

Activism and Social Media

Subjects: Behavioral Sciences

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Given their social nature, human beings have a constant need for interacting, cooperating, and communicating with others to work towards the satisfaction of their multiple needs. In this context, activism can be understood as the diversity of behaviors that people exhibit within society and the aim to make problems of social interest visible. Such actions are developed in-person or in digital environments through the internet. These forms of participation are interrelated, and therefore not independent from each other, giving rise to the term “hybrid activism” characterized by the development of integrated actions in both online and offline platforms.

Keywords: social media ; ICT ; digital communication ; social participation ; virtual communities ; digital natives

1. Introduction

The internet has amplified and enhanced the possibilities of social activism ^[1]. Here, social media serve as a platform for the viral dissemination of information that has a high impact potential on the public's opinion ^[2]. From a youth-centered perspective, social activism is necessary to promote the betterment of society in areas related to education, politics, law, socio-economic wellbeing, and culture. Therefore, hybrid activism opens up and interconnects powerful spaces fueling the engine of social change ^[3].

Likewise, some young people possess a decisive personal capacity to pursue social change and acquire civic commitments. This can be developed, channeled, and enhanced through educational contexts, which act as catalysts for activist action within different societies. It is worth noting that social movements which involve youth participants tend to take more risks and have more vehement demands and militant tactics ^[4].

Consequently, the relevance and scope of youth social activism are evident. In other words, activism driven by young people constitutes an element of social transformation, which disrupts the status quo and collectively unwanted situations or contexts, promoting social coexistence that adapts to human needs ^[5]. Social activism in young people can be highly effective, even when initiated at a very early age. Evidence suggests that social activism projects with school-related platforms have successfully achieved their objectives in a significant way ^[6].

Hence online activism through the internet and social media is a particularly relevant topic on this subject. In this sense, recent academic literature has focused on social networks and their relationship with human motivation. The digital world promotes communication and cooperation between people interested in participating, to some degree, as an activist, both virtually and offline. This is affected and enhanced by the continuous emergence of new information and communication technologies. In consequence, new spaces, platforms, and possibilities of interaction among activists are continuously generated. Another essential feature is the control that people have over communication processes, in which all parties involved can participate using a direct and bidirectional dialogue. As a result, it is possible to achieve greater awareness, motivation, and involvement towards social activism causes ^[7].

To further understand this topic, it is necessary to present an integrated definition of social media in the context of the current research. Social networks are “internet-based and persistent channels of mass personal communication facilitating perceptions of interactions among users, deriving value primarily from user-generated content.” ^[8] p. 49; while also stating that “Social media are Internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others” ^[9] p. 50.

The importance of youth participation today has become a topic of great interest for social research since young people's environmental and communication systems are strengthened by the interrelationship that occurs through social media and the virtual world. In this sense, the current youth generations are considerably defined by a permanent hyperconnectivity state that maximizes their socialization potential through social media and instant messaging applications. However, this

hyperconnectivity tends to be negatively perceived, with criticism focusing on the time young people dedicate to non-educational or productive activities [9].

According to the Youth in Spain Report of 2019, there are approximately seven million young people in Spain, of which 78% use social networks to participate in social movements, 9% in social-oriented associations, and 5% in political parties [10]. This might lead us to believe that young people are not particularly interested in participating in social movements. Nevertheless, research legitimizes this low participation and apathy based on young people's disinterest in politics or party membership [11]. However, many social movements generate interest in youth. They participate directly through social media and virtual platforms, with a high purposeful involvement and communication rate.

Virtual social media created from the development of the Internet and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are a phenomenon of increasing importance in academic studies [12]. Compared to other mass media, their development and use have not stopped growing, given their immediacy, interactivity, and use as a communication tool between people and global activism [13][14][15][16].

Hence, the interest of young people in participating in these new social contexts of interaction is high [17], with a high prevalence of social media usage within this age group [18][19] due to different motivations [20]. This affects their behaviors and relationships with others, including family and societal structures [19][21], since social media is a robust platform of social expression and youth participation targeting various causes.

Thus, the internet facilitates and promotes many possible scenarios of interaction and communication through social media and, at the same time, causes a profound effect on the development of young people. In this regard, the language used by young participants in their media communication patterns will regulate the developmental impact of social media. This may include symbols, codes, narratives, speech, etc. [22]. Although these social communication mechanisms are essential to enhance and promote youth social movements, we must also weigh other factors related to their success and effects [18]. Communication allows the integration of different motives in virtual spaces, which are also referred to as "expanded public space", "digital public space", "scenario of cybermobilizations", and "digital communities" [23].

The digitalization of society has affected the modes of communication, causing an adaptation of language that responds to the demands and dynamics of the new digital social reality [24]. Social media users have the freedom to adapt their language, giving place to a set of communication rules built and accepted by the internauts, resulting in the appearance and development of characteristic and creative linguistic behaviors. Additionally, there is a relationship between their use of written language and its corresponding oral manifestation. At the same time, new linguistic codes are constantly generated, usually based upon signs and new abbreviated words that facilitate their writing. It is, therefore, appropriate to consider that we are dealing with a virtual language that also aims to transmit feelings, sensations, gestures, and emotions [25]. Examples of this type of language used by young activists through the construction of symbols, codes, narratives, and discourse have been addressed in previous research [26][27].

On the other hand, an important point is the modality of social activism that young people carry out in virtual social networks. In this sense, the geographical and social proximity may cause variations in youth activists' involvement in online and offline platforms [16], highlighting the active online participation of young people in actions of a civic, social, and solidarity nature. There are many factors motivating youth cyber-activism. Young people are digital natives and feel that online media is a natural platform for communication that allows for the massive dissemination of messages that can raise collective awareness. This might be done through "viral" content, of which young people are both creators and consumers. Additionally, young people may need to fight against certain aspects of reality to promote social change [28].

2. Activism and Social Media: Youth Participation and Communication

We have analyzed youths' online activism and its relationship with social media usage. Findings suggest that the participants use a specific communication system that adapts language usage for social media activism. Considering microsocial and macrosocial conditions, results indicate a high prevalence of youth participation in social causes; some are motivated within the school setting, and others related to personal interests.

It suggests that young people perceive social media as a platform for expression and communication. Since digital resources are widely available to young people, they serve as an ideal and accessible platform to share opinions and committing to causes without formally joining an organization [29]. However, this digital access should be equitable and must be accompanied by civic education processes. Additionally, many factors might prevent young people from participating in cyberactivism movements. These include unreliable internet sources, online bullying, mistrust in the

government, and privacy-related issues [30]. This is of extreme importance since many authoritarian governments often seek to censor the digital presence of critical opinions or that incite social mobilizations [31].

Participants are aware of their transformative potential and how online platforms are an effective tool for communication, capable of reaching a diverse and massive audience. This has resulted in a linguistic adaptation to promote immediate and concrete communication systems in which new communication codes are established, accompanied by images, short and direct messages [32]. An example of this is memes, which are used as a coping strategy, helping to the reinterpretation of stressful situations that impact society [33]. In this same line, emojis have also been identified as an expression of emotions (positive, neutral, negative), meanings (behavioral and passive), and the content of the message. This serves to simplify communication. However, there is also the risk that the use of emojis leads to ambiguities that may be difficult to interpret [34]. Despite this, it is necessary to emphasize that stickers in virtual communication, in conjunction with textual messages, are highly effective in achieving a sense of intimacy among people [35].

Additionally, motivation for social participation is usually associated with the concerns arising from the environment in which young people develop. This includes their educational context, family environment, peer groups, or personal experiences linked to social movements, such as racism, xenophobia, homophobia, inequality, discrimination, gender violence, or climate change. Such themes are consistent with the movements identified in previous research [36]. It is worth noting that several of the topics the participants were interested in are in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The interviewees specifically mentioned poverty, good health and wellbeing, gender equality, responsible consumption and production, reduced inequalities, life below water and on land, climate action, and peace [36]. Consequently, public and private institutions should consider youth's transformational potential and promote activism and digital civic engagement to enhance sustainable development [30][37].

Furthermore, previous studies have found that young people who participate in digital activism are more likely to exercise "offline" political participation [30]. Additionally, the number of interactions on platforms, such as Twitter, was a significant predictor of people's participation in social protests [38]. Therefore, social media creates new forms of youth participation and help develop participation in traditional spaces [39].

The rise of social networks usage is reaching unsuspected parameters and even more so among the young population. This constitutes a communicational resource that transcends beyond a merely informative purpose, becoming an instrument of expression and social mobilization for young people, generating identity links based on their linguistic codes. Endogenous and exogenous factors are decisive to articulate language and message construction processes while generating dimensions of social co-responsibility, commitment, vindication, knowledge, critical judgment, and the development of citizen values. It is precisely this argument that provides the added value of the research presented in this article.

Evidently, research on the link between social networks and the youth population has proliferated in the last decade [11]. However, the current work makes a distinctive contribution since it has allowed articulating the existing connections between the modalities of participation in virtual social networks, the construction of spaces for spontaneous and intentional communication, the identification of complex and problematic situations, evidencing them as a focus of intervention and socio-community commitment. Our research can also characterize those youth populations susceptible to use virtual networks as social activism channels and their language symbology, connotations, attitudes, and behaviors. Therefore, the current work has made it possible to approach the reality of young people's social activism and how their participation influences it through social networks using a language and communication system adapted to a changing reality.

In conclusion, we confirm the potential of young people's social participation through social media and virtual platforms, turning an informal mode of communication into an effective vehicle for social transformation.

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