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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.

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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-

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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 Le Gall, 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 Péliissier, 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 deliberate actions by autonomous actors (Donnat, 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

73 the analysis of amateur practices to the social distribution of taste-related judgements, and
74 that mediations and the decisive role of communities of practitioners in their actualization
75 need to be considered (Hennion et al., 2000; Ethis, 2001; Bromberger, 1998). Our research,
76 therefore, aims primarily to investigate individuals' networks of relations via their cultural
77 and recreational activities.

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

99 2. Methodology and choice of a the corpus

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

112 In this methodology (Gribaudo, 1998; Eve, 2002), the respondents were first asked to
113 record a set of data relative to all the individuals they contacted and all their media-related,
114 cultural, recreational and communication practices over a period of two weeks. These data,

115 recorded in a notebook, enabled us to identify regular or occasional relations as well as their
116 context of activation. They also allowed us to make an inventory of daily cultural practices.
117 We then constructed a matrix of relations between people who know one another. The
118 analysis of the different information provided by the notebooks and the matrix then served
119 as a basis for long biographical interviews that enabled us to articulate the respondents’
120 cultural profiles to their relationship patterns.

121 The data production method did not enable us to work on large corpuses or representative
122 samples. Since our aim was to obtain individual portraits with cultural profiles characterized
123 by a *screen culture* (Jouët and Pasquier, 1999), we opted for a qualitative sample based
124 on a particular social group with seemingly rich and varied combinations of forms of
125 sociability and cultural engagement: ten young people of both sexes, in the 19–24 age-
126 group, with extensive contact with screens, use of a computer with Internet access (at home,
127 at their parents’ home, at university, etc.), use of various functions of mobile telephony,
128 and attendance of higher education institutions. Since the distribution of cultural practices
129 and social networks corresponds, cumulatively, to an individual’s cultural capital (Héran,
130 1988), the weight of the cultural capital inherited from their social background and acquired
131 from higher education institutions makes this group particularly well-suited to the type of
132 questioning implemented in this research.

133 The 19–24 age-group, corresponding to a period of experimentation that tends to be
134 longer than in the past (Galland, 1995a, 1995b; Dubet, 1996), is a key phase in the con-
135 struction of personal networks. During these years, a more elective and interpersonal logic
136 in “choices” of relationships gradually replaces a contextualized logic centred on shared
137 places and activities (Bidart, 1997), and relationships tend to be linked to cultural and recre-
138 ational practices. The cultural orientations of this group are characterized by a decrease in
139 the consumption of “established culture” and more consumption of information, along with
140 a greater variety of activities (Mendras, 1988). Students show more broad-mindedness as
141 they shift their focus from a single “genre”, characteristic of adolescence, to an “eclecticism
142 accompanied by the ‘discovery’ of formerly less popular genres” (Patureau, 1992; Donnat,
143 1994). This student eclecticism can be seen, for instance, in the typical repertoire of out-
144 ings, situated precisely at the intersection of characteristically juvenile practices (cinema,
145 discos, bars, sports events), more cultural activities (theatre, opera, museums, exhibitions)
146 and essentially family-oriented activities (walks, fun fairs, etc.).

147 3. Specialization, distribution, polarization

148 We applied a descriptive tool to our sample that enabled us, in each portrait, to identify the
149 person’s individual ways of configuring certain segments of their network of relations, based
150 on their cultural practices. Three different situations were identified: (i) situations in which
151 a specific type of cultural practice is reserved (quasi)-exclusively for a type of relational
152 network (*specialization*); (ii) situations in which a type of cultural practice is shared (in
153 the form of common activities, conversations and/or exchanging equipment) with several
154 circles of the person’s relational network (*distribution*); (iii) situations in which several
155 types of cultural practice involve the same relational network (*polarization*) (Fig. 1).

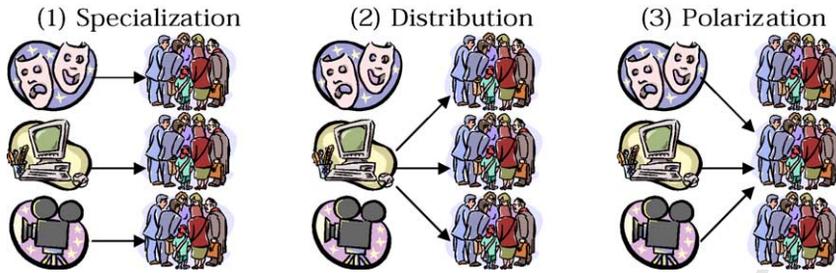


Fig. 1. Three types of relation between sociability and cultural practices.

156 In order to illustrate the methodology used in this study, we will now consider the
 157 portrait of three of our respondents corresponding to these three types of relationship.
 158 In our approach, the production of relational graphs was designed as a continuation of
 159 interviews with the respondents. During the last interview, we showed them their relational
 160 graphs and asked them to ring the different circles of relations and to describe each of
 161 these groups. The “spontaneous” qualification of these social groups corresponded to very
 162 different categories: place or time of the first meeting, the status or activity of meetings,
 163 professional contexts, etc. (Maillochon, 1998).

164 4. Nathan’s specialized virtual relations

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

170 Apart from the family network that plays a minor part in the construction of Nathan’s
 171 “new social world”, the actors of his relational network clearly belong to four poles related
 172 to specific territories and individuals. The first pole consists of the other students that he met
 173 in the private student residence in which he chose to live on arrival in Rennes. Neighbourly
 174 relationships were thus initiated, some of which turned into lasting friendships. Unlike his
 175 family relations, the friendships resulting from these direct encounters are all based on
 176 cultural affinities related to music. In Nathan’s world, the passion for music is an essential
 177 motivating force behind the development of strong bonds. Through it, other areas of common
 178 interest are discovered and shared, such as computing or films. The university was the second
 179 way in which Nathan met people. In September 2000, he started a course in musicology
 180 but switched to languages after a year. The third part of Nathan’s network consists of the
 181 “virtual” relations that he maintains with various interlocutors on the Internet. He subscribes
 182 to various newsgroups on computing, films, music and video games, and his online activities
 183 are structured around forums on *mangas*, hacking and certain cultural products (DVD, video
 184 games, etc.). He has also created a “pirate” website (*warez*) from which he downloads
 185 software and files under copyright, free-of-charge. These electronic relations can be divided

Nathan's relational graph

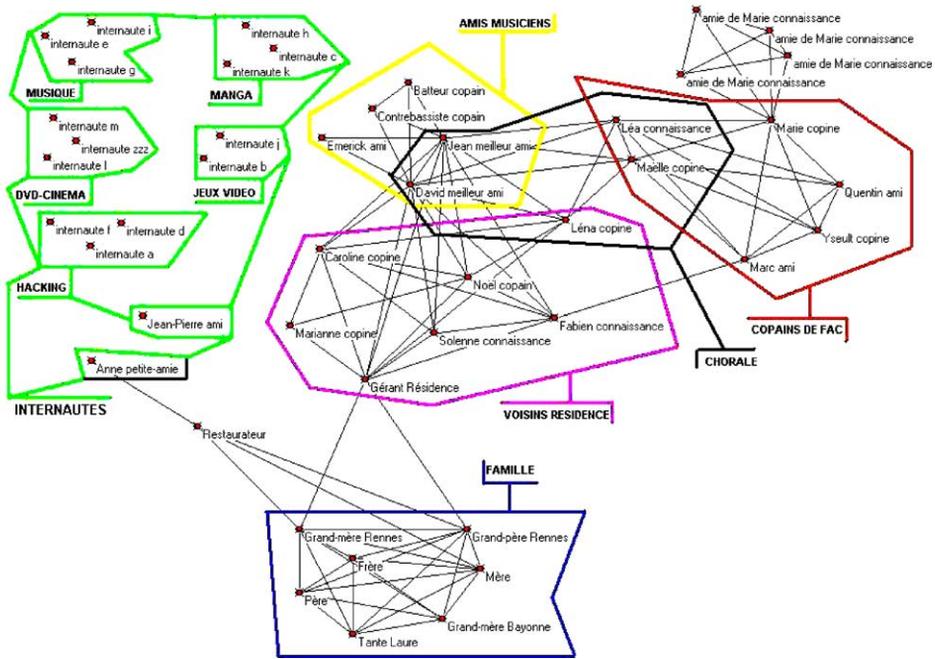


Fig. 2. Nathan's relational graph.

186 into two categories: on the one hand, a majority of individuals with whom he has only
 187 electronic contact (requests for technical information, that he answers, or the exchange of
 188 files, initiated in a newsgroup or chat) and, on the other, two people with whom Nathan has
 189 developed a closer relationship: Jean-Pierre, a friend with whom he has a lot in common, and
 190 Anne, his girlfriend whom he met through chatting and with whom he maintains different
 191 forms of communication on a daily basis. Finally, the fourth and last pole in the structure of
 192 his sociability is music. Nathan has developed a taste for classical music, maintained by his
 193 family, but also shows an interest in all other forms of music. Throughout his life, music has
 194 always been a resource for making (strong or weak) contacts and enhancing his circles of
 195 relationships. Thus, his passion for music partly structures his sociability which in turn draws
 196 on it to grow and develop (e.g. he belongs to a jazz band with David and Jean, his “best”
 197 friends, and to a choir). Nathan’s passion for music is distributed differently, depending on
 198 the interlocutors concerned. With his musician friends, he exchanges pieces by unknown
 199 specialized musicians found on the Internet, whereas to his university friends he gives (or
 200 sells) compilations of pop music from throughout the world, also downloaded from the Net.

201 Nathan manages his social capital on his own. Rather than trying to interconnect the
 202 different social circles he frequents, he keeps potential links to a minimum, as he used to
 203 do when he lived in New Caledonia. Nathan’s social network thus contains few multiple
 204 relations. Although some of his friends in a particular group (e.g. his fellow students) know

205 other friends in other circles (e.g. his musician friends), Nathan purposely keeps these
206 different relational spaces separate. For instance, none of the members of his network know
207 his girlfriend, his musician friends have not met his student friends, and his family knows
208 virtually none of the people he has met in Rennes.

209 **5. The distribution of Nina's festive sociability**

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

227 Nina's oldest network of friends was constituted during summers at La Baule. These
228 are friendships formed around windsurfing during the summer or over weekends spent at
229 each others' homes. Initially, this network of friendship was formed partly by her two older
230 brothers, and this group remains fairly close to the family circle. While she was at high
231 school, Nina formed a fairly large group of friends that bonded during a linguistic trip to the
232 US. During their last year at school, they were together all the time, meeting at one another's
233 homes or going to cafés or the cinema. In Nina's eyes, this thriving network is embodied in
234 Jean-Philippe (her ex-boyfriend), the core, a gateway to a set of friends that have never lost
235 their love for having fun. Jean-Philippe knows and has occasional contact with the other
236 segment's of Nina's network. After completing high school, Nina did a two-year preparatory
237 course to get into Rennes University to study physiotherapy. These two years of hard work
238 and going out with friends were marked by the sudden death of her brother that destabilized
239 her. She stopped attending classes and went out a lot with her friends from high school,
240 first, and then with her late brother's friends who consider her as "a little sister". Initially,
241 Nina had little contact with this older group that had already entered employment and was
242 known to be devoted to partying. After her brother's death, she shifted into this network
243 that met regularly to organize long weekends and big parties of 20–50 people. This is where
244 Nina met Marielle (a public relations officer), who became a close friend and confidante.
245 Together, they created a "private" website to put photos, films and graphic collages of their
246 parties online, for the group.

Nina's relational graph

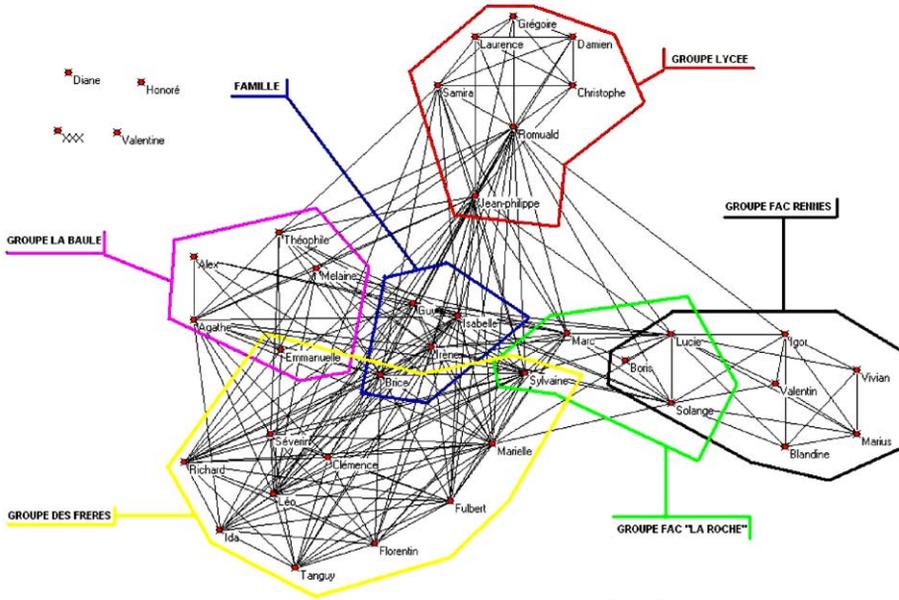


Fig. 3. Nina's relational graph.

247 On the periphery of this group, Nina met Sylvaine with whom she took a flat at La Roche-
 248 sur-Yon. At the time she had registered at a private university to study biology, a choice that
 249 marked the end of her physiotherapy orientation. TV evenings with her flatmates, studies,
 250 and group outings every Thursday evening to the same bar characterized student life at “La
 251 Roche”. It was an opportunity to build a new network of relations in which Lucie soon
 252 became Nina's best friend. Both enjoyed TV series and comedies, spending a lot of time
 253 on their work and weekends together. After her second year, Nina obtained a diploma and
 254 with Lucie and about 10 people from the La Roche-sur-Yon group, she left for Rennes to
 255 do a bachelor's degree. She took a flat in the city centre where she could receive friends
 256 to watch DVDs together. In Rennes, Nina constituted a new group in which she included
 257 some members of the former group from La Roche-sur-Yon. She now takes advantage of all
 258 her weekends, in Nantes, La Roche-sur-Yon and La Baule to maintain relations with these
 259 different circles of friends that she continues to see frequently.

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

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

Goulven's relational group

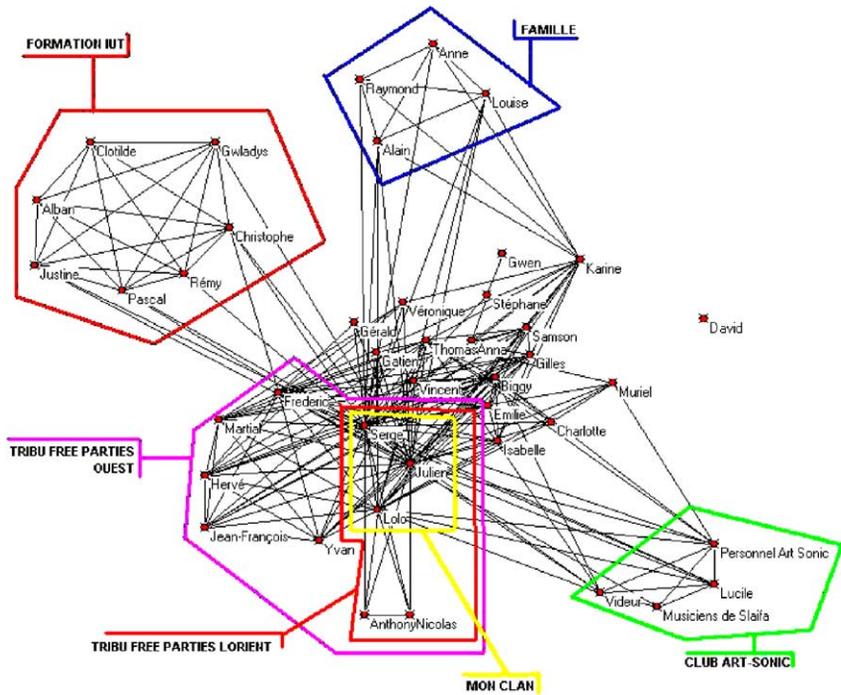


Fig. 4. Goulven's relational group.

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

272 Goulven gradually discovered alternative rock, reggae and hashish with his high school
 273 friends with whom he subsequently lost contact. During his school years, he played the
 274 guitar, did Breton wrestling and played video games a lot. In his final year, he also did a
 275 course in youth leadership and started producing cannabis with his school friends. After
 276 scraping through his A-levels, he abruptly stopped seeing his school friends. He moved
 277 into a flat in Vannes with his girlfriend Charlotte, a commerce student whom he met at
 278 a beach party. He then started his job at the school. During this period, he and Charlotte
 279 used to go to nightclubs on Saturday nights with her friends and to organize meals at home
 280 with other couples. Frédéric, a colleague in a similar post at the school, introduced him to
 281 reggae and computing. After a year, he suddenly put an end to his conventional lifestyle,

282 broke-up with Charlotte, revived his passion for alternative music and went to live with his
283 father in Vannes. His mother had just left with one of his two brothers and his sister for La
284 Réunion. Goulven lived in an independent flat in his father's home with his brother Serge
285 whose friends were present more or less permanently. Goulven's "clan" thus comprised his
286 21-year-old brother, who had repeatedly failed at school and two of his friends, Julien and
287 Lolo, both doing a course in horticulture. They more or less lived together in the flat and
288 spent their evenings smoking, playing video games, listening to music and watching TV.
289 During this period, Serge taught Goulven rap. On weekends, the clan systematically went
290 to concerts, especially to listen to sound systems reggae at the Art Sonic, the only concert
291 hall in Vannes that played their kind of music and where Goulven occasionally worked as
292 a DJ. The parties he went to and the people he met at the time gradually changed the tribe's
293 taste in music from reggae and rap to techno. This change in their centre of interest was to
294 prompt them to go out and move about far more, looking for free parties.

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

308 7. From configurations to relational dynamics

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

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

Table 1

	Clan (polarized configuration)	Circle (specialized configuration)	Network (distributed configuration)
Type	Tribe, clan	Group of amateurs, fans	Network of relations belonging to multiple and distinct circles
Common activities	Techno parties, video games on LAN, TV evenings, chatting, relaxing	Sports training and competition, <i>manga</i> chatroom, playing music, specialized computer design	Parties, meals, sport, relaxing, music and TV
Modes of coordination	Co-presence in a shared space	Common interest, passion	Maintaining the relational repertoire
Relations	Strong multiple	Weak multiple	Average multiple
Friendships	Hardly individualized (“undifferentiated”)	Specialized (“differentiated”)	Individualized (“elective”)
Interaction	Interaction in multiple spheres (cultural consumption, lifestyles, sentimental)	Expertise, advice, tips, collections (records, comics, software)	News, scandal, secrets, conversations on current events
The outside collective	Clan linked to a galaxy	Strong opposition between the inside and the outside of the circle (“them”/“us”)	Extension of the network around elective relations and opportunities for contacts
Use of communication tools			
Internet	+	+++	++
Mobile	++	+	+++
Face-to-face	+++	+	++

324 and his Internet friends, fans of *mangas* and video games. On the whole, these relational
325 spaces are kept at a distance from one another and from the other groups constituting his
326 network of sociability (family, university friends, friends in the same residence). Nathan
327 closely manages his social capital, essentially by creating “relational niches” over which he
328 exercises tight control. His tastes and activities serve less to unite these different “relational
329 worlds” in a common space of shared activities than to isolate them. The specialization of
330 his practices has an increasingly strong selective impact on possible interlocutors. Oppor-
331 tunities for contact become rarer as the information, competencies and learning required
332 for the accomplishment of the activity become more specialized. That is probably why fre-
333 quentation of virtual communities seems far more developed in the specialization dynamic
334 than in the other two. When no interlocutor can be found close by, interaction on the Internet
335 is an essential resource for creating communication spaces in specialized areas. Whereas,
336 when it comes to music, Nathan can interact in the presence of his musician friends who
337 regularly inform him about musicians or pieces unknown to him, the same does not apply
338 to hacking, *mangas* or video games. Internet-amateurs (fans, experts, critics, etc.) present
339 in dedicated virtual spaces constitute a form of labile social capital that is occasionally
340 mobilized to obtain specific content, for example, which may, in turn, serve for specialized
341 contacts in other social worlds. Between the members of the specialized circles a form of
342 “differentiated” friendship develops that, as Simmel put it, “each time concerns only one
343 aspect of the personality without interfering with the others” (Simmel, 1991: 34). They do
344 not meet in other places and their conversations are oriented by their shared activity. These
345 groups are thus formed in the same way as amateur clubs, fan clubs or communities of
346 conviction (Le Guern, 2002). Yet the formal diversification of the link and more personal
347 conversations do sometimes appear as a necessary step in maintaining and enhancing the
348 initial relationship.

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

369 friends. The distribution of activities in a highly multiplexed network probably corresponds
370 to a form of constitution of social capital that the middle and especially the upper classes
371 seem to be skilled at. Since face-to-face contact is essential, it is the communicational
372 configuration in which most interaction concerning parties and television developed.

373 Co-presence is even more important in the *polarization* dynamic. This dynamic can
374 be defined as a propensity to focus a set of cultural practices that are distinct yet of the
375 same nature, on a relational circle in the form of a clan (or gang). The clan, a close-
376 knit core that initially thrived on gregarious “doing together”, nevertheless remains open
377 and also participates in larger collectives that can be qualified as “galaxies” (*nébuleuses*)
378 (Bidart, 1997)¹. This is the case of Goulven who involves members of the clan with whom
379 he practices multiple essentially “internal” activities (music, videogames, TV, growing
380 and use of cannabis, crosswords, etc.), in “external” activities related to “live” musical
381 performances (concerts, free parties). These activities lead them to broaden their small
382 circle to other people that they then contact occasionally by phone and meet personally at
383 concerts and parties. The youth culture galaxies, that often revolve around public places
384 in which people can meet without making appointments (bar, nightclub, marked territory
385 in the public sphere), have found particularly fertile ground for their deployment in the
386 development of urban cultures and, more specifically, in the free parties movement (Racine,
387 2002). Hence, the intensification of practice in the *polarization* dynamic is collective rather
388 than individual. It is the clan as a whole that socializes, accumulates knowledge and develops
389 competencies. In the case of Goulven’s group, the expansion of the clan’s interest in free
390 parties will lead them together to become the organizers of techno events.

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

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

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