

Personal photos of adolescents of popular areas on *Facebook*

Performances de autopresentación a través de fotografías digitales. El caso de los adolescentes de sectores populares en *Facebook*

DIEGO BASILE, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires, Argentina (basilediego@hotmail.com)

JOAQUÍN LINNE, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires, Argentina (joaquinlinne@gmail.com)

RESUMEN

This article addresses the issue of personal photographs posted on Facebook by adolescents from popular sectors of Buenos Aires City. The methodology is qualitative and consists of content analysis of Facebook profiles (n: 200). The hypothesis is that these teenagers use these communication tools for self-presentation on Facebook. Among the results, we emphasize that most important photos for adolescents are selfies and pictures of themselves with their peer group. Lastly, we propose three categories to categorize the personal photos posted by these adolescents: “selfies”, “photo-book” and “photo with peer group”.

Keywords: Teenagers, Facebook, personal pictures, popular areas.

ABSTRACT

Este artículo aborda el tema de las fotografías personales que producen y publican en la plataforma Facebook los adolescentes de sectores populares de la ciudad de Buenos Aires. La metodología es cualitativa y consiste en un análisis de contenido de perfiles de Facebook (n: 200). La hipótesis es que estos adolescentes utilizan cotidianamente estas herramientas comunicacionales comunicativas para autopresentarse en Facebook ante los otros. Entre los resultados, se destaca que las fotos que más importancia tienen para los adolescentes de esta población son las fotos de sí mismos y las que los muestran con sus grupos de pares. A su vez, se proponen tres categorías para clasificar las fotos personales que publican en red: “autofotos”, “foto-book” y “foto con grupo de pares”.

Palabras clave: Adolescentes, Facebook, fotos personales, sectores populares.

•How to cite:

Basile, D. y Linne, J. (2014). Performances de autopresentación a través de fotografías digitales. El caso de los adolescentes de sectores populares en Facebook. *Cuadernos.info*, 35, 209-217. doi: 10.7764/cdi.35.536

INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

During the last years, with the massification of information and communication technologies (ICTs), new practices have been developed in most of the social fields (Castells, 2009). Among them, in recent decades there was a global increase in access to photography. This phenomenon occurred in three dimensions: by social sector, given that with the massification of digital cameras popular sectors (PS) have access to their own equipment; by age segments, since adolescents use their cameras on a daily basis; and by gender, since photography is no longer only male but a large part of women has her own camera. Within the universe of adolescents in the city of Buenos Aires, we focused on the PS. Some questions that guide this research are: what types of photos they post? What are the differences by gender in the production of photos? Which moments do they chose to photograph themselves?

According to Internet World Stats (2013), of the more than 1100 million users of Facebook (FB), Argentineans are in place 12, with more than 22 million. Among this population, adolescents are the most numerous and active sector (Internetworldstats.com, 2013). This is explained, to some extent, by their availability of time, their status of "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001) and at the same time, because they are at a stage in which experimentation and identity construction becomes central (Boyd, 2008; Urresti, 2008; Krauskopf, 2010). Unlike what happened until the end of the last century, with what was called the "Kodak culture" (Chalfen, 1987), in the 21st century ICTs allow this exploration to be registered and put to the test with a wide network of contacts.

Adolescents live different experiences according to their social sector, gender and geographic residential area (Urresti, 2008; Krauskopf, 2010). In the case of adolescents of PS, in their daily lives they usually have to deal with socio-economic, educational and housing shortages. Sometimes, these shortcomings have as a consequence social stigmatization, gender violence, addictions and pregnancy at an early age (Auyero & Berti, 2013). In this scenario of exclusion and social inequality, ICTs expand the access to social networks and to a diversity of free digital content. Within the new resources of self-presentation that emerge with the change of century and massification of ICTs (Murray,

2008), we chose to focus on the digital photos that these adolescents publish on a daily basis.

On the other hand, the need to experiment with self-image is a characteristic of adolescents, for whom appearance is fundamental, because the look of others is considered and overestimated (Urresti, 2008; Bonacci, 2011). In addition to this, adolescence is also the stage of exploration of sexuality and seduction games. New self-presentation and meeting spaces are configured with ICTs. Among them, we decided to analyze FB since a significant part of contemporary adolescent experiences is developed there.

Contemporary adolescents photograph themselves, edit, and exhibit these photos in the common spaces of the social network on a daily basis. In them, their peers are responsible for recognizing, comment, click 'I like' (onwards, IL), praise, criticize or ignore such personal images. In this way, they are learning and collectively building codes of what is desired and ignored, celebrated and rejected. Then, such codes are transferred to traditional spaces, where meeting face to face with their community of peers adds other protocol elements of interaction, such as gestures, physicality, the look and the tones of the voice. All this social dynamics acquires circularity between the traditional and virtual meeting spaces. What is new in the self-presentation of adolescents? Unlike previous generations, they deploy a visual autobiography (Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2010) on their FB profile through the daily practice of taking personal photos, publishing and commenting on them. Thus, adolescents choose what to show and monitor their profiles and those of their peer group in search for the best possible presentation of themselves. This skill is not spontaneous, but it comes from the experience in the use of the social network and of shared learning. By having greater control over what they expose to each other (Goffman, 1959), social networks as FB allow them to present to their generational peers with a highly selective version of themselves. While the recipients of these photos are basically peers, it should be considered that the social network enables a common space of shared visibility, which margins are diffuse. In any case, their audience exceeds their peers, if we understand them as the group of friends from the neighborhood, family, club and high school teammates.

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology consists of content analysis of the adolescents' profiles from the city of Buenos Aires (n: 200) PS. We chose to use virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000), since it is the right strategy to explore the practices of these teenagers in their everyday technological environments.

Virtual ethnography allows a detailed study of online relationships, since the Internet is not only a form of communication, but also an everyday artifact in the lives of people and a meeting place that allows the formation of communities, of more or less stable groups and the emergence of a new form of sociability (Ardévol et al., 2003: 73).

Regarding the field work, it was carried out during 2013, through the creation and maintenance of an ad hoc social network profile. To reach adolescents, we used informers/contacts of the "micro-communities" of PS adolescents in the city of Buenos Aires. To multiply the contacts and expand the intentional sample that allows the content analysis, we used the snowball strategy, enabled by the social platform by suggesting contacts on a daily basis. Through the creation and development of this profile, we performed a content analysis through observation of the published photos and texts. This analysis was contrasted with individual in-depth interviews and in-person observations to ten adolescents selected from the sample. The interviews were face to face, individual and each had an approximate duration of forty minutes. For the selection of survey and interview subjects, we defined adolescents of popular sectors such as those between 12 and 18 years old that attended public high schools; their parents work in manual jobs and have incomplete secondary education.

The interviews were carried out in schools, cultural centers or digital inclusion centers. Regarding the ethical aspects, we had authorization from the adolescents and their names, addresses or faces are not used.

MULTIPLE SENSES

Most adolescents appropriate FB for performances of self-presentation on a daily basis, which frame of reference is the visual support of the photographs.

Those photos—personal and from others—work for them as a catalog of memories and contacts, and also as a mobile archive of images to look anywhere and go through an interstitial time in the daily routine. We define personal photos as those that portray the user's body or their groups of peers or family. Its novelty is to present intimate components of the user who publishes the image, sometimes instantly and without foreign participation. In this sense, personal photo works as an extension of the relationship with the mirror and allows adolescents to experiment with their aesthetic presentation through the manipulation of various tools and strategies.

Adolescents are the ones that use the most both digital cameras and FB, where they broadcast in their community more self-portraits (selfies)¹ than any other age group (Facebookstats.com, 2013). In this way, digital photos and platforms such as FB are their favorite resources to entertain and socialize. Thus, the practices associated with ICTs operate as personal and collective resources, in-person and virtual.

In line with what Scifo (2005) outlines for Italian adolescents, we observed that the photos published by teenagers of PS in the city of Buenos Aires have multiple meanings. First, there is the aesthetic component, appreciated by the quality of the photography, from the angle to the staging of the objects, the place and the edition. Secondly is the sexual component, referring to the cases in which the image aims to seduce. Then, the social value, since the image usually seeks for acceptance, praise and popularity. In addition, the photo usually carries affective value when it is taken with the peer or family group, and serves as a reminder of a lived experience. In relation to its historical value, the image operates as a footprint and archive of a moment of personal history. The ludic aspect is evident, since the majority is the result of experimentation and play of adolescents, both face to face and mediated by computers. Finally, the sense of identity is given because these personal photos are crucial in their digital self-presentation. In this way, mobile photographic and communicative culture of adolescents intensifies the relationships between them and creates a shared code of interpretation of the experience.

TYPES OF PHOTOS

With portable digital photography new amateur genres emerged, unthinkable in the days of analog technology. ICTs incorporated two advantages: firstly, the portability, which allows producing images in a multiplicity of situations (for example, in school, on the street, in a shopping mall or in a square), and secondly, gratuity, which enables both spontaneity and experimentation. In all of these modalities, adolescents take photos of themselves, without the mediation of adults. This causes that the space of publication and circulation of the photographs on social networks as FB is also permeated by these images.

From field work, we have established some exploratory categories to classify different typologies in which the analyzed photographs can be arranged. Since photos with family (even with pets) are scarce, we chose to focus on selfies or images of the peer group (which include the couple). These can be divided into three categories: selfies, photo-book and photos with peers groups.

SELFIES

A large part of the observed portraits fits into this typology of selfie, i.e., photos of presentation which tend to show adolescents alone looking at the camera. This type of photos is central in the identity configuration and the everyday sociability of contemporary adolescents, both from medium class and popular sectors.

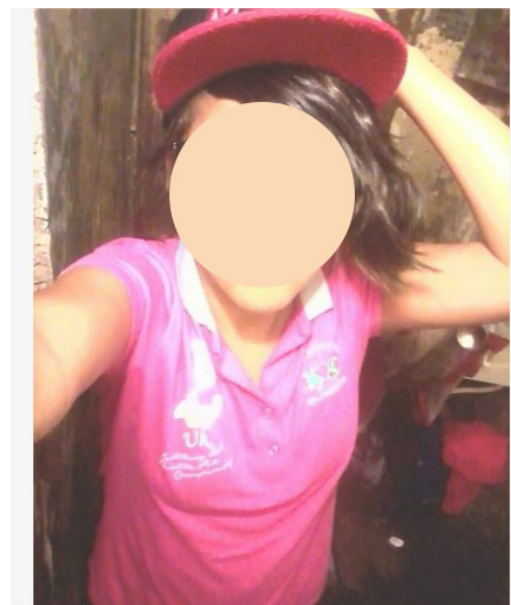
Published in many cases as cover images in their profile, they tend to be intimate, taken at home, in the bedroom or bathroom. They allow adolescents to experiment with self-presentation and self-image. At the same time, this practice serves as an extension and socialization of the “traditionally intimate” relationship with the mirror. The daily and collective use of these platforms feeds at the same time the online interaction they receive from their peers. These images show the highly ludic and identity component mentioned by Scifo (2005).

In these selfies we see elements that contribute to self-presentation: in the case of women, earrings, rings, watch, tongue, tank tops, makeup and extreme close-up of long fingernails; men show serious faces and naked torsos. In the “profile pictures” album (defaulted by the platform) usually appear photos of the adolescents’ face, but also of their whole body, looking at camera, smiling,

showing piercings in navel and different costumes, gestures and hairstyles.

Produced with digital cameras, mobile phone cameras or webcams, this type of performances (Butler, 2005) allows testing different types of femininity and masculinity, in a constant dialogue with the feedback of the wall comments or private messages of FB contacts.

Figures 1 and 2. Selfies



Source: Captures made by the authors from www.facebook.com

PHOTO-BOOK

Photos in this case are mainly made by women. Female adolescents especially bring into play their media imaginaries. Like selfies, it tends to occur in intimate places, as the room or the bathroom interiors. This practice consists basically of playing to “be a model”, in the performance of a photographic production about a “confident, desirable and provocative” body, according to the premise that “bodies matter” (Butler, 2005), i.e. those built and represented by mass media, advertising and show business.

Just as in selfies, adolescents “test” the level of effectiveness of their image, through the comments they receive from their peers according to the amount of IL and the level of approval of the comments. Thus, adolescents have two fundamental tools to exhibit themselves before others: the camera, which records personal images and allows them to publish them easily without cost, and FB, which makes it possible to publish and obtain feedback from these images. The ludic sense, the aesthetic and the sexual component are condensed here.

Figures 3 and 4. Photo-books



Source: Captures made by the authors from www.facebook.com

Individual photo-book

These photos are usually taken in solitude and at home (bedroom, kitchen or bathroom). In many cases, as we see in image 8, they are produced in series that are then grouped by default by FB under the heading “pictures”, or organized in albums with titles like “Bored at home” or “Am I cute?” In these series, girls rehearse different gestures from different angles, and use different types of editing effects allowed by the programs associated with FB, such as Instagram. In this example (image 7), what is relevant is showing the piercing in the navel as a sign of femininity. In short, it is to emulate a typical model photo shoot posing for a magazine, advertising or a television program, which shows the influence both of the mass culture and traditional media and new technologies in the construction of identity of adolescents (Castells, 2009).

It is common for adolescents to show their full body or some parts of it, while they change clothes, makeup and accessories. These strategies generated intuitively but consciously, depending on what they learn through their media, family and peer group socialization, mainly intend to seduce and obtain acceptance among their community of contacts.

Duo photo-book

Amateur modeling is emphasized when two adolescents photograph each other. This type of photos is usually done with friends and they are more fun than the individual photo-book, although in many cases they imply a larger erotic-sensual component. This performance has features associated to identity in multiple ways: firstly, to friendship, social and emotional components; second, the sexual component, the construction of gender and physicality. These performances generate an aesthetic code which become legible and legitimate these ludic-identity practices (Butler, 2005).

Within the contemporary youth cultures, more uninhibited in sexual and affective relations than the cultures of previous generations (Urresti, 2008), some male adolescents also have begun to perform these amateur modeling practices and publish them on FB.

In inside-spaces duo photo-book, usually the mirror is central, allowing them to test in different ways their physicality, anticipate the result of the photo and exacerbate their femininity or masculinity. The

mirror also increases the level of intimacy and plays the role of the viewer. In addition, it is also a fetish object very used by both the traditional and the new and self-produced sensual photo shoots.

These same photographs, taken with personal digital cameras, can be replicated in public places, such as the school, the street or the square. The proposal is the same: one poses and the other takes the photos or they both pose in front of a mirror and gesture to the camera, usually with sensual, uninhibited and provocative intent. Adolescents also create and publish duo photos-book in the outside; this type of photos is typical of adolescent women. They tend to be more ludic than the interior. Thanks to mobile technology, they can occur at any time, in public and open areas mostly within the school or in the vicinity.

They are usually taken by two females or males, in part by the absence of a mirror, which plays in the inside duo photo-book—as we have seen—a key role. When girls have a couple, sensual positions tend to diminish considerably. In return, there are more photos with the boyfriend and more declarations of love. Outside the house, group pictures dominate; their proposal is different from the photo-pose, and is not so focused on the body figure. In these, adolescents are more spontaneous, in scenes of leisure and fun.

PHOTOS WITH PEERS GROUPS

Daytime

With a larger ludic, affective, identity and social component, in this images tend to be central intimate in-person friendships and the use of mobile technologies. They are more spontaneous and there is less emphasis on the erotic and in the representation of legitimate corporality, unlike the photo-book and a significant proportion of selfies.

The most photographed spaces tend to be school (classroom, courtyard, bathroom), squares, shopping malls, and to a lesser extent, the adolescents' houses. These images serve as a diary of daily life with the peer group. At school, either in the classroom, in the bathroom or on the courtyard, they appear with friends and schoolmates, with benches, chairs, barred windows and boards as background, while fellow classmates appear in many cases studying, sleeping or using their mobile phones. The common denominator is its relaxed appearance. When they are taken with a mobile phone,

Figure 5. Daytime sociability with peers



Source: Capture made by the authors from www.facebook.com

they are usually published almost instantly on their FB walls, sometimes with comments like “bored in school” or “here at the school using FB²”. This kind of practice gives an account of the new phenomena lived by the majority of adolescents from the massification of ICTs: ubiquity, de-localization, trans-localization, dual localization and the plurality of spaces and experiences (Scifo, 2005). These phenomena enabled by ICTs refer to the possibility of multitasking on different screens, activities and “places”. One can, for example, be chatting with a cousin who lives abroad, editing a personal text and looking at photos of friends from school at the same time. And all this, if one has a tablet or a mobile personal computer, can be at school, while in a free hour, recess or time of classes.

In the case of photos of male groups, what tends to exacerbate is physicality. As shown on image 16, what is evident is—in addition to friendship or fraternity with the peer group—that physicality and the condition of masculinity is associated with thinness and youth. Such images are produced in places of everyday sociability, where a group quorum gathers to develop photographic sessions. For example, at school, in streets, in a food place or at the house of one of them.

Night photos

The night has been considered a temporary space mainly ruled by young people, while it is the space-time in which adults sleep (Margulis et al., 1994). Nowadays this “culture of night” has this new possibility of self-registration that, subsequently published in FB, makes up an amateur version of the magazines of the star system and the social establishment: how someone was dressed, with who was someone seen that night, how much the party was enjoyed. In this case, it is

an audience comprised of an intimate community, a set of friends and acquaintances, and an indefinite rest of spectators. Although they occur mostly during the weekend, they account for a significant part of sociability generated and fed back on FB during the rest of the week. At the same time, they function as evidence and “document” of what happened. In this sense, they are sometimes triggers of conflicts of jealousy or infidelity among friends and couples.

The most photographed spaces tend to be the streets, fast food locals, nightclubs, ‘*bailantas*’³, party halls, bars and houses in which they held ‘*la previa*’⁴, organized in FB. This photographic practice operates as a record and testimony of festive, cheerful, recreational or adventurous moments.

Figure 6. Night sociability



Source: Capture made by the authors from www.facebook.com

Figure 7. Aesthetic duels



Source: Capture made by the authors from www.facebook.com

In these moments that are photographed and published, sometimes adolescents explore the transgression of social boundaries and record this experience as part of their identity construction to the others.

In the night photos between groups of male peers, what is exacerbated is a kind of masculinity that highlights a defiant attitude associated with excesses and “stamina”, in the sense of resistance against excesses of drugs or defense of territory and honor. Such images give account of a part of the identity of the youth of popular sectors. Indeed, in a large number of these photos masculinity is exacerbated through excess, weapons, alcohol, dark clothing, caps, sports jackets and a strong attitude.

EDITION AND USED DEVICES

The majority of adolescent women, unlike men, among who this activity is more nuanced, edit their photos with free programs available on the internet. However, among adolescents of PS in the city of Buenos Aires, both women and men, it is frequent to find montages edited in Pizap or Photoshop in which they propose, playfully, a duel between friends. While this type of postings started being more massive and viral among female adolescents from the age of 12 to 14, it soon went viral⁵ and transformed into a common practice among teens of PS. Thus, “aesthetic duels” begin to appear on the walls of adolescent boys.

In the majority of cases adolescents show in their photographs their digital cameras, mobile phones with camera, TV and laptop or desktop computer. These devices, with which they portrait themselves, are part of the visual theme, scenery and presentation of themselves that they build for others.

The quality of the photos published works as a sign of distinction for teenagers in the South of the city of Buenos Aires; thus, a higher image definition and editing implies a higher status within the community. The ability to know and edit portraits is one of the most valued qualities both in male and female profiles.

CONCLUSIONS

As we have seen, adolescents of PS publish on daily basis personal photos in FB, produced through webcams, mobile phones, and digital cameras, taken in

the majority of cases in their own homes or their friends', in public places, at school or in fast food locals. We have organized these photos into three types: portraits, photos-book and photos with groups of peers. In the first two, which have important identity components, aesthetic, sexual and ludic, teens experiment with their image and build their physicality while they try on different accessories, clothing, makeup, gestures and editing programs. In photo-books they undertake a free and amateur version of the typical book offered by professional photographic businesses. At the same time, the photo-book has a more narcissistic and erotic character. Within this category, the daytime with peer group accounts for a relaxed moment, and instead the night photos with peer group work as a self-registration and archive of night as space of adolescents, that leads to excesses and consumption of stimulants and recreational substances. On the other hand, in the photos with peers groups the representation of the

encounter is highlighted, they tend to be more relaxed and have important social (in-person), identity and affective components.

PS adolescents produce and share photos of them. FB allows them to register and publish such experiments, becoming a space of common and shared publication of their amateur photographic sessions. Thus, for them photographs operate as a laboratory exploration of their identity. In the interaction of these identity aspects, there is a double movement: on the one hand, they maintain the ideal normative of masculine and feminine gender and, on the other, test forms of dissent.

In this exploratory research, we have brought evidence that personal images are central to the presentation that adolescents of both genders display to their community of peers. It is for future investigations to deepen gender issues linked to the image, the self-presentation and the construction of physicality, central aspects in the identity of adolescents in PS.

FOOTNOTES

1. This type of photos is called by the global news as 'selfies'. This term is used to refer to the portraits published on social networks like Twitter and Facebook. In particular, with this term the press refers to the self-portraits of famous belonging to the star system.
2. This can be related to that observed in previous research (Basile and Linne, 2012): in many cases, PS teenagers find a low level of satisfaction and usefulness in what they learn at school; in medium class sectors, on the other hand, this level of satisfaction and sense of utility seems to be greater.
3. *Bailantas* in Argentina are nightclubs where they play cumbia mostly. The majority of attendants is youth of popular urban sectors.
4. In Argentina "*previas*" are youth gatherings that tend to be done before going to parties, concerts, bars or nightclubs. The meeting places "*la previa*" tend to be the home of one of the members of the peer group that will then attend to the main event of the night.
5. The term refers to the contents –in certain cases of anonymous source– reproduced fast and massively across platforms of social media, websites or Internet search engines.

REFERENCES

- Ardevol, E. et al. (2003). Etnografía virtualizada: la observación participante y la entrevista semiestructurada en línea [Virtualized Ethnography: participant observation and semi-structured interviews online]. *Athenea digital*, 3, 72-92.
- Bonacci, J. (2011). "Los jóvenes de perfil: una aproximación a las representaciones corporales de adolescentes y jóvenes usuarios de Facebook". Paper presented at Jornadas sobre Jóvenes, in Tucumán, Argentina, October 2011.
- Boyd, D. (2008). Why Youth Love Social Network Sites: The Role of Networked Publics in Teenage Social Life. Buckingham, D. (Ed.), In *Youth, Media and Digital Media*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Castells, M. (2009). *Comunicación y poder [Communication and power]*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial.
- Chalfen, R. (1987). *Snapshots versions of life*. Ohio: University Popular Press.

- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Hine, C. (2000). *Virtual Ethnography*. London: Sage.
- Internet World Stats (2013). Retrieved from www.internetworldstats.com
- Krauskopf, D. (2010). La condición juvenil contemporánea en la construcción identitaria [The contemporanean youth condition and the constitution identity]. *Última Década*, 18(33), 27-42.
- Margulis, M. et al. (1994). *La cultura de la noche [Culture of the night]*. Buenos Aires: Biblos.
- Mendelson, A., & Papacharissi, Z. (2010). Look at us: Collective Narcissism in College Student Facebook PhotoGalleries. In Papacharissi, Z. (Ed.), *The Networked Self: Identity, Community and Culture on Social Network Sites*. Illinois: Routledge.
- Murray, S. (2008). Digital Images, Photo-Sharing, and Our Shifting Notions of Everyday Aesthetics. *Journal of Visual Culture*, 7(2), 147-163.
- Prensky, M. (2001). Digital natives, digital immigrants. *On the Horizon*, 9(5), 1-6.
- Ritzer, G. & Jurgenson, D. (2010). Production, Consumption, Prosumption: The Nature of Capitalism in the age of the digital 'prosumer'. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 10(1), 13-36.
- Scifo, B. (2005). The Domestication of Camera-Phone and MMS Communication. In Nyíri, K. (Ed.) (2005), *A Sense of Place. The Global and the Local in Mobile Communication*. Vienna: Passagen Verlag.
- Urresti, M. (2008). Ciberculturas juveniles: vida cotidiana, subjetividad y pertenencia entre los jóvenes ante el impacto de las nuevas tecnologías de la comunicación y la información [Youth Cibercultures: daily life, subjectivity and belonging among young people under the impact of new technologies of communication and information]. In Urresti, M. (Ed.), *Ciberculturas juveniles [Youth Cibercultures]*. Buenos Aires: La Crujía.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Joaquín Linne, born in Buenos Aires in 1981, holds a degree in Sociology, is a Professor of Sociology and has a Master's Degree in Communication and Culture from the University of Buenos Aires. He has published articles in different journals on issues related to adolescents and technology.

Diego Basile, is a Bachelor in Sociology (UBA), Professor in Sociology and Master in Communication and Culture (UBA). He currently works as a researcher and pedagogical advisor on technologies.