



Book or screen, pen or keyboard? A cross-cultural sociological analysis of writing and reading habits basing on Germany, Italy and the UK



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 18 March 2015

Received in revised form 14 September 2015

Accepted 16 September 2015

Available online 21 September 2015

Keywords:

Paper and digital writing

Paper and digital reading

Educational setting

Students

Qualitative approach

ABSTRACT

The goal of this paper is to investigate cross-cultural similarities and differences in the adoption of writing and reading technologies by young people. In particular, it explores the affordances of writing and reading on paper and those of writing on a keyboard and reading on a screen in Germany, Italy and UK.

The study is based on a comparative analysis of essays ($N = 206$) about reading and writing practices written by 54 German, 23 British and 129 Italian students. These essays were analyzed through qualitative content analysis in order to understand how reading/writing are reshaped after the advent of ICT use in the educational context.

The main result of the study is that there are no major differences between German, Italian and British students. Their choice of paper and pencil vs. screen and keyboard depends on different reasons, which could be summed up into six categories: (1) aesthetic reasons/appearance; (2) practical reasons/habits/traditions; (3) social reasons/receiver and sender relations; (4) physiological/cognitive/health reasons; (5) technological reasons; and (6) ecological reasons.

Secondly, there are not mutually exclusive. Both reading on paper or screen and writing with a pen or a keyboard has advantages and disadvantages at the same time. Students take that mode of reading and writing which subjectively suits those best in different contexts.

Further research is proposed to explore how subjective preferences and actual performance are affiliated with each other.

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1. Introduction

In the last decade, digital media have reconfigured the entire media landscape and come to play a crucial role in contemporary culture and society. Especially in the Western world, everyday life has become digital and online, and devices like the landline telephone or desktop computer are changing to mobile media devices. Insofar as where the Internet access is possible, smartphones and laptops can be used in all contexts, for example at home, work, or at school. It seems that paper and pencil are increasingly being replaced by screen and keyboard. The widespread presence of digital technologies is

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modifying the way in which people share, consume and create knowledge, affecting significantly the development of our social, cultural and educational competences. However, the impact of digital technologies on writing and reading within the educational context has not been analyzed widely. A recent significant exception is represented by the qualitative study conducted by [Fortunati and Vincent \(2014\)](#) about the use of digital media (laptop, computer) and analog media (paper and pencil) by Italian students. They detected that “reading and writing competencies are changing with the use of digital technologies but that paper and digital interactions are not mutually exclusive” ([Fortunati and Vincent, 2014, p. 39](#)). Using pen or keyboard is dependent on the task: students prefer to write longer texts digitally while pen and paper are seen as more useful for creative tasks and meta-communication.

Going one-step further, we chose three European countries namely Germany, Italy and United Kingdom, which have relatively similar economic, social and education systems, to investigate the question: what similarities and differences of writing and reading habits exist between these different countries? In the next section, we provide a brief literature review on the impact of digital media on reading/writing practices. In the following section, we present a broad picture of the current status of media usage in Germany, Italy and UK, focusing in particular on the adoption of the Internet and e-books. We then describe the research questions, data collection and samples and provide an overview of our approach. The main findings of the study are illustrated, followed by discussion and concluding remarks as well as suggested direction for future research.

2. Literature review

Although the design and features of media suggest certain practices, many studies about the appropriation of digital media into everyday life practices provides a more detailed analysis: people integrate and adapt media to their requirements. As an example, instant messaging was developed for communication within a business context; now, it is a common tool for daily communication ([Harper, 2010](#)) and an exemplar of “social shaping of technology” is postulated by [Williams and Edge \(1996\)](#) (see also [MacKenzie and Wajeman, 1999](#)). Highlighting that people integrate digital devices into everyday life practices within the limits set by their functional features, the social shaping of technology perspective occupies a middle position between a social and technological determinism.

While the impact of the use of digital tools in the domestic (e.g., [Silverstone and Haddon, 1996](#); [Silverstone, 2006](#); [Peil and Roeser, 2014](#)) and business environment has been extensively analyzed (e.g., [Sellen and Harper, 2001](#)), what is still scarcely investigated is how computers, tablets, e-books, etc., are reshaping the educational environment and changing the students’ practices of reading and writing.

Some research carried out by disciplines such as psychology, which for example analyzed the effects of digital devices on cognitive skills, have shown that there is a difference between both handwriting and writing on keyboard and between reading from a paper or a screen ([MacArthur, 1999](#); [Longcamp et al., 2006, 2008](#)). Educators have debated the importance and influence of handwriting on the efficiency of learning ([Christensen and Jones, 2000](#); [Christensen, 2004](#); [Buckingham, 2007](#); [Mangen and Velay, 2010](#)) and also discussed about new types of learning by using e-books ([Luik and Mikk, 2008](#); [Slater, 2009](#); [Woody et al., 2010](#); [Daniel and Woody, 2013](#)). Moreover, the issue of declining writing and reading skills are also discussed among concerned linguists (e.g., [Baron, 2008, 2014](#)). A common point of these existing works is that the implementation of digital technologies in education presents both advantages and disadvantages to learning. Concerning technologies, [Mesthene \(1997\)](#) calls such a phenomenon a “duality of effects”. Mesthene’s body of thought is applicable to digital media use because he defines technologies “in a general sense including machines, but also incorporates linguistic and intellectual tools and contemporary analytic and mathematical techniques” ([Mesthene, p. 74](#)). He sees the duality of effects not as an either-or-matter but rather as a continuum between advantages and disadvantages at the same time.

Most of the pedagogic studies focus on the effectiveness of digital media for learning progress ([Barker, 2008](#); [Buckingham, 2007](#); [Siemens, 2005](#); [Venkatesh et al., 2014](#)), but seem to widely neglect that pupils and students do have subjective preferences and experiences for reading and writing. With the words of the Uses-and-Gratifications approach ([Rubin, 1994](#); [Ruggiero, 2000](#)), people have reasons for their actions. Reasons are motives, which “are words societal members use to make sense of their behaviour and the behaviour of others” ([Leiter, 1980, p. 202](#)). Such reasons or ‘motives’ can be used to explain why people use digital media in a specific way.

[Fortunati and Vincent \(2014\)](#) took a first step to fill this research gap. Using the Media Richness Theory ([Daft and Lengel, 1986](#)) approach, they asked Italian Masters students to write an essay on their practices concerning reading and writing analog vs. digital. The essays were then analyzed by a qualitative content analysis and the findings show that students describe many affordances ([Dourish, 2004](#); [Hutchby, 2001](#)) of reading/writing on paper compared with reading/writing digitally. Writing on paper is perceived as a multi-sensorial and emotional experience and overall, students seem to have a positive impression of the paper-based communication. However, digital media do not replace paper and pencil; they rather support different reading and writing tasks. For example, students prefer to write long texts digitally, but they still prefer to read on paper. Besides this, the authors highlight that their results may be country-specific: “as national standards for literacy pedagogy and the adoption of digital devices such as laptops and mobile phones can be expected to vary by country, the results we discuss herein may be different from countries where taught chirographic writing is being replaced by word processing at a young age” ([Fortunati and Vincent, 2014, p. 40](#)).

In order to evaluate how much of their findings depend on the Italian culture and, for instance, if they can be determined by the degree of digitalization of the specific education system, it is pivotal to conduct a comparative study involving other

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