Instagram and gender inequalities

The discourse of young women regarding social networks

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the discourse of the use of social networks perceived by young women between 18 and 25 years old, specifically on their Instagram profiles. The main objective is to detect what is the discourse of young women regarding social networks and analyze how they transfer their position towards feminism into their Instagram profiles. To do this, we analyze the discourses of young women participating in two cultural youth groups without a strictly feminist agenda. These are: a group of *castellers* from a Catalan university and a youth orchestra from Barcelona. To respond to the stated objective, we have carried out eight semi-structured interviews and four life histories with these young participants. The results show that social networks and, specifically, Instagram make the daily practice of feminism more complex and contradictory, consequently it generates a more critical discourse regarding the use of social networks by young women who have an active profile.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Social and professional topics** → User characteristics; Gender; Women; User characteristics; Age; Adolescents; • **Networks** → Network types; Mobile networks; Network types; Public Internet.

KEYWORDS

Youth, young women, Social Networks, Instagram, gender inequalities, discourse

1 INTRODUCTION

Today's young people have grown up with information and communication technologies (ICT) and can be included within the so-called Hashtag Generation [1]: young people born in the 90s, educated in the digital age and who have spent their youth around 2010,

making it coincide with the consolidation of social networks and the social web.[1]

The cultural influence of these technologies is essential to understand how these young people shape their vision of life and the world [1]. Beyond using ICT to communicate, get in touch and establish relationships, their use of interfaces and social media also influences the configuration of personal identity [2]. It is through these interfaces and screens that young people can decide how they want to portray themselves and what they want to show. As van Dijck says [3] digital photographs are tools for communicating identity and sharing them on social networks implies that identities are now mediated, that is, they can be modified and remodeled. Therefore, the construction of identity is active [2], young people have a role and an intention.

In this sense, Boyd [4] conceptualizes identity as a continuum between the offline space and the online space, meaning that people do not change their identity depending on the space, but they rather adapt to the social context in which they are based, depending on their own interests. Along these lines, Caldeira [5] argues that the current conception of identity is no longer based on notions of solidity and stability, but rather on the idea of openness and constant change. Thus, confirming identity through photographic creation generates a continuous flow of image creation.

Precisely due to the influence and pressure of the screens, it is in young people where it becomes more difficult to establish a difference between the private and the public self [2] and finding out what belongs to each of the spheres is complicated if we take into account that they are immersed in a communication system based on representation, appearance and public approval [6].

Social networks provide a very concrete and different context, and young people adapt to show what interests them in it. As Guardiola [6] explains, when we make the intimate coincide with the exhibited, intimacy loses all its private character and, consequently, we become subject images. In other words, while we represent ourselves in a specific way, we are looking for the other to identify what we are most interested in highlighting to then position ourselves one step above. A conception closely linked to individualism and neoliberalism that rules today's society, where personal recognition is sought to be positively valued and in the case of social networks, in the form of a like, by otherness [6].

This increases pressure for the construction and maintenance of the self-image of young women and their relationships, as explained by Tortajada and Araüna [7]. According to these authors, who investigated gender representations on Fotolog, young women are aware of the rules of the game that are activated on social networks, but this does not exempt them from suffering the consequences and seeing their own self-image conditioned. Today, these same

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[1] A Catalan tradition that consists in constructing human towers.

conclusions can be applied to Instagram, a social network originally designed as a photography application but which over time has become a social network where youth participation increases because it adapts very well to the rhythm of life, to the interests and needs of young people [8]. But the truth is that the use of Instagram entails an inherent duality: users can document and share their daily lives, but at the same time they can also use Instagram as a platform for creating idealized and aspirational worlds [5]. Consequently, this idealization that we find on Instagram forces us to show our most ideal identity to perpetuate the creation of aspirational worlds. And young women do not escape from this practice.

This online context faced by young women in their day-to-day lives coincides with the rise of the feminist movement in the streets. In the last three years, in Spain in general and in Catalonia in particular, patriarchal structures have been questioned through different political actions. The goal has been to create a new, more egalitarian society. It all started with the feminist strike of March 8, 2018. Never in Catalonia have been seen so many women going out to the streets to demonstrate for their rights. More than half a million people were counted in the demonstration. 2019 was no less, the streets were retaken and this time, also by many young students. Year after year, and also thanks to the Declaration of the Feminist State of Emergency in 2019, this form of challenge to patriarchal structures has been consolidated.

For years, in the political and media discourse and also in a part of the academic literature, prevailed the idea that young generations were increasingly individualistic, more disaffected and apathetic in relation to their social and political context [9, 10]. However, in recent times and in different countries around us we have witnessed mobilizations with a strong youth component that have contributed to changing the perception of their forms of political involvement. The younger generations are essential to understand the process of normalization of political protest [11]. But even beyond the most classic forms of protest, the repertoires of activism and political participation have become enormously diversified, offering citizens an infinity of options for social and political involvement outside the channels of participation of representative democracy. One of these channels of political participation is the internet and social networks. These allow a greater visibility and scope and as Castells says [12] it is not that technology has led to the appearance of these movements but without it they would not have reached their current capacity to oppose power.

However, the same thing that happens with identities, happens with activism, the borders between online and offline spaces are blurred, the two forms of political participation complement each other and feed off each other [13]. Thus, it is not surprising that on the online space the habits and practices that we find in the streets, such as sexism, also prevail. Especially young women are more aware of these existing inequalities and it generates certain contradictions when they communicate and show themselves on their social network profiles.

In this sense, it is relevant to analyze what discourse and opinion the use of social networks generates and see how their feminist discourse is transferred and adapted to a virtual and mediated space that is part of their day-to-day, such as Instagram, of the same way that MySpace, Fotolog, Tuenti or Facebook were previously. This identity constructed and mediated between offline and online is influenced by the discourses in constant construction that young women internalize over time. Thus, this identity will also be affected by the feminist discourse that they preach or the discourse on the role of social networks. Thus, the main objective of this study is to detect what the discourse of young women is regarding social networks and analyze how they transfer their position towards feminism into their Instagram profiles.

2 METHODOLOGY

In order to detect what is the discourse of the young women regarding social networks and analyze how they transfer their idea of feminism into their Instagram profiles, eight semi-structured interviews and four life stories were carried out with young women between 18 and 25 years old participating in two cultural youth groups without an explicitly feminist agenda: a group of *castellers* from a university in a medium-sized city in Catalonia and a youth orchestra from the city of Barcelona[2]. The choice of these two groups belonging to two different cities with socioeconomically differentiated contexts, makes it possible to compare profiles of different young people thanks to the participant selection process that involved: first, contacting the groups; secondly, to present the project to the young participants of the groups; third, they were asked to participate and, finally, four young participants were selected from each of the groups, taking into account different intersectional variables such as social class, sexual orientation, academic background or religion.

The semi-structured interview is a research technique that allows effective access to individual representations and opinions. In this technique, it does not matter so much the truth, what matters is the justification effort that the interviewee makes. Thus, we can access their concrete way of seeing reality [14]. On the other hand, life stories are interviews that seek the biographical narrative. The objective is the reconstruction of the interviewee's personal experience in relation to their own system of values and beliefs [15]. Although each life story is individual, it allows contextualizing the events of the interviewees in a historical moment.

These two techniques have served to identify the use of social networks and the impact that these have on the daily lives of young women. They have also served to talk about gender inequalities in the networks and how they practice feminism from their profiles. In order to interpret them, based on the transcripts, the most relevant topics have been identified in relation to the questions asked [16]. Next, the topics were categorized, which allowed a more precise analysis of all the information. An inductive categorization model has been followed, which starts from the particular to reach the general, in turn, groups the information thematically and simplifies the analysis [17]. To carry out this analysis, the qualitative data analysis software N'Vivo was used.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Individual use of social networks

All the girls define themselves as feminists, in general, they are aware of the feminist cause and try to change sexist attitudes in their closest environment. However, some of the young women consider

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[2]Group names are not mentioned in order to preserve their anonymity

that they have a more passive attitude in terms of mobilizations or theoretical knowledge:

> "Everyone makes feminism their feminism and there are some pseudo-feminist people but then their actions are not feminist, so for me what happens is that the human is who contradicts himself, so for me neither to be a hypocrite and to say that I am a super feminist I prefer analyze myself and do some things day by day and then realize others and gradually rectify myself within my daily life." [Alba[3]].

> "I consider myself a feminist in everything, I know that things escape me, sometimes some comment does not agree with feminism, but I realize what atrocity I just said, we have it so ingrained inside... but well I think that realizing is already a step." [Figaro].

But, if we turn the focus on the use of social networks, the interviewees confirm the intensive use of Instagram over other networks such as Facebook. However, regarding the creation of their own content, the interviewees point out that they publish images occasionally and without following a certain pattern, that is, they publish when they feel like it regardless of the day or time.

If we focus specifically on the feminist content generated on Instagram, the young women interviewed affirm that they follow profiles on different topics with a gender perspective that allow them to stay in touch with the feminist cause and stay informed and updated. However, Instagram is not the first source to look for information on feminism and they are not linked to specifically feminist movements that are organized or have met through Instagram. The only thing they do from their personal profiles and through the stories is to share publications that they consider interesting on a topic related to feminism:

> "I always search, but not on social networks, I look for it online, then I find out if there is a social network (...) there are times when I spread it a lot, yes. When I see things, I do publish them on Instagram stories" [Olga].

> "Through social networks, I follow many things. For example, the one I use the most is Instagram, I follow many illustrators who are women, I like illustration for example, and there are many feminist illustrators on there" [Gis].

3.2 Social Networks: for or against?

Generally, the girls from the university group of *castellers* are critical of digital social networks. Although social networks facilitate contact and communication with the people around them, as well as being informed, expressing themselves and sharing content through Instagram, young women feel that they are dependent on this social network and that sometimes they waste their time. This causes them a feeling of stress and overwhelm:

> "I think they provide me more negative than positive things" [Mel].

> "It angers me not to realize about things around me because of starring at things that may be dispensable in your life" [Audrey].

On the other hand, the young women interviewed from the youth orchestra are not so critical on Instagram. They have a much more positive conception of the social network and, in general, they are happy to use it and present themselves through it. This trend coincides with the fact that the young women from the youth orchestra are young people who are dedicated to the performing arts and, therefore, they like to show this facet of a more professional nature:

> "I like it. Specially because I love photos, I love to look good in photos and I love it. Is a reality" [Olga].

> "In a more artistic or professional way in the sense that when someone sees my Instagram, see that I am dedicated to theater, dance, that I am also a happy person, I like to perform with the trapeze, I like spending time with my friends, I like to smoke. . ." [Alba].

The young women openly declare that they like to give a good image, they are aware of the image they intentionally want to give through their publications.

3.3 Gender inequalities on the online space

Regarding their use of Instagram, most agree that users should be responsible for making good use of this social network and following profiles that influence them in a positive way.

> "There are a lot of Instagram profiles on equality, but you have to look for them, and if you don't have an interest in looking for it, you won't find them" [Olga].

> "You have to know how to use it" [Gis].

> "It depends on you how you use it, the content you watch, and what you want to watch" [Audrey].

With this discourse, indirectly, they consider that they do make good use of this network, they follow profiles that positively influence them and that they are sufficiently responsible for publishing good content, because they are aware that they may be victims of sexist attacks. Although they have not suffered any type of sexist and offensive comment on their profiles, they know the problems that exist in society, even cases within their close friends.

> "Sometimes she publishes videos of her dancing with shorts and a top and then she receives private messages with photos of a penis, just because she posted this video" [Emma].

Emma also criticizes the widespread phenomenon of sending photos of private parts through the networks without being requested:

> "Men believe they have this right, if you post that, I have the right to send you a photo of my cock" [Emma].

On the other hand, Mel exemplifies a case of sexpreading[4] close to her, and in relation to this she says:

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[3]The names of the young women have been changed to preserve their identity

[4]Disseminate images with sexual content of another person without their consent

"We must also be aware of what we do, that is, I don't think it's her fault because it's not about pointing out the culpable, but we do have to be responsible in this sense to see what happens, because you can't really trust anyone" [Mel].

Therefore, the young women themselves are aware that depending on what exposure they make of themselves on the networks, it can lead them to later problems related to sexism, and that makes them adopt a more responsible attitude when using social networks.

When they are being asked about gender inequalities in the field of social networks, the topic that comes up the most is the censorship applied by Instagram to the bodies of naked women. Regarding this, the young women complain that the same censorship is not applied to boys:

"I have seen many guys topless on Instagram photos, I have seen a girl too, but then they have deleted it" [Aire].

On the other hand, they attribute it to the objectification of the woman's body:

"The body of a woman is always much more protected than man's body or it's judged in the sense that it is much more sexual" [Emma].

"The fact that on Instagram you cannot post naked photos, that is, if you post a nude photo of yourself you must cover your nipples, it creates a bit of controversy for me (...) why can't I show what I want from my body?" [Audrey].

They also criticize that on Instagram there is a type of sexism that is perpetuated through young women and their bodies:

"Now if I open Instagram, the first thing I'm going to find is surely some chick showing her whole ass to get more likes and it's a reality too. I don't know. It seems like that is what sells. If you are a woman and you want your profile to be successful, you should undress ... which is another kind of sexism" [Olga].

From this explanation, the young women consider that an image where the body of a sexualized girl appears will have many more likes and, therefore, will become a person with a high social recognition, but this at the same time is denigrating the person.

The young women agree on being able to show themselves as they want, always from individual freedom and being aware of why it is done and from the position in which it is done:

"If you want to show your ass, then you can show it" [Mel].

"If you want to expose yourself this way, do it because you really want to, not to get something in return. That is, there's nothing wrong about showing your ass if you feel like it, not to expect an answer from... Do it just because... I don't know, like someone who does topless on the beach" [Olga].

Their speeches are critical on the gender inequalities found on Instagram, in this sense they highly value their own freedom when it comes to showing themselves as they want and respect any decision that any girl can make.

"I believe that everyone is free to post whatever they want, whether I agree or not, and will share it or not, is something else, I will never post a profile picture of myself where you can see my nipple (...) but I respect if you do it, that is, I won't tell you anything" [Aire].

Thus, with the intention of equalizing rights to men, the girls position themselves in favor of freedom of expression, which at the same time link it with the freedom to show themselves as they want.

4 CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The radiography carried out in this study on the relationship between youth, use of social networks and feminism allows us to conclude the following:

Non-activist use of social media. The girls participating in the project follow feminist accounts on Instagram of different topics that allow them to be informed and share, from time to time, information that is of special interest to them, but they do not actively belong to any movement related to feminism that is organized through this social network. The fact that they do not use Instagram as the first source to search for information related to feminism suggests that girls have a conception of Instagram as a platform that is still little linked to feminist demands. The idea of the construction of the image and the contact with the followers prevails more than the idea of the feminist struggle.

The practice of feminism that the interviewees have is different according to the online and offline space, it contradicts itself. They are ambassadors of feminism in the offline space and their close environment, but instead, they do not make it so explicit in the online space. However, that they do not link the feminist movement to Instagram, it does not mean that feminism is not part of them. They conceive feminism as a movement that leads women to fight for gender equality, that is, the practice of feminism involves a daily practice, it is not enough just to declare yourself a feminist. As the feminist activist Carol Hanisch [18] put it in her well-known article "The personal is political", relations of domination govern all levels of human interaction, including on social media. Being able to connect the virtual day-to-day actions of the young women interviewed with a more political dimension is essential to understand the success of recent feminist mobilizations among youth. As Soler i Martí says [19], young people take more direct paths to link their political involvement with their values, emotions and experiences and with the causes for which they fight. In this way, it is understood why the forms of youth participation have changed.

Different views and positions regarding the role of networks. There is a significant difference in the conception of Instagram between the girls of the two groups. On the one hand, the young women of the *castellers* group are much more critical of Instagram. In general, they do not have a good perception of the network, they consider that they waste their time on it and they do not believe that it is used correctly. On the other hand, for the girls of the youth orchestra, Instagram is a social network that they enjoy, and they also like to see themselves represented. They comment that it can even be used for professional purposes. Stokes and Price [20] argue that on the online space, where attractiveness prevails, young women with more critical skills and strong

visual knowledge will be the ones who will be able to make more successful use of social networks and better manage their online reputation.

Feminist speech vs. self-censorship. The discourse that girls have on Instagram in relation to feminism is, in general, contradictory. They want to be free to show themselves as they want and believe that all young women should be (although some directly state that they would not expose themselves), but at the same time they are the ones who put up the barriers as they are aware that they expose their image to a sexist structure that will make them suffer the consequences with comments or inappropriate messages. This idea agrees with what O'Donnell says [21] the process of sharing the self through a photo in a social network places the body and exposes it to be judged by otherness, consequently it can affect the confidence of young women and lead them to have the need for a visual identity.

The results show that social networks and, specifically, Instagram makes the daily practice of feminism more complex and contradictory and consequently generates a more critical discourse regarding the use of social networks by young women who have an active profile.

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