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## **Digital social networks as spaces for sociability among adolescents. Case study: Escolapios school in Aluche**

### **Las redes sociales digitales como espacios de sociabilidad de los adolescentes. El caso del colegio Escolapios de Aluche**

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#### **Abstract**

Opposite to the limited social skills in the offline, where the casual sociability spaces are becoming more restricted, virtual sociability brings teenagers unlimited possibilities when building relationships with their equals. This dissertation focuses on the importance of virtual social nets in the socialization of teenagers and the main social practice's. Methodology has been qualitative; there has been conducted 4 different discussion groups among teenagers between 11 and 18 years old. For teenagers opening a profile of the social media is considered an initiation rite and represents a crucial function in their social inclusion. These networks allow them to grow the number of contacts and to interact as equals with anyone who has a profile on them. One of the main social practice stands out the fact of scouting, mainly with pictures and videos related with their daily life and they use it as reference that helps in their identity and socialization processes. The essay provides evidence also about the importance of these social practices when growing their social capital and achieving the recognition.

#### **Keywords**

Teenagers; social networks; sociability; digital identity; influencers.

#### **Resumen**

*Frente a las limitaciones que se observan en la sociabilidad offline, donde los espacios para la sociabilidad informal cada vez son más restringidos, la sociabilidad virtual ofrece al adolescente unas posibilidades ilimitadas a la hora de relacionarse con sus iguales. Este trabajo se centra en el papel que tienen las redes sociales virtuales en la socialización de los adolescentes y en las principales prácticas de sociabilidad. La metodología utilizada ha sido la cualitativa; se han realizado cuatro grupos de discusión con adolescentes de 11 a 18 años. Para los adolescentes abrirse un perfil en las redes sociales constituye un auténtico rito de paso y cumple una función primordial en su inserción social. Estas redes les permiten ampliar su red de contactos e interactuar de igual a igual con cualquiera que tenga un perfil en ellas. Entre las prácticas de sociabilidad sobresale la de mirar/"cotillear", principalmente fotos y vídeos relacionados con la vida cotidiana como referencia y ayuda en su proceso identitario y de socialización. El trabajo también proporciona evidencias sobre la importancia que adquieren las prácticas de sociabilidad en la adolescencia a la hora de incrementar su capital social y conseguir el reconocimiento.*

#### **Palabras clave**

Adolescentes; redes sociales; sociabilidad; identidad digital; influencers.

## 1. Introduction

This paper aims to analyze how teens perceive online social networks, how this age group appropriates these digital platforms for peer sociability and what forms of interaction are adopted in this process.

Sociability is understood as humans' natural form to relate to each other (Quintero, 2005), a tendency or impulse to establish relationships and interact with others, a "ludic form of association" (Simmel, 2002:197) whose only interest is association itself. This concept that should be distinguished from socialization, which alludes to the transformations experienced as a result of interaction; a process that, unlike sociability, involves the integration of social and cultural habits, values and norms.

### 1.1. Theoretical framework

The literature on the sociability of teens and young people in online social networks often offers extreme views. On the one hand, from an apocalyptic perspective, some authors consider that online social networks are actually asocial contexts (Herrera Harfuch, Pacheco Murguía, Palomar Lever and Zavala Andrade, 2010) and that the Internet causes social isolation, because it offers people a way to escape real life and a substitute for relationships and the possibilities for real interactions (Tsitsika, Tzavela and Mavromatí, 2013, in Fernández Rodríguez and Gutiérrez Pequeño, 2017). On the other hand, and from a more integrated perspective, other authors believe that the Internet enhances sociability, in both near and distance environments, that it increases the number and diversity of social relationships exponentially (Castells, 2001; Reig, 2012), and that it reduces isolation and generates a sense of belonging to a greater community (Campos Freire, 2008). From this perspective, the behaviors of teens and young people in online social networks assimilate daily life behaviors, which generates an offline/online continuum (Morduchowicz, 2012). As Winocur (2006:577) points out, interaction in the virtual space neither weakens nor replaces traditional forms of exchange, but on the contrary, it reinforces and reproduces those real-life bonds that are threatened by big-city lifestyles, which have become worse today.

We live in uncertain times and it is difficult not to agree, at least in part, with any of these antagonistic positions. These types of debates are usually associated to paradigm shifts, like the one produced by the social impacts of new information and communication technologies, which affect the possibilities of global communication (Bueno Gómez, 2010) and the referents of traditional sociability. In the context of the "Internet Galaxy" (Castells, 2001), we are witnessing a reconfiguration of the traditional categories of time and space (Giddens, 2000) and the dissociation of social relationships as they were in traditional societies, in which sociability was based on the values that kept the members of a community united. In the Internet society, sociability revolves around a great diversity of interests, upon which the network expands and generates a multitude of virtual communities (Rheingold, 2004). According to Wellman (2001, quoted in Castells, 2001: 148), these communities are becoming the mainstay of virtual sociability as they provide "support, information, a sense of belonging and a social identity". Thus, the virtual communities and online social networks that exist on the Internet are based on fleeting and temporary contacts with people who are basically strangers, and on relationships built around the mere pleasure of being related and/or individual preferences. These relationships are cyclical and when they become "exhausted or change, 'the community' disappears or develops around other people" (Winocur, 2006: 575).

The resulting consequences include a widespread weakening of social ties and the configuration of social networks on the Internet as the mainstays of this type of weak bonds (Blanco, 1999) and as enablers of strong distance relations (Castells, 2001).

In this context, online social networks can be understood as "cultural artifacts" (Hine, 2004), as they are the mainstays of relationships in the Internet culture, where the strength of weak ties (Granovetter, 1973) predominates and, due to their temporal nature and lack of emotional intimacy, act as a bridge and promote fluid relations in the context of the network society. It is precisely these weak ties what favor exchange in social networks and enable network members to get greater access to new ideas and information.

From this perspective, social networks recognize and expand the weak ties (Díaz Gandasegui, 2011) that hold liquid modernity (Bauman, 1999) together. In this social model, dominated by ephemeral relationships, individuals gradually abandon the sociability of public spaces and fall back into private spaces. In short, this type of sociability is characterized by the fragile and temporary nature of personal interactions (Moreno Mínguez and Suárez Hernan, 2010), which favors the constant circulation of information and the creation of new relationships in online social networks that users can join and leave freely without any restrictions (Cachia, 2008).

These transformations put the "me" at the center of everybody's eyes and force individuals to become fully autonomous, to "produce, stage and cobble together their biographies themselves" (Beck, Giddens and Lash, 2008:28) and to be permanently interrelated, which has been called "networked individualism" (Wellman, Quan-Haase, Boase, Chen, Hampton, De Díaz and Miyata, 2003), "personalized communities" (Wellman, 2001) and "connected individualism" (Flichy, 2006).

These phenomena are especially relevant in adolescence, an especially delicate developmental stage in which individuals mature and face the challenge of configuring their identity (Tesouro Cid, Palomanes Espadalé, Bonachera Carreras and Martínez Fernández, 2013) and finding themselves and their place in society. This process culminates in the configuration of a solid and stable personality, which reflects a balance between the individual's own personality, society and surrounding environment (Arab and Díaz, 2015).

As Ruiz-LaBella and De-Juanas Oliva (2013:107) point out, technological advances have allowed teens to configure their identity in a different way, "based on their own activity and the activity of others in this environment". This identity can be both real and virtual and, in the case of the latter, it can be multiple and even anonymous, reflecting the dissolution of the private and intimate spheres.

As Menezes, Arvanitidis, Smaniotto Cost and Weinstein (2019:117) point out, technology devices are acquiring the status of "humanized friends" among teens, substituting in some cases real friends and companions.

In this context, online social networks, with their tools for interpersonal communication and community creation, are presented as new and privileged symbolic environments for the online sociability of teens (Basile and Linne, 2015), who feel insecure but need to open up to others and establish social relationships. As Merino Malillos (2011:40) indicates, online social networks help young people "develop a digital sociability whose practice is of vital importance, because it means fostering interactivity and the constant flow of relationships with peers and, in that sense, the social anchorage with them".

Teen's digital and real identities do not have to be identical. In fact, teens can highlight or modify some qualities of their digital identity and, as Cachia (2008) points out, sometimes teens visualize their digital identity in online social networks before than their real one. In the creation of digital profiles in social networks teens take more into consideration the opinion of others than their own opinions, because they want to be accepted by others and make a big social impact (Díaz Gandasegui, 2011), which also explains the importance they give to having many followers, being popular and being recognized by others (Cáceres Zapatero, Brändle Señán and Ruiz San Román, 2017).

Teens are more committed to face-to-face interpersonal relationships than to those mediated by the screen (Segovia Aguilar, Mérida Serrano, Olivares García and González Alfaya, 2016), for which they follow different strategies (Eftekhar, Fullwood and Morris, 2014; Arab and Díaz, 2015; Segovia Aguilar, Mérida Serrano, Olivares García and González Alfaya, 2016).

In online social networks, teens find people with behaviors and lifestyles they identify with and also the possibility of creating content and expressing "technological meanings that affirm their young self and the development of their sociality" (Merino Malillos, 2011:33).

However, teens and young people also face a space of dualities that they must learn to manage (Megías Queirós and Rodríguez San Julián, 2018). The current communication paradigm involves advantages and possibilities for teens, but also a series of objective dangers, such as becoming the target of insults, threats and acts of exclusion. In this sense Páez, Luzardo and Vera (2019) highlight that teens may distrust the people they interact with, but do not consider that the web itself can be a source of risks; they are not aware of all the data they send each time they upload content to online social networks.

## 1.2. Research problem and objectives

As mentioned in the introduction, in this context, the purpose of this work is to analyze teens' perception and management of online social networks in the configuration of their identity.

To this end, the main research objectives of this study are:

- Analyze teens' sociability in the offline and online environments.
- Understand what it means for teens to be part of an online social network.
- Explore how teens understand and manage their identity in online social networks.

- Identify the types of people teens include in their personal networks and the relationships they establish with them.
- Identify teens' main practices of sociability in online social networks.

Despite the growing interest in the influence of online social networks in the identity construction and sociability of young people and teens, this topic has not been addressed in depth in academic publications, as Pérez-Torres, Pastor-Ruiz and Abarrou-Ben-Boubaker (2018) have found out.

This research explores how teens' appropriate online social networks for their sociability, and how their practices evolve from the time they start using them until they become skilled users.

## 2. Methods

The study adopts a qualitative approach based on the focus group method, due to its capacity to configure broad yet dialectically structured discursive frameworks. As Canales and Peinado (1995: 295) point out, the focus group "allows the re-construction of social meaning within a discursive-group situation".

The focus group technique is the most appropriate for understanding individual identity in a context of influence and so it is the most suitable to understand the identity of teens as a social group, which is our main objective. For Callejo (2002:96), "focus groups dynamics can be understood as a process that moderates individualism, as a loss of individualities that allow the emergence of a collective discourse and a group identity".

For this "socialized conversation" (Alonso, 1996: 93), we did not make direct questions but rather raised issues, which were divided in three thematic blocs:

- Most common activities on the Internet.
- Attitudes and motivations towards online social networks.
- Initiation in social networks and forms of participation and interaction

This structure is more conceptual than experiential, as in the conversational dynamics these topics were raised during the dialectical exchanges between of participants (Emic perspective) to encourage teens to spontaneously talk about their forms of sociability in online social networks.

The study sample is composed of students enrolled in Our Lady's Piarist School located in Aluche, Madrid (Colegio Nuestra Señora de las Escuelas Pías). The following variables were considered for the selection of this sample:

- Age: 11-18 years of age, divided into four groups: 11-12, 13-14, 15-16 and 17-18. This segmentation responds to the multiple developmental stages of adolescence and to the need to identify the changes teens experience in terms of social behaviors since they start using online social networks until they become skilled users.
- Education and sociocultural level: We have considered all the grades taught in the selected school: 6th grade of elementary education; 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th grades of secondary education; and 1st and 2nd grades of Basic Vocational Training<sup>[1]</sup>. The selected school center is line 3, so it was possible to choose students from different social classes for each education level.
- Medium and high profile in the use of new technologies.

The recruitment of participants was carried out through the school's teachers, who chose the students who met the criteria for the integration of each focus group. Students were invited to participate and then permission was requested from their parents.

Four focus groups (FG) were formed, applying a homogeneity/heterogeneity criterion. All of them were mixed, segmented in homogeneous age intervals, and were composed of 6 to 8 participants <sup>[2]</sup> each. The final composition was as follows:

- FG1:11-12 years: Composed of 8 participants: 50% from 6th grade of elementary education and 50% from 1st grade of secondary education; 50% are girls and 50% are boys. This group is relevant because its members are mainly YouTube users and have not yet made the jump to the most socially oriented social networks, such as Instagram and Facebook. They know these networks but do not have parental consent to use them.

- FG2:13-14 years: Composed of 7 participants: 4 from 2nd grade of secondary education (2 girls and 2 boys) and 3 from 3rd grade of secondary education (2 girls and 1 boy). This group represents teens who are already beginning to use social networks like Instagram, mainly to be connected with their close social circle. They also have accounts in other online social networks considered to be more infantile, such as Snapchat and Musical.ly.
- FG3:15-16 years: Composed of 8 participants (50% from 4th grade of secondary education and 50% from 1st grade of Basic Vocational Training; 50% are girls and 50% are boys. These participants already use online social networks like Instagram; they upload content to their personal profiles and follow people from within and outside their social circles.
- FG4:17-18 years: Composed of 6 participants (50% of 4th grade of secondary education and 50% from 2nd grade of Basic Vocational Training; 4 are boys and 2 are girls. They are mature users of online social networks, and some of them manage more than one account (one public and one private).

This sample has helped us to understand how teens' practices of sociability evolve in online social networks; how their interest on YouTube and their personal environment shifts to meeting new people and broadening their circle of friends; how parental control is replaced by self-management; and how they manage to expand their personal networks and sense of belonging to virtual communities.

The focus group sessions were carried out between April and June of 2018, in the selected school center. They lasted about 90 minutes each and all of them were audio-recorded and transcribed.

The fact that all students in the sample knew each other constituted a limitation, but also favored participants' expression of the meanings of their everyday practices of sociability and encouraged very spontaneous and participatory group dynamics.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Virtual environments <sup>[3]</sup> as spaces for social interaction

Interviewees move effortlessly between their off-line and online realities. They enter and leave the real world and virtual simultaneously and continuously. Both worlds are influenced and integrated in their daily experience. Even when they are offline, they are still connected, on the lookout for WhatsApp messages or notifications from social networks. They also remain connected to the real world, even if they are physically connected to the Internet.

However, beyond the fact that these two worlds are convergent and complementary, teens experience them differently: the virtual space acquires a certain prevalence in parallel to its socialization process.

Teens' full integration into the virtual world starts when they get their own smartphone, which coincides with their entry into adolescence. However, teens were completely familiar with virtual spaces such as YouTube since their childhood. The virtual world is then offered to teens as an alternative to real life, and they access it and practice sociability when they are bored and alone, which is a very common experience according to them:

"I mostly watch YouTubers, many of them..., I like them because I have such good times with them. When I'm tired of studying or when I'm sad, I watch a video and I get happy for a while" (FG2).

Participants mentioned some of the causes that led them to intensify their sociability in the virtual environment, such as, for example, the isolation they experience in cities, the gradual decrease in everyday spaces for informal interaction, and large periods they spend home alone, possibly due to the working conditions of their parents.

"I can't live without my tablet at home, but when I am out in the village I get very nervous when people are up in their phones. If you are home, ok then, but if you're outside on the streets, you can ride a bike or whatever..."

"Sometimes I get bored too, but as I have activities to do outside, for example, sports..., but the days I don't have things to do I get bored" (FG1).

This isolation is not only experienced in real life, but also in the virtual world through the YouTubers they follow.

"They're stuck in their house, recording videos on their room, alone, isolated... They go out to eat, to the bathroom, and that's it, back to the computer."

-Being so long at home, they do not have much social life, because they spend half of their day playing video games, editing videos, and only stop to eat, go to the bathroom and that's is, back to the computer" (FG1).

Teen's virtual relationships have the added advantage that they are less controlled by their parents and can be accessed immediately to broaden the circle of friendships, new friends online, who also offer the possibility of real relationships.

"I did not know the girl I'm with now at all... she was introduced to me... I met her on Instagram. We met in person thanks to a colleague, and now I'm with her" (FG4).

Teens' bonds with online friends is weak, but it is advisable to remember the "strength of weak ties" (Granovetter, 1973) in the context of the Network society, due to their role in the maintenance of the information flow in social groups.

Virtual sociability is practiced primarily through applications, including YouTube, WhatsApp and online social networks (Instagram, Musical.ly and Snapchat are their favorites), which teens use differently.

WhatsApp is the most used app of all. Teens' are always using it regardless of time or situation with their real-life friends and are on the lookout for incoming messages.

"If I have no WhatsApp, I have no smartphone... It's like part of your daily life, you go out or you're at school and you take your phone for two minutes and the first thing you do is open up WhatsApp" (FG4).

YouTube is the application through which teens access a wider space and where they find very diverse videos. It is accessed mainly through the computer, because it consumes a great deal of data and is a more relaxed practice.

Teens' use of YouTube is not so oriented to interaction with peers, and that is why some teens do not consider it a social network.

"I do not consider YouTube a social network, because you cannot chat with your friends. You can watch videos and make comments, so I do not consider it is a social network, as such. I consider it as an application where to listen to music and that kind of stuff..

- Maybe if one uploaded content and were a YouTuber, then one could consider it, as you publish your life for others, but if you do not post content and simply watch it, then I do not consider it much a social network" (FG3).

In YouTube, relationships are always mediated by YouTubers, guys like them who have become professionals.

"Many of the things we do are done by other people as part of their professional job, and so we like to see them. They play and review the video games that me and my classmates play at home" (FG1).

Being a professional has its advantages (leadership, power of influence, an income...), but also some drawbacks (stress, sacrifice, pressure to satisfy followers' demands, etc.)

"Being a YouTuber must be very demanding... You promise your subscribers you will upload a video every day... This is very demanding because some days you have no idea what to do (or don't have the time for it) and at night you are wondering 'what will I do tomorrow? a blog, a video game?... And then people are always telling you 'upload another video', 'do one about this and that'... They stress you out" (FG1).

YouTubers are also active in online social networks, where they act as influencers, and some of them use commercial marketing strategies for self-promotion (giveaways, raffles...).

"Authentic" social networks, such as Instagram, are considered natural spaces for virtual sociability. Through them, teens communicate with friends they know in the real world as well as with anyone who has an account, whom they assume is "everyone", because not being in online social networks today is considered to be 'weird'.

Unlike YouTube, in online social networks people matter more than content, and the personal relationships that are established there are direct and egalitarian, even the relationships established with professionals (influencers, brands...), because anyone can participate by sharing content.

Teens compare digital and analogue technologies and find similarities between television and YouTube, which has more varied and personalized content. For them, WhatsApp is the closest thing to phone communication, but in a multimedia version. The more sociability-oriented online social networks are compared to traditional places of informal socialization, where they gather to form virtual communities.

In short, virtual sociability does not contradict offline sociability. Both converge and contribute to the socialization of young people, but there is a certain prevalence of virtual practices of sociability, which are more versatile than offline practices, as in online social networks teens can interact without temporal limitations.

However, there are also critical voices against people's current dependence on the online world to the detriment of the real world, mainly referring to the time they spent on online social networks, which in many cases is interpreted as "a waste of time" and generates some guilt.

"What happens is that sometimes it takes up your time, a time that you should dedicate to something else.

- It is true... and instead of doing my chores I use social networks, which for me is more fun than having to do homework" (FG3).

### **3.2. Online social networks as rites of passage to sociability in teens**

"Authentic" online social networks (like Instagram) have become the sociability spaces par excellence in adolescence. They favor the sense of belonging and social inclusion and allow teens to share ideas and feelings with their peers, even anonymously.

In these social networks, teens project their most valued self ("ideal self") in order to be better accepted

"... be more sociable because, for example, if you do not talk much with people from 1st grade and they don't know how you are, whether you are nice or not; So you could talk to them on Instagram, and they can see your stories and say 'Oh, he is not too bad', because at school you act more serious" (FG2).

For teens, opening up an account in online social networks is a rite of passage that marks their transition from childhood to adolescence, and this requires parental permission. Teens do and try to imitate what they see young people around them do.

"I heard everyone was there and they were talking things about Instagram, my friends had it... and so I said 'I want it too" (FG2).

"People said 'I have posted a photo in Instagram' and 'I have uploaded a story', and I said 'well, I'm going to try it'. I asked my parents to let me do it, they said yes, and I did it" (FG2).

In this rite of passage teens move from a more passive activity on the Internet, focused almost exclusively on watching YouTube videos, to the creation of a network of contacts with whom to interact and share experiences.

It is a process of socialization that takes place in three steps. The first one is to own a smartphone and get their parents' permission to use, first, the most child-friendly apps, such as Musical.ly.

"I have a friend who opened it with her father, that is, her father knew the photos she was posting; and I asked my parents and they said yes, and so I have an account with my mother... I ask her whether I can post this or that picture and she say yes or no" (FG2).

The second step is when parents agree to let teens create an account on social networks, such as Instagram, which in most cases is shared with parents.

"The first time was Snapchat, and Instagram was like... ¡oh my god!, I a whole world opens up, because until then talking with friends was very limited, you had to go to school or your mother called theirs. It gives you freedom to talk to whoever you want" (FG3).

The third step is when teens set up their own profile, public and/or private, and can have more than one account. This change represents the passage from adolescence to youth.

It is common for teens to experiment with several social networks during their initiation, but as their become more experienced in their use, they tend to use only the most popular. For the most experienced teens, each network has a different use and functionality. For those who are new in social networks, the only thing

that matters is to have their friends in their network. However, for all teens, the key factor to use a social network is that "it is fashionable".

"At first, I was on all of them, I used everything I saw. Then Instagram became popular, so I deleted all the others and kept Instagram [...] All people use Instagram, because all you need to do is to upload a photo and get likes" (FG4).

For teens, having a profile in online social networks (for 13 and 14-year-olds) means having their own space to relate with real friends also in the virtual environment, expand their network of friends and follow celebrities, be they actors, athletes or influencers. Teens also follow corporations (like sports clubs) and leading brands or simply brands they identify with.

On the other hand, authentic virtual communities are formed in online social networks around personal connections or shared interests. In this sense, virtual communities revolve around two very important elements for teens: videogames, teen's main hobby and the cultural product of their time <sup>[4]</sup>, and celebrities and/or influencers, who talk about their everyday life and share opinions and advice. The success of this type of communities among teens is understandable, given that they are in need of role models.

But these are not the only virtual communities where teens socialize on the Internet. There are many others that revolve around more diverse topics: beauty and cosmetics, fashion and styling, music, humor, trends, etc.

### 3.3. Practices of sociability in online social networks

One of the main advantages of sociability in online social networks is that teens have the power to control their connection-disconnection with their contacts. They can decide when, how and for whom to be visible or not. Teens can share content very easily, through tags and direct messages:

"I only look, and if I liked it, I share it with a friend.

- There are two ways to do it, through a tag or by direct message..., I mostly share content directly, which is private" (FG3).

Teens' practices of sociability in online social networks focus on four fundamental actions, which according to order of importance are:

- Looking and gossip.
- Replies and comments.
- Active participation through content posting and sharing.
- Collective collaboration and sharing.

#### 3.3.1. Looking and gossip

Teens' main activity in online social networks is to look at the content posted by their contacts, mainly in Instagram. This habit is associated with "fun" and "entertainment", so they do it when they are "bored", as a way to escape their real life and "gossip" about other people.

"When you get bored you go look at people's stories (Instagram).

- Yes, you do it because you are curios, for gossip...

- You say 'I'm going to see where my favorite YouTuber is', and since YouTubers are the most important people, you are always watching what they do, what they eat, what they dine..." (FG2).

However, other sorts of deeper feeling emerge, because through this activity teens contrast their behaviors with those of the other people they watch.

"I want to know what to do to be like them. I'd like to be 18 years old, like that guy, not having to worry about school and being well-off at 18" (FG4).

Teens even stalk those who have become successful in social networks.

"We like that he entertains us, and we want to know how he got this far.

- Watching their stories and seeing how they got here.

- Yes, I stalk him and want to gossip about his life" (FG4).

Thus, stalking can be related to the importance that teens grant to role models and behaviors, taking into account that they are in the process of social integration and identity construction.

### 3.3.2. Replies and comments

A regular practice of sociability among teens is to like and/or comment what their contacts publish. This is a very gratifying form of connection, because a like indicates that the content has been seen and that people found it interesting and opens up the possibility for further dialogue.

"He may post a picture and I comment 'very handsome', or 'where are you?'" (FG2).

"You feel good when someone replies to you, when communication is reciprocal" (FG3).

"You give a like to a person, he likes you back, you see he sees your stories... There is a feeling there..." (FG4).

Teens mostly comment the content posted by people they know in real life, as a way to continue their communication in the virtual environment. Teens share a common context with their real friends, so there is more freedom to make comments, knowing that they will always be well interpreted.

"If the comment is made by one of your very good friends, you can make a bad comment as a joke, because you know that he is going to take it well... just to have a laugh with your friends" (FG3).

The most experienced teens also reply to the messages of strangers, when there is a chance to start a friendship.

"If someone I know replies I feel good, but if a stranger says 'Hello, how are you?' I think 'I don't know him', but I reply and make friends with him, and that's it" (FG4).

Teens expect their friends to react to their posts, but when it comes to "celebrities" they do not expect a response and interact less.

"For example, it is a footballer's birthday and I see 80,000 comments congratulating him. It is silly because he is not even going to look at it, say thank you or say anything at all" (FG4).

In this case, teens comment on celebrities' posts not to receive a response, which is very unlikely, but to engage with other followers and reinforce their sense of belonging to a community.

"I hasn't happened to me and I don't think it will, but... (laughter) it would be like 'Wow! A famous YouTuber has replied to my comment', but it has not happened yet" (FG3).

The comments teens make are fundamentally positive, because they do not want to engage in a discussion or get in trouble. They want to be perceived as empathic and nice persons to receive a similar deal.

"When you make a comment, it will be positive... You're not going to say that you don't like someone... You must control yourself to avoid getting yourself in a discussion or making a hurtful comment. You simply don't do it" (FG3).

However, for teens, this does not mean they are afraid of ill-intentioned comments, which are also common. Participants spontaneously mentioned practices related to cyber bullying and harassment. They mention that there are hate groups in online social networks where offensive messages predominate, and that they also follow these groups because they are funny.

### 3.3.3. Uploading of content

The most active practices, such as uploading and sharing content, are much less common among teens.

"I seldomly do it" (FG2).

"I post photos every 2 weeks or so..." (FG3).

It should be noted that parents can exercise some control over the content their children post, especially over the youngest users.

"I experienced the same that happened to my classmate, but instead of my mother telling me 'yes' or 'not', I post what I want and if my mother sees it, well ok, and if she doesn't, it is also ok (laugh), I hide it" (FG2).

Obviously, teens are more insecure when it comes to assessing the quality and relevance of the content they publish.

"I might take 1 or 2 months before to post a photo because I do not post photos that I don't like.

- Moreover, you also need a nice place to take your photo" (FG2).

The experiences that teens share almost always referred to happy, idyllic moments, and reflect their most valued self because they seek to provoke desires of positive identification, as influencers/celebrities do, and to gain the recognition of others <sup>[5]</sup>.

The most active participation in online social networks also involves a series of consequences: being on the lookout for their contacts' messages, the type of comments they receive, being caught up in replying comments, and a series of uncertainties that may affect their self-esteem and the image they want to project.

"When I see on my tablet that I have a new comment, I quickly check what they have said about me. I don't reply to those who criticize me, I do not reply to them; and to those who tell me I did a good video, I tell them 'thank you'" (FG1).

"You feel phenomenal when you see people commenting on the photo you posted" (FG2).

Moreover, and in the longer term, the contents posted today can have uncontrollable repercussions in the future.

"...sometimes I think about it. When I go to work somewhere, they will Google my name and will see all these social networks that we have, all the things about me, like photos of me playing the fool in my town..., darn, in social networks all the things you publish, like the weirdest things, will always stay there" (FG3).

"My mother always tells me 'do not post things that can harm you'" (FG3).

Other fears are generated by the improper use that others can make of the content teens post, because, although they set their accounts to be private, their personal network of contacts includes many people that teens have never met in their real life.

"Everybody has to be responsibility... If you have your account set as private, you know the people who follow you... For example, I might not know somebody so well, but I keep him in my network because people I do know, know him. In this case I say 'well, if he wants to follow me, that's fine', but it is true that when you upload a photo, people can save it. You can see how many people have saved it, but you don't know who they are and what they are going to do with it" (FG3).

### 3.3.4. Collective collaboration

Another practice of sociability that is also mentioned, although only by a minority of tens, is collaborative practices, in which teens can participate anonymously in the construction of a story. This type of sociability generates a strong sense of group belonging and self-esteem.

"You can participate, for example, in groups of comedy and memes and send in an anonymous story and if he thinks it is good and funny, he posts it up for his followers to see and laugh at the story" (FG3).

"One of my stories was published once... It felt very good. I told all friends close to me at that time: 'Look, I sent this story and they published it'" (FG3).

An application that is mentioned in this sense is Wattpad:

"People write their own novels and then publish them, and we can read them and write our own" (FG4).

## 4. Discussion

Online social networks have become cultural elements that identify the new generations, because they provide a clear generational identity and a "feeling of contemporaneity" (Merino Malillos, 2011), and also

because help people avoid the limitations imposed by reality. Faced with face-to-face sociability, where teens can feel insecure and vulnerable, in virtual sociability teens feel protected by the screen. It has been observed that after the virtual activity teens desire to turn online relationships into real-life relationships, as Winocur (2006) has found. Based on the previous, it can be argued that online social networks act as authentic "cultural artifacts" (Hine, 2004) that enhance, and modify, the forms of sociability of the past.

The results of our research clearly show how online social networks allow teens to compensate for the isolation and loneliness (Simmel, 1986) of modern life, which limits teens' need to develop relationships with their peers, by offering as a permanently open channel to satisfy their sociability needs. Moreover, online social networks can offer teens the advantage that they can easily escape parental control.

These results are in line with those of Menezes et al. (2019), who found out that teens are being retreating to the virtual space due to the increasing space and mobility restrictions they face, and that teens find in social networks a new experiential place for isolation and interaction.

At first, teens' parents, who are considered less familiar with this environment, supervise the practices of sociability of their children in online social networks (and especially of their daughters, until they are 15 or 16). However, the role of teens' parents is limited to control and protection against teens' inexperience and possible external "threats". In terms of the transmission of cultural values, teens' parents have very little influence because they do not belong to the cultural model of teens. In this regard, teachers seem to have even less importance, as they are barely mentioned despite that the focus group sessions were held at a school.

For all this, teens consider their use of online social networks (like Instagram) for sociability as an important achievement, a rite of passage that means the end of childhood and their entry into youth. Teens show a growing interest in having an Instagram account as they grow older. For example, in the group of 11-12-year-olds, only one girl with an active profile had an Instagram account, while the majority of the group of 13-14-year-olds had an account in this network, although it was shared with parents in many cases. At 15, teens already feel autonomous enough to manage their own account and most of them, especially boys, set it to be public.

For teens, having their own space in Instagram -the most popular network among this age group- to project themselves is associated it with a feeling of maturity and autonomy to expand and manage their own network of contacts and to practice peer sociability. And given that teens project their most valued self, their self-esteem and acceptance can be benefited. As other studies have pointed out, access to online social networks favors teens' construction of subjectivity in the digital culture and reinforces their sense of belonging and inclusion through the many sociability activities that can be practiced in the virtual environment.

The practices of sociability in online social networks includes the search for role models to undergo the process of socialization, integrating the values and norms of the digital culture. In this sense, the function performed by influencers is very remarkable because they have become authentic role models for teens.

Teens appropriate online social networks as a source of prestige and inclusion in sociability spaces, bringing into play and expanding different forms of capital <sup>(6)</sup>: be it social, to facilitate the construction of an online network of contacts that is much larger than the one in real life; be it cultural, due to the cultural and technological empowerment teens' acquire in their practices of sociability and the continuous exchange of content; be it symbolic, as a consequence of the recognition received from others, which undoubtedly has effects on teens' self-esteem and social integration; be it economic, given that social networks users can make money on these platforms (as YouTubers and influencers do) or at least add activities to their CV, which can be beneficial to their professional future.

Teens profusely talk about all the advantages of using online social networks, for establishing relationships with others as well as for getting the news and/or evading reality. However, they are also aware of the dangers and abuses that social networks may entail, so they understand the concern of parents and society in general towards these forms of socialization, which are still novel and very uncertain. Teens themselves, especially girls, also feel these uncertainties and fears, which is a subject matter that was not part of the objectives of this study, but should be further researched in depth from an structural perspective, rather than from a quantitative approach, which has already been done in numerous studies.

Another limitation of our study is that we cannot delve into the differences between boys and girls because this independent variable was not controlled, given that all the focus groups were mixed. Therefore, future research on the subject should use a sample design that combines heterogeneous and homogeneous focus groups to be able to determine the influence of the sex variable in teens' discourses, especially with regards to their management of social network accounts and their separation of the public and private spheres.

## 5. Conclusions

Teens' sociability takes place between the offline and online environments, which overlap in their daily lives. For teens, online social networks have become the natural and ludic way to interact uninterruptedly with their peers. While informal sociability spaces are decreasing in real life -teens have less and less time and spaces to interact with peers-, virtual sociability seems to have no limits, as it is accessible instantly and easily through the multiple computer applications available on the market, which teens use profusely.

In the virtual context, there are fundamentally three privileged spaces for teens' sociability: YouTube, WhatsApp and social networks like Instagram. In each of these three spaces teens perform different types of sociability.

WhatsApp is the most used application among teens, who use it to communicate with their closest social circle in a faster way. Its use is similar to that of traditional cell phones, but with all the multimedia resources offered by the Internet.

Teens use YouTube since they were children to watch a diversity of contents. This app is mainly used through the computer and it is not specifically designed for interaction with friends, and for this reason some teens do not consider it a social network. YouTube bears some resemblance to television based on the type of use teens make of it, although interaction is more direct and participative in the former. YouTubers have become role models for teens and exert a great influence on them, although teens are aware of the weight of fame.

Online social networks are "authentic" socialization spaces in the context of globalization, based on their scope and all the practices of sociability that they enable. They constitute a space in which all actors participate as equals and build authentic virtual communities. In online social networks teens can share ideas and feelings with their peers, anonymously and without parental sanctions. For teens, creating an account in online social networks means having their own space to project themselves and share interests with people who are not part of their nearby environment. Social networks also allow teens to build their own network of contacts to share experiences with and access a wide variety of lifestyles (influencers) that can guide the development of their identity.

Teen's networks of social contacts are composed of friends, both real or virtual, and many celebrities: who are famous people that teens follow and admire for their achievements (athletes, actors...) or for their popularity on social networks (YouTubers, instagramers and influencers of all kinds). Corporations (football teams, for example) and brands are also part of teens' social networks.

In online social networks, practices of sociability are divided into four groups: 1) looking and gossip, 2) replies and comments, 3) active participation through content posting and sharing, and 4) collective collaboration and sharing.

Looking and gossip is the main practice of sociability among teens. The main function of looking and gossip is entertainment, but they also serve as key references in teens' identity development and social integration.

Liking and/or commenting what other people post in online social networks is also a very common practice. Although in many cases these practices are rather phatic, non-expressive, types of response, they constitute very valuable forms of recognition, proportional to the category of the respondent. In the case of someone teens admire, a celebrity for example, these practices are considered a social recognition of enormous value.

Uploading content is less common, especially among the youngest teens, who feel more insecure. When teens publish something, they are very much aware of the possible reactions of other people and get frustrated when they do not get the expected reaction. Teens generally share happy experiences to provoke positive identifications and obtain recognition and approval.

Collaborative participation and sharing are a form of sociability that is only practiced by a minority of older teens, because it requires more experience and a certain collective consciousness.

Thus, virtual sociability has acquired enormous importance in teens' socialization process because it offers a wide variety of practices that favor teens' adaptation to digital culture.

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## Notes

1. The selected school (*Colegio Nuestra Señora de las Escuelas Pías / Our Lady's Piarist School in Aluche, Madrid*) does not offer high school education.
2. All groups were designed to have 8 participants, but some selected students missed their session (held between April and June 2018) because they interfered with their school examinations.
3. For the purposes of this work, virtual refers to ties and relationships that take place in online spaces, in contrast to face-to-face encounters and relationships that take place in physical (offline) spaces.
4. Reig and Vilches (2013) consider that video games have been the greatest introducers of technological devices and have led the great leap to Internet connection.
5. In this same sense, Martín Prada (2018) points out that "what almost everyone wants to achieve is a photograph that is appropriate to models that are already known and admired, to fit their reality in certain visual molds that are known to be worthy of applause and, therefore, suitable for use in online social practices" (position 1415 e-book).
6. "Capital" is understood as those resources that are invested to get benefits.

