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Young People as Users of Branded Applications on Mobile Devices

Los jóvenes como usuarios de aplicaciones de marca en dispositivos móviles

Abstract

This paper analyzes the role of young consumers in the context of new communication processes arising from emerging technologies. It examines the use of mobile device applications that activate new, more complex social and communicative uses of technology. The applications for smartphones which link to commercial advertising and enable online purchases are a recent priority for communicative actors such as trademarks, banking and technology companies. In this context, this paper describes and encodes qualitatively how young users as prosumers understand, perceive and use these corporate branding applications. Research techniques were applied to four focus groups of Spanish undergraduates of Communication Studies, as they are users that show a predisposition towards an early adoption of these practices. The coding and grouping of their responses enabled us to develop a qualitative analysis of usage and interaction with trademark applications. These focus group responses also allowed us to classify such communicative practices. In conclusion, active consumers interact with commercial content, establishing social networks with the backing of the brand culture and image as a form of group cohesion. Other uses are related to entertainment and enquiries for information, but users are still reluctant to pay for products or services through their mobile devices.

Resumen

El presente trabajo analiza el papel de los jóvenes consumidores en el contexto de los nuevos procesos comunicativos que surgen de tecnologías emergentes: el uso de las aplicaciones de marca en los dispositivos móviles. Éstos incorporan funcionalidades sociales y comunicativas cada vez más complejas y, entre ellas, las aplicaciones para teléfonos inteligentes que vinculan publicidad comercial y pagos forman un campo novedoso pero de interés prioritario para distintos actores comunicativos, como son las marcas comerciales, los servicios bancarios y las propias compañías tecnológicas. En ese contexto la presente investigación describe y codifica cualitativamente cómo los usuarios entienden, perciben y utilizan, como prosumidores, las aplicaciones de marca corporativa y los pagos. Para ello se aplican técnicas de investigación en cuatro grupos focales, de edades comprendidas entre los 18 y 24 años, compuestos por jóvenes universitarios españoles estudiantes en Comunicación, como usuarios que muestran una predisposición y una adopción temprana de estas prácticas. Las respuestas de las reuniones del grupo de discusión permitieron una clasificación de las prácticas comunicativas. En conclusión, se constata una alta predisposición de estos consumidores activos por interactuar con contenidos comerciales, estableciendo redes sociales bajo el amparo de una cultura e imagen de marca, como forma de cohesión grupal. Otros

usos se relacionan con el entretenimiento y la información, al tiempo que aún se muestran reticentes al pago de productos o servicios mediante el dispositivo móvil.

Keywords / Palabras clave

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1. Introduction. Underlying issues

Smartphones, or the latest generation of phones, have become devices that are increasingly functional and capable of managing not only personal communication but also the ever-more complex life of the digital user. The possibility of incorporating a wide range of so-called branded applications for all kinds of purposes generates new potential communicative users who become not only active consumers of, among other things, advertising content and integrated social networking, but also prosumers or generators of content or value. These digital applications installed and used by current smart phone users act as a link for a trademark of products or services to the user's phone. They allow the user to access a catalogue of brand names, purchase products, or get added value usage of promotions or exclusive products through the branded application; so the app becomes a specific, unique and increasingly frequented communication channel.

The technological and communication revolution arising from the social use of mobile devices has led to an increase in research on interactive communication, marketing and commercialisation based on mobile devices. Earlier research identified the different social uses of mobile technology in relation to age (Castells, Fernandez-Ardèvol, Qiu & Sey, 2006: 41); young users are especially inclined to use emerging technologies, along with fascination for the brand as an identifier of social and group integration, which has recently been treated by Colás, González and de-Pablos (2013), Boase and Ling (2013) and Mihailidis (2014), among others. The latter author participated in an investigation that researched how university students used their mobile phones on a daily basis. This 2012 study worked with 793 students from eight universities across three continents, and the results showed the massive use of social mobile applications, with the difference between relationships that entail real contact and those that do not becoming increasingly unclear (Mihailidis, 2014: 70-72). Such users are therefore, an ideal target for trademarks and their strategies of social penetration through mobile software applications.

The devices are based on software and can run applications and connect to Internet; they also incorporate and work with different software applications designed for a variety of purposes: purchases, information, audio-visual creation, geolocation, etc. Brand applications would be no different from any other category

in that vast catalogue of applications, except that they include within their denomination and purposes links to commercial and social actions, and proposals for a wide range of services related to the activity and image of their brand. They give increasing priority to commercial advertising, and join the traditional purchase of products or network services to aspects such as providing information or forming a bond between social and active users. In fact, the generation of social networks and contents by users are essential functions in the marketing strategy of brand applications. However, there are still relatively few investigations that follow an essentially qualitative methodology which address the description of motivations, social practices and features that users demand of these communicative forms; this is precisely the purpose of this research, which is based on focus group discussion of these issues. Dalhberg, Mallat and Ondrus (2008) presented an exhaustive review of up-to-date scientific literature on mobile device applications.

The state of the question was also dealt with by Varnali and Toker (2010), who demonstrated an exponential growth in research on mobile devices from 2000 to 2008 by assessing some 255 scientific articles from 83 research journals. Closer and even more related to this research are contributions by Kim, Mirusmonov and Lee (2010), who made an empirical study of the influences (social, technological, etc.) on the intended use of mobile devices; we can also cite Xu, Erman & al. (2011) or Yang, Lu, & al. (2012) who identify and define the ways mobile phones are used. Other contributions to qualitative research on the social use of mobile devices by groups are those by Fernández-Ardèvol (2011), in this case referring to older people, by Charness and Boot (2009) or Mallat (2007). For scientific communication research, focus groups are especially valid for studying the social uses of the new communication forms and the extent of use and interaction; all from a qualitative and humanistic perspective.

This qualitative and humanistic concept has been described by Porter (1998) from a business strategy, and by Pearce and Robinson (2005). A notable piece of research that used focus groups and also followed a qualitative methodology was that carried out by Mallat (2007). The investigation looked at individuals of various ages (from 14 to 60) and concluded that the adoption of these new uses is both dynamic and contextual, depending on situational factors such as urgency or need for speed; it also identifies barriers that hold users back, like the complexity of the system, connection rates, the possible lack of safety guarantees in transactions and the absence of a critical mass of users (Mallat, 2007: 231-232).

New users, particularly young adults, are beginning to change the traditional perception of the mobile telephone (wireless voice communication), considering it to be a personal device, a gateway to extensive, varied and enriching networking communication services. Although, these brands originally aimed to develop interactive actions with commercial, promotional or even advertising purposes, as indicated by Maqueira-Marin, Bruque-Cámara & Moyano-Fuentes (2009: 141-142), the fact is that they have evolved and now seek proactive interaction with the user with the idea of developing specific content. These social and cultural changes have been described by Dalhberg, Mallat, Ondrus and Zmijewska (2008: 169-170), identifying them as crucial in affecting interaction and consumption

habits, with people constantly on the move and increasingly aware of their free-time possibilities; an essential factor for communication and personal use of mobile technology. Brand applications are increasingly intertwined with cultural values and the personal and social idiosyncrasies of their users.

All this is a recent phenomenon, but with huge potential for business communication that runs alongside the emergence of new prosumer practices. Bellman, Potter and others (2011) observed that persuasive communication was having a greater impact, regardless of the category of the brand and application. The concept of usability and its value as a strategic factor in the expansion of mobile interactions has also been analysed by Liu, Wang and Wang (2011): in particular, it defined the characteristics of content, ease of use, emotionality focused on the user and the medium. Kim, Ling and Sung (2013) also defined how users, especially young people, have a greater predisposition towards establishing interactive communication with the brand, institution or service via the application. This goes hand-in-hand with the capability of mobile telephones to spread viral, communitarian and social content, transforming the relationship between brands and digital users, as has recently been unveiled by Bermejo (2013). This is a creative, innovative and low-cost strategy for trademarks (Swanson, 2011). Shin, Jung and Chang (2012: 1418) claim in this regard that each new technology needs to be perceived as being useful for it to be accepted and assimilated into people's daily routines.

2. Material and method

The research was centred on finding, describing and categorizing the knowledge, attitudes and types of usage among young Spanish university students in relation to their experience and social use of brand applications on their mobile devices. For Boase (2013: 58-59), the way data are collected and the analytical tools defined in any mobile phone study as an experience can determine the outcome of the results, this being a field that is still new. One of the greatest challenges for a study on mobile phone applications is access to user data and content (Humphreys, 2013: 23); content analysis here is a valid research technique aimed at formulating from certain data reproducible and valid inferences that can be applied to its context (Krippendorff, 1990: 28). According to Cook and Reichardt (1986: 29), qualitative research should contain as relevant criteria, among other reliable characteristics, solid and repeatable data; data that is valid, current, rich and deep, grounded in the process, based on reality and oriented to exploratory, ever-expanding, descriptive and inductive discoveries. This research method is one of the techniques adapted for the study subject set out here since, according to authors like Dahlberg and others (2008: 175), qualitative studies using interviews or focus groups can yield more details about the factors surrounding the adoption of these new communication tools. The treatment of the focus groups and intervention by the moderators follow the steps defined by Yin (2011: 141). This author sets out and analyses what a focus group should be in this area. It would be a medium-sized group to enable accurate data gathering following, for example, the techniques proposed by the often-cited Stewart, Shamdanasi and Rook (2007: 45-50). The focus group evolves because the researcher has selected

individuals who have previously had common experiences, or who are believed to share the same points of view. The moderator is the researcher who establishes communication and talks with these groups, and encourages all the group members to express their opinions, with minimal and no guiding or influencing of their views and experiences.

In terms of qualitative data analysis, the process of how the collected information is organised and used by the researchers is understood as a way to establish relations, interpret them, extract meaning and draw conclusions, in the ethnographic way as described by Spradley (1980: 59-70). In the qualitative analysis, Yin (2011: 6) highlights a series of phases such as: recording social reality, its material conversion into some kind of expression and coding, and its transformation through a conceptual development process.

To analyse the focus groups, this research made a transcription of the recorded audio interviews and then examined these texts to discover more about the study subject and the research categories within, using the bias limiters already mentioned. With regards to these research categories, we considered the active use of brand applications, with reference to Varnali (2011) because it introduces personality variables and subjectivity in user behaviour; we also took into account Shin, Jung and Chang (2012), who built what they call the «Technology Acceptance Model», whose apex includes interactivity and quality motivations (2012: 1425). Nevertheless, it is not without its methodological challenges as a new medium, as indicated by Kobayashi and Boase (2012). All the references cited so far in this paper have enabled us to focus the research on users and their motivations.

The processes of category construction can cater to different typologies. The first is known as inductive and consists of drawing up categories based on the readings (of the transcripts) and review of the compiled material without taking into consideration the categories deployed at the start. In this way provisional or emerging categories can be proposed which, as the encoding process progresses, will be consolidated, modified or withdrawn from the data comparison included in other categories (Rodríguez, Gil & García, 1996: 210). Some authors call this task open coding (Strauss, 1987), a process in which one aspect of the search for concepts is to try to provide data. The second process is called deductive which, unlike the previous categories, establishes a priori the role of the researcher in order to adapt each unit to an already existing category. Finally, we arrive at the mixed process from which the researcher extracts categories, formulating others when they are shown to be ineffective; this means that they cannot be considered within the category system as a register unit. This research carried out in May and June 2013 used a mixed process by means of a specifically designed computer tool, categorisation and data management, all conceived for this type of analysis. These programs are created to manage mechanical and repetitive qualitative analysis processes of responses, and are known as CAQDAS (Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software). The latest version of Atlas.ti, Win 7.0, was chosen from among the various solutions available in the market for this research. The overview diagram of working with this tool can be summarised in the following processes, which correspond to the different phases of the research.

- In the first place, it was deemed appropriate to create a Hermeneutic Unit to house the documents (in our case, the transcriptions of the opinions expressed by the participants of the groups).
- This is followed by reinterpretations of these texts to discover relevant passages and phrases to which codes and research reports are assigned,
- Thirdly, various analysis operations are developed on these codes, which are synthesised in family code groupings. In the present case, it was useful to group the visual networking concepts from which it was possible to retrieve the results of this research.
- Finally the QDA tools (including the one used in this work) allowed us to export the data in different formats and options.

The type of qualitative analysis carried out refers especially to category estimation, and infers relationships rather than verifies hypotheses (Krippendorff, 1990). The reference framework of our analysis is the description of real interaction and activity processes in mobile communication, focusing on the mobile brand applications. Within this context, the qualitative technique was applied to four focus groups of young university students aged between 18 and 24. Group composition consisted of 10 students in the first group, 12 in the second, 16 in the third and 10 students in the fourth. These groups can be classified as early adopters of technologies or services, according to marketing studies. Questions of an open and interpretative nature are related to the knowledge and use of, and communicative interaction within, the branded applications of mobile devices. This research was particularly on the look-out for indications of the depth of knowledge of these types of applications and, above all, the communicative practices established within the mobile phone's brand applications; searching for traits that would identify the users as content generators in the brand's social network.

3. Analysis and results

In the content analysis applied, the questions acted as parameters to guide the participants to contribute freely, which facilitated the work of the study and made it possible to establish codes or categories from the responses, offering indications of the interactive and social use of the applications. Relationships were also established between codes, code families and associations between codes, so the researchers could infer the uses, demands and objections of these young university students in terms of communication technologies. Finally, the results from the selected groups were validated and the sample validity verified.

The empirical encoding process is described below, and is the result of a dual process that takes advantage of the benefits inherent in the aforementioned computer tool. Firstly, after the transcription and reading of the responses from the four focus groups, an analysis was made of the content of the responses based on the theme underlying each of the questions, selecting significant fragments through a process called In Vivo Coding; that is to say, establishing the significant brands so that they can operate as future analysis codes; an inductive code process. A third review discovered semantic elements common to many of these codes and we proceeded to assign a code or category to encompass different re-

sponses. In this way, the researchers defined a total of 20 codes, of which 13 came from the responses to the questions on brand applications, use and interactivity, while the remaining seven related to advertising and payments made by mobile phone. The process of category construction is also deductive (using a mixed method for the encodings), partly due to the categories having been established a priori. The questions asked by the researchers were related to the extent of knowledge and use of, and interaction with, the brand applications on the mobile devices. They also specifically asked about the possibilities of payment for goods and services with the application. The list of the codes found in the responses and related to the brand applications were: Entertainment, Ease of Use, Information, Purchases, Curiosity, Offline, Unnecessary Items, Technical Limitations, Advertising, Speed, Rejection, Usability and the Value Added. With respect to the use and perception of advertising and payments (NFC or others), the group participants gave opinions that were clustered into codes, such as Comfort and Ease of Use, Knowledge of the Technology Without Use, Expenditure Control, Social Influence, Concerns over Security, Technological Optimism and the Value Added.

It also proved to be convenient to build clusters of codes into supercodes or family codes, based on a search and analysis strategy. For example, the code family named «Users of Brand Applications» included the codes, and hence the quotes, of the participants related to information, purchases, entertainment, curiosity and advertising. It should be noted that certain codes belong to more than one family; for example, the «Information» code belongs equally to the «Users of Applications» family and to «Features in Demand».
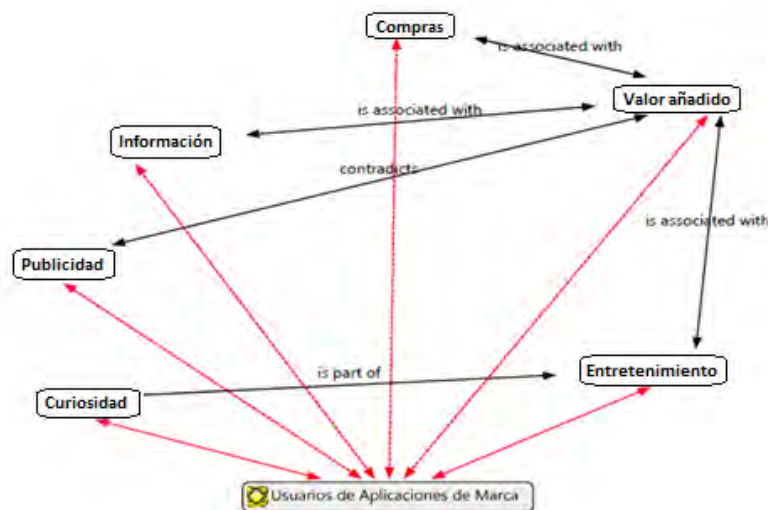

Figure 1: Users of Brand Applications, codes and qualitative analysis.

The research results shown below include some that are particularly expressive and present information in the form of conceptual diagrams of the codification work and the qualitative analysis using the QDA software tool. The types of relations obtained mainly include «is associated with», «contradicts», «is part of», «is the cause of», among others, from the relationships established in a list of codes.

For a more complete, clear and significant understanding of the conceptual diagram, the more frequently mentioned categories are located above while the codes lower down represent a smaller number of appeals in the transcripts of the various participants in the focus groups. These relationships are included in figure 1: The users of brand applications are numerous within the focus groups, and these apps are used, as seen in the previous results chart, for buying and obtaining information on products and services. The «Value Added» code is especially relevant: it includes the prosumer's practices, particularly regarding personalised and exclusive promotions, communication with the brand and, above all, the generation of online content. Other minor, although significant uses, have to do with entertainment or downloading and occasional use out of sheer curiosity. A curious result emerges from the «Advertising» code. For example, the inclusion of advertising is principally rejected and contradicts the «Value Added» category, even though some users occasionally permit its use. Furthermore, students who had declared themselves to be non-users of branded applications expressed their opinions more strongly but less clearly than others. The majority said that they had found some applications to be unnecessary or of no significant use. Secondly, there is a categorical refusal to use these applications in abundance; and linked to the previous code, a very small number of users mention the technical limitations of the device, or refer to the network, arguing that they do not have smart phones, or a flat rate data tariff, or they complain about the difficulty of working on small screens, which are just some of the other reasons that have been encoded. This is displayed in figure 2:
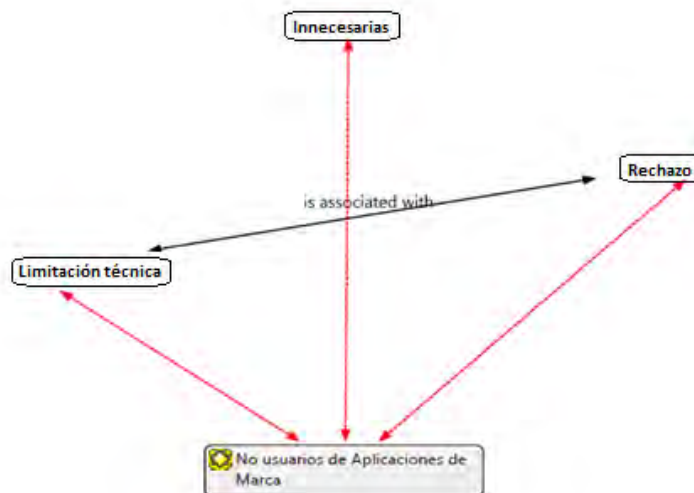

Figure 2: Non-users of branded applications.

Understanding of «Branded Applications» is related to the family the researchers composed from the codes that responded to the questions referring to what the users would like to see as features in those applications regardless of whether they are users or not. The results can be seen in figure 3, in which the determining factor is that the applications contained «Value Added», this is to say, the ability to create content, brand communication, the creation of Usenet, speed, immediacy and exclusive products or services. The views of both groups on what the

mobile applications should contain contradicted some categories; for example, a small number of non-users of branded applications also cited certain off-line services that could be included. These non-users are defined as not permanently connected to the network either for financial reasons or due to the technical limitations of their mobile device. This naturally clashes with «Value Added», or with use in terms of the access to immediate and constant «Information» that users demand. The non-users of these technologies also called for greater usability or ease of use of the applications.
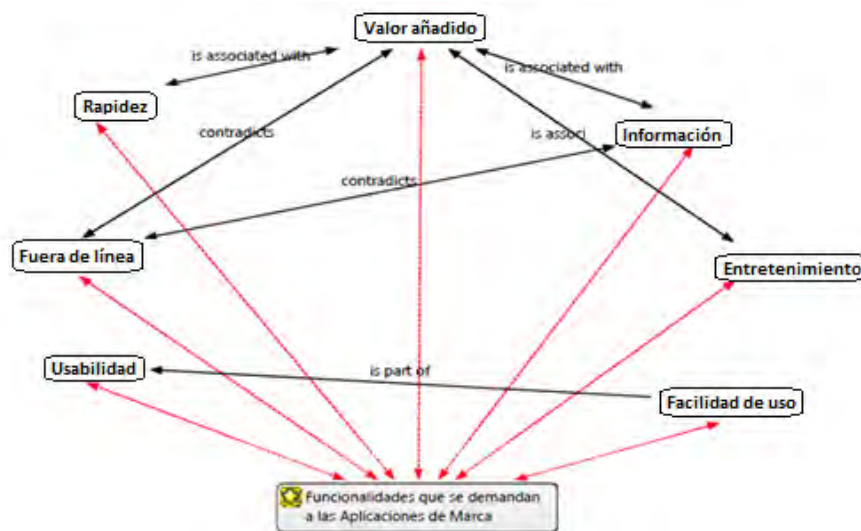

Figure 3: Features demanded of Branded Applications.

While the mobile phone applications and their features were well-known and used by the majority of members of the four focus groups investigated, NFC mobile phone payment proved less popular. Nevertheless, in a vaguer and more imprecise way, a significant number of students were aware of the possibility of making payments by the mobile phone and other applications yet to be implemented. The technological optimism associated with a positive social influence was observed transversely in all focus groups. It is necessary to emphasize the scant or non-existent critical capacity of these young users of mobile applications in terms of the advertising and commercial strategies that the brand applications discreetly incorporate into the social networks, and the standing invitations to participate and generate content through the device's software.

4. Conclusions and discussion of results
Young users of smart mobile devices are now pioneers in the use of the new social, communicative and cultural services provided by technological and communicative tools such as brand applications. These are related to user life experience and the creation of communities based on the values, lifestyles and idiosyncrasies of the brand. For companies, and this remains a subject to be discussed and researched further, these branded apps are extremely useful in building customer loyalty strategies.

The young university users surveyed show a very positive attitude towards downloading, installing and using brand applications. Their use broadens the communicative experience far beyond a mere commercial relationship. Therefore, in addition to the obvious usefulness of finding information, products and new services or commercial offers, the added social value is significant. The formation of virtual communities, the sharing of social and cultural experiences, and belonging to and identifying with brand values are essential elements for the youth groups. This is the main contribution of the prosumer.

In particular, use among the Spanish university population studied of brand applications was considerable, and this use extended to the applications for purchasing and obtaining product information, services and other added values, especially exclusive offers, discounts and instant communication with the brand as well as with other users. Other minor uses, although still significant, related to entertainment or sheer curiosity. Obviously complementary ethnographic research is necessary, as knowledge of these social groups' lifestyles would enhance understanding of their communicative mobile uses.

The number of students who declared themselves to be «non-users of brand applications» was very few. They stated that this was mainly due to the presence of unnecessary applications, given that their use did not offer any significant value. To a lesser extent some expressed a categorical refusal to use these applications and a small number mentioned the technical limitations of their device or network, on the grounds that they do not have smart phones or a permanent flat rate data tariff plan. They also complained about the difficulty entailed in using small screens, among other things.

The focus groups expressed opinions on what a brand application should include in order for it to be attractive and interesting. In general, they referred to the inclusion of new features with respect to the corporate website, the possibility of specific utilities (such as the creation of networks, communities or making contact with other users) and payments through the application. The young university students approved of elements such as speed and immediacy in accessing content, exclusive sales offers and the discovery of products not found in stores or other establishments, as well as the community and cultural connection with the values or philosophy of a brand.

Technology as a positive social value, and the need for the integration and use by individuals of new communicative proposals were opinions on which almost all students agreed. . This is further reinforced by the widespread technological optimism expressed by the young university students, as well as in regard to communicative interaction.

This study also demonstrates the influence of the economic crisis in the methods and channels of traditional commercial communication and advertising. The use of new media such as the telephone or mobile device, both closely linked to personal, intimate or private use, highlights the breakdown of the traditional mass media advertising model (television, radio).

The qualitative research only found one single and significant objection to the use of these technological resources: the feeling of insecurity when making payments via mobile devices. The security issues surrounding these purchasing transac-

tions represent one of the greatest concerns among users and one of the biggest obstacles to increased purchase and payment activity via the mobile telephone. In turn, a small but significant number of users in the focus groups almost exclusively rejected the notion of making payments via their mobile devices.

Finally, and although the analysis developed excludes the quantitative aspect, it is interesting to note that the typology of the codes discovered, as well as the percentage corresponding to each one, ended up being very similar in all four focus groups. This indicates a uniformity in the typology of mobile application use among the Spanish university population, who are at the forefront in the adoption of new communicative, social and cultural uses of mobile technology.

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