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Social Networks and Young People. Comparative Study of Facebook between Colombia and Spain

Redes sociales y jóvenes. Uso de Facebook en la juventud colombiana y española

ABSTRACT

Social networks have become areas of social interaction among young people where they create a profile to relate with others. The way this population uses social networks has an impact on their socialization as well as the emotional and affective aspects of their development. The purpose of this investigation was to analyze how Facebook is used by young people to communicate among themselves and the experiences they gain from it. On the one hand, while teenagers claim to know the risks, they admit to accepting strangers as friends and to sharing large amounts of true data about their private lives. For this reason, it is necessary to understand the media and digital phenomenon that the youth are living through. Although they are legally prohibited from using Facebook until they are 13, the number of underage users of this social network is growing, without any restraint from parents or schools. This investigation compares the use of Facebook by youth in Colombia and Spain by using the content analysis and interview techniques. In Colombia 100 Facebook profiles were analyzed and 20 interviews carried out with students between 12- and 15-years-old attending the Institución Educativa Distrital Técnico Internacional school in Bogotá. In Spain, 100 Facebook profiles were analyzed and 20 interviews held with students of the same age group attending various secondary schools in Andalusia.

RESUMEN

Las redes sociales se han convertido en ámbitos de interacción social entre los jóvenes, que crean un perfil para relacionarse con los demás. La exposición pública en el caso de los adolescentes puede generar problemas sobre aspectos sociales, emotivos y afectivos. Esta investigación analiza cómo se usa Facebook por parte de los jóvenes y qué experiencia obtienen de ello. Aunque dicen conocer los riesgos, admiten que aceptan a desconocidos como amigos y ofrecen datos reales sobre su vida. Ante esta situación, se hace más evidente la necesidad de la alfabetización mediática y digital de estos jóvenes que, aunque no deberían estar en Facebook hasta los 13 años, cuentan con un perfil de manera mayoritaria. Para ello se ha utilizado una metodología basada en el análisis de contenido y las entrevistas en profundidad. Se trata de un estudio comparativo entre Colombia y España. En Colombia se han realizado 100 análisis de perfiles y 20 entrevistas en profundidad. La muestra ha sido de adolescentes de 12 a 15 años, de la Institución Educativa Distrital Técnico Internacional de Bogotá. En España se han analizado 100 perfiles y se han realizado 20 entrevistas a chicos de 12 a 15 años, de Institutos (IES) de Andalucía.

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1. Introduction

Since their creation, social networks such as Facebook, MySpace, Cyworld, Bebo or Twitter have attracted millions of users (Foon-Hew, 2011), many of whom have integrated these websites in their daily activities (Boyd, 2007; Piscitelli, 2010). Schwarz (2011) suggests that the youth are moving away from the dominance of telephones and face-to-face interaction and prefer communication based on text, especially messaging, as a method of instant communication. Social networks offer a new way to communicate, to build relationships and create communities (Varas-Rojas, 2009).

Haythrnthwaite (2005) argues that what makes social networks different is not that they allow young people to meet strangers but that they enable users to articulate their social networks and make them visible thus leading to connections between individuals (Timmis, 2012).

1.1. Research background on social networks

Most research on social networks has focused on how individuals present themselves and create friendships through the online networks, their structure and privacy.

• Studies on how individuals present themselves and develop friendships through the online networks: as in other online contexts in which individuals are able to consciously construct a representation of themselves, social networks constitute an important research context for studies of the management processes of self-presentation and the development of friendships, as studied by Junco (2012), McAndrew & Jeong (2012), Ross, Orr & al. (2009) and Moore & McElroy (2012). Although, most sites invite users to create exact representations of themselves, participants usually do so at different stages (Marwick, 2005; Ong, Ang & al. 2011). Marwick found that users of social networks handle complex strategies when negotiating their real or «genuine» identities.

• Studies on the structure of social networks: researchers of social networks have also been interested in the structure of friendship networks. Skog (2005) argued that members of social networks are not passive but participate in the social evolution of the social network. Likewise, studies have been developed around the motivations for joining certain communities (Backstrom, Hottenlocher & al., 2006). Liu, Maes & Davenport (2006) stated that connections between friends are not the only network worthy of research. They examine how people's interests (music, books, movies, etc.) constitute an alternative network struc-

ture to what they call the «likes networks». And Soep (2012: 98) points out that «the youth have developed new codes of behavior and created models to support production beyond publication», and Gonzales & Hancock (2011) study the effects of Facebook use.

• Studies related to privacy: The coverage of mass social media in social networks has focused on issues of privacy, particularly on the safety of younger users (Flores, 2009: 80), cyberbullying and other possible risks (Calvete, Oru & al., 2010; Law, Shapka & Olson, 2010; Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; McBride, 2011).

In one of the first academic studies on privacy and social networking sites, Gross & Acquisti (2005) analyzed 4,000 Facebook profiles and described the potential threats to privacy arising from the personal information contained on the site.

Stutzman (2006), in his study of surveys of Facebook users, described the «privacy paradox» that occurs when teenagers are not aware of the public nature of the Internet.

Jagatic, Johnson & al. (2007) used data from open-access profiles of Facebook to develop an «identity theft». Data from this study provide a more optimistic perspective and suggest that teenagers are aware of the potential threats to privacy online. The research also concludes that of the teenagers with open profiles 46% admitted to including at least some false data about themselves (Jagatic, Johnson & al., 2007: 97).

Privacy is also an issue in users' ability to control and manage their identities. Social networks are not a panacea. Preibusch, Hoser & al. (2007) argued that privacy options offered by social networks do not provide users with the flexibility they need.

In addition to these issues, a growing number of studies address aspects such as race and ethnicity (Byrne 2007), religion (Nyland & Near, 2007), how sexuality is affected by social networks (Hjorth & Kim, 2005) and the use that certain segments of the population make of social networks, as in the case of children (Valcke, De-Wever & al., 2011), teenagers (Pumper & Moreno, 2012; Moreau, Roustit & al., Chauchaud & Chabrol, 2012; Aydm & Volkan-San, 2011; Bernicot, Volckaert-Legrier & al., 2012; Mazur & Richards, 2011) and digital natives (Ng, 2012).

2. Materials and methods

This research used a mixed methodology with qualitative (in-depth interviews) and quantitative (content analysis) techniques. It is a comparative study of teenagers in Colombia and Spain comprising 100 Facebook profiles and 20 in-depth interviews of 12- to 15-years-olds in Colombia and Spain. In Colombia,

the study centered on teenagers at the «Institución Educativa Distrito Técnico Internacional», school in Bogotá. In Spain, the survey focus was boys and girls at various schools in Andalusia (Los Olivos, Torre Atalaya, El Palmeral, El Jaroso and Rey Alabez). The selection of schools was random. We analyzed the Facebook profile of those teenagers who had agreed to participate in our research, and from among these we randomly selected students for the in-depth interviews.

A template was used for content analysis of the Facebook profiles containing research variables and items such as the frequency of sign-ups, the language used, the number of pictures and their descriptions, and the number of friends and type of personal data (hobbies, likes, relationships, etc.). In relation to the in-depth interviews, the topics covered were the uses of and gratification gained from social networks and the explanation of specific aspects relating to their profiles.

The period of analysis was from May 2011 to May 2012. The study examples do not include names or pictures because all participants are minors.

3. Analysis and results
3.1. The case of Colombian teenagers
a) How do they present themselves on Facebook?

For those teenagers studied for this research, having a Facebook a profile means managing his/her personality. Creating a Facebook profile and assigning content to certain fields already pre-established in the interface is the act of creation of a being who moves in a digital environment. Although it is about presenting themselves as they are, there is also room to present themselves as the wanted to be seen. Teenagers have a clear notion of how they want to present themselves on social networks which depends on something very important at this stage of life: their socialization, both real and virtual.

In this regard, our study demonstrated how teenagers adopt a name other than their own on Facebook to describe attributes of their identity. Of the 100 profiles studied, 45 teenagers assumed a name that had little or no relation to their real names. For these teenagers, the resonance of their name is very important. One Colombian boy interviewed explains that «my name is…because it looks cool…also because I listen to Ska and Punk»; similarly another youngster justifies altering his name «on Facebook by always writing it with the C and not the E to make it different. And the name Tanz means that I belong to a group of 6 friends from my school but we also have that name on Facebook».

> Teenagers communicate on Facebook using new codes of writing that ignore conventional grammar and spelling rules, yet they type quickly and adopt the digital aesthetic. Their way of writing seems to be capricious; new ways of writing emerge in the form of «text-images» created from the keyboard, in which the letters become part of the image that means something entirely different from the linguistic meaning.

b) Profile pictures: makeup and changes in pixels

Teenagers spend more time working on pictures of themselves to post on the social network than anything else; they think about their image, design it, create it, produce it, edit it... and send it. However, in their images they stand alone. The «Profile photos» of the 100 Facebook profiles studied show the teenagers appearing by themselves, and the photograph is normally taken using a mirror.

A teenager explains how she built most of her profile pictures in which she usually appears alone: «Taking pictures in front of the mirror is not a fad, it is just easier because you know how they are going to look… for this reason I take many pictures of myself in the bathroom. There are photos that I do not like and so I do not upload them… Besides I almost always modify the photos I post… A lot of boys like my pictures… I think that is why I get so many friend requests».

The number of «Profile pictures» in the 100 Facebook profiles studied amounts to 2,612, an average of 26 per teenager, with 1 photo published in each profile. It is also interesting to note how teenage girls tend to have more pictures in their «Profile pictures» albums than boys.

c) Profile information

The «information» link in a Facebook profile contains an «About me» field. An analysis of the 100 profiles found that 33 had published personal information via this link, but even more interesting was that although the interface only allows users to include information as text, several of the teenagers had deployed their keyboard skills to copy and paste to create images.

They publish their dates of birth, though not entirely truthfully (they tend to backdate), add their home

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addresses and the schools where they study, their favorite music, movies, television programs and activities and interests. However, they do not disclose their religious beliefs, political affiliations or name their favorite sports or books.

So, as in friendship, love is now mediated by technology. For these teenagers, a relationship presented on Facebook is a true reflection of a relationship that exists in real life. Of the 100 Facebook profiles studied, 22 posted information related to sentimental relationships with other users. In 6 cases, the teenagers described themselves as married which is certainly not true.

d) How do they interact?

For teenagers, having friends on Facebook means more than having a contact list; it is the management of friendships in another scenario where the image is the main link. This is confirmed, for example, by one Colombian youngsters interviewed, aged 13, who explains that «for me to add someone as my friend is because he has a nice picture, must be good looking or cute… (laughs) and has friends in common with me,

because I know that if any of my friends know him, he is not dangerous. However, if someone asks me to add him as a friend and we do not have friends in common, I look very closely at the pictures and if he is cute I add him».

For these young people, having a friend on Facebook does not necessarily mean meeting face to face. Several of the teenagers interviewed talked to «Facebook friends» who they had never seen. The number of friends on the 100 Facebook profiles studied totals 34,730. But, how do they get to have so many friends in their profiles? They use two criteria to add unknowns as friends: in their pictures they must be «good looking or cute» and must have friends in common. However, the former may be sufficient to accept a request to be a friend.

The decision whether to accept or reject a request to be a friend on Facebook is taken very quickly. These teenagers did not take longer than 20 seconds to accept a request to be a friend and rejected very few. Unlike the real world, in which teens interact with adults such as their teachers, parents, authority figures, etc., adults are forbidden entry to their Facebook profiles, in fact only 5 teenagers had added their parents or other relatives as friends; 2 had even added their teachers but most say they do not want their parents to find out what is in their profiles.

The conversations of teenagers on Facebook center on their image. There are few posts that have anything to do with subjects other than image. Pictures are the starting point of conversations and relationships. Most of the texts relating to images were very short compared to the large numbers of photographs. The reasons are explained by one of the girls interviewed who says that «when I post a picture and nobody comments on it, I delete it: why leave something there that nobody cares about! For instance, the pictures with most comments are the latest ones I have uploaded, so I am more and less discovering what my friends like to see… well, I think they are the sexy ones». The number of photos in the 100 Facebook profiles is 11,426, an average of 114 per user, with 26 published in each profile.

The image has also become a way to express

affection: take a picture and modify it, upload it to Facebook and share it. They call this action a «zing», derived from the English «sign», as a signature added to a photo uploaded to Facebook, with a message sent to a friend.

Teenagers communicate on Facebook using new codes of writing that ignore conventional grammar and spelling rules, yet they type quickly and adopt the digital aesthetic. Their way of writing seems to be capricious; new ways of writing emerge in the form of «text-images» created from the keyboard, in which the letters become part of the image that means something entirely different from the linguistic meaning.

e) Facebook groups: new ways of belonging

For Colombian teenagers, belonging to a Facebook group is not just feeling that they are part of something, it is having a shared image that shelters and protects its members, allowing them to act as an «I» group. Being part of a group is belonging to a real community.

3.2. Spanish teenagers
a) How do they present themselves on Facebook?

The vast majority (95%) of the Spanish youngsters sampled used their real names in their Facebook profiles. However, when interviewed about this, half of them agreed that it was dangerous to use the real name, and one of them said: «My mother always tells me that I should not give any true data, because anyone with bad intentions could find me». Therefore, the theory holds but they forget to put it into practice.

Most teenagers in our sample have all their profile content and wall open to whoever wants to read it, and only a small group limits access. When asked about this in interviews, most responded that they were unaware of the privacy option they had activated. In this sense, one of the girls stated that «nothing happens from sharing on Facebook. All of my friends do it. Because we are so many, someone is going to be interested in what I do or say». Therefore, the fact that it is common among her colleagues to share is interpreted by this girl as meaning an absence of danger.

On the other hand, when stating their age they are not so honest. Almost none gives their true age. Facebook has established a minimum age of 13 to open an account on this social network, but teenagers simply get around this by declaring they were born a few years before their actual birth date. Most teenagers analyzed use the wall to share links, pictures and to post and receive comments on photos of friends. However, with one exception, wall activity is not very common, with an average of only three or four posts per month. This was proved during profile analysis and also in interviews with these teenagers who said they posting less than five comments per month, and usually from home.

b) Teenagers' profile picture and photos on the social network

The Spanish teenagers, like their Colombian counterparts, make great use of photographs in their profiles. Of these 78% upload pictures without modification, 13% design photos, 6% use retouched photos and only 3% have no profile picture. The profile photos usually show the protagonist alone (60%), or with friends (20%). The remaining 20% is divided between photos with a partner (6%), with relatives (3%), of landscapes (6%), famous personalities like soccer players (4%) or fictional characters like The Simpsons (1%).

The pictures that teenagers upload to their profiles usually have them posing (sometimes very unnaturally). The feeling is that they are imitating their TV or media idols, and retouched or designed pictures seem to further highlight this desire to emulate their media leaders.

One of the Spanish teenagers interviewed recognized that there is some competition between friends to see who can upload the most appealing, controversial or original photo.
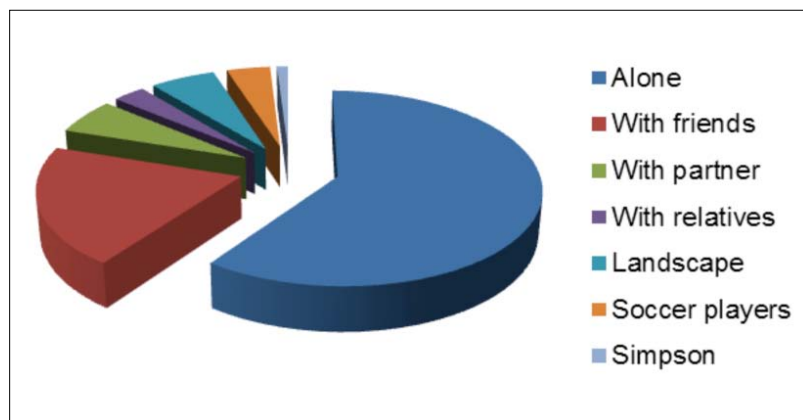
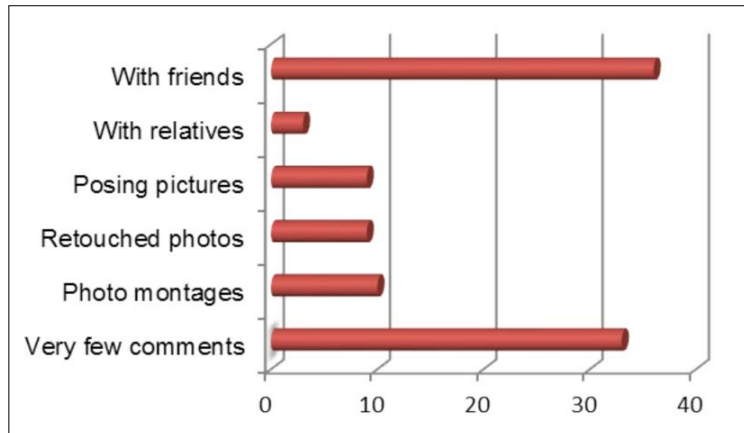Figure 1: Who appears in the profile picture?

Figure 2: Comments of photos.

do add phrases like «I like going out with my friends», «I am a shy guy, but charming», or incorporate famous sayings or express the greatest joy because they feel understood by their partner. Texts are written in the abbreviated style that usually omits vowels (spelling rules ignored). In no case did we find «text-images» similar to those produced by the teenagers in Colombia.

Three quarters of the boys and girls sampled failed to mention their sentimental status. Of those that did, 12% said they were single, 9% said they were in a relationship, 3% «engaged» and 1% said they were married (obviously not true). One the teenager interviewed justified why he never provides true data: «I say that I live in another place, I make up my data… even my name.» He says that having a false identity is not a problem because «I use a name my friends know so they know right away who I am». Nearly all the teenagers (98%) decline to give a contact phone number on Facebook while 80% give an email address which in most cases is via Hotmail.

The number of pictures per profile («Profile Pictures») ranges from one to 251. The average number of pictures per profile is 23. Curiously, as also happens in Colombia, girls have more photos in their profiles than boys.

The average number of photos in each case is considerably higher: 168. Two teenage girls have 1,116 and 1,184 photos respectively. Something similar happens with the number of albums, ranging from none to 32, with the average being 5.4.

The average for photo sharing is also high. One teenager shared up to 817 pictures, while the average is 120 photos shared per teenager. Of these pictures, the most widely discussed are those taken with friends (36%), far ahead of photo-montages (10%), posed and retouched photos (both 9%), and those taken with relatives (3%). Therefore, friends of the teenager often comment on pictures in which they appear or on pictures of people they know. Photos that have been retouched or come in montage form also seem to arouse their interest.

c) Profile information

We observed that 84% of teenagers in the sample did not indicate in their profile which languages they speak. Curiously, those who did so speak more than one language: 9% declared that they speak Spanish, English and French, 6% speak Spanish and English and 1% English, French, Spanish and Latin.

Philosophy, religion and politics are of no particular interest to teenagers. In the case of philosophy and religion, only 12% said they were Catholic, and 7% posted sayings by philosophers or famous people in their profiles. Only 2% named a political party with which they sympathize.

Teenagers do not tend to include a description of themselves in their profile («About me») and those that

d) How do they interact?

Teenagers do not use Facebook frequently or on a daily basis. They usually post three or four times per month. Similarly the average number of friends is quite low, at 202. In the Spanish sample one boy had as many as 559 friends, while another boy had only 3. Therefore, it can be deduced that these teens are only just beginning to interact with social networks and still restrict themselves to their closest circles of friends.

e) Groups and applications

Spanish teenagers do not usually participate in groups. Over 80% are not members of a group and those who do, participate on average 3.8 times per month. However, they make greater use of applications, with each teenager using an average of 2 applications, mainly games such as «Aquarium», «Pet Shop City», «Sims Social» and «Dragon City».

f) Teenagers' likes

Teenagers do not generally justify their likes although soccer registered highly (54% of profiles listed soccer as their favorite sport); 39% of teenagers do not specify a favorite sport. In cases in which they mentioned sports, soccer, tennis, volleyball, swimming,

basketball, paintball, paddle tennis and ballet are among the favorites. The music that teenagers like includes Lady Gaga, Justin Bieiber, David Guetta, Shakira, Jennifer Lopez, the Jonas Brothers, Michael Jackson, Beyonce and Selena Gomez. Favorite films are «Toy Story», «Tres metros sobre el cielo», «Twilight», «High School Musical», «Avatar» and «Harry Potter». The television programs named among their likes are usually comedies or «top trending» series such as «Tonterías las justas», «El intermedio», «El hormiguero» or «El club de la comedia»; and contests like «Tú sí que vales» or «Fama»; and series such as «El barco», «El internado» or «Friends».

4. Discussion and conclusions

Both in Colombia and Spain, the majority of teenagers between 12- and 15-years-old use Facebook to interact with their friends. Facebook has become a socialization medium as important, if not more so, than the other social networks.

In both countries, teenagers reveal their need to belong to a network and to present themselves on it in the most original way possible (or, at least, in a way they deem to be original). One such way is to adopt a personalized language in their communications that defies conventional spelling rules. Furthermore in Colombia, the use of «text-images» (images created from text) was common. This manifestation of supposed originality is also evident in their photographs. The teenagers sampled in Spain and Colombia competed with each other to upload pictures that would attract their partner's attention: posing or making suggestive gestures, retouching images, montages.

Most teenagers are over-exposed on the social networks, as shown by averages of114.6 pictures per person of the studied sample in Colombia and 168 photos per person in Spain. In the individual «Profile pictures» the average is 26.1 photos in Colombia and 23 in Spain.

But this over-exposure goes beyond pictures. Ninety-five per cent of Spanish teenagers use their real names in their Facebook profiles, while only 55% do so in Colombia. Hardly anyone expresses affiliation to a political party or religion, but a substantial group has no problem in declaring their sentimental status. Interestingly, both in Colombia and Spain some teenagers said they were «married» when this was obviously not true.

Another example of overexposure is found in the contact information. The most common indicator is an email address. However, in Spain, two teenagers gave their mobile phone numbers. But what could be even more dangerous is the fact that teenagers admit that they accept unknowns as «friends», and although they know it is dangerous they still do so. In Colombia, the teenagers acknowledged that they added unknowns to their list of friends, while in Spain most teenagers declared that they only accept people they know, yet this was proved to be untrue. In this sense, it is necessary to extend this research to other national and cultural backgrounds to make a transnational comparison.

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