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**EDUCATIONAL APPROACH TO TECHNOLOGY-RELATED**  
**YOUNG RELATIONSHIPS: DIGITAL IDENTITIES, PRIVACY**  
**AND INTIMACY**

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*Abstract*

Digital identities shared in online socialization environments are key performatives influencing affective relationships. Current debates on the concept have highlighted the importance of taking this construction into account when understanding socialization processes of young people, in which multi-focal cultural influences are at stake. This study, based on a qualitative methodology structured according to the precepts of digital ethnography, tries to approach the elements that make up the digital identities of young people on Twitter and Instagram. After working with 528 different profiles, relevant information is obtained on the elements making up personal biographies according to the different predefined interfaces. Conclusions got show the ways in which the scenarios that social networks draw become spaces for social experimentation and otherness' game. Also, they show a deconstruction of intimacy and privacy concepts. The importance of taking into account the emotional and affective level in educational environments is taken into account in order to improve psycho-pedagogy intervention and counselling.

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**Keywords:** Emotional development, identity, interpersonal relationships, social media, youth.



## 1. Introduction

Understanding identity as "the feeling of relevance and identification with individual and collective interests and motivations" (Romero-Rodríguez, 2014, p. 31) compels us to understand the beings who develop these identity processes as immersed in an environment that drifts and compromises. Identities have been understood as inescapable traits of people, as something defining and seen in them.

For years now there has been a discussion (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Rizo-García, 2011; Serrano-Puche, 2012), based on the work Goffman (1959), of the ways in which we begin to play a role based on an idea that we want to represent in the co-presence of figures that we find evocative of certain trends in acting. We preceded present and future behaviors, and, based on these predictions, we present ourselves and act with certain objectives, always depending on the kind of relationship we want or we expect to establish. In a resource kit based on shared feelings and relationships, an interactive link is generated that will define the perceived identity. All this within a framework of regions, situations, assumptions, social and moral demands, non-explicit obligations, disturbances, and so on. In short, there is a certain strategic orchestration, of which we can be aware and/or architects, aimed at keeping a place for ourselves in a specific social location. Behaviors from present or absent people, which in social life would be comparable to people assuming more passive roles in group interactions, also modify these interaction dynamics.

In the present-day context, Zygmunt Bauman is one of the authors whose thesis provides greater relevance and making easier to understand the concept of identity in a changing society. His works on the concept of the liquid society (Bauman, 2000) attempt to draw clean lines placing the individual in a clearly determined context because of a capitalist system. Thanks to the metaphor of the liquid, Bauman argues for a status change concerning lives, relationships and worldviews: from a great idea of stability that would dominate the solid state of life, to a constant flow that would be forced, without drift to highlight the liquid state, which is close to the current reality and tinges it with despair. Under a supposed notion of freedom closely linked to the consumer society's future, individuals are not able to assume this freedom without feeling anxiety and detachment when they cannot control or answer certain questions about an uncertain future. The process for developing an identity (Bauman, 1999, 2000) also reflects the liquid societies' flows, so that it is required to be as versatile as the life course. The fact that this identity is necessarily self-developed, autonomous and self-referential (Bauman, 2000) meets the requirements of a competitive and individualistic consumer market, which will have a violent impact on the way in which our social bonds and affections are linked.

Many theories consider an identity concept scarred by history and cultural heritage, which requires acknowledge the past, anchorage in a physical and social environment and a sense of belonging to a specific reference group. In short, identity is understood to be linked to a "dynamic, relational and dialogical process that always develops in relation to one another" (Serrano-Puche, 2012, p. 108). For this reason, we find ourselves with a fluid identity, reconstructed through social movement and exchange between people who influence each other in a direct or indirect way. This movement also establishes values and trends accepted or rejected from the proactive narration of a particular self (Hall & Du Gay, 2003).

Several studies published in recent years (Ballesteros & Megías, 2015; Boyd, 2014; Colás-Bravo, González-Ramírez, & de Pablos-Pons, 2013; Richardson, 2016; Rodríguez-San Julian & Megías-Quirós,

2014) have focused on a specific collective to analyze digital identities and interactions on the web: youth. Young people and teenagers, especially minors, are understood as priority test subjects, so the knowledge generation about their uses and technological practices seems to be objectively assumed as necessary. In addition to technological issues, it is important to highlight the evident presence of feelings in socio-personal development (García-Vázquez, Ordóñez, & Arias-Magadán, 2014; Venegas, 2013).

## **2. Research Questions**

Our research mainly aims at detecting significant lines describing peculiarities on affective boundaries of young people established through ICT, especially around the communicative traits of emotional and couple interaction. In particular, we try:

- Expose certain differentiating features of the digital identities expressed, detecting the characteristics that define and shape the new ways of representing the self in virtual spaces.
- Detect the features that make up the public digital communicative model deployed around digital identities.
- Elaborate guidelines and proposals for reflection, training and intervention from an educational perspective geared towards the critical and active use of ICT in the framework of interpersonal relationships.

## **3. Research Methods**

Our research is involved within a model based on the updated concept of virtual ethnography (Horst, Hjorth, & Tacchi, 2012; Pink et al., 2016) which, in turn, incorporates a narrative-biographical approach (Fernández-Cruz, 2010). Within this framework, we deal with information obtained from the study of 403 profiles on Instagram and 125 profiles on Twitter of boys and girls belonging to different Asturian educational centers over an 8-months period (January 2015 - August 2015). The research involved students from 12 urban and rural educational centers who, at the time they were in this field, were in their fourth year of secondary education (15-17 years old). The sample was intentionally selected according to the involvement of the guidance teams from different centers in the institutional Asturian sexual education agenda "Ni Ogros Ni Princesas" ("Not an ogre, not a princess" in Spanish).

In order to access the sample, a specific protocol for action was deployed. The first step was to explain to the potential participating centres the objectives and nature of the research in order to obtain a sufficient set of related organisations. Subsequently, and after resolving all the pertinent doubts and/or questions with the people in charge on each centre (management team, orientation team, etc.), access to the different classes of 4th year of compulsory secondary education available was requested. The researcher attend all these face-to-face sessions to present this research, explaining every particularity and making a proposal for voluntary collaboration to the students on every group. People who finally wanted to be involved in the research had to follow any of the Instagram or Twitter accounts created especially for this study. These people would then receive a follow back, so they would be linked to the process. Thanks to this link we were able to access personal information and social activity involved in this testing. The profiles

generated, both with the same user name (@iddigital), were displayed according to criteria of personal data anonymization and dissociation.

The information from the profiles was collected using several qualitative strategies and tools: direct observation, writing of a digital field journal and monitoring of the profiles through a computer application created specifically for this purpose called AUTOGRAM. AUTOGRAM allowed to obtain raw data of the treated profiles. Specifically, the data collected were: shared images, texts on posts and interactions, emoticons used in publications and interactions, #hashtags used in publications and interactions, links used in publications and interactions. AUTOGRAM incorporated an image analysis API identifying characteristics such as the number of people tagged on images or some features of the faces detected. This image analysis utility made easier the reading and subsequent qualitative treatment of the visual content worked on.

#### 4. Findings

The data were analyzed according to their multi-contextual nature and format. First, and concerning field journal entries and direct observation, specific categories, subcategories and keys were proposed. This categories system launched from the first screening of initial information gave us a general overview of the most relevant topics for the study, as well as the most redundant and/or noteworthy ones. The data were presented in the form of maps of interrelated categories and subcategories. The category maps were very useful for the discussion as they made it possible to organize the evidence detected around major themes that were later broken down by the subcategories detected. Secondly, the information quantified through AUTOGRAM made it possible to indicate references and frequencies such as the number of times a specific expression was repeated or the number of uses of a specific emoticon. This detection and quantification of results was very useful in relating the findings to the categories previously described.

For the specific questions concerning this paper, the first step is to indicate the number of profiles we have worked with. In particular, for the information expressed here, we must focus on those profiles having a fulfilled specific section for public presentation of digital identities (biography) since this information will allow us to draw a generic profile of the self-represented and shared public self.

**Table 01.** Amount of analyzed profiles

Social Network	Amount	Biography	Posts+ Activity
Instagram	403	221	395
Twitter	125	55	123

By public presentation of digital identities we mean the information shaped and presented by every individual in their Twitter and Instagram profiles in a public way, which can be accessible to everyone. On Twitter and Instagram this information is called "biography". The biography is a limited and formally structured space where characters, emoticons and images can appear. These biographies aim at synthesizing a person's digital identity, so that by simply reading what is expressed in this restricted environment we can understand who they are and what they are looking for. A distinctive feature of biographies is that they are always public, although all other information shared through the profile (publications and interactions) is

private and limited to a specific number of people (generally, accepted contacts). This obligation, which is accepted by the user and required by the social network, determines the way in which the privacy of the digital activity is managed and, therefore, the intimacy perceived and assumed.

For this analysis we have selected at a specific time those profiles including data, at least the profile picture and personal information. We have ignored those profiles without data in the personal information section because we consider them to be inconclusive in order to understand the purpose of the analysis previously specified in this section. Altogether, we worked with 276 profile biographies on Twitter and Instagram that met all the proposed requirements. When we find ourselves with different interfaces, each social network has its own peculiarities when it comes to dealing with the results obtained. On Instagram's biographies, we have focused on the different elements of analysis: @Username / Name / Profile photo / Personal information. On Twitter's biographies, we have focused on the different elements of analysis: @Username / Name / Profile photo / Cover photo / Personal information / Linked links.

## **5. Discussion and conclusion**

Some of the conclusions and keys to the educational approach to affective relationships brokered by digital socialization environments that we have found are the following.

### **5.1. Self-representations, otherness and contexts of contacts and social experimentation**

Young identities in social networks meet the self-perceived reality of the "I" and extend it across different digital and analog social contexts. Although there are nuances between the different networks, our research leads us to agree with other researches advocating digital identity is a more or less faithful expression of the assumed analogical identity (Back et al., 2010; Oberst, Chamarro, & Renau, 2016; Wu, Chang, & Yuan, 2014). The profiles, especially those of Instagram, are a first public presentation of the person replacing first glimpses and function as simulations of the subjective and external physical presence. When developing these profiles we find very explicit personal data (names, surnames, dates of birth, locations, etc.), real profile photographs focused on individuality, and a clear orientation to reaffirm the idea of a couple in those cases in which the bond becomes public.

Personal information on display is managed shaped like "business cards" which give priority to offering contacts (or potential contacts) other more personal digital communication means available and reachable for an individual wishing to establish any kind of interaction. These pathways can be phone numbers linked to WhatsApp, Snapchat profiles, or private message calls.

The digital identities constructed and projected are linked to the analogical experience, and the analogical is under discussion and connected through the digital field. There is continuity between planes, remaining connected and being able to see in both the changes taking place through the other. Widely, young people under the age of 18 use technologies to connect and deepen relationships with those people they actually or potentially met in person (Liu, Yin, & Huang, 2013).

Starting from the main idea that digital identities are subjective expressions of analogical realities, a characteristic is detected that covers and defines them: a component of otherness or otherness of identities as part of their development process, starting from the aspirations of what one wants/wish to be and is justified according to the embodied gaze from other people. Digital identity is transformed into a trial and

error space in a security environment over which there is some control, where tests responses offer information about what is positively or negatively valued and, therefore, model the components to incorporate or reject in the identity construction.

Digital identities, and everything involved in them, set themselves as shared ideals and proomted thanks to the appreciation and support from other (González & San Fabián, 2018). Identities are compared with those of peers (Oberst et al., 2016) and references. Thus, we support the Lasén (2012) theory in which digital identity is justified as a verification game that starts from a presentation (of my body and my "I"), a representation (for oneself and others) and an incarnation or embodiment.

## **5.2. Deconstructing privacy and intimacy concepts**

Privacy and intimacy concepts are constantly changing. This change is fostered by the logics of interaction and presence on social networks, otherness as the defining axis for constructing digital identities, and the coexistence of all this with personal development processes and self-assertion (Tello, 2013). Intimacy and privacy no longer have the supreme and unequivocal value that they held years ago. People who share their profiles on social networks become public figures, which means they can manage life plans. Certain questions that were previously limited to the private plane of the most intimate life can now be set up as a structured feature of public identities in a conscious way. The judgment and consideration of what others have posted on networks is personalized, creating a whole system of values around social behavior, which we sometimes try to extend to other people without taking into account personal or generational particularities.

Our value system will depend on personal perceptions, experiences and degree of alignment with society in virtual environments, among other issues. They are used to seeing very intimate posts from media references and peers. These posts can be positively reinforced, becoming positive examples of what to do or not to do on the Internet. In addition, they carry with them a whole complex ideology that involves them emotionally: expressing the affections to whom I love, expressing myself to others as someone who loves and is loved, conceiving myself in public as someone attractive and achieving reaffirmation from others. The dichotomy between achieving a certain social status and maintaining a secure privacy becomes complex when dispensing with the intimate becomes a bargaining chip with which for reaching a certain type of social satisfaction. When an adult tries to assimilate this situation, difficulties in understanding can arise due to a very different socialization experience, where the plans were obviously sealed and tinged with unquestionable axioms: private life is shady, and sharing it is shameful and dangerous. In the era of the paparazzi and gossip columns, safeguarding the private was a strength slogan against certain types of media attacks. The coexistence of these two tendencies is a difficulty for empathy and understanding of digital social activity. There is a tendency to treat young socialization from a perspective that is not only inconsistent with the vital moment, but also with the digital one. Trying to impose a privacy and intimacy concept prior to the "Instagram era" leads to a futile debate. The general value system has changed and is currently diverse, so it is necessary to attend to a public-private scenario (De Frutos & Vázquez, 2012) in which privacy lacks in transparency and is difficult to manage due to the breakdowns of pre-established limits and physical-temporal boundaries.

### 5.3. The affect as key element in the process of intervention and educational counselling

We emphasize that educational attention regarding affective processes linked to the emotional development of young people is an essential element to take into account in socio-educational intervention processes. The relationship between these variables and student well-being or school performance Renau, Oberst, & Carbonell-Sánchez, 2013; Ros-Morente, Filella-Guiu, Ribes-Castells, & Pérez-Escoda, 2017) seems to point to the relevant key of incorporating this knowledge as part of the formal academic curriculum. Likewise, teachers must receive quality, in-depth training that opens up new opportunities along these lines, and we therefore demand the incorporation of these issues into both ongoing teacher training plans and undergraduate and master's degrees that enable teaching and guidance (Martínez et al., 2013; Preinfalk-Fernandez, 2015).

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