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Discriminatory Expressions, Young People and Social Networks: The Effect of Gender

Expresiones discriminatorias, jóvenes y redes sociales: la influencia del género

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Abstract

In the framework of the «Project I: CUD» (Internet: Creatively Unveiling Discrimination), carried out in the United Kingdom, Italy, Belgium, Romania and Spain, we conducted a study into the expressions of discrimination used by young people on social network sites (SNS). To do so we designed a methodological strategy for detecting discriminatory content in 493 Facebook profiles and used this strategy to collect 363 examples for further analysis. Our aims were to compile information on the various types of discriminatory content and how they function online in order to create tools and strategies that can be used by trainers, teachers and families to combat discrimination on the Internet. Through this study we have detected patterns between young men and young women that reveal that there is a feminine and a masculine way of behaving on the Internet and that there are different ways of expressing discrimination on SNS. Men tend to be more direct in their posting and sharing of messages. Their messages, which are also more clearly discriminatory, focus more on discrimination towards ethnic groups and cultural minorities. Women, on the other hand, tend to use indirect (reactive) discriminatory strategies with a less obvious discriminatory component that mainly focuses on sociocultural status and physical appearance.

Resumen

En el marco del Proyecto «I:CUD» (Internet: Desenmascarando la discriminación creativamente), llevado a cabo en el Reino Unido, Italia, Bélgica, Rumanía y España, hemos desarrollado una investigación sobre las expresiones de discriminación utilizadas por los jóvenes en las redes sociales (SNS). Para la realización de esta investigación, se ha diseñado una estrategia metodológica de detección de contenidos discriminatorios en 493 perfiles de Facebook que ha permitido encontrar 363 ejemplos para su análisis. El objetivo de la misma ha sido la obtención de información acerca de los tipos de contenidos discriminatorios y su forma de funcionamiento on-line, para facilitar la creación de herramientas y estrategias para luchar contra la discrimi-



minación en la Red, y su utilización por parte de formadores, docentes y familias. Como resultado, hemos detectado algunos patrones diferenciales entre hombres y mujeres jóvenes que nos permiten afirmar la existencia de una forma femenina y otra masculina de comportarse en Internet y un uso diferencial de las SNS en relación con la discriminación. En cuanto a ésta, los hombres tienden a tener más actividad directa (publicando y compartiendo mensajes), con contenidos más claramente discriminatorios y, sobretudo, centrados en la discriminación hacia grupos étnicos y minorías culturales. Las mujeres, por su parte, tienden a utilizar estrategias de discriminación no directas (reactivas), con una menor evidencia del componente discriminatorio. Ellas, mayoritariamente, dirigen las actitudes discriminatorias hacia la situación sociocultural y la apariencia física.

Keywords / Palabras clave

Attitudes, virtual communities, discrimination, gender studies, Internet, youth, social network sites, sociology. Actitudes, comunidades virtuales, discriminación, estudios de género, Internet, jóvenes, redes sociales, sociología.

1. Introduction and state of the question

Our research focused on compiling information about different types of discriminatory content and their online presence. Our main aim was to detect differences between behavioural patterns on Facebook (our sample SNS) in an attempt to further our understanding of how discriminatory content is transformed on SNS and its patterns disseminated. Having obtained information about young people's¹ behaviour, our next step was to give practical advice to create tools or strategies to fight against discrimination and its expressions on the Net.

To this end, in the I:CUD project, we defined the concept of digital discrimination as the representation of discriminatory content and attitude by digital means. This definition implies that digital discrimination represents not a new reality, but a new way of expressing and disseminating discriminatory content.

1.1. Social networks: paths for interaction

As a starting point we would like to contextualize the research in the general framework of SNS and Internet sociability. For Schneider & al. (2009) and Rambaran & al. (2015), an online social network is a community of individuals who share interests, activities, experiences and/or friendship. Most networks are available on the Web, and users can publish profiles with text, image and video, and interact with other members. The research conducted by Garton, Haythornthwaite & Wellman (1997) shows that virtual communities can be understood as relational communities in which sociability has quantitative and qualitative patterns that are different from those of classical physical sociability. For Quan-Haase & Wellman (2002) and Haythornthwaite & Wellman (2002), communities created around the Internet are «personal communities» (communities based on individual interests and affinities between people who decide to connect).

SNS make new interactions possible and, therefore, help to create new forms of sociability. Martuccelli (2002), for example, states that the Internet is a strong support in the process of individuation. For many users, the main purpose of the World Wide Web is to create contacts (Kadushin, 2013), and SNS increase the individual social capital of young people (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Even so, some researchers conclude that the Internet and SNS help to create weak relational ties, quite unlike the strong ties² created in other fields of socialization (Haythornthwaite, 2005). Far from being a negative feature of networks, this is its distinctive mark: networks make it possible to create infinite weak contacts, but it is also useful for strengthening those strong ties created in offline relations. Likewise, Castells (2001) concludes that this ongoing tendency decreases physical community-based sociability. Other researchers (Steffes & Burgee, 2009) have



shown that people who are connected through SNS have homophile relations, different tie strengths and similar decision-making patterns. The behavioural patterns in small-medium relational circles are similar and the number and intensity of the interpersonal links strengthen these patterns (Centola, 2015). Stefanone & Jang (2007) concluded that the main personal attitudes and skills that lead to using blogs are the same as those that are required to maintain strong-tie networks: extroversion and self-revelation. On the other hand, they concluded that age, gender and educational level are not correlated to network size, blog content or the use of blogs to maintain relations and strong ties.

Wellman & al. (2001) proved the correlation between bigger physical social networks and Internet use. This is what they define as «the more, the more». And the opposite is also true: the more individuals use Internet social networks, the more they will use offline networks. Boyd (2007) has studied the potential audiences technologies can have. These audiences help to develop the properties of technology and the applications that are derived from it. According to Boyd, the audience is partially determined by the following features: 1) persistence, 2) searchability, 3) reproducibility and 4) invisible audiences. These features help to understand the Internet as a double-edged sword if you are not discerning enough to distinguish between the contents that are being transmitted. Those contents are persistent, but they are also easily reproducible. They are often inaccurately summarized or generate stereotyped versions of the initial contents, reaching the invisible audiences that Boyd described. Joinson (2003) underlined the synchrony created by the swiftness in which individuals enter into conversation on the net. Internet helps to create constant interactive situations and opportunities because of the low connection costs, the ease in which computers and applications can be reached, the anonymity of the connection and the possibility of enjoying privacy in a conversation with multiple speakers. Joinson also warns of the quandaries associated with the fraudulent use of net content and the negative impacts of anonymous criminal behaviour. However, he describes the paradox of the coexistence of research that shows that the Internet helps both to desocialize people and to strengthen preexisting relational and social skills. For him, the Internet can help to share life's experiences and vicissitudes, and can be a practical self-help platform for problem solving and finding company in difficult situations. He concludes that there are benefits in virtual communities and websites, from both the emotional point of view, and the point of view of information exchange.

1.2. Theoretical framework: Women and men on the Net

1.2.1. Is there a masculine and a feminine way of interacting in SNS?

The number of Facebook users is estimated to be three times the number of inhabitants of the United States. At the end of 2012, Facebook had 800 million users around the world. A total of 65% of North-American adults had entered a profile in some sort of SNS and 92% of these profiles had been created on Facebook. Of the young users of Internet, 80% are active users of SNS, and over half of these write and send messages regularly through networks (García, Alonso, & del-Hoyo, 2013). It is estimated that 75% of Internet users under the age of 25 have an SNS profile (Lenhart, 2009). It is undeniable then that the use of SNS is gaining enormous importance in teenagers' lives.

In the Spanish case, 93% of young people between 11 and 20 years old take part in SNS (Urueña & al., 2011; Fundación Pfizer, 2009). This high percentage of SNS use can be understood as an indicator of the ongoing revolution in the ways young people communicate, but it also means that their process of socialization is different. Although the framework of socialization used to be the family and school, it has now extended to include social networks. As many authors have stated, networks have a great impact on socialization, particularly on gender socialization (Gómez, 2010; Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Bortee, 2005; Thelwall, 2008). Therefore, gender, sexuality and identity are becoming more and more open and Internet gender socialization is a new way of socialization that is based on a modern definition of gender and revolves around the concepts of fluidity, con-



struction and performance. Although Livingstone & al. (2014) focused on kids' online behavior (9 to 16) and found few differences between the tastes and interests of girls and boys, Bringué & Sádaba (2011) obtained interesting results on gendered approaches to online activity: teenage girls are keener than boys to surf the net with friends, teachers or parents.

Social networks are a necessary socialization space for contemporary youngsters: they have become places where they can meet and get to know each other, introduce and represent themselves, build their identity, share their hobbies and tastes, and learn new skills and abilities that help in their personal and social development. Contemporary youth cannot be understood without taking the transformative power of the Internet into account. SNS have become an environment for exploring self-identity and for the self-representation of young people (Tortajada, Araüna, & Martínez, 2013; Stern, 2004; Manago & al., 2008).

Espinar & González-Río (2009: 88) state that there is little information available about the new phenomena of SNS on the Internet and its use by young people. In particular, there is little data on the different possible uses made of them by men and women. They also point out that the differences between men and women are not linked to how much, but to how they use Internet.

As far as interaction is concerned, Valkenburg, Schouten, & Peter (2005) analyzed the different strategies of self-representation that are used by the different genders when preparing their personal pages on the Internet. Men tend to emphasize their status, capacities and competences, and generally use shapes and icons linked to technology. For their part, women tend to present themselves as nice and attractive, and use drawings of flowers and pastel colours. In their study, after analyzing 609 teenagers, they concluded that 50% of the young people interviewed changed their identity. Younger teenagers were keen to alter or transform identity, and some gender differences were detected in the changes made: men tended to reinforce masculine stereotypes, while women tried to adopt adult attitudes and transform their physical appearance.

1.2.2. Gender system and SNS

Masculinity and femininity are core concepts in the definition of the gender system. They involve the values, experiences and meanings that are associated with women and men and which define feminine and masculine images. These notions change from one period to another and from one culture to another, but they are expressed in every particular situation through beliefs and expectations (Alvesson & Billing, 1997). Gender, then, is a social construct not a natural quality. It is organised hierarchically and legitimates different treatment for men and women. The distinction between sex and gender represented an important break from the functionalist paradigm of traditional sexual roles, and allowed feminists to explore the cultural basis of sexism (Amorós, 1994; Valcárcel, 1994).

The origin of the concept of gender can be found in the work of Rubin (1975). From the very beginning, gender theory suggested that there was a difference between sex and gender. Sex is understood as a biological category linked to individual chromosomes and expressed in genital organs and hormones. Gender, on the other hand, is associated with a complex set of social processes that create and maintain differences between men and women.

The gender system makes it possible to understand a model of society in which biological differences between men and women are translated into social, political or economic inequalities between sexes, with women being the more disadvantaged (Rubin, 1975). These elements of the gender system contribute to the creation of omnipresent structures that organize human behaviours and social practices in terms of differentiation between men and women (Bourdieu, 2000; Fenstermaker & West, 2002). In other words, this system helps to produce two different types of person: women and men. Women develop as they do because they have a shared assumption of what being a woman means. The same can be said of men. These beliefs are not created ex novo: they are linked to predominant cultural ideologies (Alvesson & Billing, 1997; Deaux & Stewart, 2001). The messages about gender come from diverse and fragmented sources that are often contradictory: society, subcultures, organisations, family, school, media or individuals. As a result,



gender identity can have multiple forms and often conceals considerable ambivalence. Individuals can choose whether to accept or reject these cultural associations in their own thoughts, actions and self-comprehensions (Deaux & Stewart, 2001). The social definition of men as power owners, for example, can be translated into an image of masculinity tied not only by beliefs, behaviours and emotional states, but also by physical strength or the body positions adopted by men. This example shows how male power can be understood as part of the natural order (Connell, 1993; Valcárcel, 1994). In contemporary societies, hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1993) tends to emphasise authority, autonomy and self-sufficiency, while idealised femininity is linked to the satisfaction of men's desires. Obviously these images do not necessarily correspond to what most women and men are, but large numbers of people share these ideas. Connell (2002) described other forms of masculinity: the subordinated masculinities that are based on their identification with femininity. The range of forms that masculinity adopts is partially determined by the interaction between gender and such other variables as ethnic group or social class (Curington, Lin & Lundquist, 2015).

2. Materials and method

Our research took place between December 2012 and November 2014 in five different cities at the same time: London, Rome, Bucharest, Brussels and Barcelona/Tarragona. The methodological framework provided information about how discriminatory expressions are, consciously and unconsciously, transformed to adapt to the Internet environment.

The methodology consisted of a discourse analysis of the contents collected after creating 15 profiles (three per city) and 50 friends per profile (table 1). These three profiles were constructed in accordance with the position of the participant in the educational system (university student, secondary-school student and NEET [Not in Education, Employment or Training]). To ensure that participants could freely take part in the project and that they were aware of what participation involved, each new «friend» received a message from the profile with information about the project and the methodology and a guarantee of data protection.

The final number of participants was 493. The final sample is made up of 65% women and 35% men (table 2). Many factors may contribute to this higher ratio of women in our sample: they may be closer to the organisations that participate in the project or they may be more willing to participate in a project on discrimination issues. Ultimately, however, these values are similar to the gender distribution in Facebook (Dugan & Brenner, 2013). As far as age is concerned, most of the sample members are concentrated between 17 and 24 years old. Even the concept of young is wide and undefined at the extremes but, generally, this period in life is between 16 and 30 years old.

City	Group			Total
	NEET	Secondary School	University	
Brussels	16	15	29	60
Tarragona/Barcelona	9	15	68	92
Rome	38	62	75	175
Bucharest	2	96	21	119
London	22	8	17	47
Total	87	196	210	493



Table 2. Gender distribution

City	Gender		Total
	Women	Men	
Brussels	31	29	60
Tarragona/Barcelona	77	15	92
Rome	118	57	175
Bucharest	74	45	119
London	21	26	47
Total	321 (65%)	172 (35%)	493 (100%)

We checked the information that these 493 participants were posting on Facebook in order to detect content or activities that could be regarded as discriminatory. Every item that we found was described and categorized. Following this methodology we finally collected, described and categorized 363 examples of discriminatory content.

We asked the researchers to evaluate the intensity of discriminatory content with a subjective Likert scale from 1 (slightly discriminatory) to 5 (highly discriminatory). We carried out an internal consistency test to check the dispersion of results of the various researchers, who are members of NGOs devoted to discrimination prevention. The Rho Spearman test highly correlated between all the members of the research team (for 9 of 10 possible combinations), which pointed to a high internal consistency in the evaluative criteria used by the research team and validated the discrimination scale as an analytical variable.

3. Analysis and results

3.1. Discriminatory intensity

We found significant differences when crossing the data of the discrimination scale. The discriminatory content posted by the NEETS and the secondary school pupils was significantly more intense than the content of the university group. Likewise, examples of discrimination posted by women are considered to be significantly less discriminatory than those posted by men. These data indicate that differences depend on educational level and gender. Young men are the group that is expected to be the most discriminatory and university women the least (table 3).

Table 3. Level of discrimination according to gender

Gender	Discrimination scale					Total
	1	2	3	4	5	
Women	32	55	46	43	21	197
Men	3	25	34	58	40	160
Total	35	80	80	101	61	357

The chi-square test gave significant results when gender was crossed with the discrimination scale (42.5 and $\alpha=0,000$ for a 95% significance level) and with the type of discrimination (66.8 and $\alpha=0,000$ for a 95% significance level).

Some of the types of discrimination on the discriminatory scale were rated as highly discriminatory (for example, ethnic or religious). Gender discrimination occupied a medium position, while discrimination of physical appearance, socio-cultural class or homosexuals appears to be easily concealed. In general these types of discrimination are considered to be highly incorrect or aggressive in society and are the same as the types that are considered to be most discriminatory. It must be assumed that the researchers' process of evaluation ultimately depends on the subjective approach that individuals have to the reality analysed, and those elements that are generally considered to be highly discriminatory tend to be reproduced. It is easy to regard some types of discrimination as strong but this merely points to the need to work with types of discrimination other than



«the traditional ones», which need to be much more aggressive if they are to be considered in the same way. This unconscious difference between different types of discriminatory attitudes can give some clues to understanding how some content is easily disseminated. Facebook enables some content to be tagged as inappropriate and deleted, but if users only detect traditional forms of discrimination, the rest can easily survive.

Table 4. Level of discrimination in relation with the type of discrimination (%)

Type of discrimination	Discrimination scale					Total
	1	2	3	4	5	
Appearance	7	9	6	3	2	n = 27
	25.9%	33.3%	22.2%	11.1%	7.4%	100.0%
Cultural minorities	0	1	1	9	1	n = 12
	0.0%	8.3%	8.3%	75.0%	8.3%	100.0%
Disabled people	1	8	0	3	0	n = 12
	8.3%	66.7%	0.0%	25.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Ethnic	3	6	13	25	23	n = 70
	4.3%	8.6%	18.6%	35.7%	32.9%	100.0%
Gender	12	14	33	41	20	n = 120
	10.0%	11.7%	27.5%	34.2%	16.7%	100.0%
Homophobia	2	9	4	2	4	n = 21
	9.5%	42.9%	19.0%	9.5%	19.0%	100.0%
Religion	2	5	2	5	6	n = 20
	10.0%	25.0%	10.0%	25.0%	30.0%	100.0%
Sociocultural class	4	17	18	6	4	n = 49
	8.2%	34.7%	36.7%	12.2%	8.2%	100.0%
Stereotypes	0	8	3	5	0	n = 16
	0.0%	50.0%	18.8%	31.3%	0.0%	100.0%
Other types	4	4	1	2	1	n = 12
	33.3%	33.3%	8.3%	16.7%	8.3%	100.0%
Total	35	81	81	101	61	n = 359
	9.7%	22.6%	22.6%	28.1%	17.0%	100.0%

Tables 3 and 4 show that discrimination is greatest on gender issues. There are significant differences between the way in which boys and girls use discriminatory content: boys are more focused on gender discrimination and more aggressive in their comments. Girls, on the other hand, focus more on physical appearance and social class, which are «lighter» forms of discrimination according to our scale. To further classify individual attitudes to discrimination, we created categories to describe how young people were disseminating discriminatory content and comments:

- a) «Like» to discriminatory comments made by others.
- b) «Like» to discriminatory content posted by others.
- c) Discriminatory comment made by him/herself.
- d) Discriminatory comment made by others on his/her wall.
- e) Link to discriminatory content posted by him/herself.
- f) Other option.

In an attempt to apply the principle of parsimony (provide the simplest explanations possible without losing information), we decided to reduce those categories to three, depending on who is taking the action:

- a) Direct discrimination: the users themselves create/post the content.
- b) Indirect discrimination: the users accept/agree with discriminatory content, and help to spread it by their action.
- c) Other options.

These new categories show that attitudes depend on the participant's gender and the group they are in (table 5 and 6). Secondary-school students, NEETS and men tend to create or publish con-



tents on their own, while university students and women tend to accept comments published by others. This difference reinforces the idea that men and women have different attitudes towards content and makes it possible to define masculine and feminine patterns of «facebooking».

Type of discrimination	Group			Total
	NEET	Secondary School	University	
Non-direct	32	34	138	204
Direct	36	35	40	111
Others	15	28	4	47
Total	83	97	182	362

Type of discrimination	Gender		Total
	Women	Men	
Non-direct	146	57	203
Direct	45	66	111
Others	8	38	46
Total	199	161	360

Finally, the holistic analysis of the data presented above suggests the existence of multiple correlations among the variables in the system. To obtain information about the significance and direction of these multiple relations, we developed a multiple correspondence analysis³.

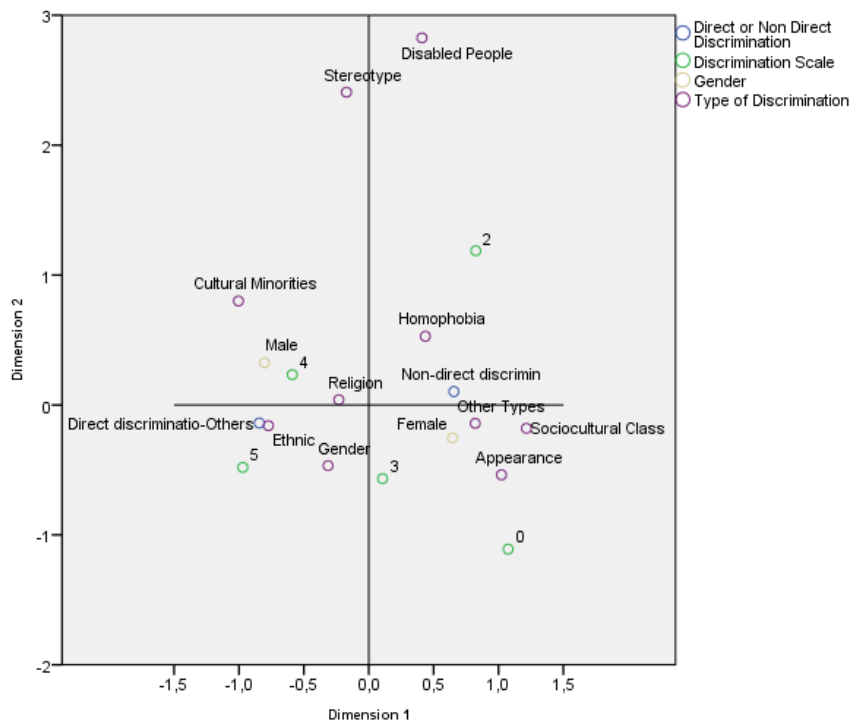


Figure 1. Multiple Correspondence Analysis results



Table 7. Multiple correspondence analysis results

	Dimension 1	Dimension 2	Total
Intertia	2.105	1.329	3.434
Eigenvalue	0.526	0.382	0.858
Correlations			
Type of discrimination	0.508	0.659	
Gender	0.513	0.082	
Scale of discrimination	0.533	0.573	
Direct or non-direct discrimination	0.551	0.014	

The results reveal that two variables (gender and type of discrimination) explain 85.8% of the model variance (table 7). The correlation of the variables with the two dimensions resulting from the ACM are significant. The first axis is defined by direct/indirect discrimination and intensity, and can be understood in terms of gender differences. The second axis is defined by the type of discrimination. These results are important as they reveal that men are associated with aggressive, direct discriminatory content that is focused on ethnic, gender and religious issues. Women's attitudes are less aggressive, indirect and focused on physical appearance, sociocultural class and homophobic issues.

4. Conclusions and discussion

As Bernárdez-Rodal (2006: 81) states «the dichotomous structure of genders around the masculine and feminine axes neither disappears nor changes, even when conditions are ideal. Despite interacting in cyberspace, the body is still important. In one way or another, interaction still takes place through it». The fact that the Internet allows you to abandon your body has been considered, at least by some feminist theorists, as an opportunity for feminine liberation, because women have been so subject to its corporeality. However, no teenagers, neither boys nor girls, seem to wish to do so. Gender determinism is still fundamental, and when «body» is not present, «word» takes its place.

We have shown that boys and girls express themselves differently when they are interacting on Facebook in three different ways: 1) the type of discrimination, 2) the scale of discrimination and 3) the way they produce these discriminatory expressions. We have also combined all these variables to find multiple correspondences between masculine and feminine patterns of behaviour on SNS and also significant differences. These differences are so important that it seems that males and females behave differently on the Internet and have different approaches to discrimination on social networks. Likewise, Mascheroni, & Ólafsson (2014) showed differences in terms of the approach to privacy: men are more likely to have public profiles, while women tend to have private ones.

Boys tend to make discriminatory comments about ethnic origin, gender issues and cultural minorities, while girls focus on physical appearance and social class. The discriminatory comments of men have been labelled as more intense on the discrimination scale, particularly the comments linked to gender; on the other hand, women make lighter comments. In summary, men use direct discriminatory attitudes, while women use indirect ones.

In general, discrimination tends to be understood and scaled in terms of the topic or the collective focus of its impact, as some categories or groups are more easily identified than others. Discrimination for ethnic origin and gender –especially the former– has traditionally been the objective of several campaigns to raise awareness about what it involves. Meanwhile, other types of discrimination have been socially accepted or have remained invisible (for example, social class or appearance). In this research, we have underlined the importance of sex differences for understanding discriminatory attitudes. The intensity, type and way in which discrimination is expressed and



reproduced can be tied to sex. Men's tendency to have more discriminatory attitudes on the three levels can be understood as a pattern of affirming masculinity during youth.

We should point out that this research does have some weaknesses (for example, the delimitation of some concepts or the limits of the object of study). Therefore, the issue of how youngsters and teenagers are using SNS needs to be further investigated. It is particularly necessary to carry out ethnographic research to analyse how boys and girls behave on the Net, and how language and power are used.

Finally, we should not forget that SNS act as loudspeakers that give visibility to attitudes that are common in young people and that used to be expressed only in a physical and individual way. SNS record these attitudes in a public or semi-public way, making the content available to a wider range of people and lasting over time. When young people post content, the pattern of expression is still determined by our oral face-to-face tradition. They do not generally think that these contents do not follow the same rules and need longer reflexive processes to avoid possible impacts on other people or their own future.

Notes

¹ The young people were informed about what their participation involved, in accordance with the legislation of each of the participating countries.

² The concepts of weak and strong ties were developed as a tool to describe interpersonal relations in networks. Granovetter (1973) described the strength of an inter-individual tie as a combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy and the mutual services that characterise the relation. He also underlines the leading role that weak ties play in promoting integration and in constructing community. For this author, weak ties are indispensable for individual opportunities.

³ The aim of MCA is to help to reduce the complexity of the holistic analysis by gathering data into simple patterns of interpretation. It creates a coordinate axes display in which the information is grouped according to the closeness of the answers.

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