

Algorithmic dynamics and youth resistance to racism on social media: affordances and experiences on Instagram, X, TikTok, and YouTube

Dinámicas algorítmicas y resistencia juvenil ante el racismo en redes sociales: posibilidades de acción y experiencias en Instagram, X, TikTok y YouTube

Dinâmicas algorítmicas e resistência juvenil ao racismo nas redes sociais: possibilidades de ação e experiências no Instagram, X, TikTok e YouTube

Magdalena Trillo-Domínguez^{1*} 

María Dolores Olvera-Lobo^{1**} 

Juan Ignacio Martin-Neira^{2***} 

¹ University of Granada, Spain

² University of the Andes, Chile

* Associate Professor at the Department of Information and Communication of the University of Granada, Spain. Email: mtrillo@ugr.es

** Full Professor at the Department of Information and Communication of the University of Granada, Spain. Email: molvera@ugr.es

*** Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Communication of the University of the Andes, Chile. Email: jimartinn@uandes.cl



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

Received: 03/10/2025; **Revised:** 03/10/2025; **Accepted:** 21/01/2026; **Published:** 05/03/2026

Translation to English: Adam Cundy

To cite this article: Trillo-Domínguez, Magdalena; Olvera-Lobo, María Dolores; & Martín-Neira, Juan Ignacio. (2026). Algorithmic dynamics and youth resistance to racism on social media: affordances and experiences on Instagram, X, TikTok, and YouTube. *ICONO 14. Scientific Journal of Communication and Emerging Technologies*, 24(1): e2331. <https://doi.org/10.7195/ri14.v24i1.2331>

Abstract

Purpose: This study offers an in-depth understanding of how young people analyse and confront racism on social media, drawing on evidence generated through a focus group specifically designed to explore their perceptions, experiences, and strategies. The analysis emphasises the ways in which platform technological architectures shape, amplify, or modulate these phenomena. **Methodology:** Using an interpretive qualitative approach, a focus group was conducted with young people who are active social media users. Through inductive and deductive coding, we examined their perceptions, attitudes, and experiences on platforms such as Instagram, X, TikTok, and YouTube, paying particular attention to how the technical features of these platforms may enable or hinder the circulation of racist and anti-racist content. **Results:** Most participants (54.4%) reported encountering discriminatory behaviours online, ranging from explicit forms of racism to normalised microaggressions. They highlighted the influence of algorithms on the virality of polarising content, as well as the role of anonymity in intensifying hostile behaviours. Their responses included both individual strategies (blocking, reporting) and collective actions linked to digital activism. **Conclusions:** The study sheds light on how certain groups of young people perceive and respond to digital racism, underscoring the need to advance critical digital literacy and to promote the ethical redesign of social media platforms.

Keywords: Algorithms; Digital platforms; Digital racism; Youth activism; Technological affordances; Digital resistance.

Resumen

Propósito: Este estudio presenta una comprensión profunda de cómo los jóvenes analizan y afrontan el racismo en las redes sociales, a partir de las evidencias generadas en un grupo focal específicamente diseñado para explorar sus percepciones, experiencias y estrategias. El análisis pone el acento en cómo las arquitecturas tecnológicas de las plataformas condicionan, amplifican o modulan estos fenómenos.

Metodología: Desde un enfoque cualitativo interpretativo, se llevó a cabo un grupo focal con personas jóvenes usuarias activas de redes sociales. A partir de una codificación inductiva y deductiva, se exploraron sus percepciones, actitudes y experiencias en plataformas como Instagram, X, TikTok y YouTube, atendiendo a cómo sus características técnicas pueden favorecer u obstaculizar la difusión de contenidos racistas y antirracistas. **Resultados:** La mayoría del grupo (54,4%) observó conductas discriminatorias en línea, desde formas explícitas de racismo hasta microagresiones normalizadas. Los participantes señalaron la influencia de los algoritmos en la viralización de contenidos polarizantes, así como el efecto del anonimato en la intensificación de comportamientos hostiles. Entre sus respuestas destacan tanto estrategias individuales (bloqueo, reportes) como acciones colectivas vinculadas al activismo digital.

Conclusiones: El estudio permite comprender cómo ciertos públicos jóvenes perciben y enfrentan el racismo digital, y destaca la necesidad de avanzar en la alfabetización digital crítica y en el rediseño ético de las plataformas sociales.

Palabras clave: Algoritmos; Plataformas digitales; Racismo digital; Activismo juvenil; Posibilidades de acción tecnológicas; Resistencia digital.

Resumo

Propósito: Este estudo oferece uma compreensão aprofundada de como os jovens analisam e enfrentam o racismo nas redes sociais, a partir das evidências geradas

num grupo focal especificamente concebido para explorar as suas percepções, experiências e estratégias. A análise salienta de que modo as arquiteturas tecnológicas das plataformas moldam, amplificam ou modulam estes fenómenos. **Metodologia:** Com base numa abordagem qualitativa interpretativa, realizou-se um grupo focal com jovens utilizadores ativos de redes sociais. Através de uma codificação indutiva e dedutiva, foram examinadas as suas percepções, atitudes e experiências em plataformas como Instagram, X, TikTok e YouTube, prestando especial atenção à forma como as características técnicas destas plataformas podem favorecer ou dificultar a circulação de conteúdos racistas e antirracistas. **Resultados:** A maioria dos participantes (54,4%) relatou ter observado comportamentos discriminatórios online, desde formas explícitas de racismo até microagressões normalizadas. Destacaram a influência dos algoritmos na viralização de conteúdos polarizadores, bem como o papel do anonimato na intensificação de comportamentos hostis. As respostas incluíram estratégias individuais (bloqueio, denúncias) e ações coletivas associadas ao ativismo digital. **Conclusões:** O estudo permite compreender como determinados grupos de jovens percebem e respondem ao racismo digital, sublinhando a necessidade de avançar na literacia digital crítica e no redesenho ético das plataformas sociais.

Palabras-chave: Algoritmos; Plataformas digitais; Racismo digital; Ativismo juvenil; Affordances tecnológicas; Resistência digital.

1. Introduction

Social media has profoundly transformed contemporary spaces of communication, redefining how individuals interact, organise, and participate in the public sphere (Dimitrova & Matthes, 2018; Milli et al., 2025; Pérez-Rodríguez et al., 2022). We are faced with digital platforms that not only serve as channels for entertainment or social interaction, but have also become key tools for political mobilisation, social criticism, and the construction of collective identities. Young people in particular play a central role in this digital ecosystem, developing new forms of participation and activism that are reshaping traditional notions of citizenship and civic engagement (Martínez Sainz & Hanna, 2023; Setty, 2023).

However, along with these opportunities come significant challenges. One of the most alarming issues is the proliferation of hate speech and discriminatory practices that, far from being outside the digital environment, are amplified by the platforms' own technological logics (Amores & Arcila-Calderón, 2025; Metzler & García, 2024). The phenomenon of digital racism cannot be understood on its own as a mere transposition of social prejudices to the online realm. On the contrary, it is fuelled by algorithmic architectures that favour polarising content, maximise interaction, and perpetuate exclusion dynamics, all within a context of anonymity and lack of accountability (Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021). Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Twitter (now X), and YouTube are privileged spaces where these dynamics are particularly visible. They are highly visual, immediate, and participatory environments where feed algorithms can have a significant influence on users' attitudes and behaviours, affecting the circulation of political and social content (Ozalp *et al.*, 2020; Vergani *et al.*, 2022; Guess *et al.*, 2023; Reinikainen *et al.*, 2025).

Within this context, attention may be drawn to how various Spanish NGOs have recognised the pedagogical and transformative potential of these platforms to promote inclusive narratives, aimed specifically at young migrants. Instagram in particular has been used as a means to raise awareness and spread educational content focused on social justice and respect for diversity (Trillo-Domínguez *et al.*, 2024a).

This study examines the perceptions and responses of young university students to racism and hate speech on social media, through a qualitative exploration centred on their communicative experiences. The focus is on digital activism as a resistance strategy, but also as a space for identity construction and youth political agency (Trillo-Domínguez *et al.*, 2024b). The investigation begins from the premise that social networks are not just communication channels, but spaces where meanings are negotiated, narratives are disputed, and emerging forms of subjectivity and collective action are generated. In this regard, there is an examination of both the opportunities and the tensions and contradictions inherent to the digital domain, including the superficiality of clicktivism, the viral spread of polarising rhetoric, and the fragility of online community ties (Li *et al.*, 2021).

The analysis is situated in a social context marked by the intensification of migratory flows, the globalisation of racial discourse, and the resurgence of

exclusionary narratives. Within this framework, media and political representations play a crucial role in shaping social imaginaries regarding otherness, reinforcing stereotypes and justifying discriminatory practices (Ozduzen *et al.*, 2021). The involvement of young people in social media is analysed from a dual perspective: on the one hand, through the lens of critical digital literacies, which considers not only technical mastery of the platforms, but also the ability to interpret, question, and transform digital discourse; and on the other, from the theoretical framework of technological affordances, understood as the structural conditions —enabling or restrictive— shaped by digital environments for the active exercise of citizenship, influencing possible forms of expression, organisation, and collective action (Barrio-Romera, 2025; Costa Sánchez & Piñeiro Otero, 2012; Olmos Alcaraz, 2018).

As such, the specific aims of the study are: (1) To analyse young people's perceptions of expressions of racism on social media.

(2) To identify, from the focus group discourse, strategies of discursive resistance against hate speech, and

(3) To explore how the participants interpret the role of algorithms and anonymity in the spread of discriminatory content in digital environments.

Through a qualitative methodology based on group dialogue and discursive analysis, the objective is to gain a deep understanding of the experiences and strategies of a diverse group of university students, who play a central role in shaping anti-racist digital narratives. Their account allows for an unravelling of how youth resistance practices are intertwined with contemporary technological and socio-political structures, generating new forms of social intervention within the digital sphere (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Castro Vieyra & Fontanelli, 2025; Flick, 2013).

1.1. Context

The rise of social media has radically transformed the way we interact and communicate, establishing new scenarios where identities, discourses, and power relationships are constructed and negotiated (Dimitrova & Matthes, 2018). Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, X, and YouTube, are spaces central to the daily lives of young people, who use them not only for leisure and socialising, but also political

expression, cultural production, and symbolic resistance to various forms of social exclusion. This centrality has created a digital ecosystem that enhances both democratic participation and the reproduction of discriminatory messages and traditional power structures (Ozalp *et al.*, 2020; Vergani *et al.*, 2022).

In this setting, digital racism and hate speech have found particularly favourable conditions to proliferate. The algorithmic logic of platforms — based on maximising attention and content virality — favours polarising and sensationalist narratives, often containing explicit or implicit racist messages. This automated boosting of discriminatory content is far from neutral; on the contrary, it follows a design that serves commercial interests to the detriment of respect for human rights and social cohesion (Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021). Young people using these platforms intensively are constantly exposed to this kind of content, resulting in emotional impacts and changes in how they perceive others.

In addition, the partial anonymity offered by social networks, along with audience fragmentation and limited effective content moderation, enables the reproduction of stereotypes and promotes the normalisation of racism as part of the hegemonic digital discourse (Li *et al.*, 2021; Metzler & García, 2024). This phenomenon manifests not only in offensive comments or direct attacks, but also in more subtle practices such as microaggressions, systematic silencing, and the invisibility of certain voices in recommendation algorithms.

Given this situation, university students are not just passive recipients. On the contrary, they position themselves as critical actors capable of identifying, questioning, and confronting digital racism through various resistance strategies. These range from direct reporting and discursive confrontation to the development of alternative content, peer education, and the establishment of support communities. The plurality of these responses highlights the complexity of youth digital activism, which integrates the emotional, the political, and the technological in their daily practices (Olmos Alcaraz, 2018; Trillo-Domínguez *et al.*, 2024b).

From a theoretical perspective, these practices are framed within the study of technological affordances, which allow understanding of how possible forms of action are conditioned — but not determined — by the technical features of each platform (Costa Sánchez & Piñeiro Otero, 2012). Thus, opting for a certain social media platform is tied to the nature of the message to be conveyed, target audience, and intended outcome. This approach emphasises that digital activism

cannot be analysed separately from the technological infrastructure that enables or limits it.

Furthermore, the analysis of these dynamics is especially relevant in migratory contexts marked by the tension between inclusion and exclusion. Media and political narratives play a central role in shaping imaginaries of migrants, influencing their integration opportunities and public representation (Ozduzen *et al.*, 2021; Valdivia-Flores, 2025). In this regard, this work seeks to provide a qualitative and in-depth understanding of how the university youth collective perceives and confronts digital racism, analysing their resistance strategies in an environment conditioned by algorithmic architectures and hegemonic discourses.

2. Methodology

The research presented in this study is framed within a qualitative interpretive approach, focused on a thorough exploration of the perceptions, experiences, and resistance strategies of university students in the face of digital racism and hate speech on social media. This perspective is particularly appropriate for addressing complex social phenomena intersected by symbolic and technological structures, such as racism and youth activism, which involve subjective, contextual, and emotional dimensions (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Flick, 2013).

Amid quantitative approaches focused on generalising results, interpretive research permits the understanding of lived experiences from the perspective of the individuals involved. Therefore, access is gained to the social and cultural constructs that participants attribute to their digital reality through analysis of their discourses, accounts, and stances (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015).

A focus group was used as the main information gathering technique, due to its suitability for generating collective conversational dynamics where attitudes, beliefs, and experiences emerge spontaneously. This tool permits the observation of how group interactions influence the construction of shared meanings, especially in regard to sensitive topics such as racism (Krueger & Casey, 2014; Lunt & Livingstone, 1996; Morgan, 1996).

The session was moderated by one of the researchers, following a semi-structured guide of open-ended questions designed to favour an organic and in-depth discussion,

set around four thematic blocks: (1) Initial perceptions of racism; (2) racism and social media, including algorithms and anonymity, supported by carefully selected audiovisual stimuli. These videos were chosen through convenience sampling, considering two types of criteria: first, quantifiable impact indicators, such as number of views, comments, and viral spread on TikTok; second, qualitative criteria, such as thematic relevance to the study's objectives, pedagogical approach taken, complementarity, and ability to spark debate among young audiences. All of the material came from profiles of anti-racist activists with a strong presence on social media, ensuring both their communicative adequacy and their potential for resonance within the focal group; (3) Strategies for dealing with racist comments, and (4) Choice of platforms for activism.

The participants were selected through purposive sampling to include individuals with different gender identities and varied personal experiences related to racism and digital activism, acknowledging limited diversity in terms of ethnicity, sociocultural background, and origin. The sample comprised 11 young students from the University of Granada, aged between 18 and 27, a demographic group considered especially relevant for the study of racism in the social media context due to their high exposure and participation on these platforms (Krueger & Casey, 2014). It included five women, five men and an individual identifying themselves as non-binary, ensuring a representation of different gender identities and, as a result, a wide range of experiences and perspectives.

Prior to the focus group, an initial questionnaire was administered to contextualise the discussions, gathering information on social media usage, interest in anti-racist content, and experiences of discrimination. The majority reported using platforms like Instagram, X (Twitter), and YouTube on a daily basis, with a significant portion stating they had experienced or witnessed acts of racism in digital environments.

The session was recorded and transcribed in full, with interventions coded using labels (P1 to P11, for participants) and speaking turns and key interactions documented. The data analysis was performed using a combined coding strategy: inductive, identifying emerging categories directly from the discourse; and deductive, applying concepts derived from the study aims and thematic guide (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The NVivo software package was used to this end, aiding the organisation of the material and the detection of relationships and patterns in the data.

Once the thematic codes were defined, they were grouped into eight discursive patterns based on their semantic and functional affinity. These patterns, representing shared narrative structures among the participants, were in turn organised around four main analytical categories: perceptions of racism; technological mediation; responses to racism, and anti-racist strategies. This thematic-analytical structure underpins the development of the results section.

In order to enhance the reliability of the analysis, independent double coding was applied by two researchers, each analysing the transcriptions separately, identifying units of meaning and assigning codes. A process of cross-checking between coders was then carried out through consensus sessions where discrepancies were discussed and the most representative codes were agreed upon, ensuring interpretative coherence and strengthening the internal validity of the analytical process. The discrepancies that arose between coders were minimal, mainly focusing on the assignment of subtopics or nuances within the main discourse patterns.

Among the most relevant codes identified were: self-isolation, influence of media and politics, role of education, impact of algorithms, anonymity on social media, authenticity in communication, intervention strategies to counter racism, and strategic choice of platforms. The final categorisation resulting from these codes is summarised in the table of the results section.

Standardised protocols were also applied for conducting the session and the subsequent analysis, in order to reinforce the consistency of the procedure and minimise potential biases. From an ethical perspective, the recommendations for social research involving human participants were followed (Corti *et al.*, 2014): written informed consent was obtained, anonymity was ensured through alphanumeric codes, and data confidentiality was maintained. Special attention was paid to the emotional well-being of all participants, given the sensitivity of the topic, allowing them to refrain from answering uncomfortable questions. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Granada.

This methodology provides a comprehensive approach to the digital racism phenomenon from the perspective of university students, articulating their lived experience with a rigorous analysis of the technological and discursive frameworks that shape communication on social media. Attention to ethics, transparency in qualitative analysis, and diversity of perspectives within the focus group afford strength and relevance to the results of the study in academic, social, and communicative spheres.

Mention should be made of the fact that standard artificial intelligence text processing tools were employed for style and format modifications. All substantive content, analysis, interpretation, and conclusions are solely the result of the authors' intellectual work.

3. Results

The findings deriving from the qualitative analysis of the focus group appear below. The presentation of results is structured around thematic categories generated from the coding process, without imposing previous theoretical frameworks. In this section, priority is given to empirical description through the voices of the participants, while theoretical interpretations and links to specialised literature are developed in the discussion section.

3.1. Discursive patterns concerning digital racism

During the thematic coding process carried out with the focus group transcriptions, eight recurrent discursive patterns were identified in the participants' narratives. These patterns reflect significant cores of shared meaning and constitute the main codes of the analysis, with each one representing a key dimension of youth experience regarding digital racism and extracted from units of meaning that appeared repeatedly throughout the collective discourse. The eight identified discourse patterns were:

- Self-isolation as a form of protection from situations of exclusion or discrimination.
- The influence of the media and politics on the reproduction of racial stereotypes.
- The role of education in fostering critical attitudes towards racism.
- The impact of algorithms on the visibility of discriminatory or biased content.
- Anonymity as a facilitator of hate speech in digital environments.
- Authenticity as a value in anti-racist discourse, distinguishing between genuine commitment and performative opportunism.

- Strategies for addressing online racism, such as confrontation and digital pedagogy.
- The strategic choice of platforms for activism, depending on type of message, format, and audience.

These eight main codes were grouped into four major analytical categories, which structure the thematic analysis of the study. This organisation was based on two main criteria: the semantic affinity between emerging topics (for example, those related to experiences of exclusion or technological mediation), and the correspondence with the thematic blocks of the discussion guide. The analysis was thus structured coherently with the study aims, allowing for an integrated interpretation of the participants' discourse. This approach aimed to provide a more systematic and coherent reading of the findings and link young people's perceptions to their subjective interpretation of certain technological elements present in digital platforms (algorithms, anonymity, virality), as mentioned in the focus group. The four analytical categories and their respective codes are:

- Racism perceptions: gathers the patterns related to experiences of exclusion, stigmatising discourses, and the role of education as a tool for raising awareness (self-isolation, media and politics, education).
- Technological mediation: includes those elements related to digital infrastructures that amplify or condition online racism (algorithms, anonymity).
- Responses to racism: refers to the strategies expressed to address digital racism, both through confrontation and emotional support (intervention, authenticity).
- Anti-racist strategies: encompasses conscious communicative decisions aimed at activism, such as choosing a platform or designing content (platforms and content).

This conceptual structure is summarised in the Table 1, which outlines the thematic coding system applied to discursive analysis.

3.2. Qualitative analysis of youth narratives

The structure presented above allows for a thorough exploration of each analytical category based on the voices of the participants, as shown below.

Table 1. *Thematic coding system applied to discursive analysis*

| Categories | Codes |
|-------------------------|--|
| Perceptions of racism | Self-isolation, Media and politics, Influence of education |
| Technological mediation | Algorithms in social media, Anonymity on social media |
| Responses to racism | Addressing racism, Authenticity in communication |
| Anti-racist strategies | Platforms and anti-racist content |

Source: own creation.

3.2.1. *Perceptions of racism*

During the focus group debate, the participants described situations of social exclusion, especially during their childhood, associated with a migrant background. They also highlighted the role of the media and education in shaping attitudes towards diversity.

Regarding self-isolation as a form of protection, several accounts revealed experiences of exclusion:

- "In my school, from a young age, the children in my class excluded anyone who was Moroccan... We didn't do anything together" (Participant 6).

"In the end that's why they exclude themselves, for the simple fact of thinking 'what am I going to open up for?'" (P5).

In relation to the influence of the media and political discourses, the participants stated:

- "The media is very influential in how it portrays racialised individuals. If they always show them in a negative way, it's normal for people to be prejudiced" (P11).
- "Being a teacher is one of the most important professions in the world because, in the end, we're all sponges, especially when we're children" (P11).

3.2.2. *Technological mediation*

The focus group members shared their perceptions on how algorithms work and the role of anonymity on social media. Regarding algorithms, they pointed out:

- "When you're scrolling on Instagram, you see the content you yourself have been selecting. "This means you only see what reinforces your ideas" (P10).

- "What goes viral is often what causes the most division" (P2).
Regarding anonymity, the accounts collected were:
"On social media you're hidden by the screen, and you're not face to face with that person. "This allows people to say what they like" (P1).
- "Anonymity emboldens many people to say things they'd never say in person" (P10).

3.2.3. Responses to racism

The university students described various ways to respond to online racist content. Some expressed a preference for silence.

- "I don't think comments lead anywhere, and you shouldn't reply. Sometimes silence is more effective" (P6).
- "You have to respond to educate. If we don't confront these ideas, they'll continue to exist" (P7).

Authenticity emerged as a criterion for evaluating messages:

- "There are lots of people who share anti-racist content just because it's fashionable, but you can tell it's not something they really feel" (P2).
- "In order for a message to get through, it has to be genuine. People notice when you're saying it just to look good" (P5).

3.2.4. Anti-racist communication strategies

During the debate, various platforms were identified based on the type of message and audience they sought to reach. TikTok was mentioned as a space for mass visibility:

"I think the platform where you can contribute the most, because of its nature and messages, is TikTok... it's where most people are, where messages are seen more clearly" (P1).

Reference was also made to the importance of visibility on social media:

"Right now, what matters is having lots of likes, followers, people who follow you on other platforms and contact you... but also that they see you" (P7).

These accounts reflect the diversity of experiences, perceptions, and strategies expressed by the focus group participants in relation to digital racism and social platform dynamics.

4. Discussion and conclusions

This qualitative study has provided an in-depth examination of the perceptions and responses of a group of university students towards digital racism, providing a situated view of their resistance strategies and critical understanding of the environment mediated by digital platforms. The thematic analysis has captured both the underlying structures that shape young people's experiences on social media and the subjective nuances of their practices and emotions. The main findings are discussed below in light of the specialised literature, paying special attention to their theoretical, social, and educational implications.

4.1. The importance of education and critical literacies

The focus group participants unanimously expressed the importance of education as a tool for addressing digital racism. This empirical finding aligns with previous studies that emphasise education as a protective factor against internalised biases and the perpetuation of stereotypes in the digital environment (Ozduzen *et al.*, 2021).

However, the discourse obtained goes beyond a traditional conception of education. The participants not only sought more information, but specifically skills to interpret, question, and deconstruct both dominant media discourses and the algorithmic structures that sustain them.

The proposal by Noble (2018) on the importance of teaching how to identify algorithmic biases resonates with the focus group interventions, where several participants expressed awareness of how “the algorithm only shows you what you already think” (P10). This emerging critical consciousness, although still in its infancy as evidenced by these accounts, suggests there is a fertile ground for the development of specific educational programmes.

Based on these indications, it is proposed that modules be included on digital ethics, algorithm analysis, and responsible communication in educational programmes, especially from an early age. However, this proposal should be understood as an intervention hypothesis derived from the analysis, not as a definitive conclusion of the study.

4.2. Critical awareness of algorithmic architectures

The expressions gathered from the focus group regarding how algorithms operate reveal that, at least in this specific group, there is an emerging awareness of how the technical architecture of platforms influences public discourse. The participants acknowledged that personalised recommendations can reinforce informational bubbles and restrict the diversity of perspectives, although their explanations were mainly intuitive rather than technical.

This partial recognition of the role of algorithms contrasts with the specialised literature on platform design, which systematically documents how these systems are far from neutral and often act as exclusion devices (Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021). The gap between users' intuitive perception and the actual operation of these technologies highlights the need for deeper educational interventions.

Following the justice by design principles proposed by Costanza-Chock (2020), three possible intervention axes are identified that could complement users' critical literacy:

1. Transparent algorithms: systems that explain to the user why specific content is shown and how their feed is configured.
2. Anti-discriminatory interfaces: designs that warn about offensive language and activate pedagogical response options.
3. Integrated algorithmic education: resources within the platforms themselves to understand how they work.

These proposals aim to shift responsibility from individual users to a structural responsibility shared by designers, regulators, and technology companies. However, their feasibility and effectiveness would need to be explored in future implementation and evaluation studies.

4.3. diversity of strategies: between silence and confrontation

One of the most significant findings of the analysis is the identification of a diverse spectrum of responses to racist content, ranging from strategic silence to active confrontation. This diversity reflects an emotional complexity that is rarely addressed in technical literature on digital activism.

Some participants expressed a preference for silence as a form of emotional self-protection. "I don't think comments lead anywhere" (P6). On the other hand, some argued in favour of intervention: "You have to respond to educate" (P7). This tension should not be interpreted as inconsistency or lack of commitment, but as the recognition that different contexts and personal capacities require different response strategies.

This duality converges with studies by Jenkins *et al.* (2016) on youth activism and participatory culture, highlighting the importance of recognising multiple forms of digital agency. From this perspective, silence is not passivity but a conscious decision for managing conflict and looking after one's own emotional well-being.

Based on these findings, it is suggested that resources be developed that include guidance on when and how to respond to hate speech, when to prioritise self-care, and how to support other users through online solidarity.

4.4. Youth agencies and communicative potential of platforms

Choice of platform as a tool for activism was another recurring element in the speeches. The participants showed a high level of sophistication in identifying the specific communicative potential of each social network, for example TikTok for visual and emotional storytelling, X for political debate, and YouTube for more elaborate content. This ability to tailor content based on the platform and desired audience demonstrates a high level of media literacy and a deep understanding of the contemporary digital landscape by young audiences.

As noted by Bucher (2017) and Hutchby (2001), technological capabilities do not determine behaviour, but they do condition it. The participants analysed in this study express an active role, using these potentials as tools for visibility,

education and resistance. Instead of taking a passive stance, they deploy strategies that allow them to maximise the reach of their messages and build digital communities committed to social justice.

This strategic capacity reinforces the notion that online youth activism is not necessarily superficial or reactive, but can be deeply articulated, situated, and affective, as demonstrated by other studies focused on anti-racist and feminist movements in the digital realm (Peña-Fernández *et al.*, 2023).

4.5. Emotional and community dimensions

The study reveals that digital racism goes beyond the structural to have a profound impact on the emotional dimension of young people, manifesting in self-isolating behaviours and a persistent search for authenticity (Ferguson *et al.*, 2025). Considering this reality, social networks cease to be mere consumption scenarios to become spaces of collective support and validation. In these environments, mutual care and solidarity emerge as fundamental political dimensions of activism, allowing affectivity to complement a critical perspective within a “digital community culture” (Trillo-Domínguez *et al.*, 2024b).

This approach encourages redefining the role of young people in the digital ecosystem: they should not be seen solely as vulnerable victims, but as critical agents with the ability to drive significant social change. However, since the focus group did not systematically delve into support networks, future research is needed to explore how building these connections ensures the sustainability of anti-racist activism among young people.

4.6. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that university students are not passive recipients, but critical agents capable of identifying digital racism and questioning the technological architectures that support it. The findings reveal a sophisticated communicative competence, where participants adapt their strategies to the possibilities of each platform, alternating between pedagogical confrontation and strategic

silence as a mechanism of emotional self-care. This duality underlines the fact that youth online activism is a complex process that integrates technical, political, and emotional dimensions.

Furthermore, the interventions highlight how certain digital environments are perceived as potential spaces for community and affection, not just exposure or confrontation. This relational and emotional dimension is key to understanding the sustainability of youth activism in contexts marked by polarisation, insecurity, and identity vulnerability. Recognising these elements can guide the design of policies and resources that provide support for these groups.

Three lines of action are proposed based on the evidence collected: strengthening critical competencies in the educational field, moving towards an ethical and transparent technological design, and promoting social collaboration networks that support and afford visibility to anti-racist activism.

While the exploratory nature and particular sample of this study restrict the extent to which its findings can be generalised, they provide a solid foundation for future research to delve into the affective dimension of resistance.

We believe this work contributes to a contextualised understanding of digital racism and the role that certain youth sectors can play in symbolically responding to it. It values the discursive and affective practices developed on digital platforms and argues the need to address them from an interdisciplinary perspective that integrates the technological dimension, representation policies, and power dynamics in the digital public space. Understanding these processes is essential in order to build intervention frameworks that strengthen a more just, critical, and inclusive digital citizenship.

Author contributions

Magdalena Trillo-Domínguez: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Resources, Validation, Investigation, Writing- original draft, Supervision, Visualisation, Writing- review and editing. **María-Dolores Olvera-Lobo:** Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Fund acquisition, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Validation, Writing- original draft, Supervision, Visualisation, Writing- review and editing. **Juan-Ignacio Martín-Neira:** Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Writing - original draft, Visualisation,

Writing- review and editing. All of the authors have read and accepted the published version of the manuscript.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest related to this study.

Ethics statement

This research complies with the ethical principles of research involving human participants. Consent was obtained from all participants and data confidentiality was ensured. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Granada (CEI-UGR-2024-055, 15th May 2024).

Data availability

Dataset of the questionnaire used, along with the audio from the interviews, as well as the transcriptions at the following link: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17868626>

Financial sources

This work was funded by the PID 2022-140150B-100 project of the MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033 (Ministry of Science and Innovation, State Research Agency, Spain) and by “ERDF A way of making Europe” (European Union).

References

Amores, Javier; & Arcila-Calderón, Carlos. (2025). ¿Cómo es el discurso de odio racista y xenófobo que se propaga en las redes sociales del sur de Europa?

- Topic modelling de mensajes antiinmigración publicados en X y YouTube en España, Italia y Grecia. *Communication & Society*, 38(1), 163-180. <https://doi.org/10.15581/003.38.1.013>
- Barrio Romera, Carla. (2025). Enredadas en Instagram: el impacto de las apropiaciones tecnológicas en el consumo virtual de las traperas. *Redes. Revista Hispana para el análisis de Redes Sociales*, 36(2), 217-229. <https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/redes.1058>
- Bourdieu, Pierre; & Wacquant, Loic. J. D. (1992). *An Invitation of Reflexive Sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Braun, Virginia; & Clarke, Victoria. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Bucher, Taina. (2017). The algorithmic imaginary: Exploring the ordinary affects of Facebook algorithms. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(1), 30-44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1154086>
- Castro Vieyra, Raúl; & Fontanelli Espinosa, Oscar. (2025). Del estigma a la violencia digital contra jóvenes estereotipados como 'generación de cristal', 'ninis' y 'feminazis'. *Última Década*, 33(65), 327-353. <https://doi.org/10.5354/0718-2236.2025.80902>
- Corti, Louise; Van den Eynden, Veerle; Bishop, Libby; & Woollard, Matthew. (Eds.). (2014). *Managing and sharing research data: A guide to good practice*. Sage.
- Costa Sánchez, Carmen; & Piñeiro Otero, Teresa. (2012). Nuevas narrativas audiovisuales: multiplataforma, crossmedia y transmedia. El caso de Águila Roja (RTVE). *Revista ICONO 14. Revista científica De Comunicación Y Tecnologías Emergentes*, 10(2), 102-125. <https://doi.org/10.7195/ri14.v10i2.156>
- Costanza-Chock, Sasha. (2020). *Design justice: Community-led practices to build the worlds we need*. MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/12255.001.0001>

- Dimitrova, Daniela; & Matthes, Jörg. (2018). Social media in political campaigning around the world: Theoretical and methodological challenges. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 95(2), 333-342. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077699018770437>
- Ferguson, Tomika; Frederick, Evan; Brown, Letisha; Kluch, Yannick; Hancock, Meg; & Siegfried, Nina. (2025). "I Was in a Position to Enact Change": College Athletes' Use of Social Media for Racial and Social Justice. *Communication & Sport*, 13(4), 686-712. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21674795241289839>
- Flick, Uwe. (2013). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative data analysis*. SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446282243>
- Guess, Andrew; Malhotra, Neil; Pan, Jennifer; Barberá, Pablo; Allcott, Hunt; Brown, Taylor; Crespo-Tenorio, Adriana; Dimmery, Drew; Freelon, Deen; Gentzkow, Matthew; González-Bailón, Sandra; Kennedy, Edward; Kim, Young. M.; Lazer, David; Moehler, Devra; Nyhan, Brendan; Rivera, Carlos. V.; Settle, Jaime; Thomas, Daniel. R., ... Tucker, Joshua. A. (2023). How do social media feed algorithms affect attitudes and behavior in an election campaign? *Science*, 381(6656), 398-404. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abp9364>
- Hutchby, Ian. (2001). Technologies, texts and affordances. *Sociology*, 35(2), 441-456. <https://doi.org/10.1177/S0038038501000219>
- Jenkins, Henry; Shresthova, Sangita; Gamber-Thompson, Liana; Kligler-Vilenchik, Neta; & Zimmerman, Arely. (2016). *By any media necessary: The new youth activism*. NYU Press. <https://bit.ly/4mz6KSC>
- Krueger, Richard; & Casey, Mary-Anne (2014). *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*. SAGE Publications.
- Li, Yevgeniya; Bernard, Jean. G., & Luczak-Roesch, Markus. (2021). Beyond clicktivism: What makes digitally native activism effective? *Social Media + Society*, 7(3), 20563051211035357. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211035357>

- Lunt, Peter; & Livingstone, Sonia. (1996). Rethinking the focus group in media and communications research. *Journal of Communication*, 46(2), 79–98. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1996.tb01475.x>
- Martínez Sainz, Gabriela; & Hanna, Amy. (2023). Youth digital activism, social media and human rights education: The Fridays for Future movement. *Human Rights Education Review*, 6(1), 116-136. <https://doi.org/10.7577/hrer.4958>
- Matamoros-Fernández, Ariadna; & Farkas, Johan. (2021). Racism, Hate Speech, and Social Media: A Systematic Review and Critique. *Television & New Media*, 22(2), 205–224. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476420982230>
- Metzler, Hannah; & García, David. (2024). Social Drivers and Algorithmic Mechanisms on Digital Media. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 19(5), 735–748. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17456916231185057>
- Miles, Matthew; & Huberman, Michael. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Milli, Smitha; Carroll, Micah; Wang, Yike; Pandey, Sashrika; Zhao, Sebastian; & Dragan, Anca. (2025). Engagement, user satisfaction, and the amplification of divisive content on social media. *PNAS Nexus*, 4(3), pgaf062. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pnasnexus/pgaf062>
- Morgan, David. L. (1996). Focus Groups. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 22, 129-152. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.22.1.129>
- Noble, Safiya. (2018). *Algorithms of oppression: How search engines reinforce racism*. NYU Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1pwt9w5>
- Olmos Alcaraz, Antonia. (2018). Alteridad, migraciones y racismo en redes sociales virtuales: un estudio de caso en Facebook. *Revista Interdisciplinar da Mobilidade Humana: REMHU*, 26(53). <https://doi.org/10.1590/1980-85852503880005304>

- Ozalp, Sefa; Williams, Matthew; Burnap, Pete; Liu, Han; & Mostafa, Mohamed. (2020). Antisemitism on Twitter: Collective Efficacy and the Role of Community Organisations in Challenging Online Hate Speech. *Social Media + Society*, 6(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120916850>
- Ozduzen, Ozge; Korkut, Umut; & Ozduzen, Cansu. (2021). 'Refugees are not welcome': Digital racism, online place-making and the evolving categorization of Syrians in Turkey. *New Media & Society*, 23(11), 3349-3369. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820956341>
- Peña-Fernández, Simón; Larrondo-Ureta, Ainara; & Morales-i-Gras, Jordi. (2023). Feminism, gender identity and polarization in TikTok and Twitter. *Comunicar*, 75, 49-60. <https://doi.org/10.3916/C75-2023-04>
- Pérez-Rodríguez, Amor; Jaramillo-Dent, Daniela; & Alencar, Amanda Paz. (2022). Culturas digitales en las redes sociales: Nuevos modelos de creatividad, (auto)representación y participación. *Revista ICONO 14. Revista científica de Comunicación y Tecnologías emergentes*, 20(2). <https://doi.org/10.7195/ri14.v20i2.1928>
- Reinikainen, Hanna; Borchers, Nils; Suuronen, Alekski; & Strandberg, Kim. (2025). Lighting the participatory spark? The role of social media influencers in initiating political participation. *Nordicom Review*, 46(1), 25-54. <https://doi.org/10.2478/nor-2025-0002>
- Setty, Emily. (2023). Risks and opportunities of digitally mediated interactions: young people's meanings and experiences. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 27(8), 1188-1206. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2023.2211929>
- Stewart, David; & Shamdasani, Prem. (2015). *Focus groups: Theory and practice*. Sage publications.
- Trillo-Domínguez, Magdalena; Martín-Neira, Juan. I.; & Olvera-Lobo, María. D. (2024a). Empoderamiento digital y cambio social: activismo afrodescendiente

en TikTok. En *Manual de comunicación y justicia social* (pp. 630–653). Dykinson. <https://bit.ly/3W9OCUE>

Trillo-Domínguez, Magdalena; Martín-Neira, Juan. I.; & Olvera-Lobo, María. D. (2024b). Instagram as an Informative and Awareness-Raising Medium on Migrant Minors: Good Practices from NGOs in Spain. *VISUAL Review. International Visual Culture Review*, 16(5), 101–114. <https://doi.org/10.62161/revvisual.v16.5295>

Valdivia-Flores, Verónica. (2025). Representaciones sociales y narrativas de la movilidad humana: derechos humanos y no criminalización en Latinoamérica. *InterNaciones*, 1(29), 67–88. <https://doi.org/10.32870/in.vi29.7308>

Vergani, Matteo; Martínez Arranz, Alfonso; Scrivens, Ryan; & Orellana, Liliana. (2022). Hate Speech in a Telegram Conspiracy Channel During the First Year of the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Social Media + Society*, 8(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221138758>