

# Temporary migration and the use of social media by international university students in Catalonia

*Migración temporal y uso de redes sociales por parte de estudiantes universitarios internacionales en Cataluña*

*Migração temporária e uso de redes sociais por estudantes universitários internacionais na Catalunha*

# 7

ARTICLE



## Guillermo Echaury

Pompeu Fabra University (Spain)

PhD in Communication from the Pompeu Fabra University. His research addresses the impacts of the incorporation of digital technologies in the fields of intimacy of youth.

gechauri11@gmail.com  
orcid.org/0000-0002-4685-6651

## Mònica Figueras-Maz

Pompeu Fabra University (Spain)

Tenured professor in the Department of Communication of the Pompeu Fabra University where she also coordinates the Research Group on Youth, Society and Communication. She is also head of the Vice-chancellor's Office of UPF for projects for social commitment and equality.

monica.figueras@upf.edu  
orcid.org/0000-0003-4912-4509

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### **Abstract**

International students belong to a type of migration characterized by aspects such as the temporality of their transnational movements. As young people, their approach to digital te-

chnologies such as social networks is usually intense. This article describes some aspects of the experience of using social networks by international university students during their periods of academic mobility in the city of Barcelona. Through an ethnographic approach, topics

such as the elements that make up the publications that students make during their stay in the city, the changes they have experienced in the use of their social networks based on their movements across borders or the perception and the appearance of national cultural differences regarding the use of platforms such as WhatsApp.

### **KEYWORDS**

International students, Digital technologies, Temporary migration, Social media usage, Youth and technologies.

### **Resumen**

Los estudiantes internacionales conforman un tipo de migración caracterizada por aspectos como la temporalidad de sus desplazamientos transnacionales; además, como jóvenes, su acercamiento a tecnologías digitales entre las que se incluyen las redes sociales suele ser intenso. Este artículo describe algunos aspectos de la experiencia de uso de redes sociales por parte de estudiantes universitarios internacionales durante sus periodos de movilidad académica en la ciudad de Barcelona. A través de un enfoque etnográfico, se exploran temas como los elementos que conforman las publicaciones que los estudiantes hacen durante su estancia en la ciudad, los cambios que han experimentado en el uso de sus redes sociales a partir de sus desplazamientos entre fronteras o la percepción y aparición de diferencias cul-

turales nacionales respecto al empleo de plataformas como WhatsApp.

### **PALABRAS CLAVE:**

Estudiantes internacionales, Tecnologías digitales, Migración temporal, Uso de redes sociales, Jóvenes y tecnologías.

### **Resumo**

Os estudantes internacionais constituem um tipo de migração caracterizada por aspectos como a temporalidade de seus movimentos transnacionais; além disso, como jovens, sua abordagem às tecnologias digitais, incluindo redes sociais, é frequentemente intensa. Este artigo descreve alguns aspectos da experiência de uso de redes sociais por estudantes universitários internacionais durante seus períodos de mobilidade acadêmica na cidade de Barcelona. Por meio de uma abordagem etnográfica, se exploram temas como os elementos que compõem as publicações que os alunos fazem durante sua estada na cidade, as mudanças que vivenciaram no uso de suas redes sociais desde seus movimentos através das fronteiras ou a percepção e o surgimento de diferenças culturais nacionais quanto ao uso de plataformas como WhatsApp.

### **Palavras-chave**

Estudantes internacionais, tecnologias digitais, migração temporal, uso de redes sociais, jovens e tecnologias.

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Academic attention of university students (including those who participate in periods of international mobility) tends to rest on the implications of their school commitments (Choi, 2005; Figueras-Maz et al., 2017) and not so much on other aspects as their extra-acade-

mic activities or their digital experience. Consequently, this article aims to examine some aspects of the impact that the temporary migration that international university students go through in Catalonia has in relation to their digital practices during their stay in Spain, particularly in their approach to social networks.

International students, understood as those students who have crossed a national border for educational purposes and have enrolled in an educational institution outside their country of origin (UNESCO, nd), are an example of voluntary and temporary migration as they choose to move freely and have an established return date (King, 2002).

To contextualize the analyzed phenomenon, it is worth mentioning the situation at the national and local level in Spain and Catalonia. The most recent data available reveals that there are approximately 75000 international students enrolled each year in the country (OIM, 2018). Likewise, Spain tends to be the main recipient of students enrolled in the Erasmus+ program (European Commission, 2018a). Madrid, Catalonia and the Valencian Community top the list of the autonomous communities with the highest presence of foreign students in their universities (Ibáñez, 2018). In the particular case of the Catalan university system, students from the United States, Italy and Germany make up the majority of students who carry out some period of mobility in the region (ACUP, 2019).

In Barcelona, public universities such as the Pompeu Fabra University, the Polytechnic University of Catalonia or the Autonomous University of Barcelona stand out with regard to the Spanish universities with the largest number of foreign master's or doctoral students (Olivella, 2016). In addition, the Catalan capital can be considered a cosmopolitan and multicultural city since the Barcelona municipal register for 2019 shows a panorama in which one in every five residents of the city is of foreign nationality and 179 different nationalities appear in the register (Barcelona City Council, 2019).

On the other hand, the information provided by the Pew Research Center (2019) contributes

to a better understanding of the contemporary situation in which digital technologies practically become omnipresent in the lives of young people such as university students. The aforementioned statistics show that young adults make up one of the groups with the highest participation in social media, since 90 percent of people between 18 and 29 years old use a social network, 8 out of 10 use Facebook and 67% use Instagram. Meanwhile, the European Union points out that some of the most common activities carried out by young Europeans on the internet are participating in social networks (with 82% registered) and uploading content of their own creation (with 47% of young people involved in this practice) (European Commission, 2018b).

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The intense relationship with digital technologies and transnational displacement are two of the characteristics that define young people today (Feixa et al., 2017; Sleeman et al., 2016). Based on this idea, a panorama can be drawn on the characteristics of contemporary youth. According to Martín-Barbero, "it is a generation whose empathy with technological culture is made not only of ease in relating to audiovisual and computer equipment but also of cognitive complicity with their languages, fragmentations and speed" (2017, p. 31). Feixa (2014) complements these arguments by suggesting that a paradigmatic case of youth cultures is linked to the expansion of transnational movements of people because young people tend to be pioneers of this type of mobility, bringing their social and symbolic worlds with them across borders.

In the case of international students, they not only depend on their personal contact networks when getting involved in experiences abroad (Beech, 2015), but also on their socio-digital networks in which, among other things, they find emotional support throughout their periods of academic mobility (Rocha et al., 2015). Consequently, it is possible to consider that the migratory processes of international students not only imply physical mobility, but also a change in their social dynamics.

Based on the approaches of Bourdieu (1997, 2007), Igarashi and Saito (2014) examine the role of cosmopolitanism in education as a form of cultural capital. According to this perspective, cosmopolitanism such as that acquired by international students throughout their displacements becomes a stratification factor at a global level since it is found more frequently in the upper classes. For their part, although they avoid calling it that way, Basaran and Olsson (2018) propose a subgenre of symbolic capital that is linked to the addressed phenomenon: international capital. This works as a marker of social relations and hierarchies and, like the rest of the types of capital, it is not equally accessible to all.

Regarding the general link between people and their technologies, we must first present the idea that the infosphere is established as the environment in which existence takes place as a consequence of the extensive incorporation of digital technologies in the different areas of life (Floridi, 2014). This infosphere is the world understood in informational terms in which a transition from analog to digital takes place. All this results in the integration of the online environment with physical reality, what Floridi calls the onlife experience. In addition, Floridi (2014) suggests the advent of a hyperhistoric

era in which society depends on information and communication technologies. Thus, hyperhistory brings with it an era of hypermemory, since all information stored on devices or in the cloud can be accessed with great ease (Floridi, 2015). However, it is important to note that a constant approach to communication technologies such as the one that life in hyperhistory implies carries risks such as those foreseen by McLuhan, for whom the extensions of the physical and psychic capacities of homo sapiens completely alter the perception of reality, given that "man is fascinated by any extension of himself in any material other than himself" (1994, p. 41).

As a sample of the opportunities open in hyperhistory for personal expansion, different concepts appear such as lifestreaming (Wargo, 2017), transmedia identity (Elwell, 2014), online self-presentation (van Dijck, 2013) or visual public intimacy (Miguel, 2016), all of which refer to personal digital narratives that allow young people to consolidate an expanded presence on digital platforms.

Based on all of the above, Bourdieu (1997, 2007) can be retrieved again to relate it to the use of social networks by university students. In this sense, the study by Ellison et al. (2007) affirms that there is a positive relationship between some uses of Facebook and the creation and maintenance of the social capital of students. Similarly, the research by Hua (2018) or Shane-Simpson et al. (2018) suggest that the use of social media has a considerable positive effect on the social capital of university students, including international students.

Furthermore, studies such as the one by Gomes et al. (2014) have found that networks such as Facebook become indispensable for inter-

national students to successfully navigate their social spaces during the temporary migration they experience. However, it can be hypothesized that the transition when migrating affects the approach that young people have with respect to their social media and other communication technologies. In this sense, the research by Gordano and Ros (2016) about young Spanish-speaking adults recently arrived in London indicated some challenges that young migrants face, such as the need to adapt their mobile technologies when having to change their mobile phone plan to acquire one from the destination country. The authors define these needs as technological adjustments of immigrants.

Finally, in an environment marked by the fast pace of digital technologies, these tools quickly become mundane (Horst & Miller, 2012a). Thus, a relevant aspect of the digital culture in which university students are involved lies not so much in the speed of technical innovation, but in the speed with which society accepts and adopts these inventions, which generates normative conditions for its use. To achieve this norms, apart from acceptance, moral incorporation is required by learning what is accepted and what is not in the use of each technology (Horst & Miller, 2012b). Consequently, "what is experienced is not a technology per se, but a culturally inflexible immediate genre of use or practice" (Horst & Miller, 2012b, p. 108).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Framed within a broader research on international students and digital technologies, the content of this paper aims to describe the impact that periods of mobility in Barcelona, Catalonia, have on international university students

when approaching social networks. For the purposes of this research, ethnography was the ideal methodological approach because it allows exploring practices and experiences that are not necessarily observable without investigative action (Scolari, 2018), which makes it an optimal way to understand the meanings that make up the social processes (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983).

The execution and design of the ethnography carried out has integrated perspectives from different models, mainly from Beneito-Montagut's expanded ethnography, which "implies following the users and extending the field of research to all the communication technologies that they use daily in their interpersonal communications." (2011, p. 731) and short-term ethnography (Pink & Morgan, 2013) which, in the face of the more intensive approach to the investigated people, forces to develop the research in shorter periods.

The search for participants was carried out by sending invitations through the distribution lists of some offices in charge of welcoming international students at the university in Barcelona where the study was carried out. The first stage of the ethnography consisted of conducting three focus groups with exploratory purposes about the use that students gave to their social media and other technologies during their stay in Barcelona. A total of 18 students participated in the 3 groups, 5 in the first, 9 in the second and 4 in the last. Of these, 13 were women and were 5 men with an average age of 21.2 years. Table 1 presents the participants of all the focus groups identified by a pseudonym.

**Table 1***Research participants*

Research participants		
Name	Age	Country
Olivier (man)	20	Belgium
Dominik (man)	21	Germany
Clara (woman)	20	England
Marina (woman)	24	Bulgaria
Megan (woman)	19	Scotland
Shannon (woman)	21	England
Xia (woman)	21	China
Yasemin (woman)	23	Turkey
Halima (woman)	21	England
Colin (man)	23	Scotland
Tania (woman)	21	France
Gianna (woman)	20	Italy
Anjali (woman)	21	Wales
Laura (woman)	23	Germany
Antonia (woman)	23	Chile
Josefina (woman)	20	U.S.
Carlo (man)	24	Italy
Paolo (man)	21	Italy

Next, eight participants were selected (Olivier, Dominik, Clara, Yasemin, Halima, Colin, Gianna and Antonia) to continue with the next stages of the study. The choice of these eight students was due to the intention of complying with the greatest possible diversity in terms of age, sex, place of origin and characteristics of their use of social networks.

The next step was a participant observation of the online activity of the eight selected participants, this lasted four weeks and consisted of observing and recording the activity of the informants on Facebook and Instagram.

The first round of semi-structured interviews served to deepen the knowledge of the individual activity of each of the eight students cho-

sen in terms of their interaction through social media and other aspects of their life in Barcelona. The second round of interviews took place in the bedrooms or departments of the participants. Each of the interviews began with a photo-elicitation activity, in which the participants were shown one or more photographs that they could have published on one of their social media and were asked questions about them. Then, they were asked to recreate the use of one of their social media, that is, to show and explain to the researcher how they navigate on Facebook, Instagram or WhatsApp. Next, a series of particular questions was made for each student based on their testimonies from previous meetings. Finally, questions of a general nature were asked for seven students, since Halima did not continue with her participation.

Finally, the qualitative software NVivo was used for the analysis of the obtained data, which allowed establishing a series of main categories for the presentation of the results.

It is worth mentioning that at each stage of the research, the participating students have signed a consent form on confidentiality in the treatment of the information provided and those who participated in the entire ethnography received a financial compensation of 20 euros in total. It is also worth mentioning that, since the ethnography was conducted in Spanish, it was essential that the students who collaborated were able to speak this language fluently. However, they were offered the possibility to express themselves in English if they had problems expressing some ideas during the course of the investigation.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1 POSTS IN BARCELONA

Regarding the posts made during their stay in Barcelona, the students emphasize the desire to show aspects of their life that are different from those of everyday life in their usual places of residence. The publications also focus on highlighting the international life experience that young people acquire during their stay in Catalonia. As an example, Clara details the image of herself that she wishes to project through her posts:

But I think it's an image of a person, I don't know, more international, with more life experiences, that's what I want to show.

Clara explains the elements of Barcelona that she has wanted to share on her social media:

I think interesting things about Spain and Catalonia that we don't have in England, like flags, demonstrations, food, places, things like that.

Along the same lines, Olivier points out that the photographs of his life in Barcelona acquire more value for him than those of his daily life in Belgium because "it is not the same as saying that I am in Barcelona". Among the young participants, there is a prevalence of the idea that their publications on social media revolve around their life in Barcelona during their stay abroad. Gianna's testimony allows us to appreciate how the value that some participants give to the city of Barcelona is transferred to the way they present their lives in social media posts:

Well let's say on Instagram, I think I present a lot how much I like the city, because it is my favorite city in the world, I think you can see that. And also the

beauty of the city, everything I like, always the same theme.

As explained, the students try to show interesting aspects about their daily life in the city and the elements of their life that are different from what they experience in their countries. All this allows them to build a type of digital memory about their period in Catalonia. What Antonia expressed can summarize this perception:

Instagram is like a memory of my travels, I publish about two photos a day, I have many stories and it is like to remember the exchange, right now that is its function, to remember what I am living.

### 4.2 CHANGES IN THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The main change registered in the use of social media by international students since their arrival in the Catalan capital is related to the decision to use networks that they previously did not use or, on the contrary, to choose not to use anymore some previously preferred networks. Halima details that "in England I didn't have Instagram or Snapchat, I only had Facebook and Twitter", but now "I use Instagram and Snapchat to show my colleagues what I'm doing". Meanwhile, Clara wanted to start using Snapchat:

Because I knew I was going to have a very exciting year, at Oxford life is very normal and I don't want to share everything that I'm doing, but yes, I knew I was going to have an exciting year and I wanted to show it, and it's a way to keep in touch with friends without speaking personally to them.

On the other hand, during his stay in Barcelona, Colin decided to close his Instagram and Snapchat accounts:

I don't have to have Instagram or Snapchat to enjoy my experience here, so if I don't need Instagram or Snapchat, I don't need this. Technologies are much more, I don't know, useless, not important.

Another important alteration is associated with greater use of their social media due to the novelty that their life in Spain implies. In this sense, Laura shares that:

I use them more because there was not so much to do, you were already in the same place for years and years, so now if you are going to do something it is new every time, it also encourages you.

Consequently, higher usage can translate into higher frequency of posts. "I think I post a lot more of photos here," says Yasemin after reflecting on the changes she has experienced in the use of her social media since her arrival in Spain.

Other more subtle differences relate to the language and cultural context of the posts. There are those who have begun to share more elements related to Catalonia in their networks and others who now adapt the language of their publications to facilitate their understanding among their new contacts. Like Gianna, who comments that:

Maybe I have posted more articles about Catalonia or songs in Catalan on Facebook than before, clearly because I did not listen to music in Catalan or know much about the political situation in Catalonia.

### 4.3 CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Several differences appear in the use of technologies related to the cultural context of the students. For example, Clara was struck by the lesser relevance that Facebook has in Spain compared to England:

There are many people who do not have Facebook here and it surprises me because it is a necessity in England, in my university everything is organized on Facebook. They don't use Snapchat here, not much. And I think Instagram is just as popular as in England, possibly more popular here.

Antonia mentions that the use of emojis is very common among her Chilean friends and not so much among the international friends she has made in Barcelona:

I mean, yes there are differences in the way they write, besides the obviousness of the language sometimes in English or Spanish. I have people who do not occupy any emoji and in Chile, for example, if you texted and did not use a face or anything it could sound rude.

On the other hand, students like Colin deny that there are differences in what their contacts in their countries and those they have met in the Catalan capital share, they only allude to the difference in the language of the publications:

People my age who are in Spain or Scotland put the same kind of things on social media or Instagram and everything.

The main cultural differences registered in the research on the use of digital technologies emerge in the use of WhatsApp. The mere use of WhatsApp appears as a cultural difference,

especially in the case of British students, for whom the use of this application has been a novelty because they are more used to using services such as Facebook Messenger. Colin describes the differences in the use of WhatsApp between Scotland and Spain:

Well, in Scotland hardly anyone uses WhatsApp. It is more common to communicate by texts or Facebook, or Instagram for messages. But hardly anyone uses WhatsApp, really. Here it is as if you do not use WhatsApp you are not Spanish, it is like all the people use WhatsApp here.

However, young people in the United Kingdom are not the only ones for whom the use of WhatsApp has been a novelty when they start living in another country. Olivier explains that the use of WhatsApp is not common in Belgium:

In Belgium, WhatsApp is hardly used at all. It is completely the opposite of here, much more mobile messages and much less WhatsApp, and here the opposite.

Regarding the resources that WhatsApp offers, the use of voice notes is perhaps the main difference promoted by the cultural contexts of international students. They are also British students who are less used to this element, as revealed by Colin:

Yes, here when I see people on their mobile recording a voice message, for me it is very strange because in Scotland we do not do it, it is as if someone does this in Scotland it would be very, very rare.

Meanwhile, for Gianna from Italy, sending voice messages is a common practice for the comfort she finds to communicate:

I do it too much, it is super comfortable for me. You can do things, you can send them and do other things in the meantime. It works well, I recommend it.

#### **4.4 INTEGRATION OF THE PHYSICAL AND DIGITAL FIELDS**

The testimonies of the informants unanimously demonstrate the idea that their life experience in Barcelona would have been very different and much more complicated if they did not have their social media and the rest of the digital technologies they use on a daily basis. Among the main aspects cited about the difficulties that would have emerged in an international experience without social networks are the impossibility of maintaining continuous contact with family and friends in the country of origin, the problems in organizing activities with friends they have met in their new city or follow-up on matters related to their academic experience. The following comment from Colin sums it up:

It would have been much more difficult, much, much more difficult because like I said, I like to be in contact with my friends in Scotland using Facebook and everything, and if I did not have this link with my life there it would be much more difficult because you do not have this support. Do you know? Being in another country is very difficult, sometimes you feel very disoriented, it's like not knowing how to do anything here, but your family and friends can support you, they can be there supporting with "it will be fine, maybe you can do this." If I didn't have my social media or the technology, everything would be much more difficult.

Consequently, the consensus among the informants is that, both before and during their periods of mobility, the constant approach to their social networks contributes to the fact that physical and virtual reality tend to join or overlap in multiple moments and areas of life, but no matter how much they can be integrated, these spaces will always be something distinct and well differentiated. Students like Dominik point out that “a face-to-face conversation is very different from a Messenger or WhatsApp conversation”. Meanwhile, Clara refers to the continuity that exists between the conversations that she has with her friends in person and through social media:

Yes, sometimes I am talking to my friends and we continue the conversation that we have had on Facebook as if it were a face to face conversation, we do not differentiate them and there are so many features, things that can be done in Facebook Messenger to make it more like real life. You can send voice messages, videos and photos; those things are making Facebook and WhatsApp more like real life.

The participants accept and incorporate the idea of the deep and continuous integration of both spaces, although they are aware that there is a marked separation between them. Antonia thinks that “right now we can be in this conversation, but we know that a world is happening out there, in the networks, but I think it is possible to separate them”. On her part, Gianna recognizes that the conjunction of the material and digital fields occurs at every moment of her life, but she also clarifies that the border between the two is permanent:

Well yes, of course they intermingle. In the end you are, I don't know, in the subway, but you are talking to someo-

ne who is in another country and of course, you are in the real but also in the virtual. Or also if you speak, they always intermingle in the end but they are not the same things.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In the first place, the posts that students make throughout their stay in Barcelona can be explained through the notion of cosmopolitanism as cultural capital (Igarashi & Saito, 2014) or the idea of international capital as a subgenre of symbolic capital. (Basaran & Olsson, 2018). The fact that the participants enjoy publishing elements of their life in Spain that they would not find in their countries, try to show themselves as individuals with an international experience or wish that the contacts in their places of origin follow their activity in Barcelona highlights the prestige associated with studying in the Catalan capital, perceived both by the students themselves and by other people. Thus, the cosmopolitanism associated with the idea of living in a different country and getting to know a new culture in their study abroad experience serves to increase the reputation of young people among their circle of acquaintances through their display on social media. Also, the fact that their mobility takes place in a world famous city like Barcelona has a direct influence on increasing the international capital associated with the international experience in their digital activities.

In addition, the hypermemory that Floridi (2015) talks about is evident in some of the comments of the participants about the publications made throughout their time in Barcelona. For example, the students mention that the photographs they share on Facebook or Instagram serve them to build a kind of digital log of their

experience in Barcelona that can later help them relive their experiences and remember their most important moments. Based on what was expressed by the informants, it is feasible to describe a panorama regarding this issue in which university students delegate on social networks the preservation of visual elements that may be useful to recall with greater clarity and precision the special moments of their life, such as those lived during their stay in Catalonia.

In general terms, the description that the participants make about their posts on social media coincides with concepts such as *lifestreaming* (Wargo, 2017), *transmedia identity* (Elwell, 2014), *online self-presentation* (van Dijck, 2013) or *visual public privacy* (Miguel, 2016). With some exceptions, international students have no problem showing a good part (especially the positive part) of their experience abroad, as a kind of narrative about their own person in which they participate intensely by sharing elements different than those they find in the normality of their countries of origin or aspects about the city that may be striking for their contacts. All this is intended to also negotiate relationships with other people, such as the notoriety they can acquire in their social circles through their publications about Barcelona.

Although the results of this paper do not delve into the mediated interactions of the students, the fact that several of the participants use their social media more frequently since they moved to Barcelona allows us to suppose that, in most cases, the use of social networks has the potential to increase the social capital of university students (Ellison et al., 2007; Hua, 2018; Shane-Simpson et al., 2018).

On the concept of technological adjustments for immigrants proposed by Gordano and Ros (2016), the results show that international students tend to exercise a particular type of ad-

justments during their stay abroad that is more related to the use of new applications to adapt to the forms of communication of the site. In this sense, this research proposes the existence of technological adjustments of a social nature, that is, they are not motivated by technical needs nor do they require deeper adaptations of technological tools as occurs with telephone lines, but are promoted by social demands. The clearest example of this idea among the results obtained is that of the cultural differences in the use of WhatsApp, especially in the case of students for whom the use of WhatsApp has been a novelty since their arrival in Catalan territory.

The need to participate actively and satisfactorily in social activities in Barcelona is what motivates students to include WhatsApp in their media repertoire if they did not use it before. The findings show that, in certain cultural contexts other than Spanish, the use of Messenger or SMS messages prevails over WhatsApp. Consequently, once university students make this technological adjustment of a social nature that does not involve difficulties, they can engage in more interactions and expand their circles of friends by communicating with them on a common platform whose use predominates in the host site.

Contact with other cultures during their stay abroad works for students to perceive other differences in the approach to digital technologies that appear between people of different nationalities. For example, as a consequence of the integration of WhatsApp in the communication practices of some international students, the use of voice notes emerges as an important cultural difference in the use of social media of the informants. The irruption of messages of this type usually represents a moment of strangeness for some young people, which is a demonstration that the cultural context still

determines the nature of the relationship that young people establish with and through their digital technologies, although many times it can be easy to think that technology platforms are global products with features deployed worldwide. Despite the broad similarities between them in terms such as age or educational level, their origin affects what technologies they use and how they use them.

Thus, this type of clearly established national distinctions reveals the existence of normative parameters regarding the use of technologies in different national contexts (Horst & Miller, 2012b), which would help to understand why some students observe a lower importance of Facebook in Spain compared to their place of origin or why British participants have had to adapt to the use of WhatsApp during their stay in Barcelona.

The integration of the physical and the digital in a single field on which Floridi (2014, 2015) insists is recognized by international students to a certain degree. The consensus among them is that online and offline overlap not only in contact with and through their social media, but in practically every moment of life. At the same time, they insist that these continue to be differentiated areas. In this way, the existence of an onlife environment, as proposed by the aforementioned author, is recognized by young people, although not as a permanent and absolute experience, but as a gradation in the level of integration that they perceive between the two spaces, the analog and the virtual.

When they were questioned about how their experience abroad would have been without having their social media and other digital technologies available, the participants referred to hypothetical scenarios in which they would have suffered difficulties of different kinds. These results are reminiscent of the approach of Gomes et al. (2014) that social networks become an essential tool for international students throughout their migration processes. These findings are also related to the scenario of a hyperhistoric life in which digital technologies become essential at different levels of existence (Floridi, 2014) or to the idea that the media are extensions of a person with which it is established a bond of subordination because the human being is fascinated by his own extensions (McLuhan, 1994).

As participants in a youth culture defined by the approach to digital technologies or transnational movements (Feixa, 2014; Martín-Barbero, 2017), the experience of students in the use of social media is defined in terms of migration and its temporality. Although broader factors are involved, such as connectivity that defines contemporary society, what lately gives its most essential characteristics to the addressed phenomenon is the transnational mobility that students go through. This happens in such a way that in their use of social networks two realities converge, that of the place of origin and that of Barcelona; further stimulated by the knowledge that the stay abroad is only temporary.

In short, the use that international students make of their social media depends on their experience at the host site. Whether they share posts about their activities in Barcelona or have had to start using WhatsApp to successfully navigate their new environment, their situation in Catalonia is what largely determines how they use their networks throughout their mobility periods.

The results show a panorama in which the relationship of young people with their social media is quite intense and extended during their experience of life abroad. In addition, the use of social media contributes in a decisive way to consolidating their temporary identity as international students and expanding their personal identity both in geographical and social terms. Additionally, the very action of using social networks to keep a record of their international experience or communicate through new ways, such as through voice notes, is placed as one of the most important activities for international students during their temporary migration.

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