

Social Networking Sites and Self-Promotional Culture. Notes for a Theory of the Mosaic Identity

Las redes sociales y la cultura de la autopromoción. Apuntes para una teoría de la identidad mosaico

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Abstract:

This exploratory work proposes a theory regarding the way in which social networking sites, as identity technologies, lean toward a way of conceptualizing and presenting one's individual identity in self-promotional terms. As a result of the normalization of this logic –which is consistent with the promotional culture of late capitalism–, the incorporation of practices such as self-branding in users' daily communications, the perception of social profiles as a micro-media of communication, and the concept of the network of contacts as a type of personal audience, are all increasing. In brief, four main trends in the design and presentation of identity that are promoted by these web services are identified: a distributed and fragmented concept of the self, where the tiles of the mass media become key contents in expressing subjectivity; a tendency to quantify relationships and affections; the perception of being in unavoidable competition with others; and normalization of the audiovisual presentation of the self as communicative material capable of attracting attention and conveying authenticity.

Key words:

Identity; social networking sites; self-promotion; publicity; the mosaic culture.

Resumen:

Este trabajo exploratorio teoriza acerca del modo en que las redes sociales digitales favorecen, en tanto que tecnologías de la identidad, un modo de concebir y presentar la identidad individual en términos de autopromoción. Como resultado de la normalización de esta lógica –coherente con la cultura promocional del capitalismo tardío–, crece la incorporación de prácticas como la marca personal en la comunicación cotidiana de los sujetos, la percepción del perfil social como un micromedio de comunicación y la concepción de la red de contactos a modo de audiencia personal. En síntesis, se señalan cuatro tendencias centrales en la concepción y presentación de la identidad que favorecen estos servicios web: una concepción distribuida y fragmentaria del yo, donde las teselas de los massmedia se convierten en contenidos clave para expresar la subjetividad; una tendencia a la cuantificación de las relaciones y los afectos; la percepción de encontrarse en una ineludible competencia con los otros; y la normalización de la presentación audiovisual del yo como un material comunicativo capaz de atraer la atención y comunicar autenticidad.

Palabras clave:

Identidad; redes sociales; autopromoción; publicidad; cultura mosaico.

1. Introduction

The demands of the Second Modernity regarding identity as a project of reflection (Giddens, 1994; Sibilía, 2008; Cover, 2014) find in social networking sites a formidable way of allowing the individual to define himself to others through his choices of culture and consumption (Liu, 2007; Rendueles, 2013a, 2013b). These platforms have been studied as technologies of subjectivity (Marwick, 2013) or identity (Cover, 2014), both formulations being inherited from the proposal of Foucault (1990) on technologies of the individual self: technologies of access and construction of subjectivity, which would allow for self-care.

However, at the present stage of capitalism in which the market is the organizing force of social life (Wernick, 1994, Brown, 2003, Verdú, 2007, Rendueles, 2013a), “web 2.0 is a neoliberal technology of subjectivity that teaches users how to succeed” (Marwick, 2013: 14), thereby achieving a union of self-government of the individual and the principles of the system. As will be discussed later, the culture of these spaces and various decisions regarding the design of interaction contribute to promoting the free adoption of a series of values and practices that allow for the transfer of the process of capitalist accumulation to the experience of everyday life in relation to the affections, connections and conception of one’s own identity.

In this sense, under the metaphor of the mosaic identity¹ the present work brings together a series of trends that can be observed in the communication of users according to the current consolidation of these web services². In particular, four main trends regarding the conception and presentation of identity favoured by these platforms are analysed: a distributed and fragmented concept of the self in which the tiles, or distinct elements, of the mass media become key contents in expressing subjectivity; a tendency toward the quantification and accumulation of relationships and affections; the perception of being in unavoidable competition with others for visibility; and the growing audiovisual presentation of the self as communicative material capable of attracting attention and transferring authenticity and truthfulness.

2. State of the issue

Current academic work on the implications of social networking sites in the conception of identity (Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin, 2008, Caceres, Ruiz-San Román and Brändle, 2009, Andrejevic, 2010, Arcila, 2011, Arda, 2011, Davis, 2012, Harper, Whitworth and Page, 2012, Vivienne, 2012, Caro Castaño, 2012, Zappavigna, 2012, Marwick, 2013, Serrano-Puche, 2013, Van Dijck, 2013 and Zajc 2013), can be framed in the tradition of those investigations that analyse how communication

¹ The notion of mosaic identity has already been the subject of a first approximation (Caro Castaño, 2012) although the concept is reformulated as a theory in this work.

² The design of these types of services is considered dependent on the practices carried out by users in an eternal “beta phase”, always open to modifications, using *software* engineering terminology.

technologies mediate the imagination in the creation of subjectivity (Haraway, 2006, Gergen, 2010, Kember and Zilinska, 2012, Nakamura, 2014).

Along the lines of what is probably the most widespread definition of these platforms in academia, social networking sites constitute egocentric networks (Boyd and Ellison, 2008), or in other words, the network is constructed by every subject – ego– versus previous constructions such as virtual communities based on a common interest related to a specific theme (Kozinets, 2010). In addition, these web services not only create the idea of a social individual (Rendueles, 2013a, 2013b; Zajc, 2013), but also enhance the presentation of a non-anonymous individual (Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin, 2008) due to the fact that the platform constantly challenges users to provide data about their daily life (workplace, geographical location of the publications, telephone, etc.).

All of this facilitates the incorporation of pre-existing relations in the day to day world (Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe, 2007, Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin, 2008, Hampton *et al.*, 2011). In this way, legal and virtual identities tend to converge in these spaces. Furthermore, it has been proven that among young Spaniards, as an example, anonymity in the network is a fact that is considered to be morally reprehensible (Cáceres, Ruiz-San Román and Brändle, 2009). Therefore, in the face of experimentation with the masks that allowed for pre-web 2.0 platforms (Arda, 2011) –in virtual worlds, forums, chat channels, etc.–, subjects tend to conceive their presence on social networking sites as a continuation of their daily reality, where their offline and online worlds converge into a single realness (Jurgenson, 2012, Reig, 2012, Pérez Subías, 2012): what happens on Facebook does not remain only on Facebook, whereas in environments such as virtual worlds, whatever occurs there can stay there.

One of the direct consequences of this merging effect is that strategies developed by users on these platforms seek to produce effects in the offline world (Lampel and Bhalla, 2007, Kozinets, 2010, Davis, 2012 and Woermann, 2012). This would explain the time and effort invested by many users in expanding their number of contacts and creating and disseminating their own free content that allow them to become more visible, gain authority, or define their position online (Myers, 2010) –in terms of branding and search engine visibility–. Consequently, within the framework of a promotion culture in which the desired subjectivity is that of a “subject-brand” (Rowan, 2012), which is able to sell itself, social networking sites would be seen as micro-media (Del Fresno, 2012) that would allow for the construction of networked audiences (Marwick and Boyd, 2011; Marwick, 2013), thereby allowing access to mass visibility.

Finally, it should be pointed out that the analysis of social networking sites as an integrated media in the neoliberal power mechanism, following Foucault's terminology, has been posed by various authors (Han, 2013, Marwick, 2013, Rendueles, 2013a), while other researchers have insisted on the growing instrumental conception that favours these affective platforms (Illouz, 2007), communication skills (Fuchs and Sevignani, 2013), and self-identity as a consumer product (Hearn, 2008; Deresiewicz, 2011; Page, 2012).

3. Objective and research question

In this research, social networking sites are seen as socio-technical constructs, or in other words, their analysis must take into consideration their material infrastructures and social meanings, including those that are imaginary and the metaphors that circulate and give meaning to practices by users. Therefore, these spaces should not be understood exclusively as technological mechanisms; on the contrary, they should be analysed considering the interdependent relationships that take place in these new social places, as well as the synergies that arise among technologies, discourses and practices. In this way, although these tools pose a series of potentialities for communication and expression of identity, the agency is shared by the individual and his tools (Lasén, 2009, 2012; Kember and Zylinska, 2012). Therefore, the social uses of these mechanisms are what cause people and communities of these potentialities to co-determine their development.

Based on this approach, the following objective is addressed in this work: to define a theory related to the specific way of conceiving subjectivity and presenting social identity on social networking sites. In this sense, the objective is to understand how subjects interact with the medium, the potentialities and limitations of different platforms for the interaction and projection of the self, and the way in which these designs favour the pre-eminence of some discourses on their practices compared to all other possibilities.

In order to achieve the stated research objective, the following question was posed: What kind of subjectivity contributes to creating social networking sites in accordance with the potential of these technological devices?

4. Methodology

This is an exploratory work that focuses on a bibliographic meta-analysis that allows for the study of trends and transformations in the ways of conceiving and presenting identity, and the sociability derived from it, on social networking sites. These web platforms are analysed as socio-technical constructs from the perspective of the approach known as STS (Science, Technology and Society) (Pinch and Bijker, 1984). Given the theoretical nature of this work, the conclusions reached in this research will have to be tested in future empirical studies.

Conversely, in order to provide direct access to the object of study, the bibliographic revision is complemented –although with a secondary weight in the research design– with the use of digital ethnographic observations (Hine, 2004; Kozinets, 2010; Ardèvol and Gómez-Cruz, 2012; Del Fresno, 2012) on different social networking sites.

5. Mediatization and the mosaic culture

The choice of the mosaic metaphor in naming this theoretical proposal seeks to communicate as directly as possible a series of ideas that are considered key in this work in relation to the way in which identity is presented on these platforms. On one hand, it appeals to the most popular notion of the term, both in its denotative meaning—as a collection composed of elements of different sizes, colours, origins and/or textures that make up a work—, as well as in its metaphorical definition—as synonymous with cultural and/or ethnic diversity, for example—.

Therefore, we seek to use the image of a mosaic to portray the way in which these spaces are based on the creation of a network structure where relations define the place occupied by the subject in society, either more in the centre or closer to the margin—with greater or lesser capacity of influence on the network, respectively—. The imagery of mosaic tiles is also used because individual identity is made tangible on social networking sites through countless pieces of information from various sources and of a diverse nature (self-creations, comments from friends and strangers; film clips, television programs, news, etc.), which contribute to building the narrative of the self.

On the other hand, in relation to academic literature of communication, an attempt is made to express some of the contributions of Moles (1978) and his proposal of the “mosaic culture”, which according to his theory of cultural socio-dynamics would have been generated by the mass media, this culture being one of the mediations that are considered central to understanding the way in which identity is conceived in these spaces. However, as will be seen in the following pages, there are notable exceptions regarding the mechanistic and unidirectional vision of Moles’ proposal in which agency is exclusively attributed to the mass media and the ruling elite.

Thus, the appeal to mosaic culture advances one of the central theoretical tools of this work, which is the notion of mediatization. This term refers to the omnipresent characteristic of the mass media and its ability to affect the way individuals understand reality at multiple levels (Silverstone, 2002, Martín Barbero, 2002, Sampedro 2004; Krotz, 2007, Couldry, 2008, 2014, Hjarvard, 2013). Likewise, mediatization has been used to confirm the transformation that the mass media has produced in various social spheres. These social areas have adapted to the media representation that has been built around them, with topics ranging from political communications to how a present-day wedding should be arranged (Bird, 2010). With regard to social media, Smith and Watson (2014) speak of “automediality” to refer to the way in which the characteristics of these media affect the way they present identity (2014: 77), insisting on the fact that the peculiar aesthetics of automediality are those of a “collage, mosaic, or patchwork” (ibid. 78), thus contributing to the rupture with the myth of an essentialist conception of identity (Mischel and Morf, 2005; Haraway, 2006; Gergen, 2009, 2010).

5.1. Contributions of the mosaic culture

For Moles, the logic of the mass media and its preponderance on the configuration of the social cosmo-vision caused a rupture with the causal and rational nexuses that are characteristic of the rational humanist model, enhancing the fragmentary logic among mental contents. According to the French author, the important thing was not the loss of a logical connection between concrete and juxtaposed contents, but the cumulative effect that this practice would have on individuals: the annulment of the capacity to produce global causal interpretations of reality. Within the mosaic culture, the fragments are assembled without any criteria, at random and by juxtaposition, according to Moles.

The sociologist proposed the concept of “*cultureme*” to refer to units of content that allow subjects to understand cultural systems – the tools to understand culture that are selected by the media without taking into account their social transcendence (1978: 302). This lack of order would generate an amalgamation of issues, and even if their dissemination had increased, they would not have produced a greater number of associations between different types of *cultureme*. That is to say, they would not have produced new ideas, but rather a phenomenon of revival (ibid. 308). Thus, the fact that the majority of *cultureme* comes from the mass media would evolve, according to Moles, into a trivialization of content and the disappearance of tools that would allow subjects to unravel the scheme of discourses that converge in the media’s construction of everyday life.

However, the possibilities of expression, manipulation and diffusion that mass self-communication platforms offer to individuals today have shown that the audiences are active in their processing of the information they receive from the media, and that they are able to produce their own counter-discourses toward those informative biases that do not coincide with their view of reality. Thus, if we compare the *cultureme* stated by Moles with the political memes that are created and remixed by users in social media, it is evident that there is constant manipulation by members of the audience regarding mass media products for the purpose of perverting their original meaning (Jenkins, 2008; Rodríguez, 2013; Shifman, 2014).

5.1.1. Fragmentary narration as a symptom of spontaneity

In spite of the fact that nuances such as the one previously mentioned are necessary for the reestablishment of Moles’ proposal, the mosaic identity presented in this paper is directly related to the cultural model stated by the sociologist and resumes two of its features. The first is the fragmentary nature of the discourse of the self, or in other words, the non-existence of a linear narrative in terms of authorship, format or subject matter. Since many of these contents will not be generated by the user, it is the exoticism in the selection of tiles that communicates singularity, and although it is secondary, it is sufficient: what is important is the individual criterion of consumption that is expressed through these choices. This idea connects with the discourse of lifestyles and the search for contemporary ontological security (Giddens, 1994), which can be related to the proposal of Belk (1988) regarding the “extended self”: what a subject chooses to surround himself

with expresses a unique subjectivity, a project of life, a point of view and actions that are specific regarding reality.

Furthermore, it is believed that the narrative of the self should not maintain a rigid theme in its publications within these spaces due to the fact that when a person uses his profile to share information exclusively regarding his profession or some subject in which he regards himself to be an expert, he will tend to be perceived as a person who is not genuine, a kind of automaton, by completely restricting the access of others to more personal and intimate information. Thus, within the process initiated by the mass media, a new stage is reached in which the exposure of content previously characteristic of private and intimate spaces is normalized (McLuhan, 1980; Meyrowitz, 1985; Thompson, 2001; Han, 2013), and also goes in parallel with the great social process in which personal and professional separation, forged in industrial society, tends to merge again.

Among the factors contributing to this growing fusion is the phenomenon of co-presence, which has contributed to the development of what Thompson called the “self-revelation society”: “Political leaders can now address their subjects as if they were friends and family” (2001: 66). Moreover, just as political leaders, celebrities, and any other public figures have been doing in general, at the present time any individual who observes his social profile as a micro-media of communication can also address a crowd. On the other hand, in relation to the type of experience offered by these media, it is interesting to note how the primacy of the personalized experience offered by the algorithms of social networking sites and search engines have transformed the web into an intimate sphere: “This digital proximity offers the participant only those parts of the world that *he likes*. Consequently, this deteriorates the public sphere, public conscience and *criticism*, and privatizes the world” (Han, 2013: 69). Having removed the public from the equation, what remains is the “publication of the person”, according to Han: the showcase and marketplace facing the common social space.

5.1.2. Media content as central elements of identity

Another feature of the mosaic culture is the media origin of most of the content of the tiles shared by users of social networking sites, with cultural industries and the mass media considered to be designers of the collective imagination, as noted by Moles (1978):

“The press, radio, successful record albums, reproductions of paintings [...] exert an overwhelming influence on the entire social system, govern our culture by filtering it, extract from it particular elements and attach importance to them, value some ideas and devalue others, and completely polarize the cultural field” (ibid. 100-101).

The intrigue of media content in everyday life is evident on social networking sites. This can be seen not only in the enormous amount of content produced by the media that users share, but especially in the proliferation of applications that offer users the option of defining themselves to others according to distinct products of cultural industries. Thus, there

are many tests in Facebook, for example, where the answers given end up classifying the interviewee according to characters from films, series, etc. “What movie is your life based on?”, “What *Star Wars* character are you?”, etc. This type of application emphasizes the idea that subjectivity can be exploited in cultural and consumer choices, such as mainstream cultural materials produced by cultural industries that would help the subject express to others the fact that he belongs to a particular cultural group or subgroup.

6. Features of the mosaic identity

The omnipresence of social networking sites and their integration into everyday life have contributed to the emergence of a new way of seeing the world that modifies the view of the body itself and the context in which the weight of the strategic dimension of social interaction that Goffman raised in his classic theory of dramaturgic interaction increases (1967, 1969, 1991, 2006). Below we survey the main features we have observed regarding the specific ways of being and acting in the world proposed by social networking sites.

6.1. A co-constructed, fragmented and fluctuating self

The design of the interaction and the way in which the profile and relations of the user are shown on social networking sites poses a structure that fosters a distributed conception of social identity, as these platforms allow the subject to manipulate the representation of his social graph. Thus, as pointed out by Zappavigna (2012: 2), “the social network consists of using the Internet to represent relationships rather than share information, although the two functions are clearly interconnected.” According to McLuhan (1980), this tool offers the subject, as did the reflection of the calm water for Narcissus, a way of observing himself in a new way: a distributed self in continuous co-creation and negotiation with the primary group and the extended network. In short, social networking sites allow the individual to make his position tangible, and also permit him to translate and renegotiate his position on the digital social graph with regard to people, organizations, cultural and ideological creations, etc.

Given the fact that the main purpose is the expression of bonds, it is not surprising that the most viral applications in a general social network such as Facebook are those that focus on the subject and the representation of his relations and biography, such as the video application that Facebook created in 2014 to celebrate its 10-year anniversary, or more recently, the app to create a video in which the user can make a one-minute clip devoted to a friend. This feature always follows the same pattern and standard narrative, so that what changes from one video to another is the selection of the specific publications that one wishes to use in communicating the special value of friendship to the subject in question and to the rest of his or her contacts. Therefore, it is a type of prefabricated video that allows the user to express to others the preferred links within his network.

Translating sameness and reconstructing the concept of a place-in-the-world in the online environment allows the subject to have different degrees of freedom in the accuracy of this reproduction of his offline life that will, in any case, be performative in both planes of reality –face-to-face and non-face-to-face–. However, as previously pointed out, the increase in transferring relations from a face-to-face reality to a non-face-to-face existence would reduce these creative possibilities in the definition of a stable and connected digital identity.

6.1.1. Dialectic web and symbolic interactionism

Given the dialectic nature of the web (Senft, 2008, Deuze, 2012), these spaces not only allow the subject to strategically manage the presentation of his identity and connections, but also make it possible for others to participate in this creation. Identity in these spaces is materially co-constructed, thus realizing in a physical way –the materiality of bits–, the central proposition of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1980; Mead, 2009) and Honneth's theory of recognition (1998). Therefore, the way in which others relate to the subject in public, either by responding or remaining silent when faced with the publications of the subject, or being photographed with him or not, etc., lets the subject know what other people think of him –especially regarding weak links–, while at the same time it functions in the presence of the audience as a “warranting principle” (Walther and Parks, 2002) of how the subject describes himself, and of the social status that he intends to express in online platforms.

In addition to the possibility of explaining and sometimes improving one's position on the social graph, digital networks are employed by users to maintain connections in a constantly growing social network. As Miller (2008) points out, social networking sites would be “phatic media” (2008: 395), the primary function of which is to allow communicative interaction that supports links with other people over time, connections that are particularly expensive to maintain when links are weak. This would explain the scant informational value in much of the content that users put into circulation, as the key is not what flows through the links, but rather, the important point is that the circulation of those items of information reinforces the sense of co-presence. In short, the publication of these informative items, though of little interest and/or not well-developed, would help to maintain social ties over time with less dedication of personal resources.

On the other hand, as already indicated in relation to the theory of cultural socio-dynamics of Moles (1978), the flow of updates maintained by users follows a fragmentary logic with regard to the origin and authorship of these tiles of content, and to the narrative logic that each subject develops. Moreover, though it may be completely different in each individual, this tends to present a flowing logic of fragments, increasingly brief. This trend toward brevity –especially emphasized by Twitter and its 140 characters– has been accentuated with the incorporation of platforms like Vine, the short videos that Instagram allows, or the instantaneousness of the narrative of the GIF that expands the expressive capacities of the users in these spaces.

6.2. Personification, reification and quantification of the self

In the current phase of fictitious capitalism³, the relations between object and subject have achieved a new status, according to Verdú: the “sub-object” (*objeto*)⁴: with objects being transformed into “animated beings that receive life through actions among themselves and actions with the subjects” (2007: 103). According to the Spanish sociologist, this new dialectic emanates from an animistic phenomenon (ibid: 107) in which any object or reality –cities, for example, now “intelligent” (Mitchell, 2007) or “sensitive spaces” (Di Siena, 2011)– are presented today with human attributes.

The dialectic described by Verdú focuses on the idea that products in the phase of fictitious capitalism have been endowed with sensitive attributes in a process that has incorporated appearance (visual), the work related to texture and finish (touch), and the symbolism of the brand (intellect), the sound –the noisy slogan of a Volkswagen door closing, the tempered sound of a Mac keyboard, etc. – and the scents (ibid: 108) of sensory marketing. From the perspective of this work, this animistic process is completed in a deeper way in the digital world, in such a way that both subject and object share the same material and space.

At this point, it is important to emphasize one of the ideas indicated by Verdú in relation to this process in which brands become essential tools for the expression of ontological security: the perception of the subject is not that of feeling treated as an object; on the contrary, he feels that objects, or brands, “personify” him (ibid. 113). The move to the digital field will further deepen the process of ontological equalization between people and brands, a transformation that helps explain the ease and joy with which many individuals have turned themselves to the task of becoming a personal brand, or the fact that younger consumers can interpret their link with their favourite brands as more than a preference related to a consumer choice: they see it as an emotional link (Aa.Vv., 2014) and identity.

The tendency to equate the status of a human being’s existence with an object is proposed to the consumer as a discourse in personification and not of commodification. Following this reasoning, managing the social identity as a personal brand would not be perceived by the individual as a process that devalues the human being in its reification⁵, but rather as a project that works on the coherent self with the capitalist dynamic and maximizes the perception regarding individual agency oriented to the attainment of its own goals.

³ Verdú gave the name of *fictitious capitalism* to the stage that followed the other epoch known as consumption capitalism, with the latter being exceeded by the former to a great extent by the discrediting aspect of advertising, according to the author (2007: 110). Fictitious capitalism is a phase in which capitalism started to replace what was real with what was produced.

⁴ The neologism created by Verdú makes a play on words by joining the terms subject and object.

⁵ The notion of reification is used here in a non-Marxist sense, following Honneth (1998) and Illouz (2007). The name reification is used for those processes by which people treat themselves and others as abstract categories, thus considering the concept as if it were real, with the subject being treated not according to his human qualities, but as a means to an end, an object or a commodity.

The discussion related to whether or not this transformation devalues the ontology of the human being is beyond the scope of this text, but what it certainly confirms in relation to the effects of social networking sites as a means and metaphor of conceiving identity is the contribution made by this transformation to the process of contemporary individualization thanks to the insistence of these platforms on the need for differentiation. As some authors have pointed out (Zajc, 2013, Rendueles, 2013a, 2013b), despite the generalization of the term social media, these spaces reinforce the individual conception of social identity, enhancing an interpretation of social collaboration from the point of view of individuality and weak links, thus favouring relationships that are occasional and of low commitment, or liquid relationships, as put forth by Bauman (2009). Rendueles (2013b) expresses this tendency to underestimate the idea of commitment as follows:

“We have become accustomed to defining ourselves by our preferences: our musical tastes, lifestyles, political opinions, etc. We see ourselves as the sum of choices, with the only foundation being that those choices have been made by us. From this perspective, any form of commitment that cannot be reduced to an immediately reversible choice simply by desire can only be understood as a burden [...] Internet has accentuated this self-understanding to the point of paroxysm” (ibid.).

Once the subject is classified into conceptual categories, and after conceiving relations with an otherness in a manner that is increasingly strategic (Illouz, 2007) and self-promoting (Hearn, 2008; Marwick, 2013), both in the subject’s strong and weak relations, then the quantification of affections, the measurement of preferences and the recognition of others (Honneth, 1998) are transformations that can be understood as the next step that is consistent with this process of equating the human being with other dimensions of existence.

In this way, and based largely on the performative capacity of metaphorical language (Lakoff and Johnson, 2009), as well as on the communicative power of the image –the pre-eminence of positive iconicity (the thumbs up of *like* on Facebook or a heart on Instagram and Twitter) –, the expression of affections and affinities on social networking sites have been enhanced from a quantifiable perspective as a result of these spaces, whereas qualitative categories (affections, for example) have become quantifiable (number of *likes* or number of re-tweets).

The main communicative problem of quantification is that the system tends to unify unequal affections. In other words, it standardizes in order to establish comparisons with others. Although Facebook has developed the *reactions* option (Figure 1), which broadens the possibilities of expressing “empathy” in the platform (Alba, 2015), all *emojis*, whatever their initial meaning might be, end up being reduced to a final number of interactions that allow us to compare the social success of a publication –success being understood as the ability to attract attention– with previous items and publications of other platform users.

Figure 1. Image of the new *emojis* offered by the *reactions* feature in Facebook. Source: De Sancha Rojo (2015).



The meaning of the *favourites* option on Twitter, for example, is even more complex in terms of the number of meanings that users give. Thus, Gorrell and Bontcheva (2016) have analysed the range of uses of favourites for users: as bookmarks of tweets that they want to retrieve in the future but do not share, as a way of saying thanks for a tweet, expressing agreement, closing a conversation, self-promotion, etc. The variety in meaning attributed to this feature was verified in 2015 with the protests and ironic comments of users as a result of the icon change made by the platform, from being represented by a star to that of a heart (Aa.Vv. 2015).

In spite of this semiotic variety, when a user places the mouse on a tweet and observes that this item has ten favourites, this diversity of meaning and use is reduced to a numerical datum that provides information especially useful for machine language and the development of rankings and classifications of trendy topics, but that radically reduces the meanings created by the subjects in their interactions.

The applications and utilities programs that allow for the quantification and measurement of actions and interactions of the individual are not limited to harmless measurements; much to the contrary, they establish points of comparison of the subject with himself and with others. At the same time they help to establish what is socially desirable, where the subject is located in relation to the goal of the ideal self, and how one must understand the care of the self in relation to these means.

6.3. *The self in competition with others*

Within neoliberal rhetoric, the design of utilities for quantification on social networking sites –number of *likes*, re-tweets, favourites, comments, etc.–, as well as the possibility of connecting these platforms to other services that extract data generated by the user –Klout, PeerIndex, Favstar, Tweetreach⁶, etc.–, sets up a system of rewards for the actions of users in which competition for the attention of a social audience is favoured, while the logic of capitalist accumulation is moved into the realm of relationships and affections.

⁶ Tweetreach is a tool that measures the potential visibility that every publication of a user can achieve. This service takes data from the Twitter API to provide the datum of the potential audience that could have seen one of their tweets by adding the personal audiences of each user who publishes a re-tweet.

Contributing to this situation is the quantification and visibility that the different platforms give to the items that arouse more reactions in others. Twitter, for example, sends e-mail notifications as a newsletter highlighting the publications that have stimulated more interactions among contacts of the receiver while offering the user the possibility of knowing the “reach” of each of his own tweets, and even promoting them. (Figure 2). For its part, Facebook combines the criteria of proximity to the link, current affairs, and the ability to attract attention when presenting the news that make up the timeline, while at the same time enhancing the nostalgia and assimilation of Facebook in a personal album with messages that invite the subject to remember some old publications, such as the feature called “A day like today”. In this way, these applications and utilities of the interface have considerable influence on building consensus around what is important, desirable, acceptable, worth remembering, and so on.

Figure 2. Screenshot of the information provided by Twitter regarding the scope of the audience for each tweet and the possibilities of promoting it.



In his study on the presentation of identity in the search for a mate through dating sites, Illouz (2007) reviewed the influence of capitalism and the rise of twentieth-century psychologism in the use of emotions by users. According to the author, emotional capitalism has produced a reinterpretation regarding the value of using emotions, which now tend to be employed strategically by individuals in their relationships. On the other hand, Illouz considers that publishing an online profile turns the private self into a public self, presenting the subject himself to “an anonymous and abstract audience that

is not, however, an audience (in the Habermasian sense of the term), but rather a set of private selves [sic]" (ibid.: 170). From the perspective of this work, a more adequate definition of the term *audience* would be the type of relationships established in these spaces where the search for mass visibility orients many of the communicative strategies.

In this public representation of one's identity before an audience –compared to the idea of community, for example–, individuals tend to adopt formulas of representation typical of the mass media and commercial communication: body posture, gestures, retouching the image, etc. The hyper-ritualization (Goffman, 1991) of profile images on social networking sites has been confirmed to be incessant for the purpose of insuring that a set of signs are transferred to the audience that they can interpret with the meaning they were expecting, thus communicating a personality and recognizable style.

Another of the consequences pointed out by Illouz states that the way in which subjects must conform to these tools and to the collective imagination that runs through them is a predominance of the "liberal ideology of choice" (ibid.: 171), a situation analogous to the market in which the user must make the best possible selection. In this way, if the subject sees himself and others in a free market situation, he is therefore in competition with others, and in this context he must sell himself in order to be considered more attractive than the undefined others with whom he competes, which is similar to the way that communication of any commercial brand functions.

From this perspective, the struggle for attention becomes a scarce commodity that individuals on social networking sites are encouraged to achieve through quantification mechanisms that allow them to compare themselves to others. If consumption has become the language used to express identity (Giddens, 1994; Verdú, 2007), then data related to the number of links and interactions the subject is able to accumulate must be added to this consumption information on social networking sites. Therefore, just as "status is an intrinsically competitive game" (Heath and Potter, 2009: 132) and leads subjects to engage in consumer races with their neighbours to show their status through visible consumption, then on social networking sites the systems that make connections and interactions visible enhance the perception of being in competition for the goods of these spaces: attention and expression of affections, essentially.

To attract attention, many users develop actions aimed at luring audiences by using images, GIF and video as enticements that are more attractive *per se* than text. Likewise, users tend to take a position that differentiates them from others, even incorporating tags into their publications that are trendy in the platform where they are published, even if there is no connection between the shared theme and the hashtag. This is a practice that Abidin (2014) calls "*hijacking*". This practice seeks to gain greater visibility and dissemination of one's own publications, even at the risk of turning the content itself into spam for users who employ the labels as folksonomy (Figure 3).

⁷ In the computer field, hijacking refers to any illegal technique that leads to seizing or stealing something (usually information) by an attacker, so the term can be interpreted in this context as theft of a user's attention through the unscrupulous use of tags that does not contribute in any way to organize the content generated by users of the network so that others can find them, but only tries to achieve visibility and self-promotion.

Figure 3. Screenshot of a publication in Instagram that uses popular tags regardless of their connection to what is published.



6.4. Audiovisual presentation of the self

According to Miller and Sinanan (2014), increased communication through webcams would change the way in which the subject observed himself in communicative interactions. This is due to the fact that seeing one's self while interacting with others would become commonplace. In this sense, social networking sites have also contributed greatly to making prevalent the possibility of constructing a visual and audiovisual presentation of identity (Van der Molen, 2014: 65). In fact, in the case of young people, users who do not post pictures of themselves in spaces such as Facebook tend to arouse suspicion among the contacts in their network (Aziz, 2014; Caro Castaño, 2015). Along these same lines, Han (2013) has put forth the idea of the emergence of “iconic coercion of becoming an image” (2013: 31) within the “society of transparency”, where everything that is not exposed to the regime of the visible is automatically under suspicion. The subjection of the body to hyper-visibility, for Han, constitutes part of its transformation into a commodity (ibid. 51).

In spite of this situation, and faced with the promise of spontaneity and the unveiling of what is authentic in these spaces, mediated communication makes possible repetition, rehearsal of the pose, and retouching of the pre and postproduction phase of the audiovisual presentation of the self. In this way, processes that are typical of productions and audiovisual realizations of the mass media and their aesthetic representational keys become integrated into everyday communicative practice and in the care of the self (Foucault, 1990). The work related to one's own audiovisual representation becomes an

exercise in self-realization in an almost literal sense: if the Second Modernity brought with it the self as a distinct and individual task in which the subject must externalize his or her identity to seek social validation (Giddens, 1994), then social networking sites have become the tools that allow for experimentation of that construction on the screen (Cover, 2014, Miller and Sinanan, 2014), in narrative and audiovisual terms.

At the same time, members of the audience are faced with the possibility of distributing their own image and discerning what strategies and tactics contribute to attracting the attention of others, thus introducing the logic of competition and accumulation. The fifteen minutes of fame raised by Warhol are now the search for a massive re-tweet in order to achieve the greatest number of *reactions* to the new profile photo, or exceeding a certain number of comments on each new image or video. This finalist orientation of communication is determining the ways in which users are described in text and shown in an audiovisual sense.

Given the fact that the situation not only involves caring for the way in which the self is displayed in an audiovisual way, there is also concern regarding the response that this representation produces among users, as the subject develops a version of himself with aspirations in this process of externalization. As Pérez-Chirinos (2012) has pointed out regarding the narration that the subject makes of his daily life in these spaces:

“There is greater influence from what one aspires to be (qualitative identity) than from what others expect someone to be (social identity): What is shared are those things that are special, novel or enjoyable, rather than a confirmation of customs and routines (ibid. 22).”

Building and sustaining this online presentation with aspirations requires constant intangible work by subjects to generate their own content. Thus, as stated by Lasén (2012), it is a common practice among young people to make “meet-ups” of friends to have photographic sessions that will later be retouched and published on social networking sites. These sessions are usually carried out in non-domestic spaces, or at least in a space that is not presented by the subject as his or her usual daily space. The photographs taken in these meetings usually demonstrate that great care was taken in their composition, use of costumes, makeup, etc., in order to produce images that typically replicate the aesthetics of fashion magazine reports in which models explore the most brilliant poses to represent themselves, as Goffman (1991: 168) points out, using the gestural repertoire hyper-ritualized by discourses on fashion, advertising and cinema.

Obviously, the normalization of a strategic audiovisual presentation of the self as a form of self-realization and self-care has not emerged along with these web services, although these services are the ones that have most clearly allowed for the exercise of this way of conceiving and expressing the self up to the present time. The cultural basis for this phenomenon is at least twofold. Firstly, the influence of the promotion culture should be noted, as it has established the competitive and economic value of the “artificial semiosis” created by marketing, advertising and public relations enmeshed with the commodity-sign (Wernick, 1994: 18). Secondly, the weight of mass media culture and celebrities –with the latter being

versions to which audiences aspire and identify themselves (Marshall, 2011)– whose *ethos* have surrounded their visibility with an aura of glamour has created a situation that has enhanced the conception of hyper-visibility as a form of contemporary power.

7. Conclusions

In summary, considering everything that has been expounded above, along with all of the cautions required by the conception of social networking sites as socio-technical constructs, it has been argued that these spaces propose a specific way of conceiving and displaying subjectivity in the presence of otherness, which has been called the *mosaic identity*, and is characterized by the following:

- a) Fostering a distributed conception of social identity in a continuous co-creation and negotiation of the representation of the subject's position in the network structure, where the content that the user causes to flow through the links follows fragmentary logic and diverse authorship;
- b) Favouring processes of reification –toward the subject himself by normalizing the fact of converting himself into an object of consumption and toward his social relations as well– and quantifying the self by reading the relations and interactions according to the visibility systems offered by each platform (retweets, *likes*, favourites, etc.);
- c) Promoting a perception of the self in competition with others –for attention, affection, social recognition, etc.–, a perception emphasized by the mechanisms of quantification of these spaces that provide comparison units, and lastly;
- d) Encouraging normalization of a strategic audiovisual presentation of the self in which the representation of the body is conceived as an expression of authenticity and closeness, even though in this presentation there is a tendency to adopt the semiotics of the mass media.

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