


Digital social media cultures: New models of creativity, (self)representation and participation

Culturas digitales en las redes sociales: Nuevos modelos de creatividad, (auto)representación y participación

Culturas Digitais nas Redes Sociais: Novos Modelos de Criatividade, (Auto)Representação e Participação

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Abstract

Today's digital ecosystems, in which social networking sites play a leading role, foster communicative phenomena of great interest, where diverse content creators make individual and collective experiences visible. In some cases, these communities give rise to cyberactivist movements, or become a trend, generating dialogue and debate on issues of interest to society. In other cases, they are presented as challenges promoted by brands and influencers, constituting true digital cultures of great impact on networks such as Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok or Snapchat. This topic has become an object of interest in the academic sphere due to its implications for understanding the interactions that characterize citizen participation and (self)representation. The purpose of this special issue is to explore the strategies, languages, codes and skills that make it possible to connect and make content visible so that it becomes a trend, exploring the new modes of expression and communication of various groups of creators and their communicative and multimodal skills within digital social media.

Keywords: Social media; Digital cultures; Visibility; Influencers; Digital activism; Participation

Resumen

Los ecosistemas digitales de la actualidad, en los que las redes sociales tienen un elevado protagonismo, promueven fenómenos comunicativos de gran interés, donde creadores de contenidos diversos visibilizan experiencias individuales y colectivas. En algunos casos, estas comunidades dan origen a movimientos ciberactivistas, o se convierten en tendencia generando diálogo y debate sobre temas de interés para la sociedad. En otros casos se presentan como retos propiciados por marcas e *influencers* constituyéndose, de este modo, verdaderas culturas digitales de gran impacto en redes como Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok o Snapchat. Esta temática constituye un objeto de interés en el ámbito académico y de investigación por las implicaciones que se derivan para entender las interacciones que caracterizan la participación y (auto) representación de la ciudadanía. Este monográfico se ha planteado con el propósito de indagar en las estrategias, lenguajes, códigos y competencias que permiten conectar y visibilizar contenidos para que se conviertan en tendencia, explorando los nuevos modos de expresión y comunicación de diversos grupos de creadores y sus habilidades comunicativas y multimodales dentro de las redes sociales.

Palabras clave: Redes sociales; Culturas digitales; Visibilidad; *Influencers*; Activismo digital; Participación

Resumo

Os ecossistemas digitais atuais, nos quais as redes sociais detêm um elevado protagonismo, promovem fenómenos comunicativos de grande interesse, nos quais criadores de conteúdos diversos tornam visíveis experiências individuais e coletivas. Em alguns casos, estas comunidades dão origem a movimentos ciberativistas, ou tornam-se tendências, gerando diálogo e debate

sobre questões de interesse para a sociedade. Noutros casos, são apresentados como desafios promovidos por marcas e influencers, constituindo-se, assim, como verdadeiras culturas digitais, com grande impacto em redes como Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok ou Snapchat. Esta temática é objeto de interesse na esfera académica e da investigação devido às implicações que tem para a compreensão das interações que caracterizam a participação e (auto) representação dos cidadãos. O objetivo desta monografia é investigar as estratégias, línguas, códigos e competências que tornam possível ligar e tornar visível o conteúdo, de modo que se tornem uma tendência, explorando os novos modos de expressão e comunicação dos diferentes grupos de criadores e as suas capacidades comunicativas e multimodais no seio das redes sociais.

Palavras-chave: Redes sociais; Culturas digitais; Visibilidade; Influencers; Ativismo digital; Participação

Introduction

This monograph aims to explore current trends in the strategies, languages, codes and competencies of content creators on social media. To this end, it focuses, on the one hand, on the connective and interactive characteristics of each platform and the configurations that shape and construct digital modes of self-representation, activism and participation. It also addresses the analysis of communicative practices and their adaptation to the digital spaces of social networking sites. And, on the other hand, it expands the understanding of diverse digital cultures and the ways in which they negotiate and position their identity and belonging within these spaces.

In this context, it is especially interesting to consider the multimodal nature of social media and the mutations of human communication to adapt to these digital spaces and languages. Communication on social media is more visual, connective and interactive. It follows codes generated by users in a constant negotiation with the platform and its algorithmic model. Visual, sonic, and textual converge and become memetic and iconic. Imitation and constant learning of what 'the algorithm' prefers governs these contents created by diverse and creative people, many of them influencers who become referents of their topic or area of expertise, ranging from topics such as fashion, makeup and music, to politics, activism and citizen journalism.

In these digital communicative models, visuals are fundamental, with emojis replacing text, choreographies that constitute true narratives and with filters and effects that change the basic aesthetic notions in today's society. This primacy of visuality requires methodological approaches that place the visual as a key aspect of the content and adapt to the speed at which the digital space is changing and developing. From textual to visual, from visual to interactive and from interactive to algorithmic.

The interactive aspect of networked content is characterized by elements such as the profile tag (@) and the hashtag (#), which make it possible to connect any content, post, profile, or story with a network of creators. The communicative implications of interactivity are important to understand how communication and language are changing to adapt to digital media.

The study of these languages and phenomena generated within social platforms and digital communities has been approached from the area of Internet research. This is a multidisciplinary field of knowledge that includes scholars of media and communication, computer science, data science, anthropology, sociology, linguistics, political science, and psychology, among others. The most relevant research network in this field of knowledge is the Association of Internet Researchers or AoIR, which has led research in this field and has proposed key guidance on ethical principles of Internet research (Franzke et al., 2020).

Social media and new forms of connected expression

The current communicative reality makes McLuhan's metaphor of the "global village" relevant. Today's society is inconceivable without the increasingly powerful and continuous use of mobile devices, their applications and platforms. The space of interactions is characterized by a permanent connection. In this sense, Gewerc et al. (2017, p. 182) point out new symbolic scenarios and new forms of socialization and entertainment, with the aim of "bringing the presence of others closer, having a status in the reference group, etc.". Thus, it is evident that social networks have transformed current forms of expression. In the last two years, the unquestionable influence of the Covid-19 pandemic has increased the dependence on media and technology. Key concepts for communication and its development, such as sender, receiver, channel, context, code and message, have undergone profound changes in accordance with the permeability of platforms and their technological development. This facilitates and allows hybridizations and the convergence of codes and languages, which enhance and assemble each other, highlighting the recursive, rhizomatic character, and the incidence of algorithms and virality (Pérez Tornero, 2020).

Social media have shaped a media environment and ecosystem where technologies enable the manipulation and dissemination of content by consumers in a variety of ways, so that people implement a range of skills through processes aimed at creators "doing it themselves", and the free flow of multimedia narratives through multiple channels, which turn users into active participants (Jenkins, 2008).

Connected expression has involved a revolution, since digital technology brings together different senses (hearing, sight, touch) and ends up transgressing them. In this sense, Sánchez-López and Pérez-Rodríguez (2021) point out, that virtual universes enable individuals to intervene, interact and transform according to their own internal rules and

logics. These authors also argue that digital spaces offer an array of media modalities that facilitate manipulation, as well as imitation, or the combination of synchronous and asynchronous communication. There are multiple options for reusing content and re-signifying messages and narratives. Connected contents acquire such visibility and impact that many have become references for activism, politics and society as a whole, with great transformative potential. Thus, phenomena such as trolling, shaming and cyberbullying take advantage of the possibilities of this permanent connection including the visibility generated, for the dissemination of trending content that modulates and transforms opinions, views and interpretations.

The keys to act in these new communicative venues are associated with the digital and media use practices of sharing, publishing, recommending, commenting and re-sharing digital content. These processes has been termed as collective intelligence and participatory culture (Jenkins, 2008). Creators try to make collective experiences visible. In some cases, these contents and creative expressions give rise to cyberactivist movements, or become a trend, generating dialogue and debate, or challenges that encourage brands and influencers. As a result, they become true digital cultures with considerable impact on social networks such as Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok or Snapchat. Thus, mimesis and the use of connective elements such as hashtags, profile tags, audio and different effects are the identifying signs of connectivity.

In this framework, the economy, culture, education, relationships and people's problems and concerns, society, in short, are displayed and interpreted through the creation and production of content, sometimes as amateurs, and mostly in a process of self-training, informal or peer learning, through manipulation, simulation, adaptation, and creativity, in a participatory environment of collaborative communities (Guerrero & Scolari, 2016). The profile of active users who create content and information instead of passively consuming it stands out.

Contemporary digital languages

Social networks are configured in a constant negotiation with platforms trying to respond to the needs of their users and content creators. Examples of this negotiation can be traced back, for example, to Chris Messina's proposal on August 23, 2007 to use the # symbol known as the popular hashtag for the first time as a connector within Twitter when he tweeted

How do you feel about using # (pound) for groups. As in #barcamp [msg]? (Cooper, 2013).

This tweet generated one of the most characteristic connective elements of today's social media, a symbol that in the last decade has allowed grouping and generating activist and

political phenomena beyond online spaces, empowered communities, as well as important discussions in different social networking sites. Hashtags have also enabled organized hate and massive content moderation, such as the case of forbidden hashtags on Instagram (Leaver et al., 2020).

Instagram's history reflects the trend towards image-based that was looming at the beginning of the 2010s. Its creators Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger wanted to design a location-based check-in application similar to Foursquare, but due to the wide availability of similar applications, they decided to keep only images, comments and likes with the possibility of adding location (Swisher, 2013). From that moment on, Instagram would become one of the fastest growing social networking sites, until it was bought by Facebook (now Meta) in 2012.

Instagram is the clear example of a multi-format platform that appropriates successful elements from other social media sites to try to keep its users (Leaver et al., 2020). This social media platform has incorporated Snapchat's ephemeral vertical video and reinvented it in the Instagram Story format; it has integrated TikTok's successful hyper-connected video and called it Instagram Reels (Jaramillo-Dent et al., 2020) and has even adapted its content distribution algorithm to increasingly resemble the successful wall for you that characterizes TikTok, which allows us to watch videos suggested by the platform even if we have not connected with the profile creating that content (Bucci, 2022).

Currently, TikTok has become the model to follow. This is due to its massive growth, which has reached three billion downloads and over one billion active users each month (Cyca, 2022). Other traditionally successful networks such as YouTube and Facebook have incorporated vertical video as part of their format offerings in an attempt to keep users engaged. YouTube shorts and the recent incorporation of Instagram's Reels recommendations on Facebook's wall are examples of the copycat processes that have become the go-to-market strategy of the world's largest social platforms.

The multimodal and interactive nature of the digital ecosystem

The concept of affordances is key to understanding multimodality and interaction in social media. This concept derives from Gibson's (1979) theory of affordances, which tried to explain the possibilities of action offered by the environment for different animal species. And it is closely linked to perception, as suggested by Norman (1988), in his key work in the area of interaction psychology. The author explains the relationship between the person and its context and the perception of the functionalities offered as a key aspect of the concept of affordance.

In the area of Internet research, McVeigh-Schultz and Baym (2015) propose the concept of vernacular affordances, which define the ways in which users understand the technological possibilities and limitations of the platform through their interactions with it. This process of understanding and interacting with the digital environment of social media also generates languages and configurations that characterize certain groups of users who imitate and repeat patterns of content and creation that give rise to digital cultures.

The multimodality of social networks refers to the sound, visual, textual, and iconic nature of the language that characterizes these platforms. Its analysis requires a special approach, since all these elements are generated concurrently and each one of them is an essential part of the message. In many cases, these communicative elements connect the message with trends and groups of creators within the platform.

Participation, dialogue and collectivity

Symptomatically, social activism has found a channel in social networking sites that exponentially increases the possibilities for dialogue, dissemination and participation. An area in which convergence "takes place in the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others" (Jenkins, 2008, p. 15). Y en el que, recordando a Martín Barbero (2008) nos situamos ante el "estallido de los relatos". Thus, it is necessary, as pointed out by Rodríguez-Suárez et al. (2021) "to go deeper into the new languages and the deep and symbolic aspects generated through the different forms of online mobilization" since they consider that there is "a new narrative in online social mobilization that uses a closer, referential and open language, and in which hypertextuality and the visual component take on special relevance". Some studies related to immigration evidence these narratives, which, in the case of Instagram, highlight the new languages and modes of communication in terms of the visual distribution of characters in posts as one of the main strategies, coupled with the textual narrative included in the post (Jaramillo-Dent & Pérez-Rodríguez, 2021).

Undoubtedly, the options of the social networks and platforms described above facilitate dialogue, exchange and the possibility for different groups to achieve visibility. Rodríguez-Suárez et al. (2021) point out how "starting from the local, a globalized symbolic resignification is produced from popular and digital culture that generates a collective identity". Examples such as Greta Thunberg's climate change movement show, as Díaz-Pérez et al. (2021) point out, this dialogue with local contexts, and how "social networks bring audiences closer and globalize them, but the capacity to resonate of collective action frameworks depends on their dynamism and capacity to adapt to local realities", based on the exchange of values and aspirations in the interaction of individuals. Also, as Garrido and Zapsi (2021) have studied, #MeToo arises from the action of Tarana Burke, an African-American activist, in 2006, although it reaches the peak of popularization and viralization

when actress Alyssa Milano used the hashtag #MeToo in 2017 to tell her story on Twitter, showing the power of networks as tools to spread feminism and awareness.

An emerging field of research

More specifically, some projects and lines of research in recent years have focused on the study of this field, centered on YouTube, Instagram and, more recently, TikTok, with different perspectives. Such is the case of two R+D+i Projects, led at the University of Huelva by Ignacio Aguaded and M. Amor Pérez-Rodríguez, on Youtubers and Instagrammers (Instatubers, 2021; Yougrammers, 2019), in which the media competence of these prosumers is analyzed, as well as the recipients of their creations and the potential of these networks to face this informative ecosystem. These investigations have provided important results regarding the uses and access of the child and youth population (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2020; Lozano-Díaz & Fernández-Prados, 2021; Ramírez-García et al., 2022; Gutiérrez-Arenas & Ramírez-García, 2022), groups at risk of social exclusion (Bonilla-del-Río et al., 2022; Civila et al., 2020; Vizcaíno-Verdú & Aguaded, 2022), the elderly (Tirado-Morueta et al., 2021), political persuasion (Jaramillo-Dent et al., 2022a), Latin American immigration (Jaramillo-Dent et al., 2022b), educators and teaching (Sánchez-López et al., 2021), trending content connected by music (Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2022), scientific disseminators in social networks (Vizcaíno-Verdú et al., 2021), among others. The Horizon 2020 project, Transmedia Literacy (2018), whose principal investigator is Carlos Scolari, from Pompeu Fabra University, has also provided interesting contributions in relation to the digital identity of young people and content curation (Márquez et al., 2022). Other projects, also of R+D+i linked to the educational and adolescent field, led by Daniel Cassany of Pompeu Fabra University, have worked on digital identities and cultures in language education (ICUDEL15, 2017), and the production and commentary of videos as a format of expression increasingly used, with diverse genres, considering its multimodality (ForVid, 2018).

In parallel, researchers and experts around the world have generated networks and research groups to promote dialogue on specific aspects of social media, their languages and algorithmic structures. Outstanding examples are the contributions of Zeng and Abidin (2021) on intergenerational trends in TikTok; on LGBTI collectives (Abidin, 2019), refugees (Alencar 2017; 2020) or Jewish creator communities (Divon & Ebbrecht-Hartman, 2022). Along with this, it is relevant to mention some of the emerging groups that are working and developing workshops and innovation in social network research: TikTok Cultures Research Network (2022) led by Crystal Abidin; Meme Studies Research Network (2022) with Idil Galip; and the Digital Ethnography Collective (2022) led by Zöe Glatt.

On the other hand, Sonia Livingstone of the London School of Economics (United Kingdom) directs several projects that explore the uses and behaviors of children and young people in relation to social networks and digital technologies, such as the Global Kids

Online project (2022), which evaluates and proposes policies and solutions for children's rights in the digital era, with a focus on the global south. And finally, the Reuters Institute of the University of Oxford (UK) publishes every year the Digital News Report, focused on digital preferences and trends in news consumption globally (Reuters Institute, 2022).

There is no doubt that the proliferation of research, groups and networks working and collaborating on this topic are an indication of its relevance, and of the need to continue to deepen these configurations and languages generated in digital spaces and enhanced by networked communities that constantly appropriate, reuse and re-signify them.

Conclusions

Social media are, without a doubt, new models for unleashing content creation and creativity. But perhaps the most interesting factor in the field of human communication is the unquestionable space that opens up for citizen (self) representation and participation. Hence the importance of studying and reflecting on these communicative phenomena due to the implications for the visibility of groups that do not have easy access to other means of expression. Also because of what it means in the field of citizenship as a forum for varied discourses, which require the necessary literacy to avoid polarization and stigmatization.

The changing nature of social media, which are constantly evolving, demands the continuous exploration of existing languages and configurations. This monograph reflects the various fields and methodologies of study that have been generated to understand in depth the diversity of uses, codes and systems that are generated to make human groups, interests, problems, needs, claims and positions visible, which take shape in a multitude of discourses. What allows such diversity, and the increase of communication possibilities is the multimodal character and the adaptations that the different platforms are providing to communicate, as our interactions move and adapt to digital spaces and hyperconnected languages.

Authors' contribution

Amor Pérez-Rodríguez: Conceptualization, Writing - original draft and Writing - review & editing. **Daniela Jaramillo-Dent:** Conceptualization, Writing - original draft and Writing - review & editing. **Amanda Alencar:** Writing - review & editing.

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