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Participatory Approaches in the Digital Era: Cellphilming. A New Way to Engage Adolescents and Young Adults.

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Abstract: The ubiquitous and often toxic presence of ICTs in contemporary life has sparked critical debates regarding their impact on society, particularly for adolescents and young adults. This paper explores how Participatory Visual Methodology (PVM) leverages the audiovisual capabilities of smartphones to challenge dominant perceptions of technology, transforming it into a tool for empowerment and critical thinking in the digital era. The paper delves into the theoretical foundations of PVM and examines its practical implications for social pedagogy and educational activism, focusing on a recent methodology: cellphilming. Then follows a short presentation of a workshop conducted by the authors with future education professionals (L-19), centered on educational practices for adolescents within the framework of visual literacy, aimed at promoting a critical and community-oriented use of mobile devices. The findings underscore the transformative potential of integrating cellphilming into educational practices designed for adolescents, fostering their media literacy and promoting their onlife agency. This study contributes to the growing body of research advocating for the conscious and critical use of ICTs, particularly among teenagers, and its application as a catalyst for social change.

Keywords: adolescence; participatory visual methodology; *cellphilming*; educational practices; social pedagogy and activism.

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1. The Ubiquity of Mobile Phones among Teenagers

According to the International Telecommunication Union (2023), 79% of the population aged 15-24 uses the Internet, with a gap of 14 percentage points compared to the rest of the age groups (average of 65%). This generational gap has been stable for some years and follows the exact percentages in different areas of the world. In middle-to-high-income countries, internet use can be considered universal (at least 95% of the population uses the Internet). In low-income countries, young people are almost twice as likely to use the Internet in relative terms as the rest of the population. The smartphone is the most used device among the electronic devices available. We are talking about a technological tool, an expression of a culture and a society (Ito, 2004), whose accessibility and multifunctionality have made it a *must*, especially among "digital natives",[2] influencing our lives at 360° (Goggin, 2013) and which constitutes

[1] The article is the result of the collaboration among the authors. However, Paola Dusi wrote paragraphs 1-2-3; Francesco Vittori wrote paragraphs 4 and 5.

[2] In Europe, 93% of the population aged 10 and over owns a mobile phone, while worldwide, the percentage is 78% (ITU, 2023).

the most common gateway to the Internet (ITU, 2023). New communication technologies, powerful objects for the construction of identity, have also given rise to new forms of interaction and social participation among peers (Caronia & Caron, 2010), onlife spaces (Floridi, 2015) where to experience adolescence (Barone, 2019).

The ubiquitous and uninterrupted use of mobile phones has raised numerous questions about the impact on adolescents' psychological, emotional, and relational well-being. Just think of cyberbullying, revenge porn, access to websites dangerous for data theft, and induced sedentary lifestyles between others (Twenge et al., 2018; Vaillancourt et al., 2017; Fossum et al., 2014). Toh et al. (2019) found a general absence of awareness, self-control, and concern among adolescents concerning their smartphone addiction, which has recently led to the coining of the term "nomophobia" (no-mobile-phobia) to indicate the sense of anxiety and disorientation felt for the separation from one's mobile phone (Safaria et al., 2024; Gilbert, 2020). However, this is our reality, and the process is irreversible. In this scenario, it is a priority to protect minors from the risks of the *dark web*, especially today, with the potential offered by the development of *generative AI* (Das, 2024; Morgan, 2024). At the same time, the analog-digital hybridization of reality, hyper-connection, and onlife requires those who do social research to at least risk a reversal of the *status quo*, trying to optimize the possibilities offered by this new reality to the maximum, acting proactively with mobile devices. In this sense, numerous experiments and methodologies have already been introduced in the socio-psycho-pedagogical field to challenge the stigma surrounding technological devices and to transform them into emancipatory and convivial tools (Illich, 1973). These approaches aim to empower both the most vulnerable individuals—those most exposed to society's negative externalities, such as those embodying multiple identities or belonging to stigmatized social categories—and the younger generations. The latter, growing up in an onlife reality, engage with the complex social dynamics of our world, often through the use of digital tools (de Castro Pitano, 2017).

2. Participatory Visual Methodology: a review

Although there are different ways to address socio-economic, political, and human rights issues, *the Participatory Visual Methodology* (PVM) represents a methodological and epistemological approach with great potential thanks to the engaging, interactive, and accessible techniques it uses. PVM was born in education and activist circles to create, stage, and disseminate new knowledge to promote social change. Technological democratization and almost universal access to the web are helping to expand the potential number of subjects able to express their voice, visions, and feelings (Barley & Russell, 2019; Mitchell et al., 2017). The innovative strength of PVM has been enhanced by the ubiquity of mobile phones, which have added to the mobile technologies already included in the framework of research for social change (MacEntee et al., 2016; Mitchell et al., 2016; Schratz & Walker, 1995). The accessibility and comprehensibility of the functioning of these tools (which can also be used for data collection) redefine power relations (once unbalanced to the advantage of the expert in the presence of sophisticated and hard-to-find tools such as cameras). Using mobile devices allows isolated and marginalized groups and communities to take the floor to represent, from the inside, perspectives, customs, and slang (Baron, 2008). The ubiquitous diffusion of mobile technology allows new subjects to take on the role

of researchers or co-researchers according to the PVM approach, making Anzaldúa's invitation achievable:

"A bridge […] it is not just about one set of people crossing to the other side; it's also about those on the other side crossing to this side. And ultimately, it's about doing away with demarcation like 'ours' and 'their'" (2002, p. 4).

In particular, the smartphone can open up to new narratives, to 'decolonial' gazes, unhinging from within the belief that marginal/marginalized subjects and communities must be told and 'saved' from the outside by others.

Using this approach to make the invisible visible is something that – especially for the Global South (for all the South of the World), for a long time told with the Western colonial gaze – opens up wide spaces for opportunities for self-determination, recognition, and emancipation. PVM can give voice to all those involved in situations of fragility, to groups relegated to contexts of vulnerability (racism, exploitation, social injustice, etc.), starting from the assumption that the most appropriate way to investigate a phenomenon is to do it together with the people involved and affected by it (Mitchell et al., 2017).

Among the various techniques used in PVM, made available by the spread of mobile technologies, in this contribution, we will delve into *cellphilming* (Mitchell et al., 2016). The accessibility of smartphones has favored their ubiquitous diffusion, giving people a chance to get into the everyday media creation world through *cellphilms*. We are talking about short videos (duration between 1 and 5 min) made through the use of smartphones, tablets and other easily transportable and available devices (e.g., action cameras) to speak with one's voice (Gilligan, 1990). For example, to tell one's point of view on critical issues that impact people and entire communities (Dockney & Tomaselli, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2016). Cellphilms are easily shareable and postable anywhere thanks to the internet. Accessibility to this participatory research technique is further facilitated by using the so-called One Shoot Shot (OSS) and No Editing Required (NER) approaches since the final product does not require any editing work. In a minute, thanks to a good storyboard, to the power of the visual message that follows a stellar and reticular logic "not fully explicable on the model of textuality" (Mitchell, 1994, p. 16), it is possible to make one's voice heard uniquely, to talk about identity, belonging, social injustice.

3. New Ways to Engage: Making a Cellphilm

Because of its universality, MacEntee et al. (2016) wonder if cellphilming can be considered a new research method. Or is it a reformulation of the participatory video? What theories guide the analysis of cellphilms? What influence can technological advances in the field of smartphones have on cellphilms? Does our familiarity with mobile phones and how we tend to use them influence the participatory research process through cellphilms? What ethical implications are underlying the production, diffusion, and archiving of cellphilms?

What is certain is that it is a research method capable of increasing the *agency* capacity of the subjects who use it. Employing the smartphone, it is possible to overcome the role of passive users becoming *produser* (Bruns, 2009), producers, actors, and users who more radically assume civic commitment and social responsibility as an integral part of the creative process and interpretation of their existence.

Producing films with one's smartphone favors the involvement of social actors in creating collective narratives that express a community. Examples of participatory research conducted in this way by MacEntee et al. (2016) concerned the issue of identities and civic engagement in Hong Kong, gender-based violence among teachers and students in South Africa (MacEntee & Mandrona, 2015), the use of cellphilm as a pedagogical tool for future teachers in Canada or linguistic revitalization in Indigenous communities. The uses of this methodology are many. Through the production of a cellphilm, it is possible to share one's point of view through social media, i.e. to transmit messages produced independently (Dockney et al., 2010). Cellphilming allows us to bring community attention to specific social issues or particular experiences (e.g., stigmatized subcultures or social groups), addressing issues such as human rights, social injustices, and climate change. This bottom-up practice is an action of individual and collective empowerment, capable of generating agentic changes in the community. It should not be forgotten that when using technological devices that are culture builders, users "make a difference in the way in which techniques shape and are shaped by culture and social practices" (Caronia & Caron, 2010, p. 97).

Through these participatory research methodologies, questions can be solicited, collective proposals can be shared, action can be called, and civic engagement and critical awareness can be promoted. Thanks to cellphilm, it is possible to:

- empower and give people a voice (*self-* and *social empowerment*);
- raise awareness of particular problems and disputes through both the group discussions necessary for its production and through the dissemination of the message (*raising awareness*);
- influence policies and promote change.

In other words, cellphilming is proposed as an aesthetic and audiovisual practice, an educational and emancipatory tool, a new means of action for community activism (MacEntee et al., 2016). It redefines the use of the mobile phone as an educational tool, capable of promoting agency[3] (Floridi, 2015) and social engagement, offering an alternative vision to the mainstream one that considers it predominantly toxic or distracting (Lepp et al., 2015). By de-stigmatizing the telephone as a simple means of entertainment, it re-signifies it as a pedagogical device: the creation of audiovisual content becomes a form of literacy for the new generations, a tool for learning, expressing and protecting identity (Maniar et al., 2008; Lieberman, 2003). This practice represents an innovative approach to engage young people in participatory research and address complex issues such as adolescent pregnancy, HIV and AIDS (Mitchell & De Lange, 2013; Yang, 2015). Through total control of the creative process and dissemination of the works, cellphilm-makers become aware of their rights and the power of their voice. In summary, cellphilming encourages a critical and conscious use of the mobile phone, allowing young people to explore the device's potential to express meaningful messages, act and contribute to the improvement of reality, experiencing the hybridization between online and offline actively and responsibly.

[3] As specified in "The Onlife Manifesto", Information & Communication Technologies (ICTs) are not mere tools but "environmental forces" that influence our agency (Floridi, 2015, p. 2).

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4. One Shoot Shot: Work Paths with Teenagers

For these reasons, we have chosen to experiment with the participatory approach offered by cellphilming, together with other *co-writing methodologies,* as part of the "Workshop of Educational Practices with Adolescents"[4] aimed at future educators. The workshop proposed a path that included several co-writing activities in small groups of 4-5 students. After sharing some of the tools most recently used in story-telling, such as *silent books*, *graphic novels*, *podcasts*, we introduced cellphilming by describing its characteristics and potential, projecting examples, and showing the first steps in creating a cellphilm. Each subgroup was assigned to create its own story and graphic representation. Once the *storyboard* was agreed, each group was invited to the actual writing of the *script*.

Our interest – as researchers in the socio-pedagogical field – was that they realized the enormous emancipatory and transformative potential of mobile phones, imagining their declination in reality and everyday life, such as the informal and non-formal educational contexts of juvenile communities, aggregation centers, neighborhood laboratories, etc. The students then tried their hand at making the cellphilm. At the end of the activities, each product was reshared in the classroom and commented on in the extended group. What emerged confirms what has been specified in the international literature, namely the extraordinary potential of the cellphilm as a device for emancipation and self- and social empowerment, a vehicle for transmitting messages of sociocultural relevance. Through the cellphilm created, the attendees raised social issues, stimulating collective debate and awareness, such as, for example, the cultural shaming that girls suffer daily concerning the menstrual cycle or, alcohol abuse. Cellphilms can become essential *advocacy* tools to claim rights and denounce situations of social injustice. It is no coincidence that international cellphilming festivals feature directors from territories typically excluded from film festivals, such as the countries of the Global South. For these socio-spatial contexts, these methodologies offer ample opportunities for emancipation and reversal of gazes and raising of issues to media attention.

5. Cellphilming: from *consumer* to *produser*

Cellphilming can be an essential tool to make the use and creation of multimedia content with commonly used devices more accessible and democratized. Thanks to smartphones, the production of audiovisual content is made accessible to anyone, even those who otherwise would not have sufficient technological sources. This reduces economic, technical and social barriers, allowing marginalized communities and social groups to tell their reality and visions. It enables everyone to become *narractors* and *produser*, overturning the traditional logic of externally mediated representation, favoring self-representation, self-reflection, and awareness processes, and stimulating the positive re-appropriation of one's personal and collective identity of a given social group. These videos can constitute a visual archive of the lived and prefigurative experiences of communities, groups, and individuals often ignored by the mainstream narrative, marginalized and forced to live in invisibility and insistently controlled by video surveillance cameras. This reversal of the gaze contributes to relocating these

[4] The teaching activity includes 12 hours and is part of the Adolescence and Education module – CdS in Educational Sciences (L-19).

subjects in society, enhancing their forms of expression and reconstructing their historical memory "from below".

There are also critical issues to be considered. Like any potentially transformative tool, the risk of being co-opted or subsumed by institutions, companies, or other organizations to improve its reputation is real. Just think of the environmental issues and the aggressive marketing of some oil companies with which they mask all the abuses committed to grabbing natural resources to the detriment of the local communities of the Global South. In the face of this risk of exploitation, it is vital to propose this particular PVM, cellphilming, to future educators so that they know how to bring adolescents closer to a different smartphone use: a usage that is conscious from the point of view of both content (to avoid reinforcing or reproducing prejudices and stereotypes already rooted in our society) and ethics (in terms of protecting the subjects involved), and that promotes agency and social responsibility.

The educational and emancipatory potential of these methodologies today requires us to attempt the application of these new forms of representation of the self (subjective and collective) in all educational contexts (formal, non-formal, informal). The education on the use of ICT can promote awareness, self-empowerment, and active citizenship among our adolescents. Cellphilming could represent an emblematic example of how modern technologies can serve the common good, promoting a critical and agentic use among the most assiduous community of users: adolescents and young adults. Through the gaze of PVM, the smartphone becomes a narrative, pedagogical, and political means capable of contributing to constructing a fairer and more inclusive society for all.

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