degree or qualification at a senior general secondary, pre-university, or level-2 secondary vocational level. Holders of a basic qualification are capable of carrying out relatively complex routines and standard procedures within their own field of work. ESL makes up a substantial portion of the low-educated youth in the Netherlands. Low educated are defined as persons whose highest level of education is primary education, a lower level of preparatory vocational education (vmbo) or secondary vocational education (mbo), up to and including basic qualification at level 2 (Statistics Netherlands).

Dutch ESL are categorized as either classic 'at-risk youth' or 'quitters'. Quitters are students who typically drop out of school because of their disengagement with school (Eimers & Bekhuis, 2006). A significant number of Dutch ESL, ranging on average between 25% and 50%, are defined as 'quitters' (Meng, Coenen, Ramaekers, & Büchner, 2009).

Current Dutch ESL policy consists of two different approaches or sets of measures, guided by two alternative perspectives: prevention and cure. The vision is straightforward, directing all efforts to students' attainment of a basic qualification, as leaving school without a basic qualification is a known predictor for unemployment, poverty and even social exclusion (Eimers & Verhoef, 2004) and combating inactivity and unemployment requires mandatory participation (Eichhorst & Konle-Seidl, 2008). The principal focus lies on prevention, meaning that schools are responsible for effective implementation of a range of interventions and held accountable for the final results. So-called curative measures are limited to offering ESL work-study placements. A work-study placement is meant to then enable them to obtain a basic qualification. An additional legislative measure nudges towards self-responsibility by forcing ELS who apply for welfare to accept a work-study placement. Curative measures are called compensation measures in the European policy context (European Commission, 2011).

Recent data show an interesting development over the period 2007–2011. The relative share of ESL in the 18–22 age group grew from 85% to almost 95%; of this 95%, almost 60% are 18–19 years old (School Drop-out Explorer). The School Drop-out explorer is a web-based, interactive tool that works with quantitative and qualitative data on school dropouts at national, regional, local and school level. A recently published ESL factsheet (ROA, 2013), drafted in 2012 and surveying more than 2000 young people who left school in the 2010/11 academic year, shows that school-related factors associated with drop-out behavior are linked with an increase in the proportion of quitters, from 41% to 51%, over a period of three years. These data imply that schools' preventive measures to tackle disengagement have not been successful. Reported drop-out reasons might even imply that schools' efforts are mainly directed at classic at-risk youth rather than quitters. A majority of ESL (80%) report they discussed their decision but still 42% claim that no one tried to stop them from leaving school prematurely. The factsheet also labels 27% of the ESL as 'inactive', meaning they are not in school, not working and not looking for work. 'Inactive' youth are called 'Not in Education, Employment or Training '(NEET) in the European policy context. Being inactive means these youth are essentially under the radar and therefore not in reach of public services. This indicates that additional attention and effort in the form of alternative measures should be addressed to 18–19 year old quitters.