

Introduction

Youth, gender identity and power in digital platforms

Guest-edited special issue:

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Two decades into the 21st century, we are living in a world that can be described as postdigital. Digital technologies have been integrated into all aspects of life (Knox, 2019). The online and offline domains are interwoven in our lives, and although they have never been ontologically separated spheres (Coeckelbergh, 2020), nothing can be considered any longer as purely and simply digital or analogical. This scenario requires a change in perspective that brings heterogeneity, complexity, and hybridity into the analysis (Haraway, 2016; Latour, 2008; Wägener-Böck, et al. 2023).

In considering the postdigital scenario, we should not lose sight of a variety of studies that identify a new era of capitalism supported by digital platforms (Srnicek, 2017) and the datafication of a large part of social processes and social interactions (Zuboff, 2019; Morozov, 2019). Digital platforms thus have become a central space in the economic, political, and cultural life of contemporary societies. Following van-Dijck (2016; 2018), they are frameworks that channel the social traffic on the Internet where technological architectures, business models and use practices come together. Through the datafication of interactions, including attention time and, when the infrastructure allows it, user reactions (even outside the platforms), digital supports connect these actions and gestures with complex tracking and commodification systems that have an increasing power and reach to organize frameworks of action, aesthetics, and ethics for millions of individuals. Within a framework of ostensible freedom, they regulate the practices and social representations based on a profound, opaque structure that continues to operate even when discourses of resistance are generated.

Thus, today's digital platforms provide frameworks where a sociability that is increasingly more technically mediated is formed and where identity scripts such as those analyzed in this monograph are offered. A particular concern of these studies is the changes in the subjectivation practices and identities, in an interchange process in which the media are actors in the process. The starting point is a relational conception of subjectivity, where individuals are conceived as subjects that consist of changing relations and boundaries between the individual and the collective, the public and the private, the masculine and the feminine, the animal, the machine and the human component. At this specific time of far-reaching, profound socio-technical transformations, we consider that it is important to look into the new boundaries between subjective and identity configurations.

An aspect in which we are especially interested in this monograph is the transformations in gender identities. It is known that gender relations, as a constitutive dimension of all relations, are inherent and inseparable from any reflection on social processes. Gender is neither a set of characteristics, nor a variable or a role, but the product of a certain type of social practices that are shaped within socio-technically mediated power relations. It is not a stable category, but a construction that is culturally and politically situated. Within the patriarchal structure of domination, cultural binary and hierarchical gender configurations have been naturalized and have been preserved, regulated

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and reproduced by different social mechanisms whose efficacy relies on the constant repetition of their logic, their rules, their ontology (Butler, 2007). Throughout history, the binary conception of gender has become a social construction that places men above women and where heterosexuality is the norm.

This binary, heteronormative pattern has recently been challenged as, on the one hand, its culturally constructed nature has become apparent and, on the other hand, the exclusions and oppressions that underpin it have been exposed. This opening to different possible varieties in gender identification has led to new experiences crisscrossed by differences in nationality, ethnicity, social class, among many others (Haraway, 2004). Today, gender identities are also shaped in digital platforms that provide a space which contributes to the promotion and visibilization of ideals and norms but also one that contributes to the imposition and subjection to such ideals and norms. Hence the interest in presenting research into the intersections between gender identity and digital platforms and the young, most of whom are users of these digital platforms and for whom these platforms have a growing weight in their subjective configuration, as analyzed below.



The volume which we are introducing represents a sample of the many contributions received. The great number of texts submitted for this dossier is a testament to the social and academic interest toward this topic and the need to continue deepening its study. Our interest was, from the outset, focused on adolescence, partly because of the scarcity of empirical research that pays attention to this age bracket, but also because of the importance of gaining an understanding of how they inhabit and take ownership of the different digital environments and what type of identity construction is built as a result of the practices they engage in within that framework. The selection that we are presenting seeks to give an account of the state of the art by displaying an innovative and challenging spectrum with significant contributions for advancement in this field of knowledge.

The study by Serrate-González, Sánchez-Rojo, Andrade-Silva & Muñoz-Rodríguez, "Onlife identity: gender and age in adolescent's online behavior", analyzes the practices of Spanish teenagers in social networks looking at gender and age differences. Based on a national survey administered to adolescents aged between 12 and 18 years (N=2076), the study looks into the use of applications and the ways of constructing identities online. Its findings show that there are significant gender differences, still linked to mandates and stereotypes inherited from the patriarchy, and that female adolescents are more likely to suffer harassment and feel negatively assessed than male adolescents. Its authors advocate for international longitudinal studies that make it possible to contrast these findings in wider scales and time frames.

The study by Ojeda, Espino, Elipe & del-Rey explores LGBTQ+ harassment from a internalized homonegativity, firstly looking at focus groups qualitatively and subsequently, in a second stage, quantitatively. It analyzes cybervictimization based on body and gender affective-sexual diversity and the potential moderating power of internalized homonegativity in adolescents aged 12 to 18. The sexual orientations and identities, as well as non-normative gender expressions, have become, on occasion, the victims of new forms of on-line hostility. The study shows that there are prejudices and

stereotypes in adolescent discourses regarding sex-gender diversity, the different involvement of LGBTQ+ cyber-bullying among sexual orientations and identities and gender expressions, as well as the determining role of internalized homonegativity in sensitizing and identifying with this problem.

The study by De-Coninck & d'Haenens addresses the differences in the development of digital competence between binary and non-binary youths, underlying the fact that gender identity as a binary construct (woman/girl-man/boy) is becoming obsolete. The study is based on data from online surveys collected from respondents aged 11 to 20 years between April and November 2021 in six European countries (Estonia, Finland, Germany, Italy, Poland and Portugal, N=6221), and its results show that non-binary youths use and feel more capable of creating content than the youths who identify as binary. This study suggests that the Internet allows them to access more relevant resources for their identity and to make the most of their identity safely, partly thanks to the anonymity of these media, as well as to relate easily to other LGBTQ members, thus strengthening the process of digitally “coming out”.

The study by Peña-Fernández, Larrondo-Ureta & Morales-i-Gras, “Feminist, Gender Identity and Polarization in TikTok and Twitter” makes a relevant contribution to understanding current feminist debates and their link to the different platforms. It presents a study focused on the analysis of the polarization taking place in the debate occurring on social networks, in the intersection between the defense of feminism and transsexuality, by analyzing the existing communities on Twitter and TikTok using Social Networks Analysis techniques. At this historical moment, the debate on identities and their political subject has been intense with “dialectic wars” and highly polarized discourses. Hence the value of the contribution of a study such as this, as it allows us to gain a deeper understanding of how, and at what level, these polarizations occur. Highly cohesive communities that are not very permeable are described and are characterized as highly homophile, although there is very little dialogue on the substantial differences between the social networks studied. In these social networks, the use of algorithms results in the formation of echo chambers and closed communities, which confirms the role of materialities in the configuration of the social practices with which the youth in these environments engage.

Lastly, the work by Regueira, González-Villa and Martínez-Piñeiro, “Adolescents’ selfies and video clips: role of gender, territory and sociocultural level”, explores the production of selfies and video clips amongst teenagers in Puebla (Mexico) and Galicia (Spain) looking at the role of gender, territory and sociocultural level, which are seen as dynamics that have an impact on the forms of producing these practices. From the approach of social practice and broadening the cisgender binomial in favor of a transgender population that has been excluded from other studies, the authors have found transit tendencies in the knowledge and meanings between the different representation practices and have identified gender marks in digital practices and in academic literature. At the same time, the authors reveal underlying gaps in the material access to selfies and video clips in the lowest socioeconomic strata in the communities studied. The study reports the complexity of constructing gender identity in digital environments, which foreshadows plenty of challenges for the educational domain.

It is with the need of including pedagogical proposals and resources in the academic and public policies debate that make it possible to counter some of the trends identified in the above studies that we wish to end this introduction. More specifically, the tendency towards isolated bubbles or echo chambers in digital networks is worrying, as this leads to a growing polarization and a lack of diversity and plurality in social interactions. Also of great concern is the continuation of stereotypes and hierarchical and binary relations in many of the contributions made by the young in the platforms. In order to reverse these trends, public institutions, especially educational institutions, must prioritize extending critical digital education and a plural and diverse gender perspective.

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