



EUROPEAN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

Women In Online Social Networks: Meanings And Experiences Of Use In Their Daily Lives

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Contribution

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The purpose of this paper is to highlight the use of online social networks to improve the digital inclusion of women and to overcome the digital gender gap in Spain (South) and Portugal (North).

The opportunities that information and communication technologies implicate for women, in the processes of change, are seen as an important perspective to the current research about the relationship between women and technology (Azevedo & Seixas, 2009). The rapid expansion of online social networking has led to changes in the traditional roles of individuals, from passive consumers to agents who transform and produce knowledge. The sharing of online content on websites, blogs, Facebook or Twitter was the beginning of a practice that currently goes beyond merely an informational dimension, to become a digital *agora*. Today, the social network Facebook in particular has become the setting in which diverse communities have developed, exchanging information, constructing and sharing knowledge, developing values and practices as citizens such as cultural, educational or business activities. According to Sloep and Berlanga (2011), the way we have organized early education in our societies makes it inappropriate to educate adults who study to acquire specific competencies needed in their lives. The knowledge society, characterized by the relentless production of knowledge, has changed the ways in which we learn and has broadened the learning contexts.

Many studies have shown gender differences in the uses and relationships between people and technologies (Wasserman & Richmond-Abbott, 2005; Hilbert, 2011). However, the web 2.0 and, especially, social networking have changed the presence

and participation of women in virtual environments. Some studies reveal that social networking activities related to maintaining contact with friends and family are led mainly by women (Clipson, Wilson & DuFrene, 2010; Mazman & Usluel, 2011). Social networks, as personal learning environments, are of great value in creating synergies between formal and informal settings for learning and to adapt educational strategies to promote adult learning and digital inclusion (Adell & Castaneda, 2010). Those studies are supported by: a) a dynamic and comprehensive notion of learning as a process that encompasses different systems and contexts of activity, which provide people with opportunities to learn, and also involve adaptation and change to be permanently updated throughout life and, b) a perspective of the learner as an active agent who is able to decide what, how, when and where to learn, and above all, with whom to learn.

Taking into account the previous theoretical framework, we have formulated the following questions:

- What do social networks do to women's lives?
- Why are social networks more meaningful to women than other technologies?
- What experiences have value for women and to what extent can their use change / improve their lives?

Method

The empirical research was developed in Spain (South) and Portugal (North). We choose a mixed approach, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques.

1- The sample. 524 women aged between 18 and 65 years from both countries have participated in this study, of which 502 women were surveyed and 22 were interviewed. On the one hand, we applied a stratified sampling by quotas, considering the age and educational level in order to carry out survey. For the qualitative interviews, we applied a theoretical sampling of discrepant cases in the level and kind of use of Internet and Social Networks.

2- Instruments. To get information, we choose two kinds of instruments:

- o A questionnaire - to evaluate the use of social media by the women, which provides different dimensions such as: relational quality, social support, subjective well-being (Rebollo García Pérez and Sánchez - Franco, 2013).
- o Qualitative interview- a semi-structured interview to deepen the information provided by the questionnaire.

3- Data collection

- o The questionnaires have been answered directly and individually in the research team presence.
- o Additionally, women representing discrepant cases have been interviewed to gather more in-depth insights about relational quality, social support, subjective well-being in online social networks.

4- Data Analysis

- o We applied descriptive analysis techniques and ANOVAs with the SPSS / PC + (version 18 for Windows) and we conducted a structural equation model with smartpls version 2.0) to test a predictive model between perceived social support, relational quality, digital inclusion of women in online social networks and their subjective well-being.
- o The interviews have been analyzed following a social constructionist approach, adopting the principles of the grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and some contributions of discourse analysis (Edwards, 1997; Mercer, 2001; Potter, 1992). On the one hand, the grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) allows us to examine, conceptualize and categorize data, facilitating the generation of hypotheses and the search for patterns in texts, to the formulation and definition of categories. We applied the constant comparison method and crossed comparison for category revision and validation. On the other hand, the discourse analysis has allow us to identify the contradictions, ambivalences and dilemmas in the women' discourses. This approach provides methodological procedures for the analysis of the discursive communication, providing keys for the identification and processing of the units of analysis. For that, we have used Nvivo –a text analysis software- and Atlas-ti 6.2.

Expected Outcomes

In our research we found that the main motivation for using social networks is relational, that is, a feeling of being socially integrated in a community or group, enabling experiences and relationships over time and space, as well as actively participating in the cultural life of local communities despite geographical distance. Furthermore, the women in this study claim to have learned, in informal settings, about very specific needs and they have done so with the support of certain people in their personal network. However, this study finds unmet needs related to learning and discovering new dimensions of their identity. Thus, social networks can become environments of growth and empowerment.

Some of the resistance expressed by women in the use of social networks refers to difficulties in reconciling their online life and their daily life, the use of time, the feeling of loss of control over certain aspects of their private life and the unclear boundaries between public and private spheres in social networks.

In this study, the data on women indicates that social support and the quality of relationships in social networks are important aspects of their online learning, but they are not measurable. On the one hand, it seems important to examine indicators on the quality of relationships regarding the regulatory mechanisms of interactions, that is, ways of reciprocal support which are used for the shared construction of knowledge and experiences in social networks. On the other hand, it is important to consider that not only individuals but also communities must be efficient in the use of resources involving the

development of effective and planned forms of communication on social networks.

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