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What is This?
Using Digital Stories to Understand the Lives of Alaska Native Young People

Lisa Wexler¹, Kristen Eglinton², and Aline Gubrium¹

Abstract
To better understand how young Alaska Native (Inupiaq) people are creatively responding to the tensions of growing up in a world markedly different from that of their parents and grandparents, the pilot study examined youth-produced digital stories as representations of their everyday lives, values, and identities. Two hundred and seventy-one youth-produced digital stories were examined and assigned descriptive attributes; of these, 31 stories were selected and subjected to a more rigorous coding and a thematic analysis. Findings fall into three main categories: self-representation, sites of achievement, and relationships. Participants’ digital stories overwhelmingly depicted positive self-images that included both codified cultural values and pop cultural images to construct novel forms of cultural identity. The gendered depictions of achievement signal a need for more varied, valued, and accessible avenues for success for boys. Lastly, relationships were prominent in the stories, but there was an absence of young adult role models, particularly men, in the stories.

Keywords
acculturation, culture, emerging adulthood/adult transition, gender, health promotion program, identity, qualitative methods, race/ethnicity, native American, racial/ethnic identity, rural context

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Introduction

Although there have been many studies linking acculturation stress and identity struggles to youth health disparities in rural Indigenous communities (e.g., EchoHawk, 1997; Middlebrook, LeMaster, Beals, Novins, & Manson, 2001; Musharbash, 2007; Tatz, 2001), there has been little research exploring the ways that Native young people are creatively responding to the tensions of growing up in a world that is markedly different from that of their parents and grandparents. A result of the rapid social change experienced in these communities is that there are no apparent pathways providing clear direction to youth with respect to the “right way” to become adults. As a consequence, growing up well requires much improvisation—indeed, a kind of creativity that is inevitably shaped by local, national, and global sensibilities and opportunities. Thus, youth must negotiate their own pathways using the resources available, sometimes without the guidance traditionally offered by older people.

In the study region of Northwest Alaska, the disparate growing up experiences of the last three Alaska Native (Inupiat) generations have had consequences that are lamented by both youth and their elders. In particular, the perceived widening divide between generations (O’Neil, 1986) leaves Inupiat Elders and adults, who traditionally helped young people grow up in a culturally appropriate manner (Condon, 1990), with pervasive feelings of disempowerment and uncertainty about how to usher youth into adulthood in the current context (Wexler, 2006). In addition, the different life experiences of generations have not offered young people clear pathways into adulthood and thus have left many indigenous youth with feelings of ambiguity about their futures (Condon, 1988; Wexler, 2009). These issues, which are described as cultural disruption, acculturation stress, and identity struggles in circumpolar indigenous communities, are all linked to increased rates of youth suicide and alcohol misuse for young men specifically (e.g., Durie, Milroy, & Hunter, 2009; Kirmayer & Valaskakis, 2009; Wexler, 2009). For young women, sexual and reproductive health disparities, including high rates of intimate partner violence, teenage pregnancy, and preterm birth, are also documented (Devries & Free, 2010, 2011; Devries, Free, Morison & Saewyc, 2009; Kaufman et al., 2007).

Conversely, several studies have linked cultural factors—such as sense of identity, engagement in traditional activities, and enculturation—to youth well-being (Diener & Suh, 2000; Garroulte et al., 2003; Noe et al., 2003; Whitbeck et al., 2004). This literature has, however, paid scant attention to indigenous young people’s active role as culture bearers in a modern world (a
notable exception being Dole & Csordas, 2003). Specifically, what needs to be asked is “How are Alaska Native young people adopting and adapting ‘traditional’ values, roles, and practices in their everyday lives to bolster resilience?”

To better understand these issues, this pilot study analyzed digital stories produced by Inupiat young people in a rural region of Northwest Alaska to explore and describe the ways in which the youth presented and represented their lives and themselves. Digital stories are 3- to 5-min visual narratives that synthesize images, video, audio recordings of voice, background music, and text to create personal stories (Gubrium, 2009a; Gubrium & Turner, 2010; Lambert, 2010). In indigenous communities, as well as across developing contexts—digital storytelling has been used as a participatory approach to support the production of social media and the elicitation of voices and unique perspectives of community members (for an overview see Watkins & Tacchi, 2008). In this study, the digital stories produced by young people were used as a means of examining how they define their multiple worlds and draw on cultural symbols in novel ways. This perspective also provides insight into the ways indigenous youth are negotiating their identities in a social landscape increasingly divergent from that of their parents and grandparents. As noted above, identity struggles are intricately linked to historical, health, and social issues among these particular youth populations. Self-produced stories reflect young people’s identity constructions and carve out future trajectories (Turner, Gubrium, & Way, in press), as well as offering others glimpses into their health and social experiences. We argue that understanding young people’s meanings through analysis of their digital stories can not only inform and guide health promotion efforts but also ultimately support a sharper focus on the various social issues and exclusions affecting these young people’s lives.

This article articulates several findings from analysis of the digital material produced from a primary prevention project that conducted open-ended digital storytelling workshops in 12 rural schools in a predominantly Alaska Native region of the state. It describes cultural resonances among Alaska Native youth, which are illustrated through the ways they are (re)presenting their identities. The accomplishments, events, and activities featured in the young people’s digital stories depict the kinds of experiences and achievements they respect and value. The scope and variability of these “sites of achievement” provide insight into the ways that gender narrows (or expands) young people’s pathways into adulthood. Of importance, we argue that understanding how young people are formulating their notions of selfhood, conceptualizing their successes, building their relationships, and imagining
their futures is important. The insights help to pinpoint mechanisms of resilience and well-being that provide youth with meaningful pathways into adulthood. We conclude with implications for practice when working with Inupiaq young people and the potential for translations with other indigenous youth.

**Background Issues**

Between 1890 and 1910, the nomadic, hunting Inupiaq population in Northwest Alaska experienced profound changes brought about by Colonial diseases, a surge in Western whaling activity, establishment of Christian mission schools and the gold rush (Burch, 1978, 2006). Since that time, Native villages were established at the sites of the mission schools, where mandatory attendance created sedentary communities very different from the traditional, nomadic lifestyle (Chance, 1990). Even as recent as the 1970s, children were forcibly taken from their homes to attend schools in other parts of the state and country (Fogel-Chance, 1993). As a result of these changes, there is intense intergenerational grief and a pervasive feeling of uncertainty related to the guardianship of young people. This was cited as an ongoing concern at the Circumpolar Youth Wellness Conference (Kotzebue, Alaska, July 6-7, 2007).

The roots of these historical problems run deep, and the lived-experience of the issues are pervasive and cross-generational (Wexler, in press). The fallout of this history can be found in high rates of suicide and substance abuse in Northwest Alaska when compared with other areas of Alaska and the United States (Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics, 2008; Halpin & Hopkins, 2008; Wexler, Hill, Bertone-Johnson, & Fenaughty, 2008). Studies have identified an association between these youth health disparities and cultural disruption in circumpolar indigenous communities (Blum, Harmon, Harris, Bergeisen, & Resnick, 1992; Hawkins, Cummins, & Marlatt, 2004; Walters, Simoni, & Evans-Campbell, 2002). Young men are disproportionately affected by these issues (Castor et al., 2006; Chandler & Proulx, 2006; Kettl & Bixler, 1991; Wexler, et.al, 2008), which is, in part, attributed to difficulties in balancing Western and indigenous expectations (Fleming, 1992; Larsen 1992; Paine, 2005; Seyfrit, Hamilton, Duncan, & Grimes, 1998).

Conversely, a link has been established between cultural continuity, enculturation, community control and action, and resilience and well-being for global Indigenous populations (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Fleming, 1994; Herbert & McCannell, 1997; Kral & Idlout, 2009; Noe, Fleming, & Manson, 2003; Paproski, 1997). While these studies identify a connection between
health and successful negotiation of both indigenous and dominant cultural expectations, they fail to give attention to understanding how this is done during adolescence. This kind of exploration could ultimately provide a conceptual map to describe the multitude of negotiations contemporary indigenous youth undertake as they develop a sense of self and enter adulthood.

As people move from preteen to adolescence, they move from concrete to abstract self-conceptions and from an awareness of local to global influences (Arnett, 2002; Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003; Ferdman, 2000; Phinney, 2000). In this way, young people are at the forefront of social change. As they become more aware of global influences in adolescence, they confront the sometimes conflicting expectations of the dominant society and their Indigenous community (Chandler, Lalonde, Sokol, & Hallett, 2003; Jensen, 2003). This is a complex and situated process that some note involves expertise in navigating multiple cultural worlds and identities (Wexler & Burke, 2011; Mistry & Wu, 2010). As young people negotiate these tensions, they are engaged in a creative endeavor constrained by meaning systems and dominant discourses (Adelson, 2000; Baumeister, 1987) that are conveyed at multiple levels, including peer, family, community, society, and global youth culture (Murray, 2000; Willis, 1990). Arguably, by considering the relative importance of these influences, and identifying the dominant priorities and concerns presented by young people, the study investigates how youth are drawing from traditional, global, and local meaning systems to produce novel representations of themselves and their lives.

**Research Context**

The first author (and PI of the project) has been working with tribes in the NW Alaska region for over a decade, which has resulted in a number of research and youth development projects (Wexler, 2005, 2006, 2009, 2011a, 2011b, in press; Wexler & Goodwin, 2006; Wexler & Graves, 2008; Wexler, Hill, Bertone-Johnson, & Fenaughty, 2008). The majority of residents (90%) in the region are Alaska Native (State of Alaska, 2010). The area is sparsely populated, with less than 10,000 people, approximately 1,400 of whom are between the ages of 10 and 18, living in the 12 communities of the 10,000 square mile region (State of Alaska, 2010). Roads do not connect the dozen villages, but people frequently travel between them by plane, boat, or snowmobile (depending on season) for school-supported sporting events or to visit family.

The intention of “Project Life” was to conduct primary prevention programming by providing young people a means to express themselves, highlight the strengths in their lives, develop a sense of mastery as they gained
technical skills, and to share their stories with their peers and family members through a community screening. From 2006 to 2009, Project Life engaged 196 students in all the region’s villages in digital storytelling workshops. The project staff included a non-Native man and alternated between an Alaska Native woman and man. Project staff traveled to each village annually to offer a digital storytelling workshop for interested youth. The opportunity to participate in the digital storytelling workshop was presented in middle and high school classes and interested (and available) students signed up at that time, with informed consent procedures done with youth and their guardians at the beginning of the workshop. A cross section of young people participated in them (e.g., those who were academically challenged and those who were excelling). The majority of participants were younger (in middle school and in some cases, elementary school), female (71%), and not playing on a sports team at that time so were available. At the time of the study, Project Life had conducted 18 5-day workshops in 12 different village schools over the course of 2 years. The project was coordinated by the tribal health organization that serves the 12 rural villages. Project staff coordinated the timing of their workshops to fit into that village’s school schedule. The workshops took place for 3 hr every day after school and in the school building; all of the computer and camera equipment were made available to participants. Students were instructed on how to technically make the short digital productions but not given directions about the content. Rather, they were shown other people’s digital stories as examples and told that they would receive a DVD of their digital story at the end of the workshop. This was the only incentive for participation.

Attendance at the workshops ranged from 3 to 35 participants, with an average of 8 participants. Each digital storytelling workshop ended with a community presentation of the stories completed during the week. Youth participants were encouraged to invite their friends and family members to the showings, and these were well attended, with the audience being primarily peers. Young people were also encouraged to—and the vast majority did—present their digital stories to others through posting on the project web site (www.projectlifealaska.org).

During the 2nd year of the project, the sponsoring tribal organization commissioned this study. At that time, more than 250 youth-produced digital stories had been completed by 65 boys/young men and 131 girls/young women. The ages of the youth participants ranged from 9 years to 19 years, with the majority 141 (72%) being under the age of 14. Aside from two of the stories, each story was authored by a single young person. The digital stories offer researchers and community members an unprecedented opportunity to learn
about the lives of young people through the eyes, voices, and perspectives of youth themselves. And, further, these insights can shape health and prevention programming for indigenous youth.

**Method**

Although Project Life was primarily a prevention project, the tribe recognized the potential for further analysis and so worked with the University of Massachusetts’s Human Subjects Committee to ensure that data generated could be used for research and advocacy purposes. As part of the approved parental consent and youth assent process, each participant was told that researchers and youth workers wanted to learn about their lives through their digital stories. While given the option of not being included in the analysis, less than 10 young people and their parents opted out of allowing their digital stories to serve as data. To ensure confidentiality, trends are reported in aggregate form.

A team of four—Wexler, Eglinton, Gubrium and Nancy Rich—researchers engaged in the analytic work, which involved fleshing out central themes through the process of coding. This was done through a continuous cycle of individual and group story watching, memo writing (i.e., taking notes, questioning the data, and developing general ideas), and discussion. All of the researchers were female, geographically located at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, and none of the researchers were indigenous, but two have worked in the region (the first author, for more than 15 years) and the other two have expertise with visual analysis.

Two hundred and seventy-one stories were imported into a qualitative data analysis software program (NVivo 8), which assisted with data storage, organization, analysis, and retrieval. All of the digital stories were viewed two times, with notes taken and basic descriptive attributes assigned to each video (see Table 1 for assigned attributes). The gender of the youth producer, the background music genre, and the general subject matter of each digital story were categorized. The ages of participants were determined through consultation with Project Life staff. Individuals above the age of 14 were considered “older” since they represent a high school–age cohort in the region. Throughout this process, stories that stood out as a thematic exemplar (or, in some cases, as a thematic outlier) were tagged as “noteworthy.” By the end of the first phase approximately 60 of the 271 videos were tagged as such.

In Phase 2, approximately half of “exemplary” digital stories were selected from the 60 noteworthy stories. Stories were chosen because each represented exemplar themes of what it means to grow up in the region. While
these ideas were present in any number of the digital stories, chosen stories richly depicted the themes, specifying how participants represented themselves—key attributes, proficiencies, identities—and significant events in their lives. Exemplary digital stories were also chosen based on gender, age, and residence (representation from all of the 12 villages). To select these exemplars, the 60 digital stories were viewed again, discussed, and then further reviewed. Thirty-one exemplary stories were selected for formal “coding” (i.e., bringing together reoccurring words, ideas, practices, and activities under a particular label). Because there were more girl participants in Project Life, the 31 stories included 19 videos single authored by 19 girls, and 11 stories single authored by 11 boys. One story was coconstructed by a group of older boys and girls (for a total of 31 stories). The initial coding scheme was developed through a modified grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), taking multimodal elements (audio, visual, and textual) into account (Gubrium & Turner, 2011). Specifically, during analysis while the

Table 1. All Digital Stories by Attributes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Younger</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inupiaq name</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, does not use Inupiaq name</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, uses Inupiaq name</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pop and R&amp;B</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rock and heavy metal</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rap and hop-hop</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotive</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country and religious</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other music</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tribal</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family and friends</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other themes</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Events</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hobbies and interests</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issues</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camping</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. As one video was produced by both boys and girls the total will not be 100%

b. Because more than one type of music and one theme was assigned in a single story, percentages for themes and music total above 100 percent.
visual, audio, and text were understood as intertextual features (Rose, 2007), at times they were also considered separately. For example, exploring audio we asked, “Did youth employ traditional indigenous music or a more global, say, hip-hop form?” And, focusing on the visual we asked, for instance, “What were the locations for filming? Indoors or outdoors?”

Of significance, part of this code development included a broad appropriation of a kind of “member checking” (Creswell & Miller, 2000) where the first author discussed the coded meanings and consensus decisions reached by the researchers with the project director (i.e., the non-Native man) and coordinators (i.e., the Alaska Native woman and man). This was done through monthly telephone meetings. Several general codes helped us conceptualize the data around broad themes (e.g., gender, context, relationships). Within these themes, more specific codes were used to describe particular, associated meanings (e.g., gender could be characterized as masculinity or femininity). Table 2 shows the initial coding scheme and Table 4 illustrates the prevalence by gender of the final codes nested within broader themes.

Because of the collaborating region’s interest, we also classified the selected digital stories in relation to Inupiaq values as codified by the region’s Elder Council and disseminated through media campaigns and recurring discourses since 1981 (McNabb, 1991). The kinds of values that were depicted in the youth digital stories are described through content-specific codes in Table 3.

Next, the 31 coded stories were explored by reviewing the coded sections of the stories to generate overarching themes that related to our driving research focus, namely, culture, youth identity development, and everyday life. With questions related to these broad ideas, software “queries” were run based on the codes. Queries retrieve data that has been coded in specific ways and/or at the intersection of particular codes and attributes (e.g., gender and age). Queries helped us look for thematic patterns across age and gender, and were accompanied by extensive structured memoing. Segments of the coded digital stories retrieved through the queries were viewed by all researchers and discussed in relation to youth identities and context. Thematic patterns set the stage for crystallizing several key findings.

At this point, concepts such as “indigeniety,” “masculinity,” and “spaces of achievement” emerged as important themes. Video clips from numerous digital stories were spliced together by the second author to create montages representing the meanings and complexity of these key themes. The first author brought these thematic montages back to the project staff and other community members, again as a kind of member checking, to explore cultural resonances and inspire new interpretations. This arguably increased the
The numerous discussions and complex understandings generated through this process have been incorporated into the findings presented here.

**Findings**

**Story Characteristics**

Table 1 provides basic descriptions cataloguing the attributes of all 271 digital stories. Most striking is the focus on relationships, whereby 91% of
digital stories featured “family and friends” as the central theme. These stories typically highlighted important people in the young people’s lives, often including family but mostly focusing on their everyday friendships with peers.

Alaska Native values were attached as attributes to most of the exemplary stories (in this case to 29 of the 31 stories—produced by 11 boys and 18 girls). A breakdown in percentages (including references to values by gender) is illustrated in Table 3. Overall, humor (72%), family roles (55%), love for children (55%), and responsibility to tribe (48%) were those most frequently illustrated in the digital stories. Gendered differences in participants’ citing of values were most apparent for domestic skills (boys 0%, girls 24%), and love for children (boys 14% and girls 41%).

As illustrated in Table 4, self-representation was evident in almost all of the 31 exemplar stories, followed by “culture—traditional Indigenous,” which included segments where youth referred to culture as a practice (e.g., hunting and being part of family) and/or culture as an identity (e.g., youth self-identified as “Native” or Inupiaq). The intersection of popular and traditional culture, including references to traditions reconceptualized and
Table 4. Selected Stories by Codes and Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Broad themes</th>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>No. of references to code/theme (31 stories)</th>
<th>% of 31 stories with code/theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender identities</td>
<td>Femininity</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Masculinity</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-representation</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediate contexts</td>
<td>Home and community</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nature</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Away from Alaska</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People and relationships</td>
<td>Intergenerational</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family and friends</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peers—same sex</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peers—varied sex</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Babies</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Elders</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popular and traditional culture</td>
<td>Culture—Traditional Indigenous</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Popular and traditional culture mixed</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Popular culture</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>Friends and family</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Events and activities</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Activism and issues</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spaces of achievement</td>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hobbies &amp; interests</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

reworked by youth was also woven through many of the stories (e.g., wearing baseball hats backwards, baggy jeans, and making gang signs with their hands with the words “Native Pride” written on the frame). Context was important, with many stories self-consciously presenting scenes from participants’ homes, villages, and camps.
Gendered conceptualizations of selfhood (i.e., masculinity and femininity) were evident throughout the stories. “Femininity,” for example, was attached to images of girls dressing up with their friends, having children, and being in romantic relationships. “Masculinity” referred to images of boys outdoors, doing jumps with snow machines, hunting, and posing (i.e., flexing their muscles) with friends. “People and relationships” and specific constituting codes (e.g., peers) were significant and referenced in many of the videos, with same-sex peers often posing in similar ways (boys), and heads touching in the frame (girls). Within this code, intergenerational images often included the participant with younger children (either their own offspring or younger family members). This was more common for girls. The theme “participation” included depictions of young people engaging in collective activities (such as a family dinner, youth leader retreat, and/or hanging out with friends in village playgrounds or favorite sledding hills); “participation other” included young people using new technologies such as computer games, and images of youth contributing to the community in some way (such as rebuilding a house). “Spaces of achievement” included winning sports events, graduation ceremonies, and cultural knowledge, and in this theme “other” included, for instance, being a successful mother or a good community member.

**Exemplar Digital Story Themes**

Three broad themes in particular arose through analysis of the 31 “exemplar” digital stories. These themes parallel the story attributes (above), but because we coded the content for frequency and meaning, these results allow us to present descriptions of the content and accompanying associations that comprise these themes. Main findings articulate young people’s (a) perspectives on important relationships; (b) self-representations; and, (c) sites of achievement. The first overarching theme highlighted the importance of relationships. These stories featured relationships with babies, elders, family, and peers. While intergenerational images were depicted most frequently (see Table 4 for people and relationships), the depictions primarily featured youth with children or with parents. Generally, family depictions figured more strongly in girls’ than in boys’ stories (84% of the girls’ stories included family, compared to 50% of the boys’ stories). Similarly, of the 51 references made to babies throughout the exemplar stories, 46 were by girls. In the boys’ stories, family was depicted more often by younger participants. Older males rarely referred to family, focusing instead more on same-sex peer groups. A vast majority of the corpus of stories focused on peer and friendship groups.
Whereas the majority of boys (older and younger) and younger girls depicted same-sex peer groups, several older boys and a majority of older girls depicted mixed-sex peer groups. Notably, few references were made to young adults (20-30 years old) in the stories.

A second overarching theme of self-representation reflected notions of identity and culture through which young people make sense of their lives, their culture, and themselves. The bulk of these self-representations were overtly affirmative, offering optimistic portraits of participants’ lives, family and peers, and community and culture. Self-representations included narratives that featured young people’s interests and hobbies. For example one participant stated, “I like to play guitar and Xbox,” and another scrolled the word “Baller” in the video frame to signify his athletic prowess in basketball.

In addition, many of the digital stories showed pictures of the producer with groups of friends either posed in the frame in a favorite “hangout spot” or walking the streets of the village. Depictions seemed to signify membership and belonging to friendship groups, highlighting the places young people inhabited, and their (or loved one’s) important events, such as the birth of a baby or winning a sports competition. Many self-representations included images of friends and family celebrating birthdays, enjoying days out riding snowmobiles, and taking part in other memorable events. Positive images of the surrounding village or community, including the natural landscape, were often featured, with images of the young person and his or her friends posing in the setting.

A third overarching theme, generated in both boys’ and girls’ stories—sites of achievement—was often linked to participation in particular activities and was largely delineated through gender identification. Boys’ successes focused largely on those spaces considered masculine, such as sports, riding fast machines (snow-gos, all-terrain vehicles, motor boats), and hunting ability illustrated through pictures of the animals they caught. Girls’ successes focused on sites of achievement associated with feminine activities, such as participating in family dinners, taking care of children, or being with their boyfriends. Gender identification, achievement, participation, and cultural mores were all linked in these depictions. For girls, the segments often highlighted more traditional “other-oriented” adult roles for women, such as homemaking (cooking, caretaking) or supporting others’ success (graduation of a cousin or a basketball tournament won by a brother). For boys, sites of achievement centered more firmly on hunting and fishing activities and proficiency with riding motorized vehicles.
Discussion

The three overarching themes of the digital stories highlight the importance of social relationships for young participants—mainly depicting their same-sex peer groups—positive, “Native” self-representation; and the kinds of achievements valued by the youth participants. Young Alaska Native people depicted their social worlds as centered around their peer relationships, but often including younger children and other family members. Boys were most likely to emphasize same-age and sex peers, which perhaps points to their more insular relationships. Girls’ references to babies were connected to the development of successful identities as Native young women. For all the youth-produced stories, there were few references to people in their 20s or 30s, possibly indicating a limited number of young adult role models for youth to consult, learn from, or draw on for support.

Participants clearly linked themselves to a particular group membership. Whether through kinship, friend grouping, village residency, or Native affiliation, youth videos forged an explicit attachment to one (or several) collective or cultural identity. More generally, youth used cultural elements (including indigenous values, activities, and practices) as a narrative resource to represent themselves and their worlds. Looking primarily at Inupiaq values (see Table 3), boys drew on values including sharing (mainly subsistence harvests), respect for nature, responsibility to tribe, and humor to create digital stories. More specifically, for example, boys represented the values of “responsibility to tribe” in a way that included participation in male friendship groups, camaraderie, and a sense of brotherhood. Girls’ stories drew on love for children, respect for elders, knowledge of family tree, as well as humor.

Connected to the point above, for the young people it seemed culture was not necessarily an essential form made up of static values and material artifacts, but rather it included both this idealized form as well as something that was dynamic and lived in the everyday. For youth, culture resonated with Cole’s (1996) understanding of culture as something both ideal and material—as changing values as well as material objects—as patterns of artifacts that not only mediate our actions but also that are transformed by people as they are used in everyday practice. Going beyond the often used metaphor of “walking between two worlds” (Dehyle, 1998; Henze & Vanett, 1993; Wexler & Burke, 2011), young Alaska Natives were reinventing “traditional” forms of being Inupiaq. Culture, as one young person put it in her story, was “alive”: something that was lived, taught and learned, passed down, and remade. In this way, culture was used as a narrative resource (Bruner, 1990) by youth as
a mediating artifact (Cole, 1996) drawn on and continuously reworked in meaningful ways, with values and practices articulated in light of young people’s present circumstances. For example, one participant, who used her Inupiaq name, labeled herself as a “googler,” “dog musher,” “meat eater,” and a “frequent flier.”

Furthermore, throughout the stories there was a continuous negotiation between types of youth cultures. For example, one of the older girls spoke about her life and about herself as at once a caregiver for her nieces and nephews, and as someone who liked to “get on the Internet” and talk to people in other places. In this case, her representation could be understood as the reworking of a cultural value, which emphasizes building and maintaining relationships. Others explicitly put forth the message that “we don’t live in igloos” to combat a popular myth about “Eskimos.” As in many youth digital stories, both Native resources (Inupiaq language, particular activities, emphasis on family) and more dominant youth resources (e.g., popular culture, new technologies) were intermingled to forge a sense of self. Thus, through their digital stories, youth repositioned traditional culture as a fluid, self-fashioned, and affiliative enterprise that was situated at the intersections of old and new as well as local understandings and the presumed imaginings of the outside world (Dole & Csordas, 2003).

Sites of achievement were more varied and readily available for girls, when compared to those depicted by boys. Thus boys are perhaps offered fewer “natural” and/or “necessary” culturally salient gender roles to play in the community. Indeed, boys’ digital stories did not feature many opportunities that were at once valued culturally and by dominant society. For instance, very few boys highlighted academic or professional success. Instead sites of achievement depicted hunting, fishing, the ability to drive fast and skillfully (by snow machine, boat, four-wheeler and automobile), and athleticism and participation in sports. Yet, although these are all culturally valued skills, expensive gas prices and equipment costs often preclude these activities. Therefore, not all boys have access to these sites of achievement. While boys certainly depicted images of successful friendship groups and belonging, it could be argued that their limited opportunities for participation in these culturally valued activities mean that there are fewer valued spaces for them to enjoy success. This could have implications for well-being and could contribute to the growing literature that links changing (or truncated) social role expectations to the health disparities suffered by indigenous men (Chandler & Proulx, 2006, Kirmayer, & Valaskakis, 2009, Kral, 2003, White, 2000).

The themes emerging through this analysis offer important insights for developing youth development programming for boys and girls, which we
revisit in our concluding remarks. The findings illustrate the need for programming targeting indigenous young men. In particular, the “sites of achievement” referenced by boys in the stories are more limited in scope and availability than those for girls. The activities in which young women engaged, such as child rearing, babysitting and school success, are not only deemed necessary and “natural” activities for young women in everyday life but are also closely aligned with traditional Inupiaq values and with culturally salient gender constructs. In other words, these gendered accomplishments are highly accessible to girls as well as valued by dominant society and by the girls’ local community. In this way, girls appear to have multiple acceptable, recognized, and valued sites of achievement available—from participating in youth culture (i.e. hanging out with friends, surfing the Internet, achieving in school) to participating in traditional cultural activities (i.e., taking care of children and elders). These sites of achievement serve as culturally resonant avenues for youth development programming that prioritizes girls.

Limitations

Due to the multilayered, time-intensive analysis process required of analyzing multimodal media (Gubrium & Turner, 2010)—including narrative, pictures, and music as material for analysis—we thoroughly analyzed only a small subset of exemplar digital stories. Although the selection of these stories was done with attention to representativeness and variety, they remain a fraction of the larger data set, and might, therefore, not provide a full picture of possible themes generated across all the youth-produced digital stories from the region. In addition, many young people were not able to participate after school because of prior commitments (mainly team sports). These youth are not adequately represented in the analysis. Because of this limitation, this analysis is not intended to be representative of the regional youth population in general, but instead is intended to provide stimulating perspectives that will generate further research. In addition, the youth developed these digital stories with the idea that they would be shared publicly (in their community and on the web). This probably influenced the ways they represented themselves and their lives, but the particular affects of this on the digital story content (and analysis) is undetermined. It should also be noted that this project analyzed data that was collected for a primary prevention project and not a research investigation. Researchers were, therefore, not a part of the digital storytelling process, which limits their understandings of the context from which the stories were produced. This is a clear limitation
of the analysis. Lastly, the coding schemes were devised in consultation with adult community members, not with young people. In fact, the authors continue to explore some of the constraints, affordances, and what could be considered ethical issues around using a kind of “secondary data” (i.e., material not originally produced for the intention of the research and/or data analyzed by researchers who have had little to do with the process of data production). Overall, it is believed that the methodology would have benefited from more thorough member checking and collaborative reflection.

Conclusion

Our findings suggest that digital stories can serve as useful artifacts for investigating youth identity construction and better understanding young people’s lives, which can be used to inform the development of more successful and effective programs and policies by and for youth to bolster well-being. Three themes generated from data analysis—sites of achievement, self-representation, and important relationships—allude to the need for researchers and practitioners to go beyond traditional public health models that are predicated on individual attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors to pay special attention to social worlds and their varied contexts in young people’s lives. In terms of “sites of achievement,” boys depicted those focusing more on hobbies, such as sports, motor vehicle riding, hunting, and fishing. While these might be highly valued forms of achievement in Inupiaq society, not all of these achievements are necessarily valued in dominant society. Moreover, even those activities that are valued locally are not always accessible due to monetary constraints. On the other hand, girls’ sites of achievement, which include practical skills (i.e., child care) and an emphasis on scholastics (i.e., graduation), are not only activities that are naturalized through gender expectations but are also necessary and perhaps easier to achieve given the available opportunities.

With regard to the theme of “important relationships,” we found the majority of girls and boys focused on peers in their stories, with few depicting elders or other adult role models. If they did feature nonpeer relationships in their stories, girls’ stories depicted family (babies and toddlers), which were entangled with and used to frame their sites of achievement. Furthermore, we found that boys’ stories often lacked a depiction of young men in their stories. We wonder why it is that boys left young men out of their stories, especially as there was a tendency for boys to depict same-sex relationships in their stories and posit that this narrative silence (Ochs & Capps, 1996) might signal an absence of young adult male role models for boys. As
reviewed in the youth development literature, near-age role models are paramount for positive youth development (Kegler et al., 2005; Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005) and may bolster well-being, especially for young people living in oppressed circumstances. It is therefore important to consider the role that young men might play within family and community settings and, perhaps relatedly, why they are not figured in boys’ stories. The digital stories analyzed suggest that what is needed are more sites of achievement and avenues of participation for boys and young men, especially those that take into account the importance of masculinity, gendered expectations, and community values.

With respect to girls, both the “sites of achievement” and “important relationships” push into relief local attitudes and the importance placed on child rearing and family. This holds implications for experienced sexual and reproductive health disparities among Native young women. Specifically, local attitudes might render some health interventions as ineffective, such as social norm campaigns related to teen pregnancy, especially in contexts in which there are few economic and social recriminations for young motherhood (Kaufman, Desserich, Big Crow, et al., 2007). As Devries and Free (2011) articulate, for interventions to be effective they need to resonate with local understandings and beliefs around reproduction.

In terms of “self-representation,” we found that participants’ digital stories overwhelmingly depicted positive self-representations, with both codified Inupiaq cultural values and pop cultural images sprinkled throughout to bolster these depictions and construct novel forms of “Inupiaq-ness.” These young people are reworking their identities through symbolic creativity (Willis, 1990), by drawing on available narrative resources and negotiating these identities in multiple cultural worlds. Youth, then, are producers and consumers of culture, and thus are positioned as productive active agents shaping both themselves and the cultural world they live in and through.

Implications of these findings suggest that community-based practitioners seek and develop more opportunities to foster nonpeer (adult/youth) relationships, and establish “sites” for intergenerational dialogue between youth and young adults. Digital storytelling and/or other participatory visual approaches can be used as mechanisms for engagement, as assets-based processes for stimulating these conversations, as well as a platform for researchers and practitioners to examine the ways that, through a kind of symbolic creativity, Inupiaq values are used and reworked by young people as affirmative narrative resources for identity construction. For example, the worldwide interest in and use of participatory media projects (e.g., Burgess & Klaebe, 2009; Frohlich, et al., 2009; Grubb & Tacchi, 2008; Hill, 2011; McWilliam, 2009;
Tacchi, Slater, and Lewis, 2003; Van der Leeuw & Rydin, 2007; Watkins & Tacchi, 2008), indicate ways that practitioners working with indigenous young people can encourage dialogue not only cross-generationally but also between young people across villages, and the wider region. The digital storytelling process might facilitate youth connections with those “missing” young adult role models, many of whom leave rural regions for work in urban areas. This process of engagement is central for reconstructing what it might mean to be a successful Alaska Native man and can lay the groundwork for more accessible pathways into adulthood for boys (see also Wexler, 2009). For girls, digital storytelling can unpack local understandings of childbirth, female sexuality, and sexual health (see also Gubrium, 2009b). As such it can support interventions that more closely align with community values and that make sense to these young women who, along with their communities, construct childbearing and rearing as a space of achievement.

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References


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