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## **Youth Committed to the Internet: The Role of Social Networks in Active Social Participation**

**Jóvenes comprometidos en la Red: el papel de las redes sociales en la participación social activa**

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### **Abstract**

This paper contributes to the analysis of the role that social networks play in civic, social mobilization and solidarity of Spanish young people, considering whether social networks are responsible for active social commitment offline or if they just intensify an existing or previous tendency towards social participation. This research was undertaken by online questionnaire –Likert scale and multiple choice questions– in collaboration with the Spanish social network Tuenti where more than 1,300 young people took part. The results show significant percentages of participation exclusively online although there were more than 80% of young people, in a way or another, involved in actions to which they were called by social networks. The study analyzes the forms of participation in solidarity actions and the influence of factors such as geographical, social or emotional proximity to causes on the degree of participation online and offline. The article shows that social networks have changed the meaning of participation. They are encouraging young people not mobilized away from social networks, to take action, so it proposes in its conclusions the need to overcome the dichotomy that opposes online and offline activism and passivity.

### **Resumen**

Este trabajo analiza el papel que las redes sociales juegan en la movilización ciudadana, social y solidaria de los jóvenes españoles. El objetivo es observar si son responsables de que los jóvenes activos on-line demuestren también su compromiso en la vida fuera de la red, y si su predisposición existente o no hacia la participación, se intensifica a través de estas redes sociales y en su respuesta offline. Para ello se desarrolló una investigación on-line a través de cuestionario –con preguntas en Escala de Likert y de elección múltiple– en colaboración con la red social Tuenti en la que participaron más de 1.300 jóvenes. Los resultados ponen de manifiesto porcentajes significativos de participación solidaria exclusivamente on-line, si bien se observa que más del 80% de los jóvenes, de una u otra forma, participan en las acciones a las que se les convoca a través de redes sociales. El estudio examina también las formas de participación en acciones solidarias y la influencia de factores como la proximidad geográfica, social o emocional sobre la participación on-line y off-line. Las redes sociales han cambiado el significado de la participación, están incentivando el compromiso y consiguiendo que jóvenes que no se movilizaban fuera de ellas, pasen a la acción. Por ello propone entre sus conclusiones, la necesidad de superar la dicotomía que opone on-line y offline en el ámbito de la participación social.

## Keywords / Palabras clave

Social networks, youth, participation, Internet, solidarity, cyberactivism, digital communication, interactivity.

Redes sociales, juventud, participación, Internet, solidaridad, ciberactivismo, comunicación digital, interactividad.

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## 1. Introduction

Social networks should not be considered merely as technological tools for exchanging messages –even if at one point in time they were– but rather as contemporary means for communication, interaction and global participation. It is currently undeniable that their consequences have resulted in a change that goes beyond them.

What occurred with the earthquake and the subsequent tsunami that devastated the Japanese coast in March 2011 marked a before and an after in terms of how social media are used. According to Tweet-o-meter (which measures Twitter activity), the number of Twitter messages originating in Tokyo those days surpassed 1,200 per minute, and they consisted primarily of messages sent by people who needed to know the location of others (Google has launched the Person Finder service, a social tool that allows disaster victims to publish and receive information about others whose condition is not known).

Initiatives based on solidarity and participation, such as the fight against cancer, for example, highlight the importance being achieved by social networks in this area. Top athletes, singers and celebrities in general have used this tool to show their solidarity with various causes. These globally famous individuals are joined by thousands of users who show their support anonymously using online networks.

However, there are those who go beyond simply stating their support in favour or against something, who go beyond exchanging messages in the various social networks, people who feel motivated to convey the values they defend –including solidarity– to the offline world through actions that take place beyond these networks, such as assisting efforts or carrying out actions that directly affect or have direct repercussions beyond these networks, such as economic contributions through networks to certain causes.

### 1.1. The value of social networks and cyber-activism

What are the aspects of social networks that allow them to influence users that other mass-communication media alternatives, such as television, have not had in the past? The effects on the audience and their mobilisation through this medium has been studied for decades. The response links two obvious aspects: immediacy and interactivity.

The creation of the World Wide Web in 1989 marked the start of a new era due to its impact on all social, economic and even political structures thanks to its extraordinary contributions in terms of communication. The expansion of this communication phenomenon was even more significant after the new millennium, when new tools that have favoured the exponential connection between audiences were developed, reinventing the classical paradigms for mass and non-mass communication. This has been possible thanks to the appearance and development of what are known as social networks.

Users no longer play only the role of recipients (a role that they had hardly left behind in the traditional mass-media communication process), and instead they alternately assume the role of recipients and senders. This alternation is a core affordance of interpersonal communication, and it has now transferred to global communication, which applied to the mass media, has coined terms such as «prosumer», a user that consumes and also creates contents.

Digital technologies have made it possible for users throughout the world to interact with each other and share opinions and experiences. Internet users have their own virtual identity that is developed through the set of platforms that comprise social media. These new channels have changed the parameters of communication between individuals and groups, allowing dialogue to be democratised and multiplied exponentially.

With the Web 2.0, any individual can have a global impact with their dialogue, and this is exactly where the phenomenon of cyber-activism takes place (Tascón & Quintana, 2012), thanks to the array of possibilities that have opened popular channels such as Youtube, Facebook and Twitter. The term Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005) was created to refer to the social phenomenon based on the interaction of various web applications centred on users that facilitate the exchange of information, multimedia collaboration and exchange in real time, which are essential for participation and social activism on the Internet.

Aside from growing in parallel with the number of Internet users (according to Internet World Stats 2012, more than 2.4 billion people, more than a third of the world population), this revolution that is defining the new digital era is also increasing the possibilities of broadcasting content that denounces situations of social injustice, abuse, etc. A good example is the witness.org website, a platform whose slogan is «See it; film it; change it» and its aim is to encourage people to provide witnesses with the mission of opening «the world's eyes to human rights violations» (<http://goo.gl/7wg5SM>) with their testimony.

This is ultimately a form of social cyber-activism or cyber-social movement that involves active participation through social networks as well as individual/social mobilisation in the real life of people (McCaughey & Ayers, 2003). Cyber-activists are «active» online and offline. This concept does not include a limited definition of cyber-activism that is referred to as «click-activism».

Establishing the concept of cyber-activism can be as complicated as defining activism before the Internet. Social movements, with the more or less active participation of many individuals, have always existed, but digital technologies and the opportunities they offer for interaction give users greater power with regard to these movements because they become content senders for mobilisation and the

active collaborators that are necessary as individuals for attaining the overall objective.

This mobilisation and participation activity is manifested through social networks (Martínez, 2013). They are the link between organisations and users, and the way in which they are able to reach them and offer their content. The work of Valenzuela, Park and Kee (2009) showed the direct relation between the use of Facebook and the commitment to civic and/or political actions. An example of this is the Facebook event that filled Egypt's Tahir Square during the Arab Spring (<http://goo.gl/6NY9kO>).

A further example is Barack Obama's campaign for the United States presidency since it paradigmatically made apparent the power of social networks and the value of trust between individuals, beyond the traditional mass-communication structures. This is exactly how the contact networks in platforms such as Facebook, with more than 800 million users just in the United States (Vitak, Lampe, Gray & Ellison, 2012), Twitter, LinkedIn or, Spain's Tuenti, should be understood. Within the strategy of communication, they have all become extremely powerful tools that are growing continuously (Harfoush, 2009).

In this context, the studies presented by Hernández, Robles and Martínez (2013) are of interest. They analysed how young people experience democratic citizenship through both digital and traditional media. Here, a more informed digital citizenship is being created, and it extends its communication relations by connecting to a network, and it also transforms civic participation into one of the predominant aspects of social networks (Kahne, Lee & Timpany, 2011; Bescansa & Jerez, 2012).

This makes it possible to conclude that the foundation for active social participation online and offline can be found in digital literacy and in the increased level of competency. Thanks to social networks, young people have access to a multitude of possibilities to participate actively in creating social changes, and this participation in networks increases their knowledge of interaction methods that facilitate this activism (Ito, 2009).

These digital natives (Prensky, 2001), today's youth, who comprise the sector that first discovered the networks and builds in them its relationship dynamics (Monge & Olabarri, 2011), have a long way to go in these new social digital communication methods. Experiences such as those of Leonard (2011) show that the education of young people, combined with the development of a critical ability in using online networks, will intensify the potential of these networks to help social mobilisation, participation, and the comprehensive training of this generation as well as future ones.

## **1.2. The role of networks in mobilising young people**

Therefore, the following research question is worth considering: Are social networks responsible for people who are active online also displaying their social commitment beyond the network, or only when these individuals were already predisposed to mobilisation do the networks strengthen this active attitude that spreads to the offline response?



In order to understand what is occurring, it is important to take into consideration that the networks create paths towards active social participation, involving users in events for which in the past it would have been complicated to even be informed of, facilitating for organisers the dissemination and for recipients the information (Rubio-Gil, 2012). As a result, users, who become active recipients that alternate this role with the senders or producers of messages and contents, are also the information transmission channel.

Participation within the networks activates a movement that frequently spreads because the aim is for it to be extended (Dalhgren, 2011). For participating users, each initiative requires a different degree of involvement and a different complexity in the response from the moment when the organiser or the creator of a certain movement in the network may ask the recipient to simply press a button (a donation to a campaign against hunger) or to go out to the street and physically surround the Congress building, passing through intermediate initiatives such as collaborating to find a missing person.

What all situations have in common is that the dissemination process has changed from the traditional «mouth to mouth» to «computer to computer» and more recently «mobile phone to mobile phone» and what is now known as «Face to Face», as the shortened version of «Facebook to Facebook» that is an unexpectedly symbolic substitute by recalling the traditional and increasingly less essential «face to face». From Guatemala (Harlow, 2012) to South Korea (Choi & Park, 2014), experiences are being gathered in how young people use social networks, national or global, to participate and mobilise for social and/or civic purposes, online and offline. This is additional proof that «users have gained control of the tool and they are transforming it into a lever for changing the world» (Orihuela, 2008: 62). As Lim (2012) states, social networks have supported the change from online activism to offline protests and engagements.

## 2. Methodology

The initial hypothesis is based on the idea that the familiarity of young people with social networks makes them an ideal instrument for involving them in social participation. As a result, the general objective of research must be none other than to analyse how the participation of young people in social networks leads to an active social mobilisation online and offline (in other words, through a virtual world and also through the real world); to see to what degree it is cyber-activism in which young people have new tools that facilitate their involvement in situations of social injustice, solidarity or humanitarian needs.

The research instrument used to perform the study was a survey, so an online questionnaire adapted to the conditions of social networks was created. Internet surveys have intrinsic characteristics –such as the speed in collecting information, the low cost and/or the improved responses– and these characteristics adapted perfectly to the study that was performed in this case (Díaz-de-Rada, 2012). The process of collecting this information relied on the collaboration of Tuenti, the Spanish social network par excellence, which has 10 million active users, that launched an advertising campaign in its platform to disseminate the questionnaire among users and encourage their participation (80% of the activity

in Tuenti is by users between the ages of 14 and 25 years). This Tuenti campaign included a link to the research questionnaire –with dichotomous, Likert scale and multiple choice questions– regarding their overall participation in social networks, not just Tuenti. The questionnaire, with 30 questions, followed a logical sequence, starting with short questions about socio-demographics (age, gender, education) and then continued with introductory or ice-breaker and basic questions regarding privacy and participation in networks. The campaign used what is known as the «standard ad» format, and Tuenti offered an incentive (a prize draw amongst participants) in order to encourage user participation. Afterwards, the SPSS statistics application was used for the data analysis. The sample used for the study was comprised of 1,330 young people, male (59%) and female(41%) with the ages of 16 (44%), 17 (34%) and 18 (22%), selected through a random simple probabilistic sample, with a confidence interval of 95.5% and  $p=q=50\%$ , and a margin of error of approximately 2.7%. The results obtained were then presented and reviewed.

### 3. Analysis and results

When analysing the role that social networks play in the lives of young people, it is important to highlight that the networks, beyond allowing them to expand their social relations, represent a medium that allows young people to not only be informed of civic, political and cultural events, etc., but also to participate in them actively (García & del-Hoyo, 2013).

As a result, with the aim of verifying this participation method, the research performed confirmed some of the descriptive data listed below. Regarding the first research question related to the influence of social networks in online/offline participation, the data seem to show that the participation of young people tends to start and end in the virtual world since 38% state that aside from participating in an online event, they tend to also join the offline version, and 44% admit that although they participate in online events, they do not join them in real life. However, interpreting this data in dichotomous terms of mobilisation and indifference would be incorrect.

In order to understand correctly the scope of these percentages, certain clarifications should be made, without veering from the data provided by the study. The mobilisation capabilities of young people through social networks should not be underestimated since they produce content and urge others to participate, as shown by 24% of the young people surveyed who state that they always or almost always use social networks «to encourage others to participate in certain events, demonstrations, meetings, etc. » or the 26% who agree with the following statement: «Social networks have led me to develop/participate in an action of social protest».

The very similar percentages show the dual role that young people can play through the networks, or the dual role they play (the percentage of young people who feel encouraged by social networks to participate in social collective actions is very close to those who use social networks to encourage others to participate). Taking into consideration the Spearman rho coefficient (García-Ferrando, 1994: 253), a moderate relationship (0.63) can be established between the variables of «I

use social networks to encourage others in the area of social mobilisation» and «social networks have led me to participate in an action of social protest».

Therefore, the figures invite us to deduce that young people are active in the networks, and that they are active in two ways: as producers of content that encourages others in the area of social mobilisation and as active recipients who transfer their empathy to situations of social need towards action.

An especially significant aspect is the percentage of young people surveyed who say they use social networks to support solidarity campaigns (34.3%), those who say they use social networks to denounce unfair situations (27.2%), and those who state that social networks have led them to develop or participate in an action of social protest (27%).

At this point, the data shed light on the participation possibilities that the networks offer young people in order to show, online or offline, their solidarity and involvement with situations of social injustice that are more or less close to them. In summary, the possibilities of promoting and channelling the social mobilisation of young people, especially as drivers of solidarity in this population group, which leads to our aim of knowing to what degree these possibilities are taken advantage of as tools for channelling solidarity in light of certain situations, and if so, how this solidarity is expressed.

Specifically, the study posed various situations to the young people selected that would require them to respond with solidarity...or not. This response could be reflected with a «click», an «economic donation» or «going to a social engagement». In the first case, and depending on the situation or the circumstances, the «click» could represent active online participation on behalf of the young person who would remain in that virtual behaviour.

However, it can be misleading to think that this would not move to the offline social life since there are associations such as Greenpeace whose webpage recognises the importance of cyber-activism. The organisation defines it in this manner: «Being a cyber-activist involves active mobilisation to defend the Earth from your computer. Your signature is a valuable tool in the fight for the environment, and with thousands of them we have been able to reduce some of the most serious assaults on our planet». Therefore, a «click» should not be considered simply as idle or passive behaviour by young people, nor should it be underestimated. Instead, the corresponding context should be taken into consideration (<http://goo.gl/ttQx5i>).

According to the study results, the majority of young people continue to participate through clicks from their computers, but as we have just seen, the effects of these actions are far from negligible. This is combined with the significant percentage of young people who seem to be involved in social and civic actions, and who take their solidarity actions beyond a click. In addition, only 17% of the young people surveyed can be considered as passive since only that 17% states that they «would not participate» through the virtual world or the real world in any of the events included in the questionnaire. As a result, it can be deduced that this reflects the other side of the coin: the confirmation that more than 80% of young people participate in some way or another in the actions they are invited to through social networks.

Therefore, social networks cannot be considered simply a passing trend. They are a fundamental change in how we communicate and interact in a global manner. The added value they have contributed to certain social movements cannot be ignored.

### 3.1. Ways of participating in actions of solidarity

The behavioural differences shown by young people in situations that require their active social participation primarily respond to matters of proximity, including geographic proximity as well as what can be referred to as social proximity.

When expressing an active attitude that goes beyond social networks, young people tend to show more solidarity with situations that are geographically closer. Therefore, in the case of participating in an ecology campaign to protect Spain's coast, 27.5% stated that they would participate in an offline engagement, while only 22% would participate in an ecology campaign to save the Arctic.

Something similar occurred when they were asked how they would participate in a humanitarian campaign against poverty in Spain or in a humanitarian campaign against poverty in Africa. In both cases, 38% responded «with a click», but the difference was made apparent in terms of transferring their solidarity beyond social networks. In that case, only 13% would go to an offline engagement for a campaign to fight poverty in the African continent, while 23% said they would go to an engagement if the campaign was to fight poverty in Spain.

Paradoxically, when making an economic donation, young people showed more awareness of poverty in Africa (33% of those surveyed would donate money) than of poverty in Spain (27.3% would do so). Of all the situations that appeared in the study, the case of the campaign against hunger in Africa is the one with the most responses for making an economic donation.

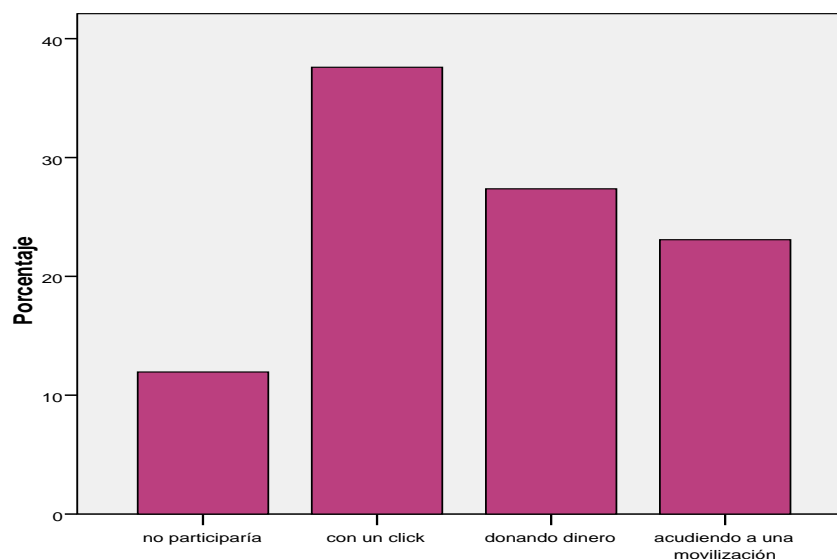
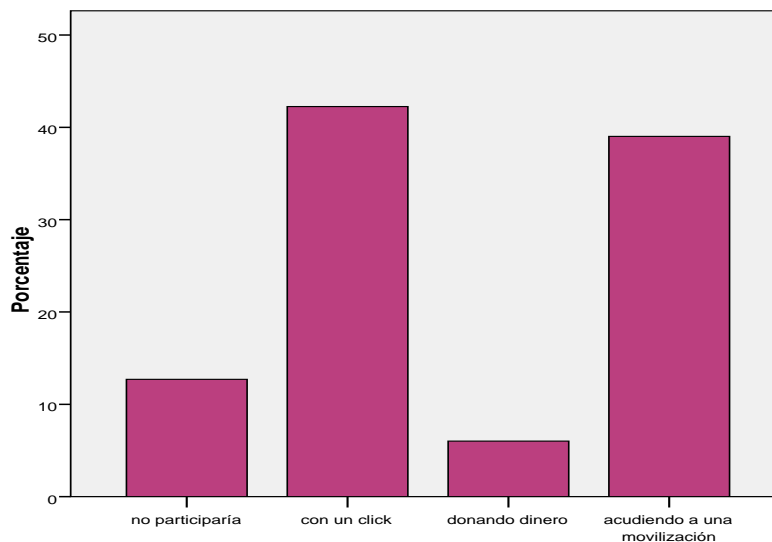


Figura 1. Campaña humanitaria contra la pobreza en España



The fact that geographic proximity can be a determining factor is also made apparent by the instance of a «Campaign against the death sentence in Iran», although in this case it would be more appropriate to refer to geographic distance, since this is what determines that 31% of the young people surveyed marked that they would not participate in this campaign. None of the other situations proposed for measuring how geographic distance influences participation obtained a higher percentage (the average for non-participation in the situations was 17.4%). The «social proximity» factor refers to events in which geographic proximity is not involved or does not appear to be decisive. Instead, it is the empathy with the situation itself that leads individuals to participate actively, guided by social networks (similar to what is occurring in the media with the proximity news value, a value with a dual dimension, both geographic as well as emotional and/or intellectual). As a result, in a campaign against cancer, 24.2% would participate in an engagement, 30% would make a donation and 36% would participate with a «click». The percentage of individuals who would go to an engagement nearly doubles in the case of a «campaign against bullying at school or cyber-bullying» (40%) as this is an issue that they seem to be more aware of and feel closer to in their lives (in terms of the geographic proximity or distance, emotional proximity is the factor in this case) since most of the individuals in the sample were still completing their education (88.2%), and the situation that was described is probably close to them, regardless of whether they have experienced it directly.



**Figura 2. Campaña contra el acoso escolar o bullying**

Although it may seem difficult to determine what type of proximity plays a stronger role in certain instances, as in the case of the «campaign to support a neighbour with a rare disease» or the «campaign to defend the neighbourhood school», the results confirm that physical proximity is a secondary factor compared to social proximity (which is perfectly in line with the fact that the networks connect people, overcoming physical barriers). In the first instance mentioned, participation in virtual support was 35% while for the second it was 40%.

The difference is exacerbated in favour of situations to which they feel emotionally closer, and when the possibility of participating in engagements outside of the network is proposed, the percentage that would participate to support a neighbour with a rare disease drops to 24%, while remaining at 31% to support situations the individuals identify with more easily in accordance with their age. An example is the new campaign against bullying at school, for which the percentage of commitment outside of the network is nearly 40%.

#### **4. Discussion and conclusions**

The study results confirm that motivations in social networks are not only aimed at areas related to personal interests, but also at social relational or inclusion needs, as suggested by Notley (2009) and Colás, González and de-Pablos (2013). In fact, they go one step further and reflect that a significant percentage of young people participate in the networks with solidarity or civic purposes in mind. American studies, like the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project on civic commitment in the Digital Era, affirm this conclusion in a study performed on adults that found 48% of Americans participated in a civic activity that could range from helping to solve a problem in their community to participating in a protest action, always mobilised by social networks (Civic Engagement in the Digital Age) (<http://goo.gl/y2q7AM>).

In the first part of this article, we stated that social networks go beyond simply being a method or a medium for communicating, and that they are also a method or a medium for social participation and global activism. The study results presented here confirm this since more than 80% of the young people surveyed channel through networks their response to campaigns that support or reject certain events.

It was also believed that the networks have an advantage over other media in terms of immediacy and interactivity. In light of the data and taking into consideration that the information for mobilising now reaches young people who in the past did not have access to it, it can be said that social networks are providing incentives for commitment and making it possible for young people who in the past did not mobilise to now take action, precisely because of the consequences resulting from the aspects mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph. The networks eliminate the physical distances that sometimes limit mobilisation significantly, and young people become closer to those who are «near» them, regardless of their actual location, and they support them because the support or the mobilisation have also overcome the physical limitations, as proven by the higher mobilisation percentages obtained by causes that feel close, regardless of their geographic proximity or distance (40% of the sample supported these types of causes).

Interactivity entails an alternation in the roles of sender and recipient in the networks, but once again, the data collected goes further by stating that users do not simply receive messages passively but instead they are capable of responding to them. This shows that those users take the initiative in new messages which the spread action. In other words, young people generate responses, but they also

generate questions, proposals and calls for action (nearly one quarter of those surveyed confirmed this).

The impossibility of maintaining a limited concept of activism in the networks should be understood within this framework, not just because of the evidence that a virtual action has real consequences, but because within the sample that has been collected, it is still necessary to address degrees of commitment and degrees of mobilisation as opposed to degrees of activism or passivity. In summary, this refers to the need to overcome the dichotomy that opposes online and offline within social participation.

The study confirms that young people do not use social networks merely to expand their offline social relations. Networks offer an infinite number of possibilities for active social participation. It is necessary to show young people the options provided by networks as a resource for channelling actions of solidarity. The networks have changed the meaning of participation: organisations request the collaboration of citizens through the networks as a way to apply pressure in light of situations of injustice or of social needs.

Amnesty International and Greenpeace are already aware of the importance of social networks in encouraging the active social participation of citizens. In fact, Facebook has become a key tool for organising and co-ordinating civic protests in many cities around the world (Lim, 2012). Experiences like Change.org, «the largest platform for petitions in the world» in which, as they have announced, more than 50 million people «have taken action» are situations that require an updated and detailed analysis of the variables that drive people to participate. In this regard, this study could contribute to the developments in this field by considering certain variables that have an impact on online participation and the corresponding offline channelling. As a result, the geographic, social or emotional proximity will determine the commitment of young people in events that require their solidarity or cooperation.

With social networks, the power of bringing people together has grown and the cost of carrying out social awareness campaigns has dropped considerably. Therefore, organisations or social movements should rely on this new method of social communication as a resource for achieving digital and real mobilisation for «Causes 2.0», which are situations that require the civic participation of citizens and use social networks to achieve this. The study confirms that circumstances exist that result in greater participation, and the door is open to discovering other variables that, aside from being collected, drive young people to be increasingly committed on a civic level, which will be addressed in future work.

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