Children Between Digital Socialisation and Surveillance: A Sociological Case Study in Istanbul

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Children’s socialization in leisure time has increasingly depended on use of modern communication technologies. It has evoked parental concern for their children’s sedentary tendency and materiality of their socialization. Yet such concerns not only overlooked children’s agency and peer culture in online environment, but also led to many parental intervention forms. This research aims to explore two dimensions of media use by children in the local context: firstly, it addresses children’s online socialization as an unstructured activity and examines frequency and intended purposes of new media use by children in both middle and lower income groups. Subsequently, it discusses motivations and emerging forms of parental intervention to children’s online interactions.

The empirical material for this study was simultaneously drawn from semi-structured interviews (N=37) and questionnaires (N=365) conducted with parents of the children aged 10 to 14, attending the two middle schools located in different neighbourhoods of Üsküdar town in Istanbul/Turkey within the academic year 2016-2017. The data from first technique was analysed through critical content analysis while the latter through SPSS 22.0. The research purposefully focuses on adults’ voice on their attitudes towards children’s media involvements in order to understand their self-justifications, while acknowledging children as social agents.

Findings presented that most children in both lower and middle-income groups had access to digital communication devices, often owned by either them or their parents. Their peer culture has been reported to be embodied mostly in media tools. Motivations for parental intervention were found to be versatile and multi-layered; from concerns of children’s lack of physical activity and time management, to the contents either shared or encountered by children. Forms of parental intervention were noted to be implicit or explicit varying from instrumentalizing of new media features for surveillance purposes to confiscating their children’s time or physically withholding their technological devices. The study may be considered important in its attempt to employ the new social studies of childhood approach to parental attitudes in discussing childhood socialization in Turkey, where such approach receives little scholarly attention.

Keywords: New childhood sociology, Parental authority, Digital socialisation, Surveillance, Istanbul