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Interactions of Andalusian Youth in Online Social Networks

Interacciones de los jóvenes andaluces en las redes sociales

Abstract

Several studies on youth and social networks have generally revealed extensive usage of these Internet services, widespread access from almost any location and the special importance that the youth attach to these services in building their social relations. This article presents part of the analyses and results from a research questionnaire on «Scenarios, digital technologies and youth in Andalusia», administered to a population of 1,487 youth between the ages of 13 and 19. The discussion on young Andalusians and social networks revolves around the structure and configuration of their profiles, intended uses and the privacy and security involved. The results reveal a population with nearly unlimited access to social networks and with very little adult monitoring; moreover, those connecting are younger than the legal minimum age defined by the Internet services themselves. The motivations of Andalusian youth for using social networks fall into three areas. The first two, social and psychological/affective motivations, are also commonly found in other studies; the third refers to the need to use social networks in matters concerning everyday life. This paper suggests certain new aspects in its conclusions in order to explain the nature and meaning of the practices of Andalusian youth in social networks.

Resumen

Diversos estudios sobre jóvenes y redes sociales han demostrado, en general, el alto consumo de estos servicios de Internet, generalizándose su uso en casi todo tipo de ubicaciones, y valorando su importancia en la construcción de las relaciones sociales entre la juventud. En este artículo se presenta parte de los análisis y resultados del cuestionario de la investigación sobre los «Escenarios, tecnologías digitales y juventud en Andalucía», administrada a una población de 1.487 jóvenes entre los 13 y 19. La discusión sobre jóvenes andaluces y redes sociales gira en torno, a la estructura y configuración de sus perfiles, a las finalidades de uso, y a la privacidad y seguridad en las mismas. Los resultados destacados muestran una población con acceso a las redes sociales sin casi restricciones y con poco seguimiento adulto, además las edades de acceso son menores de las legalmente definidas por los propios servicios de Internet. Las motivaciones de los jóvenes andaluces para el uso de las redes sociales se agrupan en tres áreas, siendo las dos primeras más comunes en otras investigaciones -como motivación social y la psicológica / afectiva- y la tercera como la necesidad ligada a la vida cotidiana. Este trabajo aporta en sus conclusiones nuevos aspectos para explicar la naturaleza y los significados de las prácticas de los jóvenes andaluces con las redes sociales.

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1. Introduction

Social networks are web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a system managed by a third party, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and, depending on the self-defined privacy of their profiles, view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Boyd, 2007; Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Social networks open an interaction space that has increasingly been occupied by youth, as shown by recent international studies (Chew & al., 2011; Mazur & Richards, 2011; Mikami & al., 2010; Pfiel & al., 2009; Subrahmanyam & al., 2008; Gross & al., 2002) as well as studies in Spain (TCA, 2012; EU Kidsonline, 2011; INJUVE, 2009). Use of social networks is spreading independently of the family income of Internet users (TCA, 2011).

The location where access is established, perhaps due to mobile devices and free wifi networks, has expanded to include streets, squares and public spaces, although the majority of connections continue to take place from home (OIA, 2010; INTECO, 2009), at the expense of school, due to the Avanza plan and the Escuela 2.0 plan. For all these reasons, using and connecting to social networks has become a new socialization environment for youth, a space for constructing one's social identity with one's peers, sometimes without any parental advice or control, despite the realization that youth are connecting at younger and younger ages, and below the minimum age allowed (INTECO, 2009). On the other hand, the youth themselves manage and maintain certain levels of safety and protection over the profiles they create (OIA, 2012; INTECO, 2012).

Research studies with large samples (Bringué & Sádaba, 2009; 2011; Sánchez & Fernández, 2010; INTECO, 2009; TCA, 2008, 2010, 2011) have inquired into horizontal social networks as a new social space for youth, which they can connect to from any screen or device; they describe the main reason for creating an account on one or more social networks as communication, perhaps because communication barriers are removed (Barker, 2009; Ellison, 2007). This could be understood, on the one hand, as the need to be available and present at whatever may be occurring in this environment (Bringué & Sádaba, 2009), thus associated with values such as social inclusion, i.e., the process of making friends among one's peers (Mazur & Richards, 2011; Pfiel & al., 2009) and strengthening friendship relations from outside the Net (Subrahmanyam & al., 2008; Gross & al., 2002), as well as self-affirmation before the other members of the network, where one maintains relationship patterns over time, online and offline (Mikami & al., 2010), and as social recognition, according to the number of one's followers (TCA, 2008). On the other hand, since there is a desire to relate to others, to meet members of the network, including strangers, the social networks are interpreted as a consumer item in its most recreational dimension. The popularity of social networks, as a fashion, converts them into services/products that must be consumed (TCA, 2010).

These studies also describe user profiles in terms of frequency of access and social network application, revealing age differences. Taking into account only the data that refer to a sample similar to the one presented in this paper (ages 13 to 19), the evidence shows that between the ages of 10 and 18, social network activity constitutes 70.7% of their Internet use (Bringué & Sádaba, 2009), with 55% of users connecting daily and only 22% connecting less than once per month (TCA, 2010); also, starting at 16, more than 71% have profiles on more than one network (TCA, 2009). Under 20, the network of preference is Tuenti, incorporating between 60% (Bringué & Sábada, 2011a) and 92% of the population (TCA, 2009), followed by Facebook and, unlike earlier studies, no gender difference is found in these age groups.

In summary, the profile that emerges from these studies may be considered fairly consistent, drawing a picture of youth who use social networks, in particular, and the Internet in general, for instrumental purposes; the events that occur in these services and the actions taken are limited to tools for meeting specific ends, falling within the range of four themes: communicating, getting to know, sharing and consuming (Bringué & Sábada, 2009). Although differences can still be found within such a homogeneous group, the fact of sharing a single space where the individuals carry on a more or less stable set of relations results in the generation of common interests among the members. Along with common interests, relationships within the community tend to generate shared behavioral norms, accepted either implicitly or explicitly by the members. Identity and a

sense of belonging are other group dimensions encouraged by interacting within the community (Robles, 2008: 39).

Studies with large samples of Andalusian youth (Bringué & Sábada, 2011; OIA, 2010; 2012; INE, 2011; 2012) have not inquired directly into the use and interactions within social networks, with the exception of the Infancia 2.0 paper on emerging social networks and technological uses in the native Andalusian online population (Rodríguez & al, 2012).

This emerging phenomenon of the use of social networks has been explained in earlier studies in terms of the types of use, activities and content associated with Internet, but there are no concrete data about these. For this reason, the Infancia 2.0 research, along with the research presented in this article, are the only two studies that inquire into the relationship of children (ages 11 to 18) or youth (ages 13 to 19) in Andalusia with social networks; together with demographic and socioeconomic data from the National Institute of Statistics, they describe a fairly accurate picture of this social phenomenon.

In terms of frequency of Internet connection, in Andalusian youth (ages 16 to 24) as well as youth from Canary Islands, Castilla-León, and Extremadura, there are seven percentage points of difference between those who access the Internet once every three months, and those with weekly access over the same three month period; in the remaining regions of Spain there is no more than 2 points difference (INE, 2012).

The presence of broadband networks in homes varies between 50 and 71% according to monthly incomes, with categories falling between the extremes of less than 1100 euros per month and more than 2700 euros. The regions that fall between 60 and 71% are, in order, Melilla, Castilla-León, Extremadura, La Rioja, Andalusia, Murcia, Navarra, Asturias and Ceuta (INE, 2012).

On the other hand, when analyzing the percentage difference of Internet access in children under 16, for the two extremes of monthly household incomes (less than 1100 euros and more than 2700 euros), we find a difference of 29 percentage points for the regions of Ceuta, Galicia, Valencia, Castilla-La Mancha, La Rioja and Melilla. Between 19 and 10 points of difference, we find Andalusia, Cantabria, Castilla-León, Murcia, Madrid, Extremadura, Basque Country, and Catalonia. And with less than 7 points difference we find Canary Islands, Asturias and Navarra. The Balearic Islands are a special case requiring a separate study, since the differential found was minus twenty-one; in other words, minors under 16 with the lowest household incomes were the most frequent Internet users.

Difference in family income is a key factor in the quality (in terms of speed) of Internet access. This difference exists in the homes of young people regardless of the device being used, and is fundamental to the use of social networks, thereby creating a gap that should be studied (Rodríguez & al., 2012).

Just as we have seen in nationwide studies, Andalusian youth create a profile in social networks before the legal age, males more than females, and naturally the above affirmations about the importance of social networks in youth sociability also apply to them. At the same time a lack of security is acknowledged, meaning a lack of behaviors that encourage proper use and consumption of social network services (Rodríguez & al., 2012).

2. Methodology

This investigation, in line with the general trend of analyzing several socio-educational scenarios, has made combined use of qualitative methodologies (interviews, case studies, discussion groups) and quantitative methodology (a questionnaire); the latter seeks to expand on results from the former through applying a questionnaire to a representative population of Andalusian youth (Facer, Furlong & al., 2003; Livingstone & Bovill, 1999).

Although questionnaires are widely used in social and educational research, it is often overlooked that an inverse approach may ensure greater relevance of the instrument's content. Carr-Hill (1984) recommends that more qualitative strategies be taken into consideration in drawing up a questionnaire. For this reason, the questionnaire applied in this study was developed in light of the results from ethnographic interviews that were carried out, such that the questions forming the instrument would have an initial validity made possible by the qualitative data.

Use of this procedure is justified on two accounts: on the one hand, to 'verify' the results obtained, primarily from the interviews, but also from the case studies and discussion groups; on

the other hand, to allow the results to be generalized to the youth and adolescent population of Andalusia.

The questionnaire was therefore organized around topic areas that emerged from using the qualitative strategies. Due to the substantial body of qualitative data already collected, the questionnaire gave priority to closed ended questions (Bell, 2002; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2006).

Questionnaire specifications can be summarized as follows: a universe of the teenaged population (ages 13 to 19) enrolled in public schools in Andalusia, with a province-stratified sample of 1487 cases, distributed across the eight Andalusian provinces, ultimately weighted by gender and age. The confidence interval was 95% and sampling error was p=q=0.5 of ± 2%. Sample composition was 49.5 % boys and 50.5 % girls.

The statistical analysis used was descriptive analysis based on frequencies and percentages.

3. Results

The study characterizes Andalusian youth (between ages 13 and 19; mean age 15) as perceiving themselves to be good students (72%), creating their first profile on a social network at the mean age of 12, beginning cell phone usage between the ages of 8 and 12 (80.1%), 62.3% connecting to Internet on a daily basis, and 69.2% connecting in order to contact their friends. The primary location for connecting to social networks is the bedroom (74.3%), followed by the living room (25.4%). More than 90% receive in excess of 1000 visits to their social network profile.

Results from this study on social networks and youth can be grouped into three sections, the first having to do with the structure and configuration of their profiles, where the youth make decisions about what to show to the other members of their list. In this study, 92.8% of youth modify their profile by adding a photograph and information on how they can be contacted, and 14.5% have modified the initial structure, for example, moving the location or size of elements on the page, adding a certain gadget or external plugin, or modifying the default template.

The reasons given for making such profile changes are, in 51.7% of the cases, to show their true self, or, in 8.6%, to show a different image of themselves. Another notable reason for these changes was to have control over the content and information that is visible to others (21.4%).

The work involved in this personalization of profiles and content on social networks is oriented toward the people with whom one interacts or wishes to interact. The study shows that friends, at 45.6%, are the primary communication partners on social networks, followed by acquaintances at 22.9%, while strangers take last place at 6.7%, behind family members (24.6%) and boyfriends/girlfriends (32.8%).

The main use of social networks among Andalusian youth is chatting (86.7%). A form of staying in contact with one's social reference group, chatting creates a placeholder by uploading images created by the members themselves (69.2%), when the environment or event does not allow them any other option. What emerges as most important in social networks is that they open the door to personal confidences, users can share with friends how they are feeling (41%), and they can meet new people, usually friends of friends (41.2%), or meet people who have the same hobbies or interests (24%). It is important to stress that the vast majority do not look on social networks as a resource for making yourself known (19.1%); on the contrary, social networks are adopted as a complementary, necessary resource in today's world for staying in contact and sharing experiences with your friends (83.5%), for expanding your personal network (46.5%), but above all for becoming closer to your network of contacts. Thus, 50.7% of participants like to know what their friends say about the photos that they post, or the experiences that they tell about, because it is important to them to know that they are liked and valued by their friends (26.1%), on the social network they can be more open than when physically together, and get the chance to feel better when they are sad (24.2%), and they can explore and do things that they would not do otherwise (21.2%).

Finally, Andalusian youth are aware of the importance of managing privacy and security on social networks, and they give access only to their friends (84.5%), that is, to the contacts on their list, those that they have accepted or those that they requested access to and were in turn accepted. Only 4.4% have set their profile to be open to all, in other words, to all who use the same service and even to those who do not.

Managing one's privacy and security is meaningful to them mainly because of harassment and bullying situations. Even though they are aware of the dangers of valuable information being stolen, or that someone might crack their password and enter their accounts, they consider this to be unlikely, in the first case. As one young woman said, "What are they going to get into my account for, I don't have anything. If they break into some account, it would be a bank or something that's worth money" (EF15). Another girl argued, "If they wanted to screw me, what would bother me the most is if they started to insult me or post crappy photos of me" (EM14). In the second case, it is usually classmates, friends or acquaintances that get hold of passwords either due to carelessness or excessive familiarity; they usually give them back to the same people that they steal them from. Therefore, the concern of the youth, and what they pursue when managing their profiles, is proper safekeeping of the image they have constructed, of the relationships established, and in general their own position within the network. As for aggression between members of a network, two profiles emerge. The first profile includes two main causes for aggression: (1) arguments and fights, at 39.7%, and (2) envy, at 38.5%. The type of aggression is verbal (56.4%), this being the main type of harassment occurring on the social network. The second profile has to do with stereotypes -- geeks with 24%, nerds with 13.2% and leaders with 12% -- where the type of aggression is psychological (43.5%), and consists of confronting and discrediting that stereotype.

Finally, regarding the bully profile, there are two clear typologies, one is found among the people closest to the victim, a male or female friend (22.2%), or the friend of a sibling or a friend (6.6%); the other is an adult male (17.7%).

4. Discussion

Findings from this scientific study and from the Infancia 2.0 research (Rodríguez, 2012) are complementary. On the one hand, they mutually support each other with similar conclusions and results; on the other hand, they describe different aspects of children and youth as social network users, useful for posing further questions in the future.

Certain aspects of this study are especially useful. First, it has been demonstrated that the practices of youth, with and within the social networks, fulfill roles that go beyond what has been described or demonstrated to date. For example, Andalusian youth are knowledgeable about the risks and benefits of social networks in their daily use; moreover, they themselves develop and manage different ways to avoid risk, through the means offered by the system itself, and also through usage styles. Second, it has been observed that the youth seek personal contact and construction of their social personhood in social networks.

Future studies should delve further into one aspect that is present, but inconclusive, in both studies: the repercussions of the quality of the Internet connection, as the obligatory gateway to social networks. Also to be considered is the importance of the cultural background of families and communities to the relationships, practices and culture that are shared in and through social networks.

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