Social networks and cultural practices
A case study of young avid screen users in France

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Abstract

What connection can be established between the cultural repertoires and practices of young users of screens and their systems of relationships? In this article, we discuss several approaches to the analysis of cultural construction of sociability, with a particular focus on the personal networks of middle-class students. We posit that the interactions between the type of cultural practice and the form of social network establish socially differentiated, decisive points of anchorage in the “use trajectories” [Proulx, S., 2002. Trajectoires d’usages des technologies de communication: les formes d’appropriation d’une culture numérique comme enjeu d’une société du savoir. Annales des télécommunications, Usages émergents des TIC 57 (mars/avril (3–4)), 180–189] of a vast and varied set of cultural productions and communication tools. By applying certain methodologies of the sociology of social networks to the sociology of cultural practices, we construct descriptive tools enabling us to explore the relational dimension of cultural and recreational activities.

Keywords: Cultural practices; Communication tools; Conversation

1. Sociability, cultural practices and uses of ICT

Our research is set within a body of closely related approaches in the study of cultural and relational practices, sociability and uses of communication tools. Valuable quantitative studies on sociability have emphasized the social and cultural distribution of contacts and encounters (Héran, 1988). In the spirit of Simmel’s definition, they consider socia-
bility essentially in terms of its formal aspect rather than from the point of view of its content. The analysis of social links then focuses on the structure of the relational system as defined on the basis of the status of correspondents (family, friends, colleagues), on the nature of interactions (regularity, density, timing, etc.) (de Gournay et al., 2001; Licoppe and Smoreda, 2000; Rivière, 2001) and on the construction of rules of selection, specialization and transformation of relations (in networks, circles or cliques) (Bidart and Legall, 1996). These studies, unable to access the content of conversations, due to the lack of ad hoc methodologies, meticulously analyse their duration, settings and timing, as well as the interlocutors’ status and gender (Héran, 1990). They often highlight the importance of the content of interactions and shared activities in determining the structure and composition of relations. They even try, in different ways, to analyse this “content”. Recent studies have, for instance, emphasized the role of certain biographical events, such as entry into employment, a move or the birth of a first child, in the reorganization of sociability (Mercier et al., 2002; Manceron et al., 2002). Others, in research on new forms of mobile communication, have focused on the way in which intimacy is expressed in SMS between close friends and family (Licoppe, 2002; Rivière, 2002). Some conversational genres that lend a particular dimension to social interactions, such as confidences, professional conversations (Bidart and Pélissier, 2002), family narrative or parent–child interaction (Galland, 1997) have been the subject of specific studies (Ferrand and Mounier, 1993). Yet a large proportion of ordinary conversational interaction is generally devoted to comments (narrative, evaluations, critiques, etc.) on cultural practices and recreational consumption. These are recurrent topics, present in a wide range of social situations. The ethnographic approach developed by the sociology of television reception has shown, for instance, how the culture industries impose their agenda on daily conversations by participating in the construction and maintenance of social interactions (Boullier, 1987; Pasquier, 1999; Cardon et al., 1999). Many social relations are constructed, in different ways, around cultural and recreational activities, without for all that being limited to them. The reasons are multiple: these activities are often performed in a group, they provide subject matter for conversations, they are the objects of common tastes, and, finally, related objects are exchanged (books, magazines, CDs, audio or video tapes, etc.). In our study, we therefore focused on individuals’ cultural and recreational activities as a tool for investigating their networks of relationships (Lavenu, 2002).

By construction, the questions produced by statistical studies on cultural practices relate to isolated individuals. Even though specific questions enable us to define the common features of certain cultural activities, the analysis of practices assumes intentions and deliberative actions by autonomous actors (Domat, 1994). The eminently relational character of many cultural and recreational activities is therefore difficult to grasp, and the collective construction of affinities and tastes remains elusive. The sociology of culture has two substantially different, although not mutually exclusive, approaches for revealing the collective dimension of cultural practices. Either it roots proximities between individual tastes and judgements in an equivalence between the modes of construction of individual dispositions, or it concentrates on the relational construction, through proximity, of communities of tastes. Without questioning the need to take into consideration the role of social positions in particular inclinations, we have opted for the latter perspective to explore the “eclectic” variety of individuals’ socio-cultural behaviours and to qualify increasingly complex forms of practices (Lahire, 2004). Recent studies have shown that it is hardly possible to reduce
the analysis of amateur practices to the social distribution of taste-related judgements, and that mediations and the decisive role of communities of practitioners in their actualization need to be considered (Hennion et al., 2000; Ethis, 2001; Bromberger, 1998). Our research, therefore, aims primarily to investigate individuals’ networks of relations via their cultural and recreational activities.

Cultural activities, insofar as they are material practices, mobilize a vast range of tools and mediums essential to the constitution of individual experiences. In this respect, the screens and interfaces of information and communication technologies (ICT) are instruments of mediation that warrant as much attention as the sociology of culture has paid to cultural equipment for a number of years now (Pronovost, 1996; Jouët and Pasquier, 1999). The “new audiovisual media” (cable, satellite, DVD, MP3 player, etc.) contribute towards the increasing offer of mass cultural products and hence to the growth of numbers of consumers. They are conducive to the development of distinctive strategies, not necessarily based on what established culture considers to be legitimate (Donnat, 1994). Telematic devices also promote the development of multi-task activities. They afford the opportunity of interacting in synchronous or asynchronous mode with one or more interlocutors (e-mail, chat, IRC, etc.) and of viewing TV, listening to music, accessing different types of writing, working or playing almost simultaneously, from the same “terminal”. The multiplication of opportunities to access cultural content is resulting in a diversification of the forms of reception, participation and action. Yet the methodologies for analysing uses of communication tools generally consider the communicating individual in terms of only a part of his or her “connected” activities. They focus either on a particular sphere of activity (e.g. work-related or domestic interactions) or on a specific type of close relationship (family, friends, colleagues, etc.). In order to grasp the full complexity of the play of interactions (substitution, synergy, plurality) of a constellation of communication tools, we need to be able to recompose a comprehensive figure of the user of ICT.

2. Methodology and choice of a the corpus

Questionnaire surveys designed to apprehend the full range of social relations and cultural practices, while remaining attentive to the technological devices incorporated in those practices, encounter severe limits (Lahire, 2001). We therefore chose, in an ethnographic spirit, to apply the methodology of personal (or egocentric) networks developed by the network analysis approach. This methodology has at least two advantages from our point of view. First, it enables us to constitute heterogeneous networks that, on the same descriptive level, associate the respondent’s contact with the individuals in his or her network of relations with the objects or content (books, music or websites) mobilized in individual or shared cultural activities. Second, it enables us to combine two major methodologies for differentiating publics: those focused on content (tastes, opinions and judgements) and those that aim to objectify practices by qualifying, in as much detail as possible, their frequency, duration and intensity, as well as related forms of sociability.

In this methodology (Gribaudi, 1998; Eve, 2002), the respondents were first asked to record a set of data relative to all the individuals they contacted and all their media-related, cultural, recreational and communication practices over a period of two weeks. These data,
recorded in a notebook, enabled us to identify regular or occasional relations as well as their context of activation. They also allowed us to make an inventory of daily cultural practices.

We then constructed a matrix of relations between people who know one another. The analysis of the different information provided by the notebooks and the matrix then served as a basis for long biographical interviews that enabled us to articulate the respondents’ cultural profiles to their relationship patterns.

The data production method did not enable us to work on large corpuses or representative samples. Since our aim was to obtain individual portraits with cultural profiles characterized by a screen culture (Jouët and Pasquier, 1999), we opted for a qualitative sample based on a particular social group with seemingly rich and varied combinations of forms of sociability and cultural engagement: ten young people of both sexes, in the 19–24 age-group, with extensive contact with screens, use of a computer with Internet access (at home, at their parents’ home, at university, etc.), use of various functions of mobile telephony, and attendance of higher education institutions. Since the distribution of cultural practices and social networks corresponds, cumulatively, to an individual’s cultural capital (Héran, 1988), the weight of the cultural capital inherited from their social background and acquired from higher education institutions makes this group particularly well-suited to the type of questioning implemented in this research.

The 19–24 age-group, corresponding to a period of experimentation that tends to be longer than in the past (Galland, 1995a, 1995b; Dubet, 1996), is a key phase in the construction of personal networks. During these years, a more elective and interpersonal logic in “choices” of relationships gradually replaces a contextualized logic centred on shared places and activities (Bidart, 1997), and relationships tend to be linked to cultural and recreational practices. The cultural orientations of this group are characterized by a decrease in the consumption of “established culture” and more consumption of information, along with a greater variety of activities (Mendras, 1988). Students show more broad-mindedness as they shift their focus from a single “genre”, characteristic of adolescence, to an “eclecticism accompanied by the ‘discovery’ of formerly less popular genres” (Patureau, 1992; Donnat, 1994). This student eclecticism can be seen, for instance, in the typical repertoire of outings, situated precisely at the intersection of characteristically juvenile practices (cinema, discos, bars, sports events), more cultural activities (theatre, opera, museums, exhibitions) and essentially family-oriented activities (walks, fun fairs, etc.).

3. Specialization, distribution, polarization

We applied a descriptive tool to our sample that enabled us, in each portrait, to identify the person’s individual ways of configuring certain segments of their network of relations, based on their cultural practices. Three different situations were identified: (i) situations in which a specific type of cultural practice is reserved (quasi)-exclusively for a type of relational network (specialization); (ii) situations in which a type of cultural practice is shared (in the form of common activities, conversations and/or exchanging equipment) with several circles of the person’s relational network (distribution); (iii) situations in which several types of cultural practice involve the same relational network (polarization) (Fig. 1).
In order to illustrate the methodology used in this study, we will now consider the portrait of three of our respondents corresponding to these three types of relationship. In our approach, the production of relational graphs was designed as a continuation of interviews with the respondents. During the last interview, we showed them their relational graphs and asked them to ring the different circles of relations and to describe each of these groups. The “spontaneous” qualification of these social groups corresponded to very different categories: place or time of the first meeting, the status or activity of meetings, professional contexts, etc. (Maillochon, 1998).

4. Nathan’s specialized virtual relations

Nathan was born in Arachon, France, in 1982. His mother is a teacher and father is in the air force. After his family had moved to New Caledonia, Nathan returned to mainland France as a university student in Brittany, from September 2000. With this move, he lost contact with his friends from Nouméa high school. He now keeps up contact with his family by phone and e-mail and writes long e-mails to his mother at least once a week (Fig. 2).

Apart from the family network that plays a minor part in the construction of Nathan’s “new social world”, the actors of his relational network clearly belong to four poles related to specific territories and individuals. The first pole consists of the other students that he met in the private student residence in which he chose to live on arrival in Rennes. Neighbourly relationships were thus initiated, some of which turned into lasting friendships. Unlike his family relations, the friendships resulting from these direct encounters are all based on cultural affinities related to music. In Nathan’s world, the passion for music is an essential motivating force behind the development of strong bonds. Through it, other areas of common interest are discovered and shared, such as computing or films. The university was the second way in which Nathan met people. In September 2000, he started a course in musicology but switched to languages after a year. The third part of Nathan’s network consists of the “virtual” relations that he maintains with various interlocutors on the Internet. He subscribes to various newsgroups on computing, films, music and video games, and his online activities are structured around forums on mangas, hacking and certain cultural products (DVD, video games, etc.). He has also created a “pirate” website (warez) from which he downloads software and files under copyright, free-of-charge. These electronic relations can be divided...
into two categories: on the one hand, a majority of individuals with whom he has only electronic contact (requests for technical information, that he answers, or the exchange of files, initiated in a newsgroup or chat) and, on the other, two people with whom Nathan has developed a closer relationship: Jean-Pierre, a friend with whom he has a lot in common, and Anne, his girlfriend whom he met through chatting and with whom he maintains different forms of communication on a daily basis. Finally, the fourth and last pole in the structure of his sociability is music. Nathan has developed a taste for classical music, maintained by his family, but also shows an interest in all other forms of music. Throughout his life, music has always been a resource for making (strong or weak) contacts and enhancing his circles of relationships. Thus, his passion for music partly structures his sociability which in turn draws on it to grow and develop (e.g. he belongs to a jazz band with David and Jean, his “best” friends, and to a choir). Nathan’s passion for music is distributed differently, depending on the interlocutors concerned. With his musician friends, he exchanges pieces by unknown specialized musicians found on the Internet, whereas to his university friends he gives (or sells) compilations of pop music from throughout the world, also downloaded from the Net.

Nathan manages his social capital on his own. Rather than trying to interconnect the different social circles he frequents, he keeps potential links to a minimum, as he used to do when he lived in New Caledonia. Nathan’s social network thus contains few multiple relations. Although some of his friends in a particular group (e.g. his fellow students) know
other friends in other circles (e.g. his musician friends), Nathan purposely keeps these
different relational spaces separate. For instance, none of the members of his network know
his girlfriend, his musician friends have not met his student friends, and his family knows
virtually none of the people he has met in Rennes.

5. The distribution of Nina’s festive sociability

Nina is a 23-year-old master’s student at Rennes University and lives alone in a small
flat in the city. She is from an upper-class family (her father Guy is an osteopath and mother
Isabelle is a housewife) and spent her childhood in Nantes and at the family’s holiday
home in La Baule. Nina has an older brother Brice (29, company manager in the computer
sector) with whom she has very frequent contact. Another brother, Stéphane, who was
three years older than her, died in a car crash four years ago. Nina is an assiduous student,
loves TV and Internet, is sporty and enjoys having fun with her friends. As the density
of her network shows, the degree of interconnection between different groups of relations
is very high in her case. Characteristically, her family network is not isolated from her
friendships, especially because she knows many of her brothers’ friends. At the time of the
survey, Nina had maintained regular contact with all the people with whom she had formed
relationships throughout her life. This high level of interrelations between the different
segments of her network is characteristic of the social ease with which Nina has established
contact between these different groups of friends (especially by attending parties). She has
gradually overlapped and shifted her different circles of relations without ever creating a
sudden break. This has enabled her to maintain bonds with different circles of friends while
progressively transforming the modalities and forms of contact with them (Fig. 3).

Nina’s oldest network of friends was constituted during summers at La Baule. These
are friendships formed around windsurfing during the summer or over weekends spent at
each others’ homes. Initially, this network of friendship was formed partly by her two older
brothers, and this group remains fairly close to the family circle. While she was at high
school, Nina formed a fairly large group of friends that bonded during a linguistic trip to the
US. During their last year at school, they were together all the time, meeting at one another’s
homes or going to cafés or the cinema. In Nina’s eyes, this thriving network is embodied in
Jean-Philippe (her ex-boyfriend), the core, a gateway to a set of friends that have never lost
their love for having fun. Jean-Philippe knows and has occasional contact with the other
segment’s of Nina’s network. After completing high school, Nina did a two-year preparatory
course to get into Rennes University to study physiotherapy. These two years of hard work
and going out with friends were marked by the sudden death of her brother that destabilized
her. She stopped attending classes and went out a lot with her friends from high school,
first, and then with her late brother’s friends who consider her as “a little sister”. Initially,
Nina had little contact with this older group that had already entered employment and was
known to be devoted to partying. After her brother’s death, she shifted into this network
that met regularly to organize long weekends and big parties of 20–50 people. This is where
Nina met Marielle (a public relations officer), who became a close friend and confidante.
Together, they created a “private” website to put photos, films and graphic collages of their
parties online, for the group.
On the periphery of this group, Nina met Sylvaine with whom she took a flat at La Roche-sur-Yon. At the time she had registered at a private university to study biology, a choice that marked the end of her physiotherapy orientation. TV evenings with her flatmates, studies, and group outings every Thursday evening to the same bar characterized student life at “La Roche”. It was an opportunity to build a new network of relations in which Lucie soon became Nina’s best friend. Both enjoyed TV series and comedies, spending a lot of time on their work and weekends together. After her second year, Nina obtained a diploma and with Lucie and about 10 people from the La Roche-sur-Yon group, she left for Rennes to do a bachelor’s degree. She took a flat in the city centre where she could receive friends to watch DVDs together. In Rennes, Nina constituted a new group in which she included some members of the former group from La Roche-sur-Yon. She now takes advantage of all her weekends, in Nantes, La Roche-sur-Yon and La Baule to maintain relations with these different circles of friends that she continues to see frequently.

6. Polarization of the Goulven clan and free parties “galaxy”

Goulven, 24, is a part-time student at the IUT (university technical school) in Rennes where he is doing a diploma in socio-cultural leadership. He also has a subsidized job as an assistant educator in a school in Vannes. Goulven’s father is from a working-class background—grew up in a rural family of seven children, now sales representative in a
Goulven's relational group

company renting building machinery—while mother is from the lower middle-class (specialized educator in the civil service, now retired and separated from her husband). Goulven has a passion for music and his taste has developed and broadened with time. His network of contacts has also evolved considerably in recent years. Schematically, it is represented by concentric groups of contacts. Like Russian dolls, his clan of friends fits into larger networks of relations related to music and free parties (on the diagram, “My clan” → “Free party galaxy, Lorient” → “Free party galaxy, West”) (Fig. 4).

Goulven gradually discovered alternative rock, reggae and hashish with his high school friends with whom he subsequently lost contact. During his school years, he played the guitar, did Breton wrestling and played video games a lot. In his final year, he also did a course in youth leadership and started producing cannabis with his school friends. After scraping through his A-levels, he abruptly stopped seeing his school friends. He moved into a flat in Vannes with his girlfriend Charlotte, a commerce student whom he met at a beach party. He then started his job at the school. During this period, he and Charlotte used to go to nightclubs on Saturday nights with her friends and to organize meals at home with other couples. Frédéric, a colleague in a similar post at the school, introduced him to reggae and computing. After a year, he suddenly put an end to his conventional lifestyle,
broke-up with Charlotte, revived his passion for alternative music and went to live with his father in Vannes. His mother had just left with one of his two brothers and his sister for La Réunion. Goulven lived in an independent flat in his father’s home with his brother Serge whose friends were present more or less permanently. Goulven’s “clan” thus comprised his 21-year-old brother, who had repeatedly failed at school and two of his friends, Julien and Lolo, both doing a course in horticulture. They more or less lived together in the flat and spent their evenings smoking, playing video games, listening to music and watching TV. During this period, Serge taught Goulven rap. On weekends, the clan systematically went to concerts, especially to listen to sound systems reggae at the Art Sonic, the only concert hall in Vannes that played their kind of music and where Goulven occasionally worked as a DJ. The parties he went to and the people he met at the time gradually changed the tribe’s taste in music from reggae and rap to techno. This change in their centre of interest was to prompt them to go out and move about far more, looking for free parties.

In the meantime, Goulven received training as part of his subsidized job at the school. During training sessions, he shared a cottage with other students in the same branch, who constituted a new circle of friends. With them, he was able to show his qualities and competencies that were not expressed in the narrow life of the clan: he played the guitar and drums, played chess rather than video games and had long conversations that were deeper than usual. His friends in the Rennes network were from a social background far superior to that of the clan. They had centres of interest and preoccupations that induced Goulven to move out of the closed circle consisting of his brother Serge and the gang of smokers-rappers. Every weekend, he and the clan frequented the free parties “galaxy”. In this context, he met Anthony and Stéphan, from Lorient, who opened a door for him. They were to act as gateways to Goulven’s deeper involvement in the techno community. Today, he has become an expert in the “free” movement in the West and sees himself as a future organizer of events.

7. From configurations to relational dynamics

The comparison between the three networks of Nathan (specialized), Nina (distributed) and Goulven (polarized) enables us to identify a few peculiarities of each of these cultural dynamics in the organization of sociability. These categories must nevertheless be understood as configurational dynamics representing trends in the different ways that individuals share their cultural practices and leisure with their circles of friends. Accordingly, these dynamics should not be seen as too intentional. They are essentially the unintentional result of an accumulation of minor acts, choices and refusal, inclinations and repulsions, that have meaning only in the overall result produced by the notebook methodology. Nor should the individuals concerned be confined to a single configuration. If we are attentive to the details of each respondent’s relational activities, we can relate them all to several figures identified in this descriptive model. In each configuration, it is the way of “forming a group” with friends that is characterized differently (cf. Table 1 below).

The specialization dynamic is characterized above all by a strong propensity to select and to separate circles of sociability, each of which are associated with a specific activity. This is the case of Nathan, who has specialized circles of friends: his musician friends
### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Clan (polarized configuration)</th>
<th>Circle (specialized configuration)</th>
<th>Network (distributed configuration)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type</strong></td>
<td>Tribe, clan</td>
<td>Group of amateurs, fans</td>
<td>Network of relations belonging to multiple and distinct circles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Common activities</strong></td>
<td>Techno parties, video games on LAN, TV evenings, chatting, relaxing</td>
<td>Sports training and competition, <em>manga</em> chatroom, playing music, specialized computer design</td>
<td>Parties, meals, sport, relaxing, music and TV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Modes of coordination</strong></td>
<td>Co-presence in a shared space</td>
<td>Common interest, passion</td>
<td>Maintaining the relational repertoire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relations</strong></td>
<td>Strong multiple</td>
<td>Weak multiple</td>
<td>Average multiple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Friendships</strong></td>
<td>Hardly individualized (“undifferentiated”)</td>
<td>Specialized (“differentiated”)</td>
<td>Individualized (“elective”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interaction</strong></td>
<td>Interaction in multiple spheres (cultural consumption, lifestyles, sentimental)</td>
<td>Expertise, advice, tips, collections (records, comics, software)</td>
<td>News, scandal, secrets, conversations on current events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The outside collective</strong></td>
<td>Clan linked to a galaxy</td>
<td>Strong opposition between the inside and the outside of the circle (“them”/“us”)</td>
<td>Extension of the network around elective relations and opportunities for contacts</td>
</tr>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Use of communication tools</strong></th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+++</td>
<td>++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>+++</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
and his Internet friends, fans of mangas and video games. On the whole, these relational
spaces are kept at a distance from one another and from the other groups constituting his
network of sociability (family, university friends, friends in the same residence). Nathan
closely manages his social capital, essentially by creating “relational niches” over which he
exercises tight control. His tastes and activities serve less to unite these different “relational
worlds” in a common space of shared activities than to isolate them. The specialization of
his practices has an increasingly strong selective impact on possible interlocutors. Opportu-
nities for contact become rarer as the information, competencies and learning required
for the accomplishment of the activity become more specialized. That is probably why fre-
quentation of virtual communities seems far more developed in the specialization dynamic
than in the other two. When no interlocutor can be found close by, interaction on the Internet
is an essential resource for creating communication spaces in specialized areas. Whereas,
when it comes to music, Nathan can interact in the presence of his musician friends who
regularly inform him about musicians or pieces unknown to him, the same does not apply
to hacking, mangas or video games. Internet-amateurs (fans, experts, critics, etc.) present
in dedicated virtual spaces constitute a form of labile social capital that is occasionally
mobilized to obtain specific content, for example, which may, in turn, serve for specialized
contacts in other social worlds. Between the members of the specialized circles a form of
“differentiated” friendship develops that, as Simmel put it, “each time concerns only one
aspect of the personality without interfering with the others” (Simmel, 1991: 34). They do
not meet in other places and their conversations are oriented by their shared activity. These
groups are thus formed in the same way as amateur clubs, fan clubs or communities of
conviction (Le Guern, 2002). Yet the formal diversification of the link and more personal
conversations do sometimes appear as a necessary step in maintaining and enhancing the
initial relationship.

With the distribution dynamic, on the other hand, there is a strong tendency to shift a
cultural or recreational activity to other circles, leading to connection and inter-relations
between the different circles. This is the case of Nina who distributes her taste for outings,
parties and television among all her groups of friends, irrespective of the origin of the group
(family, holidays, student life, brothers’ network, etc.). In fact, Nina’s activities are not
instrumental in the creation of new relations. They neither change nor impact significantly on
the forms of relationship between members of the different circles, which are often multiple.
Unlike Nathan, Nina conceives of her different groups of relations as “private clubs” among
which she distributes her tastes for “parties” and TV, while specifying particular ways of
doing things with each of them (drinking parties, dance parties, more intimate parties; TV
series, DVD, general-interest programmes). When, due to geographic distance (among other
criteria), the members of these various circles are unable to attend the same festive events,
Nina tries to share the atmosphere of the parties held with her “brothers’ group” with certain
individuals (e.g. her mother and her best friend). She allows them access to the dedicated
website that she manages, centralizing the photos, videos and various multimedia objects
constituting the visual memory of that particular circle. The wish to share experiences,
emotions and points of view with people who did not participate in the activities can also be
seen in regular conversations on “my parties with the others” and “what I watched on TV”.
In this respect, it is striking to note a particularly marked use of the telephone (in Nina’s
case, mobile: voice and text) to discuss past and future parties or TV programmes with best
friends. The distribution of activities in a highly multiplexed network probably corresponds
to a form of constitution of social capital that the middle and especially the upper classes
seem to be skilled at. Since face-to-face contact is essential, it is the communicational
configuration in which most interaction concerning parties and television developed.

Co-presence is even more important in the polarization dynamic. This dynamic can
be defined as a propensity to focus a set of cultural practices that are distinct yet of the
same nature, on a relational circle in the form of a clan (or gang). The clan, a close-
knit core that initially thrived on gregarious “doing together”, nevertheless remains open
and also participates in larger collectives that can be qualified as “galaxies” (n´ebuleuses)
(Bidart, 1997). This is the case of Goulven who involves members of the clan with whom
he practices multiple essentially “internal” activities (music, videogames, TV, growing
and use of cannabis, crosswords, etc.), in “external” activities related to “live” musical
performances (concerts, free parties). These activities lead them to broaden their small
circle to other people that they then contact occasionally by phone and meet personally at
concerts and parties. The youth culture galaxies, that often revolve around public places
in which people can meet without making appointments (bar, nightclub, marked territory
in the public sphere), have found particularly fertile ground for their deployment in the
development of urban cultures and, more specifically, in the free parties movement (Racine,
2002). Hence, the intensification of practice in the polarization dynamic is collective rather
than individual. It is the clan as a whole that socializes, accumulates knowledge and develops
competencies. In the case of Goulven’s group, the expansion of the clan’s interest in free
parties will lead them together to become the organizers of techno events.

To conclude, we would like to point out the articulations between certain types of practice
and cultural content and certain forms of sociability. First, practices on which specialization
of relationships is based mobilize collectives of amateurs who are often particularly active.
Far from the figure of the consumer of leisure, these amateurs show an active involvement in
the practice of their activities and in the production of discourse on them. This engagement
contributes to the definition of these individuals’ social identity and to the recognition of
their practice by friends and family. As Nathan’s case illustrates, the interests underlying
these “specialized” social networks tend to be heterodox, avant-garde or highly specific (sub-
culture, hyper-specialization, etc.). Yet the individuals who “specialize” a segment of their
relational network around a rare cultural practice may well have a more eclectic approach
to other practices and show keen interest in the consumption of ordinary media culture.
In the distribution dynamic, the people participating in the different circles on which the
preferred cultural activities are distributed are rarely identified on the basis of their practices
and tastes. It is regular cultural consumption that dominates here; individuals show the most
interest in shared practices that can easily be consumed in the domestic sphere. By contrast,
in the polarization dynamic cultural practices focus on outside activities, urban cultures,
etc. Individuals’ tastes are not necessarily set (as in the tendency to specialization); they
can evolve, depending on the wishes of the clan and the social spaces frequented. This is
conducive to new encounters and with them new centres of interest. For instance, Goulven,

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1 While the “gang” corresponds to a masculine form of sociability, girls participate in galaxies to a large extent,
even if they adhere less to the collective form of exclusivity and ostentation of the gang. The dynamics of female
polarization are expressed more easily through the very small circle of the “best friend(s)”. 
initially a reggae and ragga fan, gradually became interested in techno music by frequenting the free parties “galaxy”. Cultural practices set in a dynamic of polarization of networks of sociability seem to overlap substantially (graff, techno, skate, etc.), thus offering permanent bridges for moving around between the different worlds of street culture.

These relationships between cultural practices and the organization of networks of sociability in the 19–24 age-group highlight several types of phenomenon. First, in order to identify the figures of cultural eclecticism, it is necessary to consider the full spectrum of an individual’s relations. In some cases individuals limit an avant-garde practice to a particular circle and distribute more ordinary practices across other segments of their relational network. Second, the articulation between solitary and shared practices draws a dividing line between different types of activity and engagements in relationships that play a key part in the formation of cultural dispositions. Finally, these modes of cultural organization of sociability also have to be understood in a dynamic perspective. Since they correspond to specific moments in individuals’ relational trajectories, they necessarily evolve with time, as those individuals’ tastes and relationships are renewed. These categories define the characteristics of individuals and their social milieu, and specific times in their life cycles. We can also posit that the polarization dynamic corresponds to a phase closer to the experiences of high school pupils, while the distribution dynamic corresponds to entangled sequences of student life. Finally, the specialization dynamic marks an individualization of practices necessitated by the time constraints of working life. This temporal organization obviously varies from one individual to the next. This point nevertheless suggests that it would be useful to develop a longitudinal and dynamic approach to transformations of individuals’ systems of relationships, in relation to changes in their cultural practices.

Uncited reference

Proulx (2002).

References


