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Abstract

The last few years saw the development of a new line of research around the relationship between digital platforms and activism. The influence of the internet and social media on the civic and political engagement of young people in particular has become clear. Digital platforms perform in this regard a set of functions crucial to activism in terms communication, mobilisation, and logistics. These are indispensable tools, especially to young people belonging to informal structures. Digital platforms have also been shown to facilitate emotional and solidarity networks thus fostering a sense of community and a strengthening of collective identities. In this article we aim at examining this aspect based on in-depth interviews with young activists conducted in Portugal during a three-year project (2020–2022). We have concluded that, especially in certain activism contexts involving social groups of neglected or non-normative identities, digital platforms function as a crucial empowerment tool. These are linked to the emotional support and recognition of the identities of these young people, incentivising the creation of fields of political and social intervention.

Keywords: youth, activism, digital platforms, digital communities, visibility, solidarity

1 Introduction

The previous decade proved to be particularly fruitful in terms of research around digital activism, as is revealed by the extensive list of academic surveys on this subject (Castells, 2015; Fernandez-Planells et al., 2014; Gerbaudo, 2012; Micó and Casero-Ripollés, 2014; Milan, 2015; Treré, 2015). It seems therefore indisputable that digital platforms are a crucial tool for contemporary activism. This is due to the omnipresence of these resources in our daily lives, but also to our permanent state of connectivity, factors confirming that the digital world has become an integral part of our lives. Whether used at work, for socialising, in our free time, or to engage in politics, digital platforms are instruments we use to communicate, consume, share, and produce a broad range of content.

Young people are known to be especially active at this level, as engaged consumers and users of social media, and also as highly entrepreneurial in exploring these platforms and producing digital content (Bennett, 2004; Feixa, 2014; Livingstone, 2011; Lüders, 2010). It's unsurprising to see them apply their technical skills on behalf of activism. Not only are they more apt and committed to using new digital devices, but they also demonstrate a stronger disposition for creativity and experimentation of new formulas of political action. The inventiveness, dynamism, and hybridism of the political agency of young people have been noted in research focussing on these themes (Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat, 2018; Pickard, 2019; Pitti, 2018).

Finally, it's important to highlight the obvious operational and functional potential of digital platforms in facilitating communication, swift dissemination of information, in its capacity for mobilization of individuals and groups (Treré and Kaun, 2021), as well as its relevance in terms of collective community and identity building (Castells, 2015; Milan, 2015;

Treré, 2015). The thoughts and arguments developed in this article lean more on this latter question, looking into issues which, albeit present in the literature deserve, in our opinion, greater attention. We will therefore concentrate on discussing the identity and gregarious dimension linked to socio-affective bonds generated within digital platforms.

This article is based on recent research done in Portugal (2019–2022) looking at youth involved in a range of practices we may define as activist. In this context we conducted a broad range of in-depth interviews. The activist discourses made clear that, for several of them, the internet was crucial in motivating them to join certain causes and in shaping the character of their subsequent political engagement.

We thus believe that the internet plays a fundamental role in awakening and triggering civic action. Not only because of the efficacy it displays on so many levels, something which has been widely explored in the literature, but also due to the potential it shows for establishing solidarity and support networks which are hugely important for the empowerment of young people. These bonds contribute towards the development of a sense of community which may assume distinct tones (more fleeting or permanent, hybrid or strictly virtual), stemming from common experiences, values, worries, or interests. We concluded that the importance of the internet in this particular issue is especially relevant in more vulnerable social groups who find in the virtual world not only a space of visibility but also of safety and comfort.

2 Literature review: Youth, internet, and political participation

Young people seem to be particularly inclined to welcome and incorporate the new media and digital devices into their lives, for their advantage and gratification (Bennett, 2004; boyd, 2011; Cotterell, 2007; Lenhart et al. 2007; Livingstone, 2011; Lüders, 2010; Wilson and Atkinson, 2005). We would like to emphasize some aspects of the impact that the internet and digital technologies have at this stage of life. These aspects are clearly interlinked and do not exhaust all the potential represented by these technologies.

We should start by stressing their relevance at the level of youth sociabilities. Being young is a stage of life where a gradual distancing from the family orbit is taking place in a search for greater independence and autonomy. This process involves the construction and strengthening of social bonds with people of the same age group.

Secondly, and related to the previous dimension, we should mention the construction of collective identities. The emancipation from the family implies the integration into new social circles and engagement with new individuals, both fundamental to the construction of the self-image of young people and of the world around them.

Digital devices and the internet are determining factors in this process since they facilitate the processes of emancipation of young people, enabling the creation of social and affective networks developing outside the family's reach. It is via the internet, and social media, that young people maintain ongoing daily commitments with their friends, that they meet people and develop new interests and, in many cases, where unique communities emerge. As the data shows, a state of permanent digital connection of young people is, currently, the reality in the most developed countries, with elevated levels of usage. Research underscores that mobile technologies are deeply ingrained in their daily lives as way of staying continuously in touch with their networks (Goggin, 2013; Mihailidis, 2013; Vanden Abeele, 2015). To some authors this indicates the existence of a "mobile youth culture" (Vanden Abeele, 2015), reflected in the way in which young people and adolescents are using these technologies.

Such involvement produces social practices that are either specific to this age group or that come to acquire a special role in the lives of young people. The fact of permanent connectivity and interaction with their peers has already been mentioned, but we would also stress that in their leisure and social activities a variety of digital content is produced, thus

engendering an environment of collective creation (Hargittai and Walejko, 2008; Lenhart et al., 2007). We can, therefore, speak of a participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins, Ito, and boyd, 2016) resulting from these forms of collective web interaction.

Another issue that deserves some consideration on our part, is the relationship between digital devices/networks and political participation. This issue, when applied to young people, implies an assessment on how they live and think about politics. If, on the one hand, research is almost unanimous in diagnosing a significant disinterest about formal politics with low levels of participation and political party membership, on the other hand it also reveals the existence of highly dynamic non-institutional forms of participation (Dahlgren, 2007; Pickard, 2019; Pitti, 2018). A recent study conducted in Portugal reaches the same conclusions (Costa et al., 2022). The researchers defined as “participatory revolution” such cases where there is an observable disengagement with conventional politics – the vote is seen as the least attractive strategy whereas alternative mechanisms linked to “civic” action (as opposed to political/electoral) are perceived as more effective. Young people do wish to have a say on a variety of political issues, but they don’t see themselves as adequately represented through the medium of conventional political forums where they believe “the youth” is being instrumentalized.

The significance of a digital environment for the political and civic action of young people is linked to circumstances developing from broader social and technological changes, involving at the same time a transformation in the relationship between individuals and the political system. As mentioned by Pickard (2019, p. 395):

The internet, social media and other digital technologies can be helpful in informing, organising, mobilising and engaging young people in politics, especially in non-electoral forms of political participation (...) This kind of connectivity and engagement is part of the attraction of non-electoral political participation for many young people for whom posting, sharing, liking (and to be seen doing so) in online communities is natural.

Some authors stress a growing fragmentation and individualisation of political action (Bennett, 2012; Kennelly, 2011) that also contributes to a greater permeability between the public and private spheres, together with an intersection between the worlds of politics, leisure, and entertainment. Linked to this issue is the fact that the public sphere of young people and their space of participation is, increasingly, more hybrid and typified by a convergent and diversified media ecology where online and offline practices overlap and converge (Jenkins, 2006; Zimmerman, 2016).

Pickard suggests the concept of *DIO (Do It Ourselves) politics* as expression of this new arena of public intervention. Pickard’s proposal is framed in a perspective that goes against the more pessimistic approaches that perceive young people as apathetic and disinterested in politics. In this perspective, a range of authors argue that the disinterest might be a form of resistance to the status quo and to a system that fails to provide solutions to most of the problems affecting young people (Farthing, 2010; Henn et al., 2002; Loader et al., 2014). In this context, we might argue that the detachment from institutional politics leads to legitimate practices from the perspective of a political agency and, even, to a renewal of democracy (Gagnon, 2017).

We are thus before a range of social, political, and technological transformations converging on a gradual alteration of the civic and political agency of young people. The confluence of all these tendencies appears to give rise to a new profile that Loader et al. (2014, p. 143) describe as “networked young citizen”:

Networking young citizens are far less likely to become members of political or civic organizations such as parties or trades unions; they are more likely to participate in horizontal or non-hierarchical networks; they are more project orientated; they reflexively engage in lifestyle politics; they are not dutiful but self-actualizing; their historical reference points are less likely to be those of modern welfare capitalism but rather global information networked capitalism and their social relations are increasingly enacted through a social media networked environment.

One of the issues we would like to emphasise, in addition to the idea of communication and mobilisation efficiency, is the importance of digital networks and devices from the perspective of solidarity, identity and empowerment. We are aware that the existence of a collective identity is a prerequisite for “collective action” or “connected action” (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). The internet and digital devices have had a specific role in forming a favourable environment, in the sense that they provide platforms for the creation of new iconographies and lexicons – hashtags, memes, icons, slogans, etc. – something crucial to the construction of a *collective sense of self* (Gerbaudo and Treré, 2015; Melucci, 1996).

These issues cannot be disconnected from affective-emotional dimensions. According to Fullam (2017), affection precedes civic engagement with a specific group. There is, before any form of political engagement, a quest for a place of belonging nourished by feelings of trust and loyalty. Whether by family, school friends, or virtual community members, what the author names “diffuse emotional support,” the feeling of trust is crucial for the construction of identity and, later, for civic participation.

Finally, the specific use of the digital platforms for public participation may generate a sense of individual and collective empowerment. This has been analysed in detail in the literature, especially in certain cases where minority, stigmatised, or deviant groups, see digital platforms as a tool for self-expression and staying connected with likeminded people (Lovelock, 2017; Simpson and Semaan, 2021). To have voice in the public sphere, to communicate about certain problems, to explore dilemmas or personal anxieties, and find others who share the same concerns is a factor of comfort and emotional safety, and also of emancipation and consolidation of identities.

3 Methodology

This article is based on data gathered for a project funded in Portugal during 2019-2022 (*Artcitizenship - Young people and the arts of citizenship: activism, participatory culture and creative practices*). The aim of this project was researching non-institutional territories of citizenship building and political participation that resort to a variety of creative dynamics, looking at the way in which political agency is linked to creative agency in young people. We wished to identify how different groups of young people, individually or collectively, engaging in multiple social, cultural, and political causes, employ certain resources and creative grammars as a form of expression and participation as citizens. The concept of activist used in this research involves distinctive profiles of young people. On the one hand, we interviewed young people who self-identified as activists and militants of certain causes and who belonged to a variety of associations and collectives. On the other hand, we also included young people who, without categorically self-defining as activists, were nevertheless committed and engaged in activities of a political and civic nature in a more individual fashion or intermittently linked to established groups. Methodologically, this is a qualitative project using a variety of data gathering and analysis techniques. In addition to an ethnographical approach, we made videos and conducted a series of in-depth interviews. Our in-depth interviews were based on a generic script which included the following topics: (a) biography (family and sociocultural context,

political socialisation, actors and causes), (b) activist practices (activist grammars and resources, tools employed) and (c) representations (opinions about the activist and political fields). The interviewees included young people aged between 14 and 35 years. We used the technique of snowball sampling. The interviews were, for the most part, conducted individually. However, when we managed to gather more than one young person belonging to a collective, we opted for a collective interview. In such cases, the same generic script was used.

A total of around six dozen interviews were conducted, from which 50 were selected for coding¹. Following a more individualised analysis focused on biographies, we employed the MAXQDA software to develop a thematic analysis of the content of the interviews following the topics and sub-topics of the script. For the purpose of this article, we carried out an assessment of the categories created around the uses and representations of digital media.

4 Analysis and discussion of interviews: Visibility, solidarity, and empowerment through the internet

In this section we will analyse in greater detail the discourses produced by some of the young people we interviewed around the internet and digital platforms. We won't be dwelling on specific platforms, although most of the interviewees mention a wide range of social media.

The reflection presented here can be framed in a more general debate around the contribution of the internet and digital platforms to the public sphere, a subject that has been a matter of controversy (Papacharissi, 2002, 2008; Schäfer, 2016). On the one hand, we encounter optimistic and eventually utopian perspectives that privilege the issue of access and circulation of information, the creation of forums for debate that contradict the power of the mainstream media, thus allowing some social groups with less visibility the possibility to have a voice in the public square. On the other hand, there are cautious perspectives, pointing to the variety of digital gaps and inequalities, the poor quality and irrationality of the online public debate, the creation of cognitive bubbles and echo chambers, as well as the capitalist and consumerist logic that sustains digital platforms. In reality, how we understand this issue depends on how we conceive the concept of public sphere and the perspective we adopt in the analysis of how digital media is used and of its impact. An approach taking into consideration both pros and cons is, probably, the more balanced and pertinent. Although we take into consideration the criticism raised in the literature, we wish in this article to highlight the emancipatory and empowering role of these tools, as this is an issue that emerges in the discourses of the social actors involved. However, because it is something which is also highlighted by some of the participants, we acknowledge the existence of some dangers and negative effects. These will be duly mentioned, albeit in lesser detail since they do not constitute the core of our analysis.

We argue that the internet can contribute to the public sphere, generically understood, in the words of by Rauchfleisch and Kovic (2016), as a “network of communication” where opinions with a public impact are built and circulated. In the functional scheme developed by these authors, the main function performed by the internet is identified as “identity building.” This is the argument put forth in our article, something which transpires in the analysis of the interviews we conducted. We will place special emphasis on the notion that the internet, by opening spaces of debate and visibility for certain social groups, favours the creation of communities and the consolidation of collective identities.

The interviews confirm the important role of the internet and digital platforms on several different levels. Above everything else, they are linked to civic interventions and to the development of their activism. These platforms are extremely useful when it comes to

¹ Exploratory interviews or interviews whose information was below expectations were excluded. The majority of the interviews were conducted by Alix Sarrouy while the process of MAXQDA coding was mainly developed by Gabriela Leal. Both of them were researchers of the project *Artcitizenship*.

communicating. This is true not only in intragroup terms, but also externally, making it easier to recruit and mobilise activists and sympathisers. In this context, the interviews reiterate what has been shown in other similar studies. That is, the internet and digital devices opened up new possibilities for action and communication in the context of activism which translate into hybrid forms of intervention (Campos et al., 2018; Castells, 2007, 2015; Dahlgren and Olsson, 2010; Fernandez-Planells et al., 2014; Juris, 2012). However, beyond the functional and logistical dimensions, the digital medium is fundamental also in terms of identities, sociabilities, solidarities, and affection. We argue that, in some situations of increased personal vulnerability linked to minority group membership or to living subaltern and transgressive lifestyles, digital devices can have a particularly significant impact. This is because such individuals belong to historically ignored groups, culturally and socially derided or ostracised, and with limited presence in the public sphere. Their ability to intervene and voice their concerns has been constrained by structural mechanisms which, by reproducing the status quo and dominant norms, make dissenting voices invisible. For this reason, the encouragement of group activity and the creation of a shared sense of solidarity in a virtual environment has a strong empowering effect on the individual.

We thus see how the digital media assume a crucial role in different stages of civic and political socialisation and in the transition into action. There is a recurrent chronological sequence which gains shape in the activist biographies of these young people and which, frequently, has the internet as a starting point. Firstly, the internet is a starting point for individual expression facilitating the initial connection with likeminded people, finding peers, and for developing a sense of community. Secondly, to many the internet is the first point of contact with certain ways of representing and debating the world, acting as an ideological support structure for their causes and the construction of a political identity. Finally, it can lead to the development several different practices. These practices can involve joining certain groups or collectives engaged in a broad range of causes and efforts or, instead, preserving a more individualised sphere of action. Either way, it implies becoming active, which can take place via digital platforms (blogs, podcasts, social networks, etc.) or in a more hybrid way through more traditional forms of activism (demonstrations, debates, volunteering, etc.).

Visibility and empowerment

Several studies show how, by circumventing spatiotemporal constraints and a range of social inequalities, the internet enables the encounter between likeminded individuals who can discuss issues that matter to them. This is what happens, for instance, in the context of certain youth subcultures or of young people from minority backgrounds (Simões and Campos, 2017; Bennett, 2004). The internet reveals itself as a more democratic space, easy to use and operating outside the narrow confines of the mainstream media. As a result, counter-narratives or non-hegemonic narratives can obtain visibility in the digital sphere (Jenkins et al., 2016; Liou and Literat, 2020; McInroy et al., 2021; Oakley, 2016; Zimmerman, 2016). When mentioning youth activism, we are frequently speaking of a variety of causes that fail to obtain visibility in the public sphere. A large proportion of these causes is ignored or belittled by most of the traditional political actors and, to a large extent, by the mainstream media. Hence, these young people feel the need to find ways of communicating that enable them, on the one hand, to establish bonds among themselves and, on the other hand, to obtain visibility in this way making their causes public and legitimate. The legitimisation of their causes involves therefore the quest for a stronger presence in the public sphere. Although the traditional space for the mobilisation and manifestation of social movements and activists—the streets—still preserve their relevance, it is nowadays manifestly insufficient as young people recognise.

Participation via the internet, in turn, encourages an individualised form of engagement based on a personalised narrative. That is, even though we are talking about collective causes and problems, the digital media facilitate the expression of the self as a practice understood by the users as a form of civic action. This way, the psychological and emotional wellbeing of these young people is recurrently mobilised as an integral part of their activist biographies.

Unsurprisingly, the role of the internet on a personal level, of individual wellbeing, assumes a conspicuous role in our conversations. Obtaining visibility is, in many ways, seen as way of expressing themselves and their feelings. In many cases, having access to digital platforms becomes almost cathartic, as mentioned by two of our interviewees. Joana² is a black, lesbian, and immigrant 27-year-old woman living in Portugal. She notes the crucial role of her blog as a channel to vent her emotions, a “form of escape,” as she explains:

I was always looking for a way to express myself and... and let it all out, for the world to see what it feels like to be a black woman in a postcolonial country, I mean, I came from an ex-colony to a country that was an ex-coloniser. So, this is a big deal, because I believe that I find traces of it in our society [...] So, before I... initially, I wanted to make a video but, well, I... I didn't have a video camera and whatever, and I had to edit it myself. I said: “I know, I'll create a blog.” I did it and I wrote [...] and everything I was going through, everything I was absorbing, say, a situation of racism I experienced, it would end up in the blog and it was at the same... it was... at the same time it was a form of escaping, because I started dealing with my feelings only after all this, because I gradually learned to process it instead of ignoring it, which wasn't healthy. (Joana, February 2020)

Gabriela, a 31-year-old, also a female, explains how she created an Instagram page she uses to share illustrations about a variety of social issues (feminism, anti-racism, anti-capitalism, ecology). During our conversation she recalls how the sexual harassment of which she was a victim motivated the desire to express herself digitally:

I decided then to illustrate the issue of harassment (...) And so I did. And have been doing since then, after creating this [Instagram] page, where I try to explore, not only questions related to harassment and feminism, but also other things like capitalism. (Gabriela, October 2020)

The interviews make obvious an awareness about the civic role played by the virtual space in enhancing freedom of expression by giving voice to those with little access to other means of voicing their opinions. By creating this territory to share their emotions and support, they feel like they are contributing towards social change and also to the emotional wellbeing of others.

Those which are more active in the production of content feel the responsibility and impact of their actions. They have an aggregating function, by developing into a hub where communities emerge to tackle certain problems and battles that achieve visibility through the digital platforms they operate. Three of our interviewees, a male (Paulo) and two females (Beatriz and Marta), run a podcast on non-monogamous relationships and non-normative sexualities. Apart from the podcast they maintain a strong presence in social media, making strategical use of Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter in their interventions. In our interview they were quite explicit about the importance of the digital as a space where people in situations of isolation, suffering, or oppression are able to enjoy visibility and a voice. The same is true of the interview with Gabriela. These activists feel that their social role is bolstered by the

² Pseudonyms have been used to preserve the anonymity of our interviewees.

commentaries of their followers. They mention the feedback received as crucial, since it stimulates a conscious spirit of interchange, reciprocity, and recognition which are crucial to a certain conception of a community of equals.

Marta: I believe the digital gave a voice to those who never had a voice. By digital I mean the internet. When we watched television during the 90s... only those who appeared on television had a voice and... we didn't hear anyone else's opinion, because the internet didn't exist [...] It facilitates access to the people in a way which... is very simple and easy.

Beatriz: The kind of comments we get is often something like, "Hey man, finally someone's talking about this. I feel exactly the same..." [...] or "it's great you spoke about X" [...] People saying: "Ok, I identify with yourselves and what you are saying, and it is helping me as well, in my personal life [...] and there wasn't anything in Portuguese [...]" To my knowledge, there wasn't anything addressing non-monogamies or sexualities with our approach... (Interview with Paulo, Beatriz, and Marta, March 2021)

I've had people sending me private messages thanking me for raising certain issues – and I love that. Despite the webpage not having many followers, this was important to them, and this is very good to read. I have been told that things that my publications have stimulated conversation around the table, indignation, admiration... (Gabriela, October 2020)

Community building: spaces for solidarity and affection

The topic of virtual communities is not exactly new. The approaches involving this topic are from the very beginning determined by the way in which the authors understand the very concept of community (Van Dijk, 1997). Some see the links established via the internet as diffuse, frail and ephemeral, unlike the social relations typical of traditional communities. It seems unequivocal to us that the digital era has involved a profound rethink of how we conceive social ties, identity and belonging, which are decisive factors in the construction of communities. From the moment when bonds and interactions cease to involve a co-presence, the territory ceases to be a determinant element in the way we conceive the community. It is thus crucial to think of an intersection between the digital world and the physical domain as dimensions through which individuals communicate and establish more or less solid bonds. In this article we adopt a broad concept of community where there are clear scales and densities that can configure a plurality of communities – we consider that the internet can either facilitate the construction of something we might understand as "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1983), or effectively give rise to or consolidate communities in a more classical sense, with a face-to-face and territorialised configuration.

Virtual communities emerge in a context of online sociability, where individuals *gather* virtually to share information, knowledge, interests, values, creating networks of friendship and support that often transition to face-to-face interaction (Rheingold, 1993). In Castells' (2004) opinion, these communities can assume several formats, of a "variable geometry," and are sustained by those individuals' development and commitment in relation to *common interests*. Virtual communities have played an important role in generating a sense of belonging, collective identity, and emotional comfort. Nimrod (2014) catalogues a range of benefits arising from participating in a virtual community: (i) a positive impact in terms of wellbeing; (ii) an increase in the feeling of autonomy regarding the use of technologies; (iii) an increase in self-esteem and self-confidence; (iv) an increase in feeling social supported; (v) reduction in feelings

of loneliness and depression; (vi) feelings of joyfulness, motivation (intellectual and in social interaction) and camaraderie. Other surveys on virtual communities involving platforms like Twitter or Facebook reveal similar outcomes (Lizzo and Liechty, 2020; Shcheblanova et al., 2016).

A recurrent theme of debate is, precisely, how the internet has facilitated two things. On the one hand, it enables interaction with likeminded people, that is, sharing the same life experiences, social constraints, values, or political battles. On the other hand, it decreases the problem of isolation, incomprehension, and loneliness either through interaction with similar people on social networks, or by providing access to certain resources, such as blogs, podcasts, and even apps. This matches other studies that show that the internet represents for certain groups an important space of liberty, autonomy, emancipation, and comfort. The LGBT community is a good example. Several studies point to the importance of social networks in providing an escape route before the incomprehension and censure within the family or in other spheres of socialisation³. Other examples of marginalised or subordinate groups are ethnic minorities and migrants. An example of this is the DREAMers⁴ movement, who via the “Coming Out” narrative shared in their social networks managed, not only to raise awareness of the constraints the community was facing, but also to find emotional comfort (Zimmerman, 2016). In this instance, storytelling served a strategic and affective function by offering social and emotional support to young people experiencing the same oppressive reality. The members of this movement noted how these moments enabled “psychological relief,” and highlighted their “cathartic nature” (Jenkins, Shresthova, et al., 2016, p. 198).

We have a similar situation described in several of our interviews. To feel understood and supported in their problems generates empathy and a sense of solidarity. Such feelings are produced by the interaction and reciprocity that you can find digitally. Hence, receiving feedback from others is crucial not only to positively strengthen group identity, but also to develop a sense of the impact that individual actions have on other network members. This is exactly how Tiago (34 years) and Carla (26 years) see it:

The internet continues to make wonderful things possible. For the LGBT community it has been particularly incredible, especially for trans people or those with other gender identities which 15 years ago did not even have a name. Such was my case, for instance. [...] It’s great, the fact that people are able to join a support network, other people who have gone through the same experiences... it’s wonderful. (Tiago, July 2019)

One aspect of it is that you feel supported in what you are doing, because there are thousands of people online sharing your ideas and the same resources, and it becomes much easier to reach out to people. Previously it wasn’t so easy to engage in activism, to be aware of associations, where you can go to join the effort... but these days all it takes is going to Google and finding an activist group to whom you can ask how to lend your assistance. (Carla, September 2020)

Thus, without replacing traditional communities, the online medium, due to its flexible configuration, enables both the emergence of virtual communities and the creation of new networks that might also function in the physical world. In some instances, the interviewees

³ In fact, it is likely that a young trans person spends more time interacting in a virtual environment than other young people (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network et al., 2013). The performativity of sexualities on digital platforms, namely on YouTube (Lovelock, 2017) or TikTok (Simpson and Semaan, 2021) facilitates the creation of support communities of shared interests. It’s not only on YouTube, but also on Tumblr, microblogging is a widely used “counter public” practice by the LGBT community.

⁴ A movement that sought to grant certain rights to young illegal migrants in the USA (DREAM act.)

mention the fact that without the internet certain groups, collectives, or activist events would have never happened. It is quite frequent to hear young people report that through the internet they met people who, later, became friends or fellow activists. The creators of the already mentioned podcast (Paulo, Beatriz, and Marta), describe their experiences of this:

Paulo: [...] one of the people with whom we have developed a stronger online relationship, being online allowed us to want to be together offline and... we went for dinner with those people and talked a lot, and that led to even more online contacts later and more collective input and so on.

Beatriz: Inclusively, some of the people who follow and listen to us, have told me that “we’ll have dinner sometime” or “let’s go have a beer,” anything... because they end up having this... feeling of familiarity. And a desire to further engage in this... a bit more... they want to discuss the topics freely (Interview with Paulo, Beatriz, and Marta, March 2021)

Becoming aware, taking action

It is undeniable that there has been an increase in more individualised forms of political involvement (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012) where personal experiences become central to collective action (McDonald, 2006, 2015). However, collective and organisational identities are still relevant (Della Porta and Diani, 2006). It is then important to understand the role played by the internet and digital platforms in these types of expressions. Despite the growing individualisation of political participation and the erosion of an idea of identity and action based on a traditional model of engagement, the construction of collective identity still continues to be fundamental to sparking political and civic action. The development of a collective identity involves access and interchanging of information around problems and common battles (Ridings and Gefen, 2004; Rivera-Vargas and Miño-Puigcercós, 2018). These are requisite factors for the mobilisation and civic action around specific campaigns.

Achieving expression in the digital public space implies the creation of a sense of collective community and identity, but it also means creating and sharing a vision of the world. This is done through the construction of a common knowledge base, a cognitive and ideological framework that serves to explain and justify the world. During several conversations the idea emerged that the knowledge around feminism, post-colonial and anti-racist thought, non-normative sexualities or polyamory were, initially, acquired via the internet. The idea that the internet represents an alternative media, with the potential for ideological dissidence is a recurrent theme. Hence, it is represented as offering a breadth of information which is not available in the mainstream media, seen as the perpetuators of hegemonic thinking and, therefore, as responsible for the reproduction of normative structures and social hierarchies. In this sense, the internet, contrary to the mainstream media, represents a channel for knowledge with transformative potential on an individual and collective level simultaneously.

The idea of discovery is frequently raised in this regard. Both in the sense that discovering narratives and counter-hegemonic thinking allows individuals to frame in a more coherent fashion their political and personal identities, but also in that it makes them see the world differently. Linked to the LGBT cause, Tiago explains how he found on the internet a space for intellectual exploration of genre-related issues which changed the way in which he understood himself⁵. His personal identity was, thus, gradually shaped from this catalogue available through the internet:

⁵ A similar example is mentioned in a Portuguese exploratory study (Cardoso and Ponte, 2017).

The internet continues to make wonderful things possible. [...] From 25 onwards, I started reading on the internet a variety of articles and problematisations about gender and started learning words that helped me see myself differently, to name something in me that was not resolved. And it's still ongoing, it's a process. And things about me I considered settled, I realised at the time that a number of disquieting things I had in me could be understood in a more complex form in light of a series of terms used by others and which I accessed via the internet, something previously not possible. (Tiago, July 2019)

Similarly, Joana found on the internet a forum for debate where she was able to deepen her reflections around racism. The same happened to Tomás, a young person who identifies with the transgender community, who found on the internet the first space where certain relevant concepts were being discussed to problematise non-normative identity:

I increasingly found people online and... started reading, but, specifically, it was a person that I met [...] who began to take me to racism discussion groups [...] When I joined that group, it was mostly black Brazilian women, because this friend of mine [...] took me to this group and I started reading. It was... all the intellectual material was there and ... there were personal accounts and I went: wow! (Joana, February 2020)

Then Tumblr allowed conversations below. You did a reblog of something and added a comment. And then another person would come and add another comment. And those long conversations on identity and such things started popping up. And other things appeared. The term “non-binary”, for instance, I came across for the first time on Tumblr. And that was a specific space when you could meet people with similar lines of thought. (Tomás, October 2020)

As a content library, space for dialogue and intellectual training, the internet has become, to many, a source of political socialisation and development of ideological thinking. Some authors note that the political socialisation among peers has been somewhat ignored, due to the prevalence of the family and other social institutions such as the school or the media (Ekström, 2016; Gordon and Taft, 2010). However, the fact is that the political socialisation taking place within youth groups is of especial relevance and has become increasingly influential from the moment individuals acquired the power to control the means of production and diffusion of content through the internet. In the case of climate activism, for example, Östman (2014) highlights how the social media have had an important role in the political socialisation of young people around climate issues, in the sense that the conversation and search for news on digital platforms increases awareness of this cause and motivates pro-environment actions. As we concluded from our interviews, the internet, in its provision of a discussion forum and as the primary source of information of the younger generations, holds a powerful role in their political socialisation. Militancy and activism that is, the transition into action, is, in most cases, preceded by these processes where a collective conscience is developed which identifies problems, causes, and forms of (re)action.

Finally, we should stress that there isn't an exclusively positive idea regarding the power of the internet. The notion that using digital platforms, namely social networks, also carries risks has been shown by the literature (Campos et al., 2018; Davis and Santillana, 2019; Mihailidis, 2019; Silva et al., 2022). In fact, although our interviews have made clear that digital platforms and the internet hold an important function in contemporary activism which can hardly be fulfilled by other means, some risks have also been highlighted. The most important one, especial since this article is focussed on the identitarian, emotional and gregarious

dimension of the relationships established via the internet, concerns mental health. This is due to the fact that, to begin with, digital media exposes individuals to situations of violence and bullying and, secondly, because it facilitates the creation of echo chambers and the polarisation of opinions which often results in online battles. This way, some of the interviewees manifested some apprehension regarding mental health issues resulting from the regular use of social networks. In some cases, this has actually led to periods of absence or to the definitive abandonment of certain social networks.

5 Conclusion

It was not the purpose of this article to delve into the efficacy of digital platforms when it comes to activist action. This topic has been widely explored in the literature. Instead, we opted to focus on a more specific dimension that, in our opinion, has received less attention. We stressed the pertinence of the digital space as a territory for developing bonds of solidarity, communion, empathy, and understanding which are shown to be vital to stimulate community spirit and civic action in young people. Through the digital connections established by individuals, community forms of a variable density emerged that would be difficult to exist any other way.

The concept of community and the way in which we understand it depends on the context in which social bonds are formed. What brings people together, in some cases, springs from common interests and activities, in other cases it is linked to the very existential condition of the subject, to their personal and social identity. Often there is an overlap of both situations (such is the case with several of our interviewees who are black, women, or are members of the LGBTQI+ community). In this context, the internet appears to hold a crucial role, dissolving the boundaries between private and the public life, as mentioned by Papacharissi (2008). This becomes especially visible in the interviews where the young people see their individuality and their biographies as the focus of public debate, thus framing it in a broader collective struggle. For that, digital platforms constitute a crucial tool for the public exposure of intimate life and the existential condition of the subject. In some sense, this takes us to the concept of “civic narcissism” outlined by Papacharissi (2008), based on a personalisation of political action, mobilised around self-expression values. This is especially relevant in cases where young people feel isolated or, in one way or another, repressed by a variety of social norms. The democratic and horizontal logic of the internet enables a form of involvement that many young people cannot find in other spheres of social life.

Hence, we can understand that the use of digital channels can stimulate a process of empowerment of these social actors, strengthening their wellbeing and identity but, also, facilitating a more active role at the level of civic intervention. According to the accounts of the young people interviewed, we appreciate that, often, the contact with the digital world preceded or inspired a more decisive action in the field of activism.

Independently of the role these technologies have in terms of activist practices (logistics, communication, recruitment, mobilisation) there is a less visible dimension that deserves to be highlighted and that the biographical narratives allow us to see. This is the emancipatory and supportive role of digital connections that often acts as a pillar to the ingress into the world of activism and a more active and self-aware participation by young people.

In summary, the analysis of the interviews showed us that: (i) the possibility of participating in the digital public sphere; (ii) finding others sharing the same interests and problems; (iii) creating places for reflection and emotive relief; (iv) circumventing geographical or socioeconomic difficulties; leads to: (v) the creation of networks and communities (that might not exist without the internet); (vi) the empowerment of young people and (vii) the encouragement of their civic intervention.

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