Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

The significance of ICT in disabled youth's identity negotiations

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This paper investigates the significance of information and communication technology (ICT) in Norwegian disabled youth's identity negotiations in the intersections of age, gender and disability. The object of the paper is to provide enhanced insights in the opportunities and barriers ICT holds within these negotiations. The paper draws on a qualitative interview study which explores the significance of ICT in the everyday lives of 23 disabled Norwegian youth, aged 15–20 years. The analysis of the data material is inspired by the principles in constructivist grounded theory. This paper illuminates how the widespread dissemination of ICT involves complex dependencies and mechanisms of exclusion and marginalization of disabled youth, as well as inclusion. The access to ICT, and provision of ICT assistive devices, do not necessarily provide usable and suitable ICT, and this leaves some disabled youth at a neglected dead end which excludes them from their peer group.

Keywords: disabled youth; identity multiplicity; intersectionality; ICT

Introduction

This paper investigates the significance of information and communication technology (ICT) in disabled youth's identity negotiations in the intersections of age, gender and disability. The object of the paper is to provide enhanced insights in the opportunities and barriers ICT holds within these negotiations, and to illuminate how ICT might be a facilitator or an inhibitor in such negotiations. Additionally, this paper calls attention to intersections of discourse categories such as age, gender and disability, how these categories are chosen or imposed on disabled youth, and to how they are displayed.

In post-modern social science, there is a growing discussion of how peoples' lives are subjected to multiple and intersecting axes of differentiation and power. Post-modern social life is characterized by mobility, individual choices and multiple identities. However, the liquidity and mobility that appears to mark the lives of non-disabled people is not so apparent in the lives of disabled people. Furthermore, the social signifiers of disability and that of youth are in profound tension (Hughes, Russell, and Paterson 2005). Nevertheless, disabled youth are not disabled all the time, but are practically disabled in particular situations, under particular conditions, and in particular relations. Disability is, however, not the only difference being made. Sometimes differences, such as age, gender and disability, are made alongside each

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other, interacting and interfering with one another. Locating the enactments of age, gender and disability in situated socio-technical practices and relations discloses individuals as complex human beings slipping between different identities.

Communication is a keystone in social life. During the last decades, peoples' ways of communication and interaction have developed and changed contemporaneously with the development of the digital ICT. In Norway this can be observed, particularly in the extended dissemination and use of computers and mobile phones in the population. In 2006, 92% of all Norwegian households with children had a computer, and 82% of youth aged 16–24 years used the computer every day. Moreover, 99% of young Norwegians used the internet regularly in 2006, and 95% of them used it for communication purposes (Lorentzen 2007). These technologies not only do things for us, they also do things to us: they mediate relationships and influence our way of thinking about ourselves. While girls mainly perceive and use the computer as a tool in communication and interaction, boys mainly perceive and use ICT as a toy in doing and performing. Through these practices, youth actively construct and present themselves as gendered persons (Buckingham 2006; Kelan 2007). Furthermore, through youth's digital practices the real world and the virtual world are no longer separate worlds, but highly permeable and influential on each other (Livingstone 2003; Seymour and Lupton 2004).

Following technological developments, several Norwegian studies on youth's use of computers and mobiles have been carried out (Arnseth et al. 2007; Brandtzæg and Stav 2004; Heim et al. 2007; Kaare et al. 2007; Lûders 2007; Torgersen 2004). In addition, the international body of research is even more comprehensive. It is, however, very difficult to identify any disabled persons in these studies (Fuglerud 2006). This is probably due to studies which do not ask questions about personal functioning level, or about accessibility and usability of the technologies. However, some studies on ICT and disabled persons do exist, but these studies are mainly with adults and focus for the most part on ICT's potential in education, medical or work-related issues. The dissemination of ICT has both positive and negative impacts on disabled adults' lives. Increased dissemination provides more possibilities for access to information and communication, but it also increases the demand for digital competence and literacy (Fuglerud 2006). This paper investigates these impacts on disabled youth's identity negotiations in the intersections of age, gender and disability.

Theoretical binoculars

This paper perceives ICT as a tool in disabled youth's identity negotiations (Baym 2006; Seymour and Lupton 2004; Whitley 1997). To analyse the impact of this tool two somewhat different, but closely related, perspectives are mobilized. The first perspective focuses on social ascribed identities and individual chosen identities, and employs the concept of identity multiplicity. The second perspective focuses on intersections and interferences of identities, and employs the concept of intersectionality.

Identity multiplicity

This paper's investigation of identity negotiations and intersectionality draws on the following definition of identity; '*Identity* is a concept that holds together two quite distinctive dimensions. On one level it means identification with something *collective,*

cultural and social. On the other it denotes a sense of *self* and a sense of *continuity* within that self' (Krange and Øia 2005, 53–54).

The one level is given voice through the social ascribed identity where the identification is determined by collective, cultural, and social discourses. Having an ascribed identity as disabled implies that the person is not anticipated to hold other identities. Many disabled people, however, show a protest to this perception and strive towards changing their ascribed identity (Barron 2005; Grue 2001).

The other level is expressed through an individual chosen identity where the identification is based on personal preferences, and expressed through self presentations. Post-modern identities are undergoing constant changes where the emphasis is put on the individual identity (Barron 2005). Even though identity can be viewed as a concept involving an ongoing project in constant change and revision, the liquidity and mobility of this project is not so apparent for disabled people as for non-disabled (Hughes, Russell, and Paterson 2005). People's individual choices are not arbitrary; they are choices available in the social and cultural structures, in relationships, and contexts. Moreover, individually chosen and socially ascribed identities often interrelate, and are part of a dynamic interplay, they may be in opposition to each other, or mutually reinforcing and compatible (Barron 2005).

While the debate in mainstream youth literature is influenced by metaphors of an identity's liquidity and mobility, disabled youth have been given a separate status, referred to the therapeutic field, which focuses on biological status as a barrier to identity experimentation (Hughes, Russell, and Paterson 2005). In this paper, however, it is the intersectionality of disabled youth's slipping between different identities which is under scrutiny.

Intersectionality

Even though every person holds multiple identities, some ascribed and some accomplished, it is not sufficient only to acknowledge this plurality of identities. In the study of identities, it is essential to show how identities are established, disclosed and interrelated. To accommodate better the multiplicity and intersectionality of identity it is necessary to conceptualize individuals at intersections of multiple identities (Stirratt et al. 2008). By using an intersectional perspective on the issues of identity crossing meeting points between categories and identities can be illuminated.

Identity multiplicity and intersectionality contain particular relevance for research with individuals who encounter multiple forms of oppression (Stirratt et al. 2008). Intersectionality proposes that one single identity category, such as disabled, can not be used as the only analytical frame without exploring how issues of other identity categories additionally come to influence on the person's experience as disabled. The challenge is to understand and analyse a person as multi-dimensional, yet uniquely whole (Samuels and Ross-Sheriff 2008).

An intersectional perspective gives the opportunity to reveal new patterns, and how new categories and identities emerge (de los Reyes and Mulinari 2005). This perspective focuses on the results of globalization and individualization, through the analysis of identity markers, social structures and power relations. An intersectional perspective links together the individual, the institutional and the structural level. Such as when a disabled student presents him/herself as an ordinary student in the peer group, but is prevented from participating in ordinary educational settings due

to institutional resources, or even might be segregated from higher education because of society's regulations.

An intersectional perspective shows fractures, highlights connections and deconstructs discourses. This perspective ties identity, power and inequality to individuals' possibilities to act as subjects within the frame of society's structure, institutional practices and prevailing ideologies. Intersectionality makes visible the connections which constitute power and maintain inequality, and it involves highlighting the qualitatively different situations that emerge in the simultaneous effects of categories such as age, gender and disability (de los Reyes and Mulinari 2005).

The intersectional perspective posits that a person's experiences reflect social constructions simultaneously, as these experiences have a relational aspect (Browne and Misra 2003). This paper's focus on the individual and relational aspects of identity in the current intersections does not imply that institutional and structural relations are ignored. Rather, it places the individuals in their contemporary context and anchors their actions in the prevailing ideologies and social structures. Here, the notion of interference comes into play. Interference encourages the study of the combination and the disturbance, the clash and the neutralization, of different ordering processes in which categories and identities emerge. To use the metaphor of interference is an attempt to contribute to move the efforts of conceptualizing, and deal with differences in new directions (Moser 2006). Thus, I find it appropriate to employ an intersectional perspective, which includes the notion of interference, in this paper on the significance of ICT in disabled youth's identity negotiations.

Material and method

This paper draws on a qualitative interview study with a sample of 23 disabled Norwegian youth (11 girls and 12 boys) aged 15–20 years. Among these youth, 12 have mobility difficulties (3 girls and 9 boys), and 11 of them are partially sighted or blind (8 girls and 3 boys). All participants belong to ethnic Norwegian families and have similar socio-economic backgrounds. The youth were recruited anonymously through public assistive technology and resource centres and user organizations. They were allocated a personal computer as an assistive technology device.

The qualitative interviews were semi-structured and took place as face-to-face conversations about the significance of ICT in the participants' everyday lives, and about friendships and social relationships. The interviews where conducted from autumn 2006 to summer 2007. The interviews lasted for approximately one hour each, and all interviews were recorded and transcribed.

The interview transcriptions were analysed following a constructivist grounded theory approach, using a constant comparative method (Mills et al. 2007; Strauss and Corbin 1998). The interviews were read and re-read in order to identify and name patterns, concepts and categories. Each interview was first analysed on an individual level, then compared across subjects to identify patterns and common categories. This was done by employing open, axial and selective coding. Open coding involved comparing and contrasting initial patterns to uncover and name preliminary categories and their properties. During axial coding, the relationship between categories was analysed and linked to subcategories. The selective coding integrated and refined the categories (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Then, a new search for typical data extracts, validated for their context and meaning, was performed to

articulate central insights from each category. During this analytical process, the following categories emerged as a sensitizing concept evolution: (1) clashing intersections; (2) neutralizing intersections; and (3) compatible intersections.

Findings

The different categories of intersections which emerged out of the data analysis are all intersections between age, gender and disability. In the first category this intersection lead to a clash of identities.

Clashing intersections

Iselin is a 17-year-old blind girl who loves to hang out with her classmates and presented herself as a social and outgoing person. She attends the local school and enjoys singing in the local choir. When I asked Iselin if she could access any website she wished she responded:

> Some websites are very difficult to read, especially websites with lots of graphics. Sometimes I try to access them a hundred times, and if it is something important or some really good stuff, then I have to find a nice and patient soul who will read it to me.

All the blind, and partially sighted participants, complained about websites holding graphical content. Such websites are, for the most part, inaccessible to persons with visual impairments, even if they use the most advanced ICT assistive technology available. Websites containing videos and graphical elements are, however, very popular websites among youth and this is often a central conversation topic. Further on in the interview, Iselin, told me that her classmates often talked about cool videos and websites on the internet, and that she got very annoyed with her computer when she was unable to access such websites.

Another blind girl is Gerd, who is 17 years old. Gerd presented herself as a very computer-skilled girl who spends a lot of time occupied with her greatest interests, audio editing and computers. When I asked her if she sometimes ran into difficulties when she used the computer she said:

> Well it is not everything that is accessible with screen readers. There is this website with an artist I like a lot. But it is not accessible with Braille display. There are really a lot of websites that are not accessible with Braille display. Like *YouTube* and stuff. At school my friends asks me: 'Have you watched the fun new video on *YouTube*?' And I go like: 'What? How can you watch it?' Then they tell me the Web address, but: 'Oh, no it does not work with the software application for my Braille display'. The worst thing is that they might think it is me that does not know anything about computers.

When Iselin and Gerd met their classmates at school, the conversation was about their experiences on the internet, such as which websites to visit and what they thought of the sites. The most appreciated, and most used activities on the computer among Norwegian youth, are to surf and communicate with friends on the internet (Torgersen 2004; Yin and Jørgensen 2006). Among Iselin's and Gerd's classmates *YouTube* is a very popular website. At *YouTube* they watch all sorts of videos. Even though both Iselin and Gerd are very skilled computer users, *YouTube* is inaccessible to them. The screen readers allocated to Iselin and Gerd do not read websites holding a lot of graphics, such as *YouTube*. Even though the assistive technology provided to the girls is supposed to

give them access to the internet, this is not the case for many of the websites of interest to them and to their classmates.

The question is whether it is the assistive technology which is inadequate, or the adaptive interface which is not adjusted for screen readers. Is it possible to provide digital accessibility, in every respect, for everyone, at the same time? Moreover, who would be responsible to ensure universal design and equal accessibility in a global setting, such as the internet, holding both public and private parties? This limitation in accessibility results in exclusion of many visually impaired young people from participation in their peers' joint experience with *YouTube*, and other websites containing graphical content and, thus, from meaningful participation in vital parts of their peers' social interactions. In these interactions, young visually impaired people are placed outside their peer group's fellowship, and identified as deviant, and as disabled.

Through the provision of assistive ICT devices, many young visually impaired people are able to demonstrate their competence in 'doing being ordinary' and, thus, pass as ordinary. In as much as people do everyday ordinary things people pass as ordinary (Goffman 1963). For young Norwegians this involves online chatting and surfing the internet. Iselin and Gerd enjoy occupying themselves in these activities. Moreover, in Gerd's case, her digital competency is her pride. This is how Gerd chose to present herself, as a skilled computer user. However, as soon as the ICT assistive technology fails to provide the anticipated assistance Gerd, and other young visually impaired people, are put in a disabling situation in their identity negotiation and communication.

To be a Norwegian teenage girl, it is typical to communicate and share online experiences with friends and peers in offline settings. When Iselin and Gerd are made unable to participate in and share their classmates' experiences and viewpoints of *YouTube*, they are also excluded from the opportunity to participate in a gendered practice and relationships and, thus, from the possibility to display themselves as gendered persons. In these situations, clashes emerge between the discourse categories of age, gender and disability.

Some of the current participants with mobility difficulties also found it hard to participate in their friends' digital interactions. Christine is a 19-year-old girl with mobility difficulties. Christine uses a wheelchair and she has just started attending the university. Christine presented herself as a skilled student who is proud of her own academic skills. When we talked about use of computers, Christine said: 'I do not like to chat on the internet. It is too speedy for me. I do not write that fast, and I think the conversations are difficult to follow'. Later on in the interview, Christine disclosed that she often felt like an outsider in social conversations with her fellow students, probably because they had fewer shared experiences, she explains.

To understand the significance ICT holds for young people it is important to look into what manner ICT is mediated through existing social relationships, how it is incorporated in real-life relationships and how ICT has become a crucial factor in the social construction of young people's peer group cultures (Buckingham 2006). Futhermore, Grue (2001) points out how the categorization of a disabled person governs people's anticipation, interpretation and understanding of that person. How every slightly different action is ascribed to the person's impairment, as is every limitation or any characteristic. It is plausible to assume on this basis, that when young disabled people do not participate in peers' mutual digital interactions, this lack of participation will be ascribed to their impairment.

In Gerd's conversation with her classmates, there emerged a fracture in her identity negotiation as a computer-skilled teenager, and as a female user of the computer as a tool in communication with peers, when she could not participate in her peers' sharing of mutual online experiences. This fracture positions her as deviant and as a disabled person. Young visually impaired people, such as Iselin and Gerd are not anticipated to be able to surf the internet and be computer skilled. Consequently they are not anticipated to be able to participate in meaningful conversations about the internet and therefore they have to prove themselves and their ICT competencies even harder than their peers. Especially, it is Gerd's biggest fear to be considered as one who knows nothing about computers. This means, one who is deviant from the other girls at school, one who is placed apart from the girls' conversations about *YouTube*, and being made disabled.

However, these fractures in the girls' identity negotiations might also be viewed as connections between different identities, where one identity is subordinated the others. Their chosen identities as female computer-skilled teenagers are being subordinated by their ascribed identities as disabled persons, the latter taking priority due to prevailing disability discourse.

What is the qualitative difference which emerges in these clashing intersections between age, gender and disability? The clashing of identities leaves the girls at a dead end, where they are deprived of the perceived advantages in all of these identities. As teenagers, they are ascribed a social identity which is characterized by liquidity and mobility, where choice is regarded as a key variable, and is expressed thorough a diverse range of tribal affiliation (Hughes, Rusell, and Paterson 2005). In the current girls' social contexts, their tribal affiliation is their peers at school and in university. Iselin presented herself as a social and outgoing person, Gerd presented herself as a computer-skilled teenager and Christine presented herself as a skilled student. These are the girls' chosen self-identities. But in the current intersections, they are deprived the possibility to communicate their chosen self-identities through the current tribal identity marker, which in Iselin's and Gerd's context is a *YouTube* viewer and in Christine's context is a chat room user. This leaves the girls in a neglected situation where they cannot make use of any of the perceived advantages of any of the identities they hold. They are at the same time both computer-skilled girls and not, they are both ordinary teenagers and disabled, they are in between affiliations, and not really belonging anywhere. From this position they have to negotiate new identities, either based on other characteristics than their female representations and use of computer, or by turning their computer skills into other valued assets than those provided through internet access and online communication.

Nevertheless, sometimes it turns out that impairment can be made unessential and disability be neutralized. In the following category this takes place in the intersections of age, gender and disability.

Neutralizing intersections

Kenneth is a 17-year-old boy with mobility difficulties. Kenneth can walk short distances, mainly indoors. He presented himself as an ordinary boy who is interested in cars. When I asked him what he used his computer for he answered:

> I use it for everything, like everyday stuff and my hobbies. I and my buddies are very interested in cars, and we exchange pictures and news about cool cars we have discovered

on the internet. It is most fun when we sit together and surf the internet looking for cool cars. Actually it is me that know the most about cars.

Kenneth and his friends use the internet-connected computer to engage in mutual hobbies and share information about the latest news of common interest. In these settings, Kenneth's mobility difficulties are made unessential and he displayed his preferred identity as an ordinary computer-skilled male teenager, who knows a lot about cars. Another participant was Eivind, a 17-year-old partially sighted boy, who also uses the computer to make disability quite unessential. Eivind presented himself as a passionate computer game player. When I asked him what he used his computer for he answered:

> I play *World of Warcraft*. Sometimes I can play it for six hours. I play sometimes together with local friends and sometimes together with people from England and the Netherlands. We play and talk at the same time. It is fun to get to know other people. You get to know them quite well when you play and talk with them almost every day. But I haven't met any of them.

Eivind makes appointments sometimes with his local friends, and sometimes with his online computer game partners, about when to play and who to play with. Now and then he and his friends play *World of Warcraft* together in face-to-face settings as a team and other times he plays the game alone with online partners. Just like Eivind, Kenneth too engages in his online hobby now and then in face-to-face settings with his friends, and other times by himself.

Another participant was Jacob, who is 16 years old. Jacob has comprehensive mobility difficulties and uses an electrical wheelchair. His biggest interests are computers and computer games, and he presented himself as a passionate computer game player. When we discussed leisure activities and leisure time, I asked him how he got around in the local community and he explained:

> Well there are some challenges. You know most houses are not build for getting wheelchairs in. They are built for walking people. At one of my friend's house the entrance is now being rebuilt. But as it is just now I can't get in at any of my friends' houses. It is of course annoying, but what can you do? So my friends and I gather at my place. I have three buddies. We have common interests; it is all about computer games. We get together at my place about every other weekend. Everybody brings along at least one computer each. Then it is all about computer games all week-end long. It is like a social happening.

Because none of Jacob's friends live in houses adapted for wheelchair users he is prevented from visiting them. Jacob finds this annoying. The encounter with an inaccessible environment is one of the challenges disabled youth meet when they are entering society (Grue 2001). This encounter, places disabled youth in a disabling position, and identifies them as deviant from their peers. While disability is associated with tragedy, invalidity and frailty, youth is associated with potency, vigour and strength, and by consumption and consumer choice (Hughes, Russell, and Paterson 2005).

Instead of yielding to the identification as deviant and disabled, all these three boys employ their youthful qualities by taking charge and initiating activities of their own choices. In this way, they create alternative opportunities for participation and interaction, alternatives which additionally are of interest and excitement to their friends. On such occasions they are not disabled; rather, they are in full control and

are able to display their competencies and masculinity in interactions with friends and like-minded peers.

ICT-based commodities have become a crucial factor in the social construction of youth's peer-group cultures, and the surrounding culture and social relationships in which ICT is employed is an arena for a broader work which marks the boundaries between males and females. In this work, teenagers are constructing and defining themselves as gendered persons (Buckingham 2006). For many young disabled people, ICT is a vital social mediator in their identity negotiations, which contributes to a neutralization of disability in the intersection of age, gender and disability.

However, ICT does not provide all disabled young people this opportunity to avoid environmental disabling barriers, display similarities to local peers and neutralize disability in offline settings. Still, many disabled young people make use of the online opportunities ICT provides, to display competencies and participate in meaningful settings. In the next category, this takes place as a compatibility of age, gender and disability.

Compatible intersections

Maren is a 17-year-old blind girl who presented herself as a girl who enjoys singing, listening to music and attending school. I met Maren at a summer camp for visually impaired young people. When we talked about what she used her computer for and who she chatted with on the internet, she said:

> Well, actually I do not have that many local friends to chat with. Most of my friends are friends I meet at this camp. It is easier to talk to them. All of them have some kinds of visual problems, but we do not really talk about that. We talk about everyday stuff. I think other people are afraid to make contact because they are insecure and do not know how to speak to me. Some even think it is something wrong with one's head.

While only four of the participants have close friendships to local peers, 10 of the participants have developed close relationships with geographically distant friends, just as Maren has. These participants are both girls and boys, which have either visually or mobility difficulties. More importantly, they are all active members of different organizations for disabled youth, and they make friends at camps and gatherings for visually or mobility impaired young people.

Another participant was Maya, an 18-year-old partially sighted girl, who presented herself as visually disabled. Maya uses many different assistive technology devices, to get access to the computer and to the internet. We talked about school, computers, and friends. When I asked her what she enjoyed doing Maya said:

> I use the computer a lot, mostly the *MSN*. This makes me able to keep in touch with my friends. We talk about everyday stuff and share information about camps and happenings for blind and partially sighted youths. I have met all my friends at such camps and happenings. When I meet new friends on these occasions we exchange *MSN* addresses so we can keep in touch. Ninety-five percent of my friends are either blind or partially sighted.

During these interviews, Maren and Maya disclosed their everyday lives in the intersection between the discourse categories age, gender and disability. As most teenagers, they communicate on the internet with friends they have already met face-to-face (Madell and Muncer 2005; Thulin and Vilhelmson 2005; Wellman et al. 2001). However, unlike most teenagers, this is not friends living nearby, attending the

same school, or people they encounter in everyday life. In everyday life they rarely participate in face-to-face interactions with local peers after school hours. Even so, are they lonely?

Even though empirical findings are somewhat ambiguous, several studies find that computer-mediated communication might serve as an alternative social arena for youth with no or weak social networks, and that such communication may strengthen social ties (Brandtzæg and Stav 2004). The dialogue in cyberspace contributes to young people's identity construction, as an individual and as a group. Through web-based interactions youth learn to know themselves and their belonging (Brandtzæg and Stav 2004; Rice and Haythornthwaite 2006). On the internet, Maren and Maya are active and competent participants in social communication with friends. In this way, they use their capabilities and participate in a valued and equal manner to non-disabled youth. Thus, in these settings they are not different from other youth at the same time as they use their difference as a resource in these settings.

Friends make the foundation of one's self-image, and in friendship relations the most important identity negotiations take place. Maren and Maya choose their friends among those with similar interests and experiences as their own, just as most of us do. While interaction with non-disabled peers may lead disabled youth to be overly aware of their difference, interactions with disabled friends may bring support and experiences of similarity and fellowship. Furthermore, disabled youth's life situations require a greater emphatic ability than usual from non-disabled friends. This often leads disabled youth to a more selective choice of friends (Grue 2001). This seems to be the case for many of the current participants as well.

The time of adolescence is an especially sensitive period in life, a period where young people have a special need to experience themselves in social and meaningful contexts and thus display their affiliation (Krange and Øia 2005). Maren and Maya live their everyday lives, as most disabled young people do, in the intersection between the discourse categories of age, gender and disability. They perceive and engage in ICT as most non-disabled Norwegian teenaged girls, but choose their affiliation to their blind and partially sighted peer group. However, these girls' preferences to the organizations for visually impaired youth do not necessarily mean that they adopt an identity as disabled. Rather, it appears they are among those who employ the strategy of doing 'being ordinary', at the same time as they endorse the us/them discourse. This combination may at first appear contradictory, but it may also be interpreted as the emergence of a new pattern in the identity negotiation.

Before this new pattern is discussed, I find it appropriate to shortly address the us/them discourse. The us/them discourse is a discourse of identity which celebrates differences and embraces stigma. This discourse builds on the fundamental categorization of disability signs, such as blind or deaf, but it is altering the stigma, and its values, from something discrediting to something commendable. The discourse is a celebration of difference, which turns the value of the ascribed stigma. This is most clearly seen in deaf and gay communities. The question this discourse poses is one of acknowledgement, and as having a distinct identity and culture not related to medical definitions, but rather to nationhood-inspired cultural identity (Solvang 2000). The current study finds the young visually impaired participants' strong affiliation to blind and partially sighted peers to be an endorsement of the us/them discourse.

In these visually impaired young people's identity negotiations, a new pattern emerges. This pattern emerges in the intersection between age, gender and disability:

it is given voice through the use of two seemingly different discourses, the one of doing being ordinary and the other of the us/them discourse. Through the choice of their peer-group affiliations, they are choosing disability as their preferred identity, but they are simultaneously contradicting this group's ascribed identity as helpless and in need of care. They are proud of their group identity and use this identity in valued and meaningful contexts through their use of ICT in everyday practises. In this sense, these young people endorse the us/them discourse. Moreover, instead of merely to emphasize and celebrate their differences from other teenagers, they embrace and demonstrate their subordinated identities as youth through doing being ordinary. Thus, they challenge the stereotypical notions towards blind and partially sighted people. It is not either/or, it is more both/and. It is as if they are telling us, 'Yes we are different but also similar, and our difference is a resource we use in an ordinary way'. In this context, ICT functions as a facilitator in their identity negotiations, as a visually impaired youth being quite ordinary.

These three categories of intersections which have been elaborated in this section represent some typical, yet different patterns of the intersectionality and the significance of ICT in the identity negotiations of disabled youth.

Concluding remarks

This study of ICT's significance in disabled youth's identity negotiations has taken its point of departure in the perspective of intersectionality. This decision was made at the end of the analytical process. Another departure would most probably lead to other findings. On one hand I find no reason to believe that the current participants' experiences are substantially different from other disabled youth's, live in similar affluent societies and social contexts as the current participants. On the other hand, perhaps the current participants are not the average disabled Norwegian youth, but youth who are especially interested in ICT. Another methodological challenge in qualitative research is the challenge of establishing rapport. The current participants' disclosure of their challenges, problems and feelings of exclusion and loneliness, as well as their competencies and achievements indicates that a mutual rapport was built during the interviews. Taken, all together, I find it justifiable to sum up some concluding remarks.

The empirical categories presented in this paper display some everyday intersections of age, gender and disability which the disabled youth find themselves in. These categories show that disabled is not something the youth are in themselves, but something they become, in concrete situations and in particular relations. Just as everyone else, do disabled youth slip and move between multiple identities that co-exist, some ascribed and some chosen. However, what new knowledge does this study generate?

First and foremost, this study highlights how disabled youth have just as multiple, liquid, and mobile identities as mainstream youth. Disabled youth experiment with identities and seek affiliation just as youth in general do. Therefore, I find it plausible to suggest that the study of disabled youth and ICT ought to be recognized and included in mainstream youth and ICT studies and not solely be studied due to therapeutic or educational purposes. At the same time, I find it of utmost importance not to underestimate the intersecting axes of differentiation and power. By being ascribed an identity as disabled, and marked as deviant, disabled youth often have to

overcompensate to prove themselves in doing being ordinary, and to achieve the liquidity and mobility anticipated of youth.

Moreover, the current study discloses some theoretical and practical consequences of how to understand disability and disabled youth's identities. In regard to the present body of literature on disabled youth and ICT, it appears that the understanding of disability and disabled youth's lives is still stuck in a therapeutic or educational discourse. This brings about confined and simplified studies that miss the complex, multiple, and intersecting axes of differentiation and power. To perceive disability and identity as something flexible, contextual, and negotiable, such as this paper aims at, it becomes clear that different and multiple alternatives realities are simultaneously enacted.

Furthermore, the study provides insight into how the permeability of the offline and the online world involves different challenges in disabled young people's identity negotiations, according to their different impairments. The participants having mobility difficulties use digital technology and access the online world just as non-disabled youth do. They do, however, face challenges in participating in their peers' offline social exchanges about online experiences and mutual interactions. Such offline social exchanges about online experiences are vital parts in young people's identity negotiations, and they take place at almost any geographical location where young people meet. This involves challenges for young people who have trouble with spatial mobility in physical environments not accommodated for wheelchairs. These challenges are often met by initiating mutual activities around the computer screen in offline settings accessible to wheelchairs, or in online interactions with like-minded friends and peers.

While blind and partially sighted youth also use ICT much in the same manner as non-disabled youth do, they too face challenges in participating in their peers' exchanges about online experiences and mutual interactions. Their challenges are, however, connected to digital access, and ICT assistive devices' usability or suitability. While most of the blind and partially sighted participants in the current study meet this challenge by seeking their affiliation to other blind and partially sighted youth, some keep on struggling to partake in their local peers' online interactions, depending on friends to help them out when vital sites are inaccessible.

The allocation of assistive technology easily leads to the apprehension that when the assistive technology is provided, the aim of access is achieved. This apprehension may lead to a neglect of the reality blind and partially sighted youth find themselves in, and leave them at a dead end. Consequently, one may be fooled into believing that ICT serves as a facilitator, when it actually becomes an inhibitor.

The use and significance of ICT have become a social phenomenon, and should be studied in social contexts, just as age, gender, disability and intersectionality (Baym 2006; Buckingham 2006; de los Reyes and Mulinari 2005; Solvang 2000). This paper has provided insight into the production and confirmation of these intersections, through the elaboration of interpersonal relationships, which have been contextualized on an individual level. Such intersections additionally take place in practices and orderings on an institutional level, or on a societal level. Due to the extensive social and personal dissemination and adoption of ICT, the context of young people's lives contains new and complex dependencies, and mechanisms of potential exclusion and marginalization, as well as inclusion. While society's emphasis on the individual, and on individuals as detached entities, implies increased freedom of choice, it also implies a greater risk and instability (Krange and Øia 2005). Although ICT provides disabled

youth new possibilities, it also creates new barriers. The personal and social benefits and drawbacks for disabled youth of the dissemination and use of ICT can only be detected if this is studied in the cultural contexts and social surroundings in which it evolves. The question, then, is where and how the cultural and social takes place.

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