

Number 45 (december 2020)

HOME / TEENS AND DIGITAL IMAGE CREATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA: INFORMAL LEARNING, TRANSMEDIA SKILLS AND PROFESSIONAL PROFILES

Teens and digital image creation on social media: informal learning, transmedia skills and professional profiles

 Versió catalana

 Versión castellana

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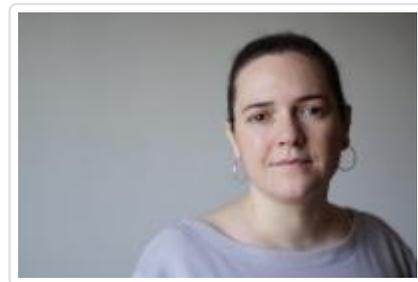
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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1344/BiD2020.45.11>

Recommended citation

Masanet, Maria José; Márquez, Israel; Pires, Fernanda; Lanzeni, Débora (2020). "Teens and digital image creation on social media : informal learning, transmedia skills and professional profiles". *BiD: textos universitaris de biblioteconomia i documentació*, núm. 45 (deseembre). <<http://bid.ub.edu/en/45/masanet.htm>>. DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1344/BiD2020.45.11> [Consulta: 21-12-2020].

Abstract

Objectives: This paper presents results from the Transmedia Literacy (H2020) project, carried out with teenagers from eight countries in Europe, Latin American and Oceania. The principal aim is to explore how teens construct their digital image on social media, focusing particularly on those participants who are professionalising their online activity and on the skills and practices they employ. We also look at the correlation between the observed skillsets and the skills profiles of communication professionals like community managers.

Methods: A short-term ethnography approach is used (Pink; Morgan, 2013) together with a variety of data collection methods (questionnaires, creative workshops, interviews, media diaries and online observation).

Results: The results show that some teens acquire skill profiles compatible with professional practice through informal learning in social media environments. A small number of the participants are developing professional-level skills and have even begun to

monetise their social media activity. The data suggest that formal education must broaden its horizons to cater for and build on the knowledge and potential that teens are acquiring informally across a range of digital settings.

Resumen

Objetivos: en este artículo se presentan algunos resultados del proyecto Transmedia Literacy (H2020), realizado con adolescentes de ocho países de Europa, Latinoamérica y Oceanía. El objetivo principal es explorar cómo los y las adolescentes construyen su imagen digital en las redes sociales, dedicando una atención especial al grupo que se está profesionalizando y a las competencias y prácticas que llevan a cabo durante el proceso. Además, ponemos las competencias detectadas entre los adolescentes en relación con las competencias buscadas en los perfiles profesionales del área de comunicación como, por ejemplo, el perfil de gestor de comunidades virtuales (*community manager*).

Metodología: para ello, seguimos los preceptos de la etnografía de plazos cortos (Pink; Morgan, 2013) e implementamos diversos métodos para la recopilación de datos (cuestionarios, talleres creativos, entrevistas, diarios mediáticos y observación en línea).

Resultados: de los resultados se desprende que algunos adolescentes adquieren competencias demandadas por los perfiles profesionales de manera informal en redes sociales. De hecho, unos pocos adolescentes ya se están profesionalizando e incluso ganan dinero mediante sus prácticas mediáticas. A partir de los datos se señala la necesidad de que la educación mediática abra la mirada, destaque y aproveche las potencialidades y aprendizajes que los adolescentes están adquiriendo informalmente en varios ambientes digitales.

Resum

Objectius: en aquest article es presenten alguns resultats del projecte Transmedia Literacy (H2020), dut a terme amb adolescents de vuit països d'Europa, Llatinoamèrica i Oceania. L'objectiu principal és explorar com els i les adolescents construeixen la seva imatge digital a les xarxes socials, dedicant una atenció especial al grup que s'està professionalitzant i a les competències i pràctiques que duen a terme durant el procés. A més, posem les competències detectades entre els adolescents en relació amb les competències buscades en els perfils professionals de l'àrea de comunicació com ara el perfil de gestor de comunitats (*community manager*).

Metodologia: per a això, hem seguit els preceptes de l'etnografia de terminis curts (Pink; Morgan, 2013) i hem implementat diversos mètodes per a la recopilació de dades (qüestionaris, tallers creatius, entrevistes, diaris mediàtics i observació en línia).

Resultats: dels resultats es desprèn que alguns adolescents adquireixen competències demanades pels perfils professionals de manera informal en les xarxes socials. De fet, alguns adolescents ja s'estan professionalitzant i, fins i tot, guanyen diners mitjançant les seves pràctiques mediàtiques. A partir de les dades s'assenyala la necessitat que l'educació mediàtica obri la mirada, destaqui i aprofiti les potencialitats i els aprenentatges que els adolescents estan adquirint informalment en diversos ambients digitals.

Keywords: Teenagers, Learning and teaching methods, Information and communication, Professional profile, Professional competences, Virtual communities

Received: 10/04/2020. Accepted: 14/07/2020.

1 Introduction

The traditional paradigm of media literacy, which emerged in the 1960s with the advent of television, has evolved considerably over the last few decades, bringing newer, more nuanced perspectives that bear little resemblance to the classic apocalyptic (Eco, 1965) view, according to which the mediasphere is a negative influence that seeks to manipulate and coerce its audience (Potter, 2005). This evolution has given rise to numerous definitions and conceptualisations and generated extensive debate, requiring us to question whether new forms of literacy and novel research models are required to respond to technological advances. As Scolari (2018b) argues, we have reached a state of emergency in which new media practices are challenging our traditional conceptions: "media literacy can no longer be limited to the critical analysis of media contents or the acquisition of skills inside the formal education system" (p. 16). Transformations in the digital environment oblige us to consider a new scenario. We no longer merely consume content created through traditional media channels; we now create, modify and share content of our own. We can construct our own digital image, provide services, interact with other users, and more.

This situation has revived the discourse of risk and danger that articulates the notion of *moral panic* (Cohen, 1980), which is now associated with new media such as social networks and video games (Scolari; Lugo; Masanet, 2019). Yet it has also led to the emergence of more integrated views and perspectives (Eco, 1965) that seek to analyse the new practices and their potential. This approach is clearly reflected in the Transmedia Literacy (H2020) project, which examines media use among teens, the knowledge and skills they possess and how these skills are acquired. To do this, the project seeks to identify transmedia skills and the informal learning strategies that teens develop and put into practice in their daily media interactions (Scolari, 2018a).

The research reveals that teens are particularly active in the production and management of social media content, which forms a central part of their media universe (Boyd, 2014; Ito [et al.], 2010). They use social media to construct and manage their digital image, in some cases going so far as to develop a complex, quasi-professional personal online brand. Teens create profiles, share their own photo and video content, comment and "like", follow celebrities (YouTubers, Instagrammers, etc.) and replicate popular profiles, and interact with peers and strangers. In engaging in these activities they are acquiring skills through informal learning (Masanet; Guerrero-Pico; Establés, 2019). Online image and reputation are key components of teen identity, so considerable time and effort is put into constructing and managing them. Erikson (1980) defines adolescence as a period of moratorium during which young people experiment in order to discover more about themselves and to forge an identity. This process is now replicated online via social media, and online identity has become a crucial part of young people's personal image. According to Funes (2004), we cannot establish an identity without a physical image, so physical appearance is a fundamental concern of young people that can generate both interest and anxiety. In this context, social networks can be seen as an aesthetic showcase through which teens present themselves to the world as they want to be seen, reflecting the process described by Barthes (1989): "once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of 'posing', I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image" (p. 37).

Most of the teens who took part in this study have an Instagram account and some also have a YouTube account. They use these channels to post content and interact with other users. A small proportion of the participants displayed quasi-professional skills in their social media practices and the construction of their personal brand, in some cases adopting the same strategies used by communication professionals themselves. In some of the teens we observe a process of professionalisation (Establés; Guerrero-Pico; Contreras-Espinosa, 2019), a few even generating income through informal media creation (Masanet [et al.], 2020). The main aim of this paper is to explore how these teens construct their digital image and personal brand on social media, looking particularly at the group of more advanced users and the skills and strategies that they deploy. We assess the participants' informal skills against the profiles required in communication professions identified by recent studies as having the best prospects over the coming years, such as digital marketing manager and community manager (Di Gregorio [et al.], 2019; Mañas-Viniegra; Jiménez-Gómez, 2019), alongside more traditional activities such as advertising (Sánchez-Sánchez, Roca-Cuberes; Fernández-Cavia, 2017).

2 Methods

The study is conducted from an ethnographic perspective, following the precepts of short-term ethnography (Pink; Morgan, 2013), which allow research to be carried out over shorter periods than in traditional ethnography, since the researcher can create contexts in which the object of study can be examined in depth more rapidly.

In this case, the research methodology comprised five procedures (Scolari [et al.], 2020):

1. Management of ethical protocols and data protection.
2. Administration of a questionnaire with questions on socio-cultural environment and media device access, use and preferences of the participating teens.
3. Participatory workshops on video games, participatory culture and social media.
4. In-depth interviews and media diaries.
5. Online observation to identify the most significant communities, websites and social media in the teens' online activity.

Teens (aged 12–18 years) from Spain, Portugal, Italy, the UK, Finland, Colombia, Uruguay and Australia took part in the research. A total of 1,633 questionnaires, 58 workshops, 311 interviews and 90 media diaries were completed and eight communities were analysed. Each country was represented by 2–4 schools.

Fieldwork was carried out in 2016 and the data processed and analysed over the period 2017–2019. Qualitative analysis with NVivo 11 Pro was carried out alongside inductive and interpretative analysis.

This paper examines the results from all participating countries, focusing on selected data from the participatory workshops and interviews for those teens most actively involved in content creation and social media management. To comply with data protection requirements, participants are identified by pseudonym and comments have been paraphrased or translated to ensure anonymity.

3 Results

The teens' use of media is varied and complex, leading to the acquisition of different skills and competences. Some, for example, display a wide range of video game skills (creating avatars, designing strategies to complete a particular level, etc.), while others have a stronger skills profile in media production (creating and editing photo and video content, etc.) or people and content management (leading and coordinating groups, downloading and organising content, etc.). Similarly, some of the teens exhibit skills at quasi-professional level, while others show a more basic understanding of media practices. The diversity of media uses and skills is unequal in terms of distribution, intensity and complexity (Pereira; Moura; Masanet; Taddeo; Tirocchi, 2018). As stated in the Methods, in this paper we focus on those teens who make intensive – in some cases, near-

professional – use of social media to construct their digital image or personal brand. As such, it should be noted that the skills examined are not shared by all participants: some are more general, while others are highly specific and observed only in individual cases.

3.1 The influencer model: information management, aesthetics and creativity

Most of the teens acknowledged that they follow YouTubers and Instagrammers; these are figures they look up to, in some cases their media idols, and constitute attractive, aspirational models (Márquez; Ardèvol, 2017). Recent years have seen a growth in the social media presence of celebrities with whom teens seek to identify. They are the same age and share the same goals, objectives and media practices (Pérez-Torres [et al.], 2018; Pires; Masanet; Scolari, 2019); they talk about topics that interest a teen audience, share experiences their followers can identify with and offer advice on day-to-day matters. According to Taddeo and Tirocchi (2019), YouTubers are mediators between spheres of individual and social emotion who promote and engage in dynamics of identification. In fact, a good number of teens taking part in the workshops spoke about influential online figures such as AuronPlay, Dulceida, El Rubius and Paula Baena.

The teens follow these celebrities because, in one way or another, they see themselves reflected in them, but also to imitate and to acquire ideas for constructing their own personal brand. By observing the celebrities' speech patterns, aesthetics and creations teens obtain inspiration for devising and producing their own content. It is here that we see the emergence of new forms of creativity, characterised primarily by the aesthetic reworking and reinterpretation of influencer content, which teens adapt and translate to their own contexts (Taddeo; Tirocchi, 2019). Yash (14-year-old boy, Australia) explains that he started out following a Minecraft YouTuber and trying to reproduce his videos, which was his source of inspiration. Once he had learned the basics, he began to explore more possibilities and create videos his own way. So some teens have a broad encyclopaedia (Eco, 1996) of references and models that form the basis for appraising other people's work but also for reinterpreting content and creating their own. This can be considered a form of intertextuality or intertextual competence that takes places in the process of creating meaning, during which an author uses information from previous texts to configure their message. It is a form of appropriation in which the author draws from existing work to construct a novel idea or original product (Sorókina, 2006). So, in viewing content created by influencers, teens are building a narrative and aesthetic encyclopaedia that will help them to construct their own digital identities.

If we look at the required skills profiles for roles in digital communication we see that teens, in this case, are already developing competences compatible with searching and managing information in a digital environment, evaluating media productions and understanding aesthetic parameters (Ventura; Roca-Cuberes; Corral-Rodríguez, 2018), as well as creative thinking (Di Gregorio [et al.], 2019) and, in particular, the specific skills for influencer management required by online community managers (Mañas-Viniegra; Jiménez-Gómez, 2019), who must develop a familiarity with influencers and their strategies for creating and managing digital environments.

3.2 Production: skills linked to the stages in the creative process

Teens adopt different approaches to the media production process when creating their online content. In the preproduction stage, for example, a variety of strategies and activities are observed in the preparation of video and photo content, which are the main types of product (Pereira [et al.], 2018). Activities range from researching locations to planning and writing scripts and preparing and configuring the shot or performance. Agustina, an 18-year-old girl from Uruguay, explains that she organises location scouting with friends to find suitable places for her social media images. Once in the selected location they take a large number of photos that she can make a selection later. Agustina and her friends forecast the volume of content they need and make sure they have enough photos to post in her social media profiles. Therefore, they are not only organising and managing the stages of production but also a team of people, mirroring the activity of any company in the sector.

Some of the teens highlighted the importance of aesthetic and narrative, both in the preparation stage and in the creation and editing of content. Some video creators, for example, specifically consider factors such as framing, narrative, character perspective and role. This is the case of a group of girls who produced a video (a trailer for a thriller) during a participatory workshop in Barcelona. To create the story outline, they made a list of characters, defined their roles, set out the locations and timings for each role, wrote a rough biographical sketch for each character and drafted the screenplay. During recording they reviewed each scene to ensure that it bore out their original idea and reflected their aesthetic and narrative criteria. The clearest evidence of their concern for the aesthetic quality of the production could be seen during editing, as explained by one of the group members (13-year-old Australian girl): "I edit the photos before publishing them on Instagram. I use filters, change the brightness; I do what I can to get the photos to look good". Her goal is to produce good pieces, which is why she takes the time to edit her pictures. Almost all of the teens who share content on social media prepare their photos before publishing, either through careful staging or by applying filters. They use professional software like Adobe Photoshop as well as apps such as InstaSize. This is an illustrative example of the new culture or art of postproduction highlighted by Bourriaud (2004), who takes the term from television, film and video but uses it to denote the new forms of understanding, appropriation and reworking that have emerged since the birth of the Internet.

As we can see, these teens possess skills that are compatible with professional profiles in the field of digital communication, including the specific role of location manager but also more traditional communication roles such as film, video or television technicians. Their knowledge covers each of the stages in preproduction, production and postproduction, from scriptwriting and location research to recording, acting, staging, editing, subtitling and dubbing. Of the various skills that can be identified in their work, many are related to creating content and using the Internet and software (Di Gregorio [et al.], 2019), while others apply more specifically to narrative and technical aspects of media creation such as writing texts, drafts and screenplays, creating and directing *mise-en-scène*, understanding and using resources, methods and procedures to construct audiovisual stories,

understanding and applying the techniques and processes of audiovisual creation and production, designing formal and aesthetic aspects, understanding and using software and new technologies and editing audio and video materials (Ventura [et al.], 2018). Importantly, it is in these activities that we observe other, more transferrable skills related to taking decisions, working in a team and managing teams, assuming leadership, displaying initiative and motivation, demonstrating flexibility and time management (Di Gregorio [et al.], 2019; Ventura [et al.], 2018; Sánchez-Sánchez; Roca-Cuberes; Fernández-Cavia, 2017).

3.3 Diffusion: social media content management skills for personal brand positioning

It is also important to examine the strategies teens use for the diffusion of their content from as early as the preproduction stage. Some teens create differentiated content for different social media channels. They understand the content, codes and language conventions that work best in each case and use these rules to construct their digital image, displaying not only content management skills but also a knowledge of media and technology. This process is referred to as the construction of the trans-platform image (Masanet [et al.], 2020). Some teenagers are able to identify the technical and social characteristics of each platform and use this knowledge to guide their content management strategies. For example, the content they upload to Instagram and YouTube is more thoroughly prepared than what they share via WhatsApp, which is seen more as an informal environment for chatting with closer acquaintances. They also display a concern for the image they are building on these platforms: "I share if I like what I did. I know what is suitable for social media. In fact my creations are intended for social networks" (Nelson, 12-year-old boy, Portugal). Some teenagers even have different accounts intended for public consumption or private sharing with family and friends.

The participants in this study therefore demonstrate both content management skills and, in some cases, competence in the areas of privacy and risk management. If we translate these skills into professional profiles, the closest matches are those of the social media manager or community manager, who require specific abilities linked to community management and dynamics and brand positioning (Mañas-Viniegra; Jiménez-Gómez, 2019), in this case referring to the management of a personal brand. More particularly, these professionals must be able to strategically manage the corporate image of a company, adding value to its products and services, search and manage information in the digital domain, display knowledge of social media and mobile devices, understand the stages in the diffusion of audiovisual content, and create content for different channels (Di Gregorio [et al.], 2019; Ventura [et al.], 2018).

3.4 Marketing and advertising: image management and audience engagement

Márquez and Ardèvol (2017) explain that one of the defining characteristics of YouTubers is their understanding of how to connect with other users in an original and creative way and how to establish their audience. This is equally applicable to the rest of the influencer community, for example to Instagrammers and TikTokers. Indeed, some teens treat approach social media like YouTube as a distribution channel where they can publish their creations and achieve fame (Pires; Masanet; Scolari, 2019). Some of our participants create content with this objective, deploying the language and strategies of marketing and advertising; they talk in terms of *audiences, engagement strategies, subscribers, views, sponsors*, and so on. One such case is Flavio, a 14-year-old boy from Portugal, who explains that he is sponsored by a video games company and that all of his earnings stem from interaction with his YouTube followers. To generate this interaction, his followers must like his videos. So teens who pursue this objective create with their audience in mind, not only for themselves. This generates a commitment to their followers, who they cannot afford to disappoint (Sáez; Gallardo, 2017). They think strategically about the people who will consume their content – their model readers (Eco, 1981) – and make every effort to please them. They want to reach an audience, win their trust and involve them in the creation of new content. This corresponds to aspects of the skillset of an advertising professional, who must research a target audience and create content designed to get its attention, to generate a need for the product. Some teens employ practices entirely compatible with the work of advertisers, attracting audiences by tailoring content to their preferences (Ferrés; Masanet, 2017): "I have a lot of followers [on Instagram]. The most important thing is to keep them happy" (Alis, 15-year-old girl from the UK). In this way, it is the audience that decides what content is produced. The 'advertisers' have a product to sell and, in order to do this, must be able to reach their desired consumers, to break through the barrier of indifference and modify their attitudes and behaviour. They must adapt the message to the defined target audience, and this can be achieved by aligning the content with their concerns and interests, by getting to know and learning to manage their interlocutors' minds (Ferrés; Masanet, 2017). Some teens even put this into practice in the way they present themselves in video content, creating a personality that will appeal to their followers. It is here that we can identify skills related to image control and emotion management, which teens use to construct an image that reflects how they wish to be perceived. Flavio, for example, also explains that his reactions during gameplay are crucial to the image he portrays: he cannot become visibly angry – for example, by hitting his keyboard – because his audience will hone in on negative attitudes.

It should be noted at this point that not all teens – only a minority, in fact – communicate with their followers as an audience, although the overwhelming majority demonstrate a concern for managing their digital image. Maintaining a social media presence is a form of exposure that invites judgement and can, in some cases, lead to insult and ridicule, to the extent that some teens make the conscious decision not to upload content or at least not to do so professionally (Guerrero-Pico; Masanet; Scolari, 2019).

These strategies of adaptation to the audience and image control highlight a variety of social management (for example, audience engagement) and self-management skills. Di Gregorio et al. (2019), for example, identify interpersonal skills and stress resilience as key competences in the skills profiles of future marketing professionals, while Sánchez-Sánchez et al. (2017) discuss

aspects of the advertising professional skillset that have been observed in our sample, specifically knowledge and development of persuasive communication techniques and strategies, capacity to develop creative strategies to achieve communication objectives and knowledge of digital marketing strategies.

4 Conclusions

As we have seen throughout the paper, some teens use social media to construct a digital image and their own personal brand, adopting practices that build a skillset compatible with the profiles of highly demanded communication professionals such as community managers and social media managers. It is particularly interesting that most of these skills are acquired informally in digital domains through contact with new models: influencers. Masanet, Guerrero-Pico and Establés (2019) introduce the concept of *digital apprentice* to describe young people and adolescents who have grown up with a digital media environment that provides the scope to learn about the digital world with which they engage, enabling them to acquire the quasi-professional skills considered in this article. According to the authors, in these new domains (largely online, where YouTube is currently the predominant force), teens find answers to their questions through new sources (peers, influencers, etc.) and new formats (tutorials, gameplays, etc.). Teens, then, engage in what we might consider a form of collaborative learning that serves as a complement to their formal education.

This informal learning-by-doing provides a range of transmedia skills, through significantly, other vital competences pertaining to ideology and values are rarely developed and less discernable. It is therefore important that formal learning structures continue to address the acquisition of media skills through the active building of media literacy. It should also be stressed that some of the skills we refer to above are acquired by some teens but not by a majority of the sample. In other words, we are dealing with a natural split, where some teens are acquiring skills that may put them in an advantageous position in a hypothetical future labour market while others may be seen as lacking in these areas. As such, conceptual categorisations like "emirec" (Aparici; García-Marín, 2018), which seeks to establish a space for media creation processes outside the mercantilist framework of traditional economic models, suggest that we should assess how these skills translate into differentiated potential and fulfil different functions in different environments. In this article, then, we widen our gaze to the tools that young people employ in a media learning context, aiming not only to explain them but also to identify the interplay of these different dimensions in practice. We therefore believe it would also be interesting to explore these skills from the perspective of how they might benefit the teens themselves, for example in their social and emotional lives.

As this article makes clear, traditional media education must broaden its horizons, valuing the knowledge and potential that teens develop through informal practices and seeking to engage with them. A new focus should be placed on training and on harnessing the positive impact of the resulting skills on the teens' social development, as well as on activities that are introduced in the learning process but whose influence extends to professional and economic circumstances.

Examples of this are the creative strategies employed to attract or build audiences, whose scope extends beyond the media to various other domains, and social management competence, which – as we have examined here – has become a fundamental condition for establishing personal and emotional relationships with peers.

The ethnographic approach enables us to observe the ways in which teens conceptualise and enact these practices, moving beyond the constraints of statistical analyses and of restrictive interpretations that condense skills into predefined categories more readily compatible with classical models. Thanks specifically to this novel form of observation, which leans more heavily towards action, we have been able to discern a small number of participants who are beginning to display professional-level skills, marking a transition from the amateur to the professional environment (Establés [et al.], 2019). Indeed, some teens already use their media expertise to generate income (Masanet [et al.], 2020), and although they are a small minority, many others seek to replicate their approach, acquiring skills along the way. In light of the current demands of the communication sector, it must surely be time to cast greater light on these skills and encourage young people to develop them to a professional standard.

It is now necessary to consider the influence these skills are beginning to exert in other areas that, at a glance, may seem only tangentially related, such as aesthetic and emotional values. With this in mind, in future research we intend to examine how the acquisition of skills and the strategies put into practice may be conceived as a space for social action and development.

Funding

This study is part of the project "Transmedia literacy. Exploiting transmedia skills and informal learning strategies to improve formal education", which is funded under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (reference 645238).

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