Life with Technology Among University of Pennsylvania Students

SWRK 781: Qualitative Research
University of Pennsylvania

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Students use qualitative methods to explore the meaning of life with technology among University of Pennsylvania students.

**BACKGROUND**

Photo elicitation was first named in a paper published by the photographer and researcher John Collier (1957). It involves a qualitative interview stimulated and guided by participant-generated photographs. This method can help break down barriers between researchers and participants and can promote rich and collaborative discussions (Harper, 1994).

Each student in the Qualitative Methods Research Class (SW781), Fall 2015, recruited a study participant (n=26) (undergraduate and graduate students from across the University) and trained them in the appropriate and ethical use of this method. Study participants were asked to define and explore the meaning of “life with technology” over the course of one week using their phones to document their exploration. Using the participant-generated photographs to guide conversation, each member of the research team conducted an interview with a participant.

**WHY EXAMINE LIFE WITH TECHNOLOGY?**

The topic for this project was determined using nominal group technique (NGT). NGT is a structured small-group discussion approach used to reach consensus. A moderator (in this case the professor) asks the group a question and gathers the responses (in this case potential project topics) from each group member.

Once all potential topics are shared with the entire group, each member of the group prioritizes the topics. This process prevents one person from dominating the discussion, encourages all group members to participate, and results in a set of prioritized topics that represents the group’s preferences. The class, by way of NGT, decided to investigate how University of Pennsylvania students perceive life with technology.
SELECT PRELIMINARY FINDINGS
Each student conducted a preliminary assessment of their interview and selected relevant quotes and images to potentially share in this exhibit. As a team, we decided which specific images to include in the exhibit, and organized images into preliminary thematic categories.

NEXT STEPS
All interviews were transcribed verbatim and will be analyzed by students. Thematic analysis will be facilitated by NVivo 10 software. Additionally, members of the research team will identify salient themes, summarize findings, prepare an abstract for presentation, and a manuscript for publication.

The study protocol and consent procedures were approved by the University of Pennsylvania’s Institutional Review Board prior to data collection.

If you have any questions or concerns about the study please feel free to contact Dr. Rosemary Frasso, 215-746-8554 or email her at rofrasso@mail.med.upenn.edu.
“Penn is about moving forward, but also about retaining tradition. The classical music and the old-timey-ness of the building juxtaposes against the other buildings right next to it.”

“And that’s kind of amazing, the way that we’ve just turned food production into something that can be mass produced. If you wanted dried cranberries, say, 200 years ago, you have to pick the cranberries yourself, you have to leave them on your roof over the summer. And I can walk a block to the grocery store and buy a container of them.”

“This is how I was exposed to technology when I was a kid, because I had a bicycle that I would ride every day…and now I’m graduating in mechanical engineering. And it’s basically the same principle that is used in this bicycle that is also responsible for flying of the airplanes or for the automobiles or anything that you see which is moving.”

“Penn can spend a lot of money on things that we don’t necessarily need. Like, we could better like allocate our money and not on this TV that’s hanging on a wall that nobody cares, but maybe like there’s a group of nursing students that could write a little something each week to give it out to other people.”

“Penn is about moving forward, but also about retaining tradition. The classical music and the old-timey-ness of the building juxtaposes against the other buildings right next to it.”
“I guess [technology] just makes my life a lot easier, but it is – from like an objective standpoint, now like looking back – it's surprising how much I depend on my technology everyday. Like, I don’t know really where I would be if I didn’t have my laptop in my classes and things like that.”

“It's the thing I use the most, the technology I use the most.”

“I think it’s like good in certain situations…But like, I find myself on my phone like way too much, like I have recipe books like I have cookbooks I could have used. I could have like called and talked to my mom and asked her how to make it ‘cause she makes butternut squash soup and like I think that I depend a lot on it, not even depend on it like, just use it unnecessarily.”

“I didn’t really use it that much this summer, then I come back to Penn and I’m like okay I’m using my laptop every day, staying up on my laptop all the time just yeah I don’t know what I’d do if I didn’t have it.”
“The second that you put a camera on...and people are watching me and it was like bleeuh. I couldn’t get it out of my head that it wasn't any different from being in a room with 500 people. Than just being in an audience with them and us sitting...All I could imagine was some mythical creature on the other side just like judging me. Judging my every move."

“Here I was with one of my friends and um it's someone I hadn’t seen for a while and so like you kinda expect that like there would be a lot of conversation and everything but we were both kinda on our phones a lot.”

“This is one of the SEPTA stations and I liked the scene 'cause I was thinking about how technology allows people to travel great distances very quickly, which you think is like a bringing together sort of thing. But...it's like it also seems to make people seem further apart in a way. And I think it's kind of a lonely picture, like all these people but it's so dank and dark. Because if you see people and you're traveling, they're not really communicating with the people near them, they're always communicating with people away from them.”
“...it represents the best of technology for me, because I think the purpose of technology should be to make your life more convenient, more efficient, more pleasant. I think that's the idea of the most basic technology – tools, forks – I thought a lot about this...and I thought that technology in its most basic form is a tool that we use to make our lives better.”

“So I have a Kindle, which is amazing if you have to move all the time...it's great! I don't have to lug around giant boxes of books or anything...I don't have to look for a book if I want to read, I can just open my Kindle and it's right there so it helps me fit that in.”

“Electricity and light bulbs in particular gives us this ability to extend our hours and extend our productivity, and also just extend our lives.”

“Most of the time I was thinking of technology that facilitates and organizes, um, and so I think the airport is a really interesting kind of orchestra of people moving together and like, whole groups of people – like hundreds of people – being, moving in and out of planes...pretty efficiently if you consider, if you think about it, how people move through the airport...”
“New technology here and there…silly to touch the faucet after you wash your hands…all of the bacteria on the faucet inhibits your ability to clean…Technology incorporated into bathrooms, automatic faucets, automatic soap dispensers, dryers. Ten years ago I cannot imagine hand sensors. Good example of technology…to promote public health.”

“The nursing students use it for their clinicals…so this is like one of the things about technology that I think is really great, um, how it’s helped further uh, new ideas, innovations, stuff like that, um and obviously it’s important to me as a public health student because we use these things um, in public health.”

“She was my first patient of the morning and she had a couple cavities that we were going to fill so this is my, this is what we call a hand piece or what lay people might call a drill. And I don’t know, sometimes it strikes fear in the hearts of a lot of patients to see. It’s shiny and um it’s kind of scary.”

“…use technology to change the way we exercise. Technology takes over exercise versus going outside, not the best type of exercise, really weird.”
“Alright, so this is a picture of basically my work desk…any kind of human error will just go away if I have the computer software to analyze the data instead of having me having to go in to do it by hand.”

“I have like a bunch of things in here…I have my research, I have a random thing I was doing, then I have HBO because I was watching a movie…I had a movie kind of in the background and it’s something interesting, because I would go back to the movie…and I was just so tired.”

“This is a picture of just me eating lunch but also doing work at the same time, so it’s kinda like, my laptop’s overtaking the table and like all the work that I have to do that’s on this computer, instead of just taking five minutes to enjoy a meal or something like that, or kinda just even like, know what I’m eating.”

“So it definitely allows you to do multiple things at once and I mean I’m like taking a picture on my phone while I’m talking to him and taking notes at the same time. And like when I wasn’t doing that I was like scrolling through Instagram…I mean it’s good in certain instances where I’ll like be on my computer and like need to look something up in multiple windows or trying to check something on my phone, but…umm…obviously like in this situation it’s probably not the best ‘cause I probably should have been giving him my full attention.”
“And with Facebook, you have to be careful with your employer, if they saw pictures of you where you were out drinking, or doing stuff you are not supposed to be doing, that would get you in a lot of trouble and I don’t think that people had that problem before, you didn’t have to worry about that, you just had to go to interview, but now you have to think about all these things...now everything is out for show...”

“I mean it’s just the nature of living in the city and going to a school that’s fully immersed in a major city. I have a lot of friends that live on campus at schools like in the middle of nowhere and they don’t have to swipe into theirs dorms, it’s just like you have a key and you open it or like it’s unlocked.”

“...it’s a close-up of my laptop at work. Um, that’s where the webcam is...it’s actually a piece of electrical tape on top of it. So this is kind of about my concerns with technology...all these devices are really powerful things we can use...makes it really helpful for us but then also like cameras can get hacked, they can get turned on remotely and I don’t feel great having something pointed at me that I don’t know whether or not it’s on and somebody else is looking.”

“...some people just cannot tear themselves away from a TV or a screen...there’s just this void that needs to be filled or if you feel like you have to constantly be engaged with something...so my Uber driver...came and picked us up using his phone GPS and watching a movie in the car while he drove us to our destination, so that is like all life with technology.”
“...there’s a person walking up on the left-hand side of the picture...she was holding a sign that she’s homeless...at the exact moment I was taking the picture she was walking by...and it was someone that I haven’t seen in many years, but was friends with on Facebook...Of course, I’ve like seen her statuses here and there...and it’s just like there’s this huge disconnect between what’s happening in a person’s life and...like what they’re posting on Facebook.”

“I think it’s really just about that you have to be really in tune with technology. Because that’s the form where everything’s presented, even like parties that like frats throw – everything’s a Facebook event or on Hangify. You have to be really tuned in or else you’ll miss that ship. So I would say that it’s really a huge part of like social life and outside of academics, just being in tune with what’s going on.”

“I don’t really know anyone in U.S. So when I came here, I had to find new people, I had to make new friends...in that way it’s helpful. And keeping in touch with people and especially for a person who has just arrived to a new country. I mean I do have roommates, but even for finding roommates I had to...I used technology. 

“It’s funny how this ended up. You can see that the picture she took on her phone is the same exact picture we’re taking here, and it’s just funny to think that we both needed a copy of this because we both have our separate set of friends that need to see this side of us, like being out and being social...”
“...on the one hand, I love being able to check my email on the go; I love being able to...see notifications that are important, grades come out, or, you know, I get announcements, I get messages from my parents, or from the school, or from applications. But, on the other hand, it makes it more difficult for me to just enjoy the moment, enjoy being in college...”

“So yeah it made me kind of sad that even when I think I’m disconnected I’m never more connected.”

“Apple has literally brought it to our fingertips. That was their mission. But now that we all have it, what does that do to us as people?”

“When you’re allowed to just play with pixels, I mean, you don’t have to commit as much. And things just lose meaning in a way.”
“You don’t as easily find moments, or even reminders, to be still.”

“All this represents, a nice sort of lounge-y day...I don’t often get moments like that. Not these days, no. So yeah, atypical...Usually if we sit on the couch and we’re lounging, we have our computers open and we’re working too. This day was better than usual because we weren’t just working, we were hanging out...very positive.”

“It provided like a nice time, like [my cell phone] actually like stopped working while I was on top of this bridge so as I was, I mean it was a beautiful day out, and as I was just trying to fix it and just taking it out...I don’t know...it was just nice to take a break and look at the view.”

“I’ve been looking at my phone and looking down for the past ten minutes, however long I had been walking and I didn’t even notice that the leaves were changing.”
“...this is the first time that I took a picture where I literally was like a Penn student on campus using technology. And I was sitting outside, which to me is life, right? To me that's like the picture of life is existing...and then I was using technology to get stuff done in like a very pleasant atmosphere.”

“I just felt like the technology was using him. Like, that it was almost unfortunate that they needed a person to do this job.”

“In order to get my students to learn the best that they are capable of, it had to be based on a relationship that mattered, that could traverse lines of difference. I feel like very often technology doesn't provide a space in which you're meeting face-to-face as often.”

“Every room in Penn has a projector, it’s something you don’t notice as often when you're in class...even if the professor isn’t using it, we know it’s there to make life easier for the professor and the students.”