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Street Children and Social Media

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Introduction: The Rise of Facebook Use Among Street Children

This contribution aims to generate knowledge on how street children’s digital identity is shaped by social media. By conducting a study on the Facebook profiles and posts of 20 street children, we show how street children’s Facebook interactions are shaped by the audiences they aimed to reach and by their capacity to deal with this social media platform’s affordances.

In Bolivia, the most recent Nation Census of people living on the street revealed that there were 3,768 persons of which 43% are between 10 and 24 years old (Viceministerio de Defensa Social y Sustancias Controladas, 2015). A significant proportion of Bolivians living on the street are children and young people due to an essential failure of care intervention models (Huang & Huang, 2008) and weak family reunification programmes that led most of these children to grow up in the streets (Losantos Velasco, 2017).

In line with other research about children and social media (boyd, 2014; Guardia & Zegada, 2018; Livingstone, 2003; Livingstone & Helsper, 2007), Bolivian street children are actively using social media platforms, especially WhatsApp and Facebook. In line with previous research (Losantos Velasco, 2017), this study found Facebook profiles of 40 street children living in the city of La Paz and 23 profiles of children living in the streets of the city of El Alto. Forty-eight of these children were using Facebook daily.

Street children and youth are keen users of Facebook, although their use patterns have been poorly studied around the globe. Several reasons can explain their invisibility in this area of research. First, there is a common belief that their living conditions do not allow them to access anything more than the essential assets such as food and clothing. Second, research on education has demonstrated that most of the Bolivian street children and youth have not finished primary school, hence it is generally assumed that many of them are illiterate (Huang & Huang, 2008).

Both of these widespread assumptions need to be nuanced. Related to the first point, the country’s largest research study on digital use showed that internet services became cheaper in recent years, internet cafes are trendy for youngsters to get online and there are few legal requirements when buying mobile phone SIM cards, enabling street children to buy them in most street shops to ‘upload’ data (Vicepresidencia del Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia, 2016). Moreover, new smartphones have become available at a relatively low cost and nowadays second-hand or stolen mobile phones can be easily found in Bolivia’s underground markets. Furthermore, even
though there is practically no information on precisely how street children and youth have access to smartphones, a previous research project by the first author indicated that nearly everyone from the two street groups had one and was using it on a daily basis, at least for some months during a year. Moreover, they invest a significant part of their daily earnings in order to acquire cell phones and they tend to change mobile phones regularly, because such hardware is used as an exchangeable tool to get easy and quick money.  

Regarding the second argument, even though street children have hardly finished primary school, the census shows that 94% can read and write with a certain degree of difficulty (Vice-ministerio de Defensa Social y Sustancias Controladas, 2015), but well enough to interact on social media.

Social media has therefore become a powerful connection tool between street children and different audiences, with whom it was difficult to stay in touch in the past, including international aid organisations, volunteers, and professionals that work with street children, and street educators with whom they are in contact in their daily lives on the street. This ‘virtual sociability’ (Cáceres, Señán, & Ruiz San Román, 2017; Delgado & Felice, 2013) has had a great impact on the expansion of the children’s social network.

Furthermore, social media also changed the way that street children relate to media in general. Only a few years ago, the only relationship these children had with the media was when TV or radio networks decided to report about them, depicting them at the extreme of two poles: a) as ‘victims’ in constant need of help, which corresponded with the social construction of them as poor and disadvantaged (Bar-On, 1997); and b) as criminals, with feral and untamed characteristics that demand forced interventions to take them off the street (e.g., Losantos Velasco, & Loots, 2015). Street children have shifted from being objects of news and passive media consumers by virtue of watching TV on the street or in public restaurants and hiding in movie theatres, to becoming active producers of content in social media, as will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

This chapter aims to expand the knowledge and research evidence in the field of street children’s use of social media by answering these research questions:

1. How do street children deal with Facebook affordances?
2. Are their Facebook profiles and posts influenced by the audience they are aiming to reach?
3. How do their Facebook interactions shape their digital identity?

The next section will describe the research methodology in which Facebook profiles and posts were selected and then analysed by using a visual and an audience perspective. Subsequently, there is a discussion about how street children’s interaction with social media is mediated by their capacity to understand and deal with social media affordances and by the audience to whom they target their posts. The final section examines how this interaction shapes the way street children construct their digital identity.

Methodology

Selection of Participants and Facebook Sample

To select Bolivian street children’s Facebook profiles there was first an exploratory search to see which of the first author’s street-connected friends had an active profile. The initial selection ended with a list of 63 Facebook accounts.

The first author had had daily contact with all the participants from the selected group up until one year earlier. Therefore, to make sure they were still part of the same street group, a street educator was invited to confirm the children’s status at the time of the research. The
information provided narrowed the sample down to a total of 54 Facebook accounts of children living on the streets of the cities of La Paz and El Alto, of whom 48 were last connected to Facebook during the previous week.

The second selection criterion was based on the first author’s regular Facebook interactions with the selected children during the previous year. This allowed the researchers to follow their updates. Furthermore, it enabled more in-depth study of how their posts related to their personal history.

The final sample consisted of 20 Facebook accounts of children – 13 boys and 7 girls, aged 12- to 16-years-old – that were followed daily for seven months.

Data Collection and Analysis

The first step was to gather together the profile information of the 20 participants. This covered information such as names, photos, addresses, school information, work information, relationship status, and other relevant information that was stored in each of the participant’s files.

Second, the children’s weekly updates were followed for seven months. Every week all posts from the selected profiles were printed off. The content of each post was checked, setting apart what the children published as a ‘shared’ post from what they uploaded themselves. The most repeated topics and those posts that had more comments and likes were highlighted and a separate file for each participant was created to compare posts over time.

Once all the materials were gathered, a preliminary analysis compared profile information with data provided by the street educator and by the first author. Next, images and texts of the highlighted posts were first read separately and then compared with the profile information to search for similarities and differences.

Furthermore, to conduct a more in-depth visual and audience-oriented analysis, the understanding of the street children’s Facebook profiles and posts was based on the conceptualisation of Mitchell, De Lange, and Moletsane (2017). This states that visual content cannot be assumed as a transparent window into its author’s mind, but rather it shows the author’s agency when producing meaning with the particular intention to narrate a ‘small story’.

Second, the analysis used the concept of ‘text–image’ proposed by Mitchell (1995) and Rose (2007). This refers to images accompanied by some text or testimony that explains them. Thus, texts and images together provide more information than single images or independent texts and, therefore, are to be analysed as a whole.

Finally, the audience perspective and influence suggested by Fiske (1994) and more recently by Livingstone (2019) was used to reflect upon how the – imaginary or tagged – audience could shape the content posted by each of the participants.

The focus on how and for whom Facebook’s profile information and posts were visually and verbally constructed made it possible to identify (a) risks face by and opportunities for street children related to social media affordances, and (b) the relevance of audience when posting. Moreover, it shed light on how their social media interaction shaped the children’s digital identity.

Ethical Issues

Considering the research context (street children) and design (visual and audience analysis in a digital environment), we anticipated several ethical issues:

1 Confidentiality. Names were erased from Facebook profiles and changed in the document to guarantee anonymity. Moreover, all identifiable pictures were only for the use of the researchers.

2 Consultation and consent. Because they were street children – without any adult family to give consent for them – these profile owners were asked through Facebook Messenger to
give their consent for the researchers to conduct an investigation of their public posts and to publish findings in academic journals.

3 Protection against social stigma. To deal with social stigma, the focus was not on typical street images such as the ones showing the use of glue, or the use of masks. All posts from the last five months of the analysis were included, broadening the scope of the review to cover a variety of posted messages.

4 Respect. The dignity and autonomy of the participants were taken into consideration when requesting their consent to conduct the narrative analysis of the visual material they had publicly posted.

Findings

Street Children’s and Social Media Affordances: Risks and Opportunities

Social media technologies, website designs, and interfaces have been described as the ‘affordances’ (Gibson, 1979) that potentially drive the formation and enactment of social identities, as they influence and prompt users to share, present themselves, and behave in certain ways (Papacharissi, 2010). Specifically, scholars have described five social media affordances that affect what happens to personal information: persistence, scalability, replicability, spreadability, and searchability (boyd, 2008, 2014; Papacharissi & Yuan, 2011), meaning that recorded and archived data can easily be multiplied, shared, and accessed through an internet search. This fact has created a new stream of information that leads to what Monika Taddicken (2014, p. 250) has called “a recontextualisation of self-disclosure”: self-disclosed personal information remains available beyond the moment of its creation. It also means that even if deleted, the data may have been disseminated, stored, and potentially modified by others, possibly reaching an audience far beyond the intended one. Moreover, information can also resurface when it matches search terms by other users, at any point in time.

The topic of children’s data and privacy online is one of the most sensitive, and it has been on the table of scholarly debate from some time now (e.g., DiMaggio, Hargittai, Celeste, & Shafer, 2004; Livingstone & Haddon, 2009). Issues such as children’s digital literacy (Bucking-ham, 2015) and cognitive and social competencies to understand and to deal with social media risks are currently under discussion and actions have been taken to raise awareness of the topic. However, as argued by Livingstone, Stoilova, and Nandagiri (2018), privacy protection has a parent-centred approach, which immediately increases the digital divide for street children.

Unsupervised street children’s use of social media can be risky in many ways. First of all, they may have a less critical understanding of present and future risks of Facebook posting. Loss of control over their personal information can lead, for example, to the ‘spreadability’ of their street condition, which can reduce their chances of social reintegration. In this respect, previous research has shown that possibilities of reintegration become limited when their street situation becomes public (Losantos Velasco, 2017). Indeed, some street youth decide to migrate to another city or even another country in order to leave the street definitively.

Moreover, girls face a higher risk because they can become easily traced by trafficking networks. Sixteen-year-old Joana posts: “in a relationship I give more sex than problems” (see Figure 42.1), which can pose a direct threat to her in the near future, depending on who is reading it.

Livingstone, Stoilova, and Nandagiri (2018) report that non-street 12-to-17-year-olds are aware of the privacy risks they take in social media. However, in spite of recognising disclosure threats, it appears to be that their decision on what to publish is somewhat “influenced by the immediacy of and desire for benefits” (p. 19) rather than by possible danger. Street children seem to act on the same basis, but run a more significant risk because there is neither parental nor social control.
While social media affordances add risks to their safety, at the same time they can also provide both new, potentially empowering ways and tools for the formation and enactment of the children’s social identities and enlargement of their social network.

On 2 March 2018, Leonor (16) denounced the disappearance of her friend Jane (16) on Facebook (Figure 42.2). She tagged some street friends and other Facebook contacts she believed could help her spread the news. To make a stronger statement, she shared her missing girlfriend’s partner photo (Leonor’s Facebook post, 21 March 2018).

Responses appeared immediately. Former workers of the NGO that used to work with them on the street, old street children, and foreign volunteers that knew them personally responded by offering help, proposing to go to the police or sharing the post. Three days later Jane appeared, explaining that her phone was stolen.

Social media has enabled street children to set up their own connections, bypassing adult mediation as illustrated in the previous example. Moreover, it reveals that although street children face significant digital inequalities, they manage to shape online social contexts and networks actively.
The Audience Matters: For Whom are Street Children Posting?

María (16) tags Juan (15?) and posts:

A mature man knows that the secret of making a woman fall in love is to hold her without her asking to, to take care of her without her demanding it and, to love her without her saying it. I love you, my love.

(Maria’s post, 24 June 2018)

The post presents a message of love directed to her street partner. However, a contradiction appears evident: even though the message seems to state that to make a girl fall in love men have to act and respond in certain ways without being asked to do so, the simple fact of her tagging him can be interpreted as a request for him to behave in the manner she suggests.

A second girl, Natalia (14), takes a selfie (Figure 42.3) and writes:

I am sorry I am not the person you want me to be. If you knew that I was trying everything for you. I am sorry, love, if when I kiss you, you don’t feel butterflies anymore. If you don’t love me in the way I love you. I am sorry, love, I don’t own your heart. I don’t regret hanging around with you. I am sorry love, but it is the moment to take another road. Cupid isn’t guilty.

Nonetheless, even if the message seems to be directed to someone she is affectionate with, she tags 21 other street friends. Some of her friends lately reply: “forget him, you don’t need him” or “You look nice, Loquita”.

The message fulfills two purposes. On the one hand it let the (ex-) partner knows she is suffering from the break-up. On the other, it allows her to receive consolation responses from her street social network.

Both posts target a street audience intentionally. Moreover, both posts follow street norms of female submission and calling for street social support in times of suffering, reproducing what Costa (2018) calls “codes of behaviour existing in the social contexts of the offline world” (p. 3642). Such is the case in the following post (Figure 42.4), where a street boy calls for help when he says he is in a new city, with no money, no place to stay, no hope, and that it is about to rain.

Figure 42.3 Natalia’s Facebook post, 23 December 2018.
In contrast to the previous two posts, Diego doesn’t tag anyone. However, virtual social support emerges from different audiences. The first comment is from a street friend who immediately suggests selling his mobile phone. The second one comes from a former street educator who offers to send him some money. The third one comes from an old street boy who now lives in Santa Cruz and offers him support if needed.

Each of the online replies concurs with the offline role of the respondents. Moreover, even when there is an evident collapsed context (boyd, 2002) in the post, each audience responds accordingly to the social code of the offline world.

Digital Identity Construction on Facebook: Much More Than Street Children Online

The social stigma of being labelled a street child carries a great identity burden that accompanies the person, sometimes even into their adult life. Few stigmas are so permanent. It is not unusual that when a street child decides to leave the street, institutions and professionals continue to identify them as part of the street children’s group.

However, the study of their Facebook profiles reveals different identities being developed. The social media digital environment enables the emergence of different – more individual – features of their identities to bubble up. In fact, some profiles were not immediately linked to street life. More than once, the first author felt the need to double-check whether the Facebook profile belonged to a child living on the street.

Figure 42.5 presents a street adolescent Facebook profile and cover photo of him wearing ordinary adolescent clothes. In the information section three sentences stand out: force, #ManythanksGod, and “I didn’t give up then . . . I won’t do it now”.

This Facebook profile is one of many in which children and adolescents post typical teenage content such as songs, jokes, memes, and drawings. However, such mainstream adolescent posts are sometimes mixed with other typical ‘street publications’ on their Facebook storyline, where they are lying on the street, wearing masks, or sniffing glue. The next post presents a street-type Facebook profile photo (Figure 42.6).

Facebook profiles enable them to share both street and non-street aspects of their lives and identities that are more difficult to show in offline social contexts. Dominant identity
characteristics such as being a street person tend to become so relevant that they overshadow alternative identities. However, as observed in this study, social media offers an alternative space for different digital identity construction and for other stories to be told.

The Opportunity for Vindication through Social Media: The Possibility to Tell One’s ‘Truth’

In July 2018 Carlota (15) posted:

Here is my truth: at the age of six I was raped by my stepfather. I felt so bad... traumatised that I became mute. I couldn’t speak anymore. My mother took me to an institution because she thought I was sick. After some months the director of the place took me to a psychiatric hospital for adults. I was terrified. I was the only kid. Everybody else was very sick grown-ups. At the hospital, I saw many things that scared me. I started to act like crazy. I heard other people scream and I used to do the same. I copied them: I don’t know why.

One day a nurse who was good to me, opened up the door for me and told me I could go: “I am going to leave the gate open for you and if you want you can leave”. And I did.
I went onto the street. I was never on the street before, so when other children saw me, they came to offer to take me to their ‘torrance’. Sometimes I used to scream for hours for no reason. And they [the other street children] just let me scream and used to say: “she must have nerve problems”.

One of them offered me a pill to calm down. I took it. I took them a lot. After a while I started to feel OK. For the first time in my life, I began to feel happy. I am now OK, thanks to many people. I have the strength to stand up and say I am OK because of my effort and the help of some very good people.

(Carlota’s post, 16 July 2018)

She tags some street friends, educators, and foreign volunteers in this poignant post. Carlota’s audience is therefore defined by those she tags but also by the Facebook friends of the tagged people. Did she want these other publics to read her story? That is difficult to know. What is clear is that she wants to make sure some specific people know her story and that her story reaches a broader audience of Facebook friends. Carlota decided to share a very intimate part of her life with a clear purpose: to vindicate the reasons for her street condition.

The posted story makes it clear why she lives on the street and why she is happier there than in any other place before. A serious violation of rights, together with a considerable amount of violence, is described in the post.

Indeed, Facebook is used as a democratic space in the story of Carlota, a virtual space where she decides what to communicate to whom, which rarely happens for street children in other social spaces. Even though there have been enormous efforts to give street children a voice through participatory research, interventions, and political movements, all of them have always been conducted or at least initiated from someone living outside the street.

Social media allow children living on the street free virtual participation to vindicate, to amplify, and to edit their story so that their strength and capacity for self-improvement can be acknowledged by a broader audience than they can reach through their offline interactions.

Attempts to make Facebook audiences think that they are more than street children were widespread. Other smaller examples of vindication of the street label could be found on the presentation section of nearly all Facebook profiles researched. All of them mentioned the school they went to, even if it was for a few days or months. They also included other references, such as working places, educational programmes where they participated in small training courses, and so on. In some cases there were also references or tags to their family relatives. Finally, some of the street children tagged street educators as family members.

As Morduchowicz, Marcon, Sylvestre, and Ballestrini (2012) observed, social media are one of the few spaces where street (and non-street) children can reinvent who they are, how they are defined socially, and how the society in which they live perceives them. Interaction with social media and technology shapes their individual and collective identity and gives them a digital space to talk about themselves to others.

**Conclusions**

This chapter aimed to expand the knowledge and evidence in the field of street children’s use of social media by conducting a study on their Facebook profiles and posts. First, Facebook’s affordances comprise both risks and opportunities for them. Street children’s rights continue to be at risk in the digital environment and, therefore, awareness of their social media participation is fundamental. Nonetheless, it is also evident that social media affordances provide new, potentially empowering ways and tools for the formation and enactment of their social identities. Their Facebook posts
revealed they were re-thinking and re-orienting ways of behaving and protecting personal information online, sometimes resourcefully and sometimes ambiguously.

Second, street children interact with social media and share information and messages to an intended audience and to an ‘imagined’ audience – as they are physically absent or ‘invisible’ (Litt & Hargittai, 2016). Street children – as perhaps all social media users – try to reach a specific audience by tagging them in particular posts and/or producing specific publications to raise concern, empathy, and solidarity to improve their offline conditions. In this respect, Kolko, Nakamura, and Rodman (2000) state that cultural biases that configure unmediated aspects of every-day social interactions also shape what they call ‘the mediated experiences’ that people have online. Such is the case of street children’s Facebook posts where street children tend to follow different offline social codes to address different online tagged or imagined audiences.

Finally, social media are used to vindicate their offline street children identity. Through Facebook, street children present themselves not only within the confines of their street identity but show different aspects of their lives that are rarely known when there is a dominant street discourse surrounding them. The study indicates that street children are using Facebook not only to stay connected to their street friends and peers but to reach other audiences with whom direct communication was almost impossible, apart from through welfare institutions that used to mediate between them and other publics.

The research findings show that street children have taken an active role in social media that counters the passive one they used to have on ‘traditional’ broadcast media. Moreover, their interaction on social media, specifically on Facebook, has enabled an enlargement of their online connections both with other street children as well as with home-based people. However, a question remains unanswered: what transformation is possible in the lives of street children through social media? The impact of social media in the lives of street children is hard to determine. What can change in their ‘real world’ as a product of the enlargement of their online social network is not at all clear. But it is clear that street children’s online social inclusion may give the false impression of their exclusion in the offline social world.

Notes
1 Although we prefer the term ‘street-connected’ children or ‘children in street situations’ (Consortium for Street Children, 2018) we will use the term ‘street children’ for reading purposes.
2 Marcela Losantos Velasco, henceforth referred to as the first author, had personal contact with these children in various previous research projects and continued to have regular interactions on Facebook afterwards.
3 For more information, the online report can be found at www.cis.gob.bo/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Bolivia-digital-sello.pdf.
4 The Nation Census of Bolivian street children showed that all children, aged 11 to 18, had a cell phone at some point during the year. However, as it is second hand or stolen, it stops working, or they trade it or sell it when they are in need of money.
5 By active profile we mean those who had performed an activity such posting, commenting, or liking within a week.
6 Street children sniff glue because its psychotropic effects help them deal with hunger and cold.
7 Torrante is the street slang to name the place where street groups sleep. It is usually located under a bridge or under the stairs of some downtown street.

References


