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Street Children and Social Media: Identity Construction in the Digital Age

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Street Children and Social Media: Identity Construction in the Digital Age

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1.   Introduction: the rise of Facebook use in street children

This contribution aims to generate knowledge on how street children's[1] digital identity is shaped by social media. By conducting a study on the Facebook profiles and posts of 20 street children, with whom the Marcela Losantos, to which we will refer to as the first author henceforth- had personal contact in various previous research projects and continued to have regular interactions on Facebook afterwards, we show how street children´s Facebook interactions are shaped by the audiences they aimed to reach and by their capacity to deal with this social media platform´s affordances.

In Bolivia, the most recent Nation Census of people living on the street revealed that there were 3768 persons from which 43% are between 10 and 24 years old (Viceministerio de Defensa Social y Sustancias Controladas, 2015). A significant amount of Bolivians living on the street are children and young people due to an essential failure of care intervention models (Huang & Huang, 2008); and weak family reunification programs (Losantos, 2017) which led most children to grow up in the streets.

In line with other research about children and social media (Livingstone, 2003; Livingstone & Helsper, 2007; Guardia & Zegada, 2018; boyd, 2014) Bolivian street children are actively using social media platforms, especially WhatsApp and Facebook. In the framework of our previous research, we found Facebook profiles of 40 street children living in the city of La Paz and 23 profiles of children living in the streets of the city of El Alto. 48 of these children were using Facebook a daily. Moreover, Facebook is a popular access point for street educators and researchers to contact Bolivian street children.

Street children and youth are keen users of Facebook, although their use patterns have been poorly studied around the globe. Several reasons can explain Their invisibility in this area of research. First, there is a common belief that their living conditions do not allow them to access anything more than the essential assets such as food and clothing. Second, research on education has demonstrated that most of Bolivian street children and youth have not finished primary school; hence it is generally assumed that many of them are illiterate (Huang & Huang, 2008).

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[1] Although we prefer the term 'street-connected' children or 'children in street situations' (Consortium for Street Children, 2018) we will use the term 'street children' for reading purposes.

Both of these widespread assumptions need to be nuanced. Related to the first point, the country's largest research on digital (Vicepresidencia del Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia, 2016) use showed that Internet services became cheaper in the last years, internet cafes are trendy for youngsters to get online and there are few legal requirements when buying mobile phone SIM-cards, enabling street children to buy them in most street shops to 'upload' data[2] (Vicepresidencia del Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia, 2016). Moreover, new smartphones have become available at a relatively low cost and nowadays second hand or stolen mobile phones can be easily found in Bolivia's underground markets. Furthermore, even though there is practically no information on precisely how street children and youth have access to smartphones, our own previous research project indicated that nearly everyone from the two street groups that participated in the first author´s previous research project had a one, and was using it on a daily basis, at least for some months during a year. Moreover, that they invest a significant part of their daily earnings in order to acquire cell phones (cell phones or smartphones??) and that they tend to change mobile phones regularly, because such hardware is considered and used as exchangeable tools to get easy and quick money[3].

Regarding the second argument, even though street children have hardly finished primary school, the census shows that 94,1% (Viceministerio de Defensa Social y Sustancias Controladas, 2015) can read and write with a certain degree of difficulty, but well-enough to interact on social media.

Social media has therefore become a powerful connection tool between street children and different audiences, with whom it was difficult to stay in touch with in the past, including international aid organizations, volunteers and professionals that work with street children, and street educators with whom they are in contact in their daily lives on the street. This "virtual sociability" (Cáceres, Señán & Ruiz San Román, 2017; Delgado & Felice, 2013) had a great impact on the expansion of the children's social network.

Furthermore, social media also changed the way street children relate to media in general. Only a few years ago, the only relationship these children had with the media was when TV networks or radios decided to report about them, depicting them at the extreme of two poles: a) as 'victims' in constant need of help, which corresponded with the social construction of them as poor and disadvantaged; (Bar-On, 1997) and b) as criminals, with feral and untamed characteristics that demand forced interventions to take them out of the street (e.g. Losantos & Loots, 2015). Street children have shifted from being objects of news and passive media consumers by watching TV on the street or in public restaurants and hiding in movie theaters, to become active producers of content in social media, as it will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

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[2] For more information, the online report can be found in http://www.cis.gob.bo/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Bolivia-digital-sello.pdf.
[3] The Nation Census of Bolivian street children showed that all children, aged 11 to 18, have a cellphone at some point during the year. However, as it is second hand or stolen, it stops working, or they trade it or sell it when they are in need of money.

In this chapter, we aim to expand the knowledge and research evidence in the field of street children's use of social media by answering the next research questions:

- How do street children deal with Facebook affordances?
- Are their Facebook profiles and posts influenced by the audience they are aiming to reach?
- How do their Facebook interactions shape their digital identity?

We will describe the research methodology in which Facebook profiles and posts were selected and then analyzed by using a visual and an audience perspective. Subsequently, we will discuss how street children´s interaction with social media is mediated by their capacity to understand and deal with social media affordances and by the audience they target their posts to. Furthermore, we will argue how it shapes street children´s digital identity construction.

2.   Methodology

Selection of participants and Facebook sample

To select Bolivian street children´s Facebook profiles we started by conducting an exploratory search on the first author´s street connected friends, who had an active profile[4]. The initial selection ended with a list of 63 Facebook accounts.

As mentioned earlier, the first author had daily contact with all participants from the selected group until one year ago. Therefore, to make sure they were still part of the same street group, we invited a street educator to confirm their status at the moment of research. The information provided narrowed the sample to a total amount of 54 Facebook accounts of children living in the streets of the cities of La Paz and El Alto, from which 48 of them were last connected during the previous week.

The second selection criterion was based on the first author regular Facebook interactions with the selected children during the last year. This allowed us to make sure we could follow their updates. Furthermore, it allowed us to understand posts more in-depth and the relationship with their personal history.

The final sample consisted of 20 Facebook accounts of children -13 boys and seven girls- aged 12 to 16 years old, which we followed daily for seven months.

Data Collection and Analysis

We started data collection by gathering the profile information of the 20 participants. Information such as name, photo profile, address, school information, work information, relationship status, and other relevant information was stored in each of the participant´s files.

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[4] By active profile we mean those who had an activity such posting, commenting or liking within a week.

Secondly, we followed weekly updates for seven months. Every week we printed all posts from the selected profiles. We continued by closely revising the content of each publication, setting apart what they published as a "shared" post from what they uploaded themselves. We highlighted the most repeated topics and those posts that had more comments and likes and we created a separated file for each participant to compare posts in time.

Once all the materials were gathered, we started a preliminary analysis by comparing profile information with data provided by the street educator and by the first author knowledge. Next, images and texts of the highlighted posts were first read separately and then compared with profile information to search for similarities and contradictions.

Furthermore, to conduct a more in-depth visual and audience-oriented analysis, we based our understanding of street children's Facebook profiles and posts on the conceptualization of Mitchell, DeLange and Moltsane (2017) about visual research, which states that visual content cannot be assumed as a transparent window into its author´s mind, but rather showing the author´s agency to produce meaning with the particular intention to narrate a ¨small story¨.

Secondly, we use the concept of 'text-image' proposed by Mitchell (1995) and Rose (2007), to refer to images accompanied by some text or testimony that explains them. Thus, texts and images together provide more information than single images or independent texts and, therefore, are to be analyzed as a whole.

Finally, we considered the audience perspective and influence suggested by Fiske (1994) and recently by Livingstone (2019) to reflect on how the -imaginary or tagged- audience could shape each of the participants posted content.

To focus the analysis on how and for whom Facebook´s profile information and posts were visually and verbally constructed, allowed us to identify relevant topics to discuss: (a) risks and opportunities for street children related to social media affordances; and (b) the relevance of audience when posting. Moreover, it shed light on how their social media interaction shaped children's digital identity.

Ethical issues

Considering the research context (street children) and design (visual and audience analysis in a digital environment), we anticipated several ethical issues:

(1) Confidentiality: Names were erased from Facebook profiles and changed in the document, to guarantee anonymity. Moreover, all identifiable pictures were only of use for the researchers.

(2) Consultation and consent: Because they were street children -without any adult family to respond for them- we asked profile owners through Facebook messenger for their authorization to do an investigation on their public posts and to publish findings in academic journals

(3) Protection against social stigma: to deal with social stigma we did not focus on *typical* street images such as the ones showing the use of glue, or the use of masks. We included all posts from the last five months in the analysis, broadening the scope of review to a variety of posted messages.

(4) Respect: the dignity and autonomy of the participants were taken into consideration when requesting their authorization to make the narrative analysis of the visual material they had publicly posted.

3. Findings

Street children's and social media affordances: risks and opportunities

Social media technologies, website design and interface have been described as the "affordances" (Gibson, 1994) that potentially drive the formation and enactment of social identities, as they influence and prompt users to share, present themselves and behave in certain ways (Papacharissi, 2010). Specifically, scholars have described five social media affordances that affect what happens to personal information: *persistence, scalability, replicability, spreadability* and *searchability* (boyd, 2008, 2014; Papacharissi & Yuan, 2011), meaning that recorded and archived data can easily be multiplied, shared, and accessed through an internet search. This fact has created a new stream of information that leads to what Monika Taddicken (2014, p.250) has called 'a recontextualization of self-disclosure': self-disclosed personal information remains available beyond the moment of its creation. It also means that even if deleted, the data may have been disseminated, stored and potentially modified by others, possibly reaching an audience far beyond the intended purpose. Moreover, information can also resurface when it matches search terms by other users, at any point in time.

The topic related to children's data and privacy online is one of the most sensitive, and it has been on the table of scholarly debate from some time now (e.g. Livingstone & Haddon, 2009; DiMaggio, Hargittai, Celeste & Shafer, 2004). Issues such as children's digital literacy (Buckingham, 2015) and cognitive and social competencies to understand and to deal with social media risks are currently under discussion and actions have been taken to raise awareness on the topic. However, as argued by Livingstone, Stoilova & Nandagiri (2018), privacy protection has a parent-centered approach, which immediately increases the digital divide for street children.

Unsupervised street children's use of social media can be risky in many ways: first of all, they may have a less critical understanding of present and future risks of Facebook posting. Loss of control over their personal information can lead, for example, to the 'spreadability' of their street condition which can reduce their chances of social reintegration. At this respect, our previous research (Losantos, 2017) has shown that possibilities of reintegration become limited when their street situation becomes public. Not in vain, some street youth decides to migrate to another city or even another country to leave the street definitively.

Moreover, girls face a higher risk because they can become easily traced by trafficking networks. 16-year-old Joana posts: *In a relationship I give more sex than problems*

(Joanna's Facebook post, August 14th, 2018)*, which can pose a direct threat to her in the near future, depending on who is reading it.

Figure 1. Joanna's Facebook post, August 14th, 2018

Livingstone, Stoilova & Nandagiri (2018) report, that non-street 12 – to – 17 – year olds are aware of the privacy risks they take in social media. However, in spite of recognizing disclosure threats, it appears to be that decision making on what to publish, is somewhat "influenced by the immediacy of and desire for benefits" (p. 19) than on possible danger. Street children, seem to act accordingly but running a more significant risk because there is neither parental nor social control.

While social media affordances add risks to their safety, at the same time can also provide both new, potentially empowering ways and tools for the formation and enactment of their social identities and enlargement of their social network.

At March 2th, 2018, Leonor (16) denounced the disappearance of her friend Jane (16) on Facebook. She tagged some street friends, and other Facebook contacts she believed could help her spread the news. To make a stronger statement, she shared her missing girlfriend's partner photo, to let him know she was blaming him for her disappearance (Leonor's Facebook post, March 21th, 2018).

Figure 2. Leonor's Facebook post, March 21th, 2018

Immediate responses appeared. Former workers of the NGO that used to work with them at the street, old street children and foreign volunteers that knew them personally responded by offering help, proposing to go to the police or sharing the post. Three days later Jane (16) appeared explaining her phone was stolen.

Social media has enabled street children to set up their own connections, bypassing adult mediation as presented in the previous example. Moreover, it reveals that although street children face significant digital inequalities, they manage to shape online social contexts and networks actively.

The audience matters: For whom are street children's posting?

María (16) tags Juan (15?) and posts*:*

> *A mature man knows that the secret of making a woman fall in love is to hold her without her asking to, to take care of her without her demanding it and, to love her without her saying it. I love you, my love. (*Maria's post, 24th of June, 2018)

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The post presents a message of love directed to her street partner. However, a contradiction appears evident: even though the message seems to state that to make a girl fall in love, men have to act and respond in certain ways without being asked to do so, the simple fact her tagging him can be interpreted as a request for him to behave consequently.

A second girl, Natalia (14), takes a selfie and writes:

> *"I am sorry I am not the person you want me to me. If you knew that I was trying everything for you. I am sorry love If when I kiss you, you don't feel butterflies anymore. If you don't love me in the way I love you. I am sorry love I don't ow your heart. I don't regret hanging around with you. I am sorry love, but it is the moment to take another road. Cupid isn't guilty".*


Figure 3. Natalia's Facebook Post, December 23rd, 2018

Nonetheless, even if the message seems to be directed to someone she is affectionate with, she tags 21 other street friends. Some of her friends lately reply*: "forget him, you don't need him"* or *"you look nice loquita".*

The message fulfills two purposes: on the one hand to let the (ex) partner knows she is suffering for the break-up. On the other, to receive consolation responses of her street social network.

Both posts target a street audience intentionally. Moreover, both posts follow street norms of female submission and calling up for street social support in times of suffering, reproducing what Costa (2018) calls "codes of behavior existing in the social contexts of the offline world" (p.3642).

Such is the case of the following post, where a street boy calls up for help when he declares he is in a new city, with no money, no place to stay, no hope and that is about to rain:
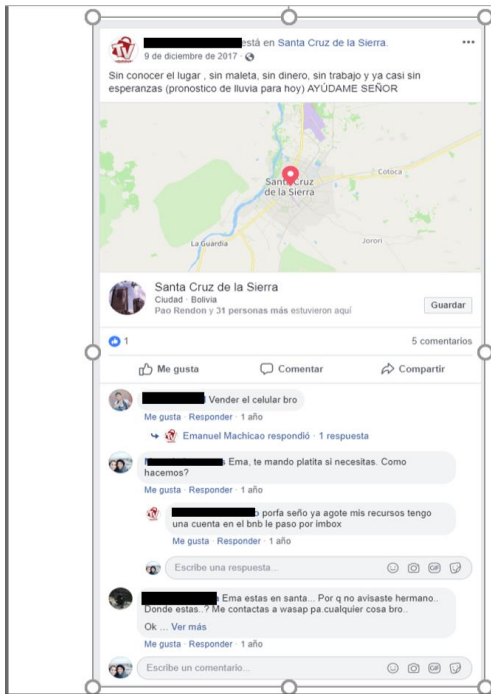
Different from the previous two posts, Diego doesn't tag anyone. However, virtual social support emerges from different audiences. The first comment is from a street friend who immediately suggests selling his mobile phone. The second one comes from a former street educator, who offers to send him some money. The third one comes from an old street boy, who now lives in Santa Cruz and offers him support if needed.

Each of the online replies concurs with the offline role of the respondents. Moreover, even when there is an evident *collapsed context (*boyd, 2002*)* in the post, each audience responds accordingly to the social code of the offline world.

Digital identity construction on Facebook: much more than street children online

The social stigma of being labeled as a street child carries out a great identity burden that accompanies the person, sometimes even into their adult life. Few stigmas are so permanent. It is not unusual that when a street child decides to leave the street, institutions and professionals continue to identify him as part of the street children's group.

However, the study of their Facebook profiles reveals different identities being developed. Social media digital environment enables for the emergence of a different-more individual-features of their identities to bubble up. We even noticed that some profiles were not immediately linked to street life. More than once, the first author felt the need to double-check whether the Facebook profile belonged to a child living on the street.

Figure 4. Facebook street adolescent profile photo.

Figure 4 presents a street adolescent Facebook profile and cover photo of him wearing ordinary adolescent clothes. In the information section, three sentences stand out: *Force*, *#ManythanksGod and "I didn't give up then… I won't do it now"*.

This Facebook profile is one of many in which children and adolescents post typically teenage content such as songs, jokes, memes, and drawings. However, such mainstream adolescent posts mixed with other typical *"street publications"* on their Facebook storyline, where they are lying on the street, wearing masks, or sniffing glue[5]. The next post presents a *street type* Facebook profile photo.

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[5] Street children sniff glue because their psychotropic effects help them deal with hunger and cold.

Figure 5. Street adolescent Facebook profile photo

Facebook profiles enable them to share both, street and non-street aspects of their lives and identities that are more difficult to show in offline social contexts. Dominant identity characteristics such as *being a street person* tend to become so relevant that overshadow alternative identities. However, as observed in this study, social media offers an alternative space for different digital identity construction and for other stories to be told.

The opportunity for vindication through social media: the possibility to tell one's "truth"

On May 2018, Carlota (15) posted:

"*Here is my truth: At the age of six I was raped by my stepfather. I felt so bad...traumatized that I became mute. I couldn't speak anymore. My mother took me to an institution because she taught I was sick. After some months the director of the place took me to a psychiatric hospital for adults. I was terrified. I was the only kid. Everybody else was very sick grown-ups. At the hospital, I saw many things that scared me. I started to act like crazy. I heard other people scream and I used to do the same. I copied them; I don't know why.*

One day a nurse that was good to me open up the door for me and told me I could go: "I am going to let the gate opened for you and if you want you can leave." And I did.

I went to the street. I was never before on the street, so when other children saw me, they came to offer to go to their "torrante"[6]. Sometimes I used to scream for hours for no reason. And they [the other street children] just let me scream and used to say "she must have nerve problems."

One of them offered me a pill to calm down. I took it. I took them a lot. After a while I started to feel ok. For the first time in my life, I began to feel happy. I am now ok, thanks to many persons. I have the strength to stand up and say I am OK because of my effort and the help of some very good people (Carlota's post, 16th of July, 2018).

She tags some street friends, educators and foreign volunteers in this poignant post. Carlota's audience is therefore defined by those she tags but also by the Facebook friends of the tagged people. Did she want these other publics to read her story? We certainly do not know. What we know is that she wants to make sure some specific people know her story and that her story reaches a broader audience of Facebook friends. Carlota decided to share a very intimate part of her life with a clear purpose: to vindicate the reasons for her street condition.

If we follow the posted story we can perfectly understand why she lives on the street and why is she happier there than in any other place before. A serious outrage of rights, together with a considerable amount of violence is described in the post.

Indeed, Facebook is used as a democratic space in the story of Carlota, a virtual space where she decides what to communicate to whom, which rarely happens for street children in other social spaces. Even though there have been enormous efforts to give street children a voice through participatory research, interventions, political movements; all of them have always been conducted or at least initiated from someone living outside the street.

Social media allows children living on street free virtual participation to vindicate, to amplify and to edit their story with the purpose of their strength and self-improvement capacity to be acknowledged, for a broader audience than they can reach on their offline interactions.

Attempts to make Facebook audiences think that they are more than street children were widespread. Another smaller examples of vindication of the street label could be found on the presentation section of nearly all Facebook profiles we researched on. We noticed that all of them mentioned the school they went to, even if it was for a few days or months. They also included other references, such as working places, educational programs where they participated in small training courses and so on. In some cases, we also registered references or tags to their family relatives. Finally, we also identified that some of them tag street educators as family members.

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[6] Torrante is the street slang to name the place where street groups sleep. It is usually located under a bridge or under the stairs of some downtown street.

As Morduchowicz, Marcon, Sylvestre, & Ballestrini (2012) declared, social media are one of the few spaces where street (and non-street children) can reinvent who they are, how they are defined socially and how the society in which they live perceives them. Interaction with social media and technology shapes their individual and collective identity and gives them a digital space to talk about themselves in relation to others.

4. Conclusions

This chapter aimed to expand the knowledge and evidence in the field of street children's use of social media, by conducting a study on their Facebook profiles and posts. Firstly, we found that street children understanding of Facebook affordances comprises both risks and opportunities for them. Street children´s rights continue to be at risk in the digital environment and, therefore, awareness of their social media participation is fundamental. Nonetheless is also evident that social media affordances provide new, potentially empowering ways and tools for the formation and enactment of their social identities. Their Facebook posts revealed they were re-thinking and re-orienting ways of behaving and protecting personal information online, and they were doing so in a way that technological affordances: sometimes resourcefully and sometimes ambiguously.

Secondly, we have found street children interact with social media and share information and messages to an intended audience and to an 'imagined' audience –as they are physically absent or 'invisible'- (Litt & Hargittai, 2016). Street Children -as perhaps all social media users- try to reach a specific audience, by tagging them in particular posts and/or producing specific publications to raise concern, empathy, and solidarity to improve their offline conditions. At this respect, Kolko, Nakamura, and Rodman (2000) state that cultural biases that configure unmediated aspects of every day social interactions also shape what they call "the mediated experiences" people have online. Such is the case of street children's Facebook posts where street children tend to follow different offline social codes to address different online tagged or imagined audiences.

Finally, social media is used to vindicate their offline street children identity. Through Facebook, street children present themselves not only confine to their street identity but showing different aspects that are rarely known when there is a dominant street discourse surrounding them. The study indicates that street children are using Facebook, not only to stay connected to their street friends and peers but to reach other audiences with whom direct communication was almost not possible but through welfare institutions that used to mediate among them and other publics.

Research findings show that street children have taken an active role in social media that counters the passive one they used to have on 'traditional' broadcast media. Moreover, their interaction in social media, specifically on Facebook, has allowed for an enlargement of their online connection both with other street children as well as with home-based people. However, a question remains unanswered: What transformation is possible in the lives of street children through social media? The impact of social media in the lives of street children is hard to determine. What we assume can change in their 'real world' as a product of the enlargement of their online social network is not at all clear, but what we can state is

that street children's online social inclusion may give the false impression on their inclusion in the offline social world.

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