Performing search: Search engines and mobile devices in the everyday life of young people – A summary

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1 Cecilia Andersson is a researcher at Lund University within the project Why do we choose the Internet instead of the doctor next door?. She is also a teacher in the ALM master programme and the bachelor programme in Digital Cultures. She defended her thesis in June 2021. Email: cecilia.andersson@kultur.lu.se
Search engines have become the gateway to finding information online in contemporary society. Through the means of mobile devices, searching online is made possible almost anywhere, anytime and about any topic. In fact, young people growing up today have never known a world where search engines could not be queried and provide a ranked answer. Using a search engine has in many ways become equated with googling, which is indicative of the dominant role that Google Search plays. Against this backdrop, the study sets out to explore the role of search engines and mobile devices in the everyday life of young people in Sweden.

The aim of the thesis is to advance knowledge about the role of search engines and online search in the everyday life of young people. The young people in this study are 13 to 16 years old and attending secondary school. I view the relation between online search and mobile devices as an important part of understanding the role of online search in everyday life. I therefore explore the relation between search engines and mobile devices, and how the two are used, and negotiated, in various social contexts. To explore these negotiations, I draw on a dramaturgical frame, more specifically the notion of impression management (Goffman, 1959) and frame analysis (Goffman, 1974). Through the dramaturgical perspective, social acts are viewed as performances. Key concepts in relation to impression management include audience, roles, frontstage and backstage. Impression management focuses on the fact that we present ourselves differently depending on social context and the audience of our performance, as norms and expectations differ. Drawing on a dramaturgical frame, the analysis focuses both on how search engines are used, and the way that young teenagers navigate expectations and rules surrounding the use of search engines and mobile devices in various contexts. Frame analysis, on the other hand, focuses on the definition of a situation. Different situations become intelligible through the application of frames. Importantly, these frames are not individual constructs but relates to shared understandings and social context. The definition of a situation not only defines the meaning of situation for people, but also how one is to act in the situation.
The study is guided by the following research questions:

- How is online search done in school, and how is the activity legitimised in a school setting?
- What framings can be identified when teenagers describe their use of Google Search?
- How do young people become aware of their online search traces, and what strategies do they have for managing them, if any?
- What framings of the smartphone can be identified in the way that young people use and describe smartphones, and how do the framings relate to online search?

The thesis is written as a compilation and each research question corresponds to one of the articles of the thesis. The thesis can be said to follow two different themes, that of impression management (Goffman, 1959, p. 19) and that of framing (Goffman, 1974) which are both captured under the term dramaturgical perspective. Article I and III focus on impression management, in relation to how online search is done (Article I), and in relation to online traces of search (Article III). Article II and IV focus on framing, of Google Search (Article II), and of the smartphone (Article IV).

In the thesis, online search is investigated in an explorative way without beforehand demarcating which forms of searching that are included in my scope. This means that I include searching on social media platforms, such as Instagram and Tumblr, in my scope. Likewise, YouTube, which can be described as a combination of search engine and social media is included. When using the term online search, I refer to the use of a general-purpose search engine. Examples of general-purpose search engines are Google Search, Bing, Baidu and Yandex.

With the aim of investigating online search and mobile devices in everyday life, material was produced through an ethnographic approach. Methods included focus groups in three schools, interviews, classroom observations and go-alongs, where I followed participants from the beginning of the school day until the end. Focus was thereby on both sayings and doing. The methods enabled me to observe my participants using their devices, as well as letting them explain their activities. Different parts of my material are analysed in the different articles.
In the first article, *The front and backstage: pupils’ information activities in secondary school*, information activities in school and the way that they are legitimised in a school setting are analysed. Through the dramatutrgical perspective, legitimate and non-legitimate ways of performing information activities are viewed through the lens of front- and backstage. Legitimate and appropriate ways of doing activities are viewed as that which is brought to the front in the interaction with the audience, while other activities are left backstage. Here, the audience for the performance is defined as the teacher. The findings of the article show that the role of Google is fluid in the educational settings, sometimes encouraged and other times forbidden. The pupils adjust their use of certain sources to their understanding of what is considered legitimate in the educational context. Wikipedia is a source that is surrounded with uncertainty and is not a preferred source to write out in a bibliography, although it might be used. Bringing performance to the fore (Andersson, 2017a).

The second article, “*Google is not fun*: an investigation of how Swedish teenagers frame online searching,” explores the role of Google Search in relation to online search. The article explores how Google Search is framed. The framings are identified: Google and fact-finding, Google as a neutral infrastructure, and Google as an authority. The fact-finding frame points towards the ways that Google Search is associated with schoolwork. The search engine is viewed as something that is used for, and in, school in the search for facts. The framing underlines the role that facts play in school as well as the way that the ranking of the search engine makes search results seem factual. The neutral infrastructure framing refers to the ways in which the search engine is involved in many online activities without those activities necessarily being viewed as googling or searching. Google as an authority underlines the way that the search engine is considered trustworthy. The three framings taken together reveal the extent to which Google Search is an important part of my participants’ online activities (Andersson, 2017b).

The third article, *Searching and deleting: youth, impression management and online traces of search*, investigates how young people become aware of their online traces of search and what strategies they have for managing them. The term ‘online traces of search’ is used instead of digital footprint as
the focus is not on the participants’ digital footprint as a whole, but specifically on the traces left from using various search engines. The findings reveal an awareness of online traces of search which comes through in an activity that I label ‘searching and deleting’. Meaning that certain content is removed from the search log after searching. The traces of search are, to a certain extent, viewed as residing in the devices in use. This underpinned the activity of removing entries from their search logs (Andersson, 2019).

Article four, Between enabling and disturbing: smartphones and shifting frames in everyday life (submitted), focuses on the relationship between online search and the smartphone. Within the article, framings of the smartphone in everyday life are identified. Three framing are identified, the entertainment framing, the easy access framing, and the challenging co-presence framing. The entertainment framing highlights the interrelatedness between the smartphone and many of the entertainment activities that it enables. The way that the smartphone is used for a range of activities, in a number of contexts, is shown by the other two framing. The easy access framing points to the way that online search is made possible throughout different situations, from the classroom to when riding the bus. In a similar vein, the challenging co-presence framing highlights how the smartphone is immersed into social situations.

Taken together the findings of the thesis highlight the important role of online search in young people’s everyday life. The study shows that young people are aware of norms and expectations in different situations and adjust their use of search engines and mobile devices accordingly. At the same time, online search is not always reflected upon as it has become a commonplace activity. With that follows a lack of critique regarding the workings of search engines. This lack of critique is not unique for the participants of my study but rather points towards the role of online search in society. This lack of critique and reflection is problematic given the role that search engines play in young people’s online activities in everyday life. It might not be so problematic when the query in focus is the capital city of a certain country but that type of question is not the only one being asked. It is a different matter when young people rely on Google Search to provide them with answers to questions pertaining to societal issues, identity construction, health and illnesses, to give a few examples.
References


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