

Hanging Out, Messing Around, Geeking Out: Living and Learning with New Media
Mizuko Ito, Sonja Baumer, Matteo Bittanti, danah boyd, Rachel Cody, Becky Herr-Stephenson, Heather A. Horst, Patricia G. Lange, Dilan Mahendran, Katynka Z. Martínez, C. J. Pascoe, Dan Perkel, Laura Robinson, Christo Sims, and Lisa Tripp (2010)

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Chatting with friends on MSN, sending text messages through smartphones, and updating personal profiles on Facebook are all activities that have become the “daily routine” of most adolescents nowadays. It may be hard for young people to imagine living a life without digital media and online communication. The book *Hanging Out, Messing Around, Geeking Out: Living and Learning with New Media* by Mizuko Ito, Sonja Baumer, Matteo Bittanti, danah boyd, Rachel Cody, Becky Herr-Stephenson, Heather A. Horst, Patricia G. Lange, Dilan Mahendran, Katynka Z. Martínez, C. J. Pascoe, Dan Perkel, Laura Robinson, Christo Sims, and Lisa Tripp, with contributions by Judd Antin, Megan Finn, Arthur Law, Annie Manion, Sarai Mitnick, David Schlossberg, and Sarita Yardi is set in this particular moment when “our values and norms surrounding education, literacy and public participation are challenged by a shifting landscape of media and communications where youth are central actors” (p. 2).

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Hanging Out reports on a three-year ethnographic study, funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, which aims to “document...the learning and innovation that accompany young people’s everyday engagements with new media in informal settings” (p. 355). Looking at learning and literacy from a sociocultural perspective, the authors see youth’s learning and engagement with digital media as “situationally contingent, located in specific and varied media ecologies” (p. 30). Two major research questions were raised in the book:

- How are new media being taken up by youth practices and agendas?
- How do these practices change the dynamics of youth-adult negotiations over literacy, learning, and authoritative knowledge? (p. 13)

In order to answer these two questions, twenty-eight researchers and collaborators conducted case studies, investigating how youth are living and learning with digital media. Although the case studies center mainly on youth in the United States, the findings are representative of all “digital youth” in other parts of the world.

Throughout their discussion, the authors use genres of participation with new media as “a way of describing everyday learning and media engagement” (p. 15). The authors draw a distinction between two major genres: friendship-driven (i.e. online practices of youth in their daily interactions with friends and peers) and interest-driven (i.e. youth building a network of peers with specialized activities or interests) genres of participation. The two genres correspond to “different genres of youth culture, social network structure and modes of learning” (p. 15).

The chapters in *Hanging Out* are organized according to the contexts in which youth engage with digital media: friendship, intimacy, family, gaming, creative production, and work. All of the chapters represent the authors’ efforts to “synthesize across different cases and youth populations” (p. 26) in the new media practice. Moreover, each of the chapters is also supplemented with descriptions of specific cases, which provide readers with a closer look into youth engagement in the digital world. In the first chapter, before describing in detail the six different contexts of youth’s media engagement, the authors provide an introduction to the different research locations, research methodology and data analysis in the study. The authors also identify in the first chapter the three genres of online participation: *hanging out*, *messaging around*, and *geeking out*.

In Chapter 1 (“Media Ecologies”), the lead authors, Heather A. Horst, Becky Herr-Stephenson, and Laura Robinson, frame “the media ecologies that contextualize the youth practices” (p. 31) described in the subsequent

chapters. The authors introduce the three genres of online participation: hanging out, messing around, and geeking out, which describe “differing levels of investments in new media activities in a way that integrates an understanding of technical, social and cultural patterns” (p. 36). *Hanging out* represents a genre of participation in which youth’s engagement with new media is driven by their desire to interact with their local and school-based friends and peers (e.g. through MySpace and Facebook). *Geeking out*, in contrast, is more interest-driven. Youth’s participation with new media centers on more specialized activities or interests. *Messing around*, in the authors’ words, “represents the beginning of a more intense engagement with new media” (p. 54). This genre of online participation involves youth looking for information online, using search engines such as Google and Yahoo, as well as playing and exploring online. These practices are often supported by the social networks they have developed in their friendship-driven or interest-driven groups. The messing around genre represents a transition along a continuum between the other two genres, hanging out and geeking out. These three genres help provide “a flexible vocabulary for describing the different ways in which kids engage with new media and how their engagement relates to social participation and identity” (p. 76).

Chapter 2 (“Friendship”), by danah boyd, presents many examples of youth using new media to develop and maintain friendship with their peers. Similar to gathering in shopping malls, youth nowadays gather in social network sites such as MySpace and Facebook to “negotiate identity, gossip, support one another, jockey for status, collaborate, share information, flirt, joke, and goof off” (p. 77). While these network sites provide spaces for broad peer groups to gather, instant messaging and mobile phones allow youth to have one-to-one interaction in small groups. This chapter looks at how social media intersect with four types of everyday peer negotiations: “making friends, performing friendships, articulating friendship hierarchies, and navigating issues of status, attention, and drama” (p. 81). The author reminds readers that social media have both a positive and negative impact on youth friendship practices. On one hand, youths are able to build a closer and ongoing relationship with their peers in their local peer-based networks, which form the “primary source of identity and affiliation” (p. 114). On the other hand, there is a possibility that their self-representations may be reframed by others in a public way.

C. J. Pascoe investigates, in Chapter 3 (“Intimacy”), the use of new media tools in youths’ courtship practices: meeting, flirting, going out, and breaking up. The intimate practices described in the chapter reveal that media usage may be “a form of informal learning through which teens develop literacy by building up relationships and communicating with their intimates” (p. 118). Besides documenting the ways in which new media has

become a part of youth's courtship rituals, the author also cautions readers about monitoring, privacy and vulnerability in youths' media practice. Through case studies, the author exemplifies how youth nowadays are "part of a significant shift in how intimate communication and relationships are structured, expressed and publicized" (p. 147). While making intimate interactions and personal emotions public, the existing norms about the boundaries between the public and the private become complicated.

Chapter 4 ("Families"), by Heather A. Horst, examines the spatial and temporal dimension of media usage at home, focusing on how families create spaces and structure time for media usage. The chapter shows that family plays an important role in how home media usage is encouraged, restricted, and regulated, and reveals how parents and children, through their negotiations over media access and participation, "transform, negotiate, and create a sense of family identity through new media" (p. 151). The description of the diverse home settings in the chapter reveal youths' desire for autonomy and independence from the regulations at home and their attempts to maintain privacy and ownership over their media usage. The author expresses that new media can help bring families closer (e.g. father and son playing PlayStation together), but at the same time can also lead to disruptions to school and family life (e.g. youths spending long hours playing online games).

In Chapter 5 ("Gaming"), Mizuko Ito and Matteo Bittanti look at the different genres of gaming practice: "killing time, hanging out, recreational gaming, mobilizing and organizing, and augmented gaming" (p. 198). The authors' description of these genres reveals the ways in which "gaming, learning, participation, and identity are intertwined in kids' everyday play" (p. 201). For example, the authors found that there is the issue of exclusion from certain forms of gaming: a gender gap exists regarding participation in forms of gaming. Girls tend to engage in less technical forms of modding and customizing, while boys tend to engage more in recreational and mobilized gaming. The authors conclude their chapter by suggesting that the most beneficial learning outcomes of gaming lie in "a healthy social ecology of participation, an ecology that includes parents, siblings, and peers" (p. 240).

In Chapter 6 ("Creative Production"), the lead authors, Patricia G. Lange and Mizuko Ito, examine different modes of new media production such as podcasting and video blogging, and analyze these creative media productions in relation to "learning and the development of skills and identities as media producers" (p. 244). The goal of this chapter is to "describe the kind of new media literacies and creative production practices that youth are developing in their peer-based social and cultural ecologies" (p. 249). The chapter begins by looking at personal media production (e.g.

creating a MySpace profile), followed by a discussion of more specialized media production such as video production and remix. Case studies show that youth producers are mainly driven by their own passions of creating media, drawing on both on- and off-line human resources. The authors stress that whether it is personal media creation or creative productions that require highly technical media skills, youth are using their media creation “as a way of documenting their lives and as a means of self-expression” (p. 290). The network public sites enable youth to interact with their peers, who serve as “audiences, critics, collaborators, and coproducers in the creation of media” (p. 291). In this chapter, readers can see that “youths are experimenting with new genres of media and new forms of literacy that take advantage of a moment of interpretive flexibility in the contemporary media ecology” (p. 292). The digital youth population has become part of defining new genres and cultural forms instead of just simply reproducing existing ones.

Mizuko Ito, in the final chapter (“Work”), examines the relationship between new media, youth, and work, focusing on three types of work-related practices: “training, entrepreneurship, and non-market work” (p. 296). The author showcases how youth are engaged in economic activity and other forms of labor that involve media usage. They point out that youth’s engagement with economic activity was “largely shut out from the formal, high-status labor economy” (p. 335). The new media provides avenues to make youths’ productive work more visible and valued as young peoples’ new media literacy, very often, exceeds that of their elders.

Hanging Out presents, in extensive detail, the diverse learning opportunities available to youth nowadays in informal settings, particularly during their interaction with peers and new media. The book showcases the diverse genres of youth’s media engagement and provides educators and researchers with a better understanding of how youth learn, develop their identity, and express their autonomy with an increase in media usage. As stated by the authors, “educators and policy makers need to understand that participation in the digital age means more than being able to access ‘serious’ online information and culture; it also means the ability to participate in social and recreational activities online” (p. 347). In this digital era, it is important for educators to be aware of the shifting media and communication landscape and to be open to “experimentation and social exploration that is not characteristic of education institutions” (p. 347). The digital world provides ample opportunity for youth to explore their interests, develop their media and technical skills, as well as experiment with different forms of self-expression in their writing and other forms of composition and media usage, as they extend their social networks, facilitate their self-directed learning, and develop their independence.

About the Author

Vickie Wai Kei Li, formerly an English Lecturer in Hong Kong, is pursuing Ph.D. studies in Education at the University of Western Ontario. Her research interests include language education policy and practice in post-colonial contexts as well as second language teaching and learning. Her doctoral research looks at the medium of instruction policy in post-colonial Hong Kong. Her study, "*Marching on a long road: A review of the effectiveness of the mother-tongue education policy in post-colonial Hong Kong*," appeared in the *GIST Education and Learning Research Journal*.