COMMUNICATION & SOCIETY

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Youth empowerment through social networks. Creating participative digital citizenship

Abstract

Ensuring citizen involvement and participation in the development of a social system is not a new phenomenon, nor has it emerged with digital communication. However, social networks and virtual environments are transforming the way in which individuals, especially young people, are called to action. This quantitative research paper analyzes how young people use online and offline tools to publicize and support "2.0 causes". Digital communication can facilitate cooperation and solidarity toward certain social initiatives that require active mobilization. However, the competitive advantage that technology can offer is greatly influenced by numerous variables (empathy, closeness, identification with the cause, etc.). It is essential to become familiar with the desires of young people and to find the best ways to gain their attention in order to help them achieve their goals of social commitment. The results of this research suggest that the factors mobilizing young people when they participate in solidarity movements are purely rational and emotional, with less emphasis being placed on the creativity of the campaign, the organization that promotes the action, or the presence of famous prescribers or influencers. They prefer the essential qualities of social activism in itself.

Keywords
Digital citizenship, digital social communication, mobility, mobilization, education, social networks, Internet.

1. Introduction

The digital world and social networks as main players are providing new social spaces where young people spend much of their time creating and sharing moments, experiences, thoughts, and aspects of life that are reflected in 140 characters, in a photograph, or in a video.

Social networks have provided a world of infinite possibilities for their users: the ability to socialize, to be informed, to contribute socially with positive attitudes of solidarity and empathy, to be trained intellectually, etc. All of this comes without time–space boundaries. In the face of criticism from detractors, young people are increasingly

aware of the potential of online social networks, the boundaries of these tools, and the limits that must be established.

In this context, digital social communication has become a way of actively participating in events that demand citizen collaboration and solidarity. This collaboration was traditionally carried out by collecting signatures at tables. Those signatures signified a certain commitment to a cause; they were a way of saying, "I agree", or a way of expressing a desire for change or support for a given situation.

Digital communication and social networks in particular, have made it possible to move from the analog commitment to the so-called "2.0 Causes". A multitude of events that demand digital citizen involvement in these causes occur every day through networks. Young people, who are major users of these relationship spaces, are also the centre of attention to whom messages are directed in search of solidarity and empathy with situations that demand citizen participation. As pointed out by Ortega (2014), young people today are not – as some have labeled them – frivolous and lazy. Rather, they are the inventors of the collaborative economy, leading players in the revolutions that are demanding democracy in half the world.

But social movements not only call for uprisings in countries, as happened with the so-called "Arab spring". The role of social networks has also been present in situations like the 15M political activist movement in Spain, or the *Occupy Wall Street* protest against global financial corporations. There are also day to day life situations that the user perceives as being geographically or socially close to their own lives, and these situations require a collective effort from individuals to achieve the expected result.

These are 2.0 causes. They are situations that require citizen participation and the use of social networks to obtain their involvement. These causes cover a wide range of options, which express individual solidarity across the digital world, ranging from stopping a family eviction to obtaining a surgery in another country for a sick child, or simply supporting environmental movements such as avoiding climate change.

2. Social movements. From Clickactivism to commitment

In most cases, these situations are not new, and involvement or protest by social groups is also probably not new. The innovation lies in how to obtain the involvement of young people and the way in which they express themselves as involved digital citizens in "2.0 Causes". These are situations in which each individual becomes a spokesperson for both activism and social networks as a means of getting their message heard to thousands of people around the world.

Participation in collective social actions can be considered a multidimensional phenomenon, while the motives that lead to involvement in one cause or another vary. A social movement can be defined as a voluntary, coordinated, collective action, organized around a cause or demand, which identifies an adversary to confront and a situation that a person wants to change (Neveu, 2002 quoted in Asún & Zúñiga, 2013). Although some authors argue that a social movement does not always want to change a situation but sometimes only seeks to express discomfort (Contreras-Ibáñez et al, 2005 cited in Asún & Zúñiga, 2013), it should be added that it is also a matter of expressing a feeling of solidarity with the cause, as this feeling is what impels citizens to decide whether or not to mobilize. More than discomfort, it is the empathy with the situation, especially "with the close proximity to the experiences we live with and how these experiences affect us [...] It is more likely that when the need is close to us, we see more clearly how to attempt to solve the problem" (Porto, 2015: 40).

Before the existence of social networks and the possibility of communication offered by the digital world, the need to involve the individual in collective social actions that helped

achieve common solidarity goals had already been studied. The German sociologist Lorenz von Stein was the first to introduce the term "social movement" into academic discourse in the 1950s (Tilly, 2004). Although the number of authors who have approached the concept (Tarrow, 1994; Goodwin & Jasper, 2003; Tilly, 2004; Lucas, 2014) has been significant since then, considering their approximations and their meanings (critical analyses and results), we can establish four key concepts in a possible current definition of social movement: social media, change, cooperation, as well as online and/or offline mobilization. Therefore, the situation is such that social media (online social networks and instant messaging) seeks the necessary collaboration of individuals to join forces in order to protest as a group for the purpose of trying to change or improve a given situation, and as a consequence these social media achieve online and/or offline mobilization from part of the population.

The scientific literature seems to have placed the emphasis on the motives that impel a group of people to mobilize. For Lopes (2014), social movements are not generated by a single variable. Rather, they are produced by a set of variables that create a synergistic effect. For this author, motivation for mobilization is as important as the way in which a citizens group is organized, and social media has contributed to the change in the way this is done. Social networks have given voice to individuals who otherwise would have been difficult to hear. But it also allows citizens to be connected and organized for a very low cost. In her study, she analyzes how the social media presents itself as an alternative to traditional forms of recruitment for mobilization and collective action.

Recent studies have attempted to establish a relationship between social media and citizen activism (Caers et al., 2013; Guo & Saxton, 2014; Thorson et al., 2013; Wojcieszaky Smith, 2014 and Sanchez Duarte, 2016). For Ilten (2015), it seems clear that social movements and citizen involvement with causes have changed along with the development of information and communication technologies. However, according to this author, these changes have taken place in organizations that already exist, due to the fact that the new technologies have made it possible for these institutions to contact citizens more effectively, an example being through the use of online platforms, and change has been less evident in the new social activism organizations that have emerged.

In the early days of Internet, organizations that had traditionally called for social mobilization used e-mail lists or *petitioning websites.* With the arrival of Facebook and Twitter, which allow for more dynamic activism, it seems that the borders of what constitutes activism are increasingly uncertain. Concepts such as *clickactivism* or *slacktivism*[1] have emerged from social networks and make users feel that they are active citizens in social situations that demand their participation (Ilten, 2015; Rotman et al., 2011: 3) proposes the idea of Halupka (2014), who considers that the most accurate approach to the concept of *clickactivism* is to define it as "a low-cost, low-risk social media activity used for the purpose of disseminating knowledge, producing change, or allowing a person involved in the activity to obtain satisfaction".

Both concepts – *clickactivism* and *slacktivism*- have been harshly criticized to the extent that they are online responses of citizens via tweets, such as "I like it", or signatures on petitions that allow them to feel good about themselves but that seem to have little real effect (Moore, 2011).

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[1] The concept of slacktivism comes from the union of two words: slacker (lazy, idle) and activism, and is defined as the act of showing support for a social cause without a great effort on the part of the individual. It is related to actions such as signing online petitions, joining a group related to social mobilization through social networks, or even modifying a profile in networks to adhere to a cause. The critical voices of this form of digital activism consider that it only benefits the ego of the people, as it does not produce any tangible effect in terms of promoting a cause. (Consulted in: https://www.techopedia.com/definition/28252/ Slacktivism).

The approach to the concept is usually accompanied by a certain doubt about its real effectiveness in achieving the social objective.

In this sense, the approach of Halupka (2014) to clickactivism is interesting, as he does not consider it an expression of continued social commitment on the part of an individual. In fact, he describes it as a collection of specific actions by an individual through the digital world, but does not predict a long-term commitment by the person. They are isolated behaviours exempt from lengthy dedication.

Among the critics, some authors assert that individuals click on the mouse as an exercise in moral justification free from the need to become engaged or make a commitment (Lee & Hsieh, 2013). Beyond "I like it" in Facebook, these individuals apparently do not demonstrate dedication to causes or social movements, although studies such as the one conducted by the University of Georgetown in the United States reveal that they are more active than one might think. The actions of these individuals in the digital world complement – but do not replace - situations related to, for example, volunteerism or making donations. Thus, this same study shows that these individuals are twice as likely to participate as volunteers, four times as likely to recruit others to sign a petition for a social cause, and have the same probability as individuals who are not part of this group of "slacktivists" to make a donation to a cause (Dixon, 2011).

3. Method

The data were collected by the authors under the PROVULDIG program, co-financed by the Autonomous Region of Madrid and the European Social Fund (Ref: S2015/HUM-3434).

In the context of digital social communication, young people play an important role in this scenario to the extent that they are considered the most active members in digital social networks at the moment. Therefore, the overall objective of this research is to establish what elements or circumstances determine youth mobilization when faced with certain "2.0 Causes", which in the digital world demand active involvement by this group. In this context, the specific objectives of this research are the following: first, to determine the degree of involvement of young people with social causes and the role of digital communication in this context; second, to establish the variables that have a greater impact on online or offline mobilization of young people; and finally, to observe the extent to which social networks serve to channel young peoples' sensitivity to social causes, or to see whether or not this is expressed through other means as well.

The starting hypothesis of this research is based on the fact that young people use these types of digital tools as a regular component of their communication, and that the social commitment of these young people, if it exists, is channeled both offline as well as online, depending on the cause to be defended.

In order to substantiate the proposed objectives and hypotheses, the triangulation methodology was used so that qualitative techniques - discussion groups - and quantitative research techniques - surveys - were combined in order to allow for a more complete view of the object of study. On one hand, the discussion group provided a more accurate and subsequently deeper understanding of the comments of young people related to practices, relationships and social bonds established in *online* social networks. The discussion group was conducted with young people between the ages of 18 and 24 who were university students of both genders from urban areas.

The discussion group activity took place in the spring of 2016. We describe the selected target group as "young users of online social networks". The group was comprised of nine young people between 18 and 24 years of age who are daily users of more than two online social networks, and who use the networks through different types of devices. The segmentation variables used in the selection of the young people used for the study, in

addition to age, were the following: gender, education level (university studies), urban area (Madrid), and active participation in networks (digital leader, prosumer, social mobilizer, and participant in events and collective social actions). The discussion group was carried out at Rey Juan Carlos University and moderated by a specialist in this research technique. Furthermore, the presence of the moderator increased the reliability of the results obtained.

Regarding the survey, once the youth comments were obtained, an online questionnaire was launched. The Internet survey had specific characteristics, such as agility in information collection, accessibility, and low cost (Díaz de Rada, 2012), which fit very well with the research carried out. This data collection technique had a reduced number of questions in order to ensure its completion. The questionnaire, created by the research group, attempted to combine closed-ended questions with dichotomous, Likert-type multiple-choice questions. In total, 11 questions were considered. The questionnaire delved into the characteristics of online social mobilization of young people and their opinions related to it.

The questionnaire was published online in the months of June and October of 2016 through social networks (*Facebook, Twitter and Linkedin*) and by e-mail. "*Survey Monkey*" was used to create the questionnaire, collect survey responses, and perform the first statistical analysis of results. Control questions were introduced to delimit the desired sample and the unfinished questionnaires were discarded. Although the response rate was 387, the final valid sample of the study consisted of 355 young people, aged 18 to 26, selected using a simple random probability sample, with a confidence interval of 95% and p=q= 50%. It was a probabilistic sample, simple-random and stratified, in which all subjects had the same probability of being selected according to age (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). As these same authors point out, when working with quantitatively smaller samples, data must be treated as a trend of social interest, with full validity and reliability.

4. Analysis and results

When analyzing the social mobilization of young people in social networks, it must be taken into account that these platforms are a means of interaction. They are not just information sources. They are different from other media because of the possibility of participation and active involvement by their users. Young people convert sharing what they do at every moment into a lifestyle, a way of communicating and staying in touch with the people who care about them. Whatever they experience in life, they share, and abundantly as well. For these digital natives, sharing and participating in the digital world is nearly a philosophy of life (García & Fernández, 2016).

In this context, the first query in the questionnaire tried to obtain knowledge about the value and relevance young people place on the use of social networks. In this sense, the young people were asked to classify, in order of importance, five activities that defined their use of digital communication. The results obtained seem to confirm that the most relevant activity is precisely that of communicating and staying in touch with family and friends, followed by being informed about current social or political events, uses involving training or education, activism, and social commitment. Lastly, young people indicated that they used social networks as a means of creating content (videos, blogs, etc.), or for entertainment. These various ways of using networks were mentioned in the discussion groups: "It's a fast way to get information about the things you're interested in" (Male, 21 years) or "Well, I think social networking is a very easy way to reach many people in different areas" (Female, 22 years).

When asked about their social commitment and their relationship to networks, most participants identified themselves as socially-involved people. 44.9% of young people surveyed considered themselves to be regularly committed to social causes, and even more

interesting, 36.6% believe that networks allow them to invite others to participate in solidarity activities. That is to say, one of every three young people views social networks as a means of inviting others to participate in solidarity movements. 28.4% of young people do not identify themselves as being committed to social causes, but nevertheless, they consider that networks allow them to participate in these events online. Likewise, 20.2% say that even though they do not consider themselves people who are usually committed to solidarity movements, the networks allow them to participate at times in offline social mobilization events. Therefore, it seems that digital communication encourages young people to engage in activism in a virtual context more than in mobilizations in the physical world, due to the fact that they consider digital communication a truly dynamic alternative that can be used to make changes in society (Porto & Fernandez, 2016).

Figure 1. The identification of young people with their social commitment, and in relation to their use of social networks.
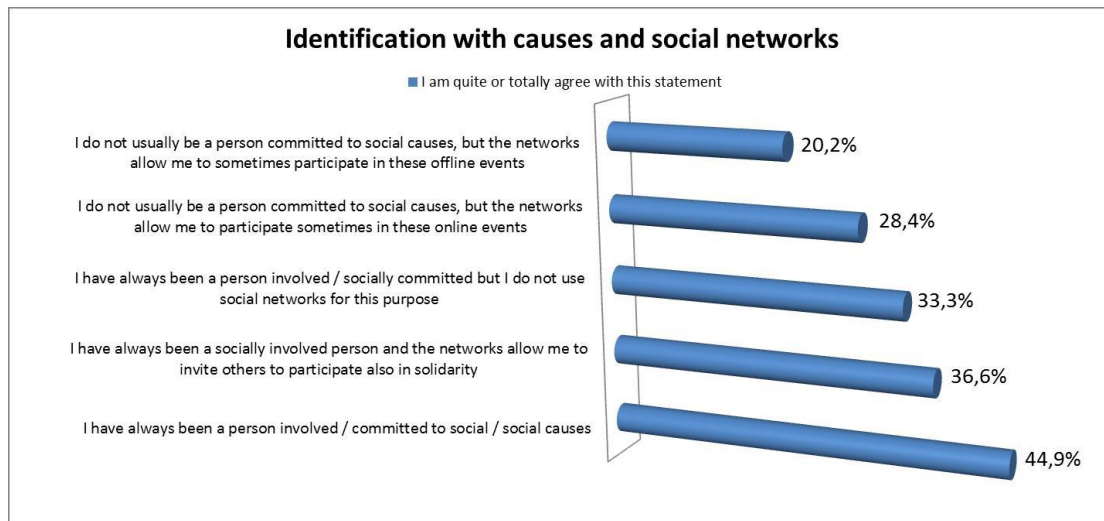
However, regardless of how mobilization is channeled, the discourse of young people shows that one of the reasons for this mobilization lies in the empathy and personal identification with the cause that requires solidarity, support and participation. One must also add to this argument the feeling of closeness of the person with the problem or event that is in need of their participation, as well as their personal values regarding which issues are of interest and a priority for them when deciding whether or not to become involved. "Empathy. Empathy with the problem. Empathy, that is, seeing something about the person that touches you, or seeing what is happening to him or her" (Male, 18 years), "You look for what interests you" (Male, 22 years), "Like he said, the thing that's closest to you, that you have more affection for" (Male, 21 years). Being personally affected by a problem and being able to denounce it and "make the entire society aware of it" would represent, in this sense, the most clear expression of motivation for participation based on the perception of closeness to the problem: "I believe that if I see something strange, and that has actually has happened to me, then I should condemn it strongly if I can, and at least make society aware of it. I see this as very positive" (Female, 20 years).

Another of the issues raised was focused on understanding the commitment of young people to political and social causes, both global and local. This last differentiation –global or local– was taken into account as a result of the conclusions of the study carried out by García, del Hoyo and Fernández (2014), which showed that young peoples' activism is

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related to the causes they consider close to them. Therefore, when faced with a series of ten different events and assumptions, the participants in the survey had to answer each of them by saying whether or not they: (1) "would participate by going to an offline mobilization, (2) would become involved by giving a *click* on social networks, 3) would make a monetary donation, (4) would not participate".

Regarding participation in offline mobilizations, what stands out is that 66.1% of the young people indicated they would go to a demonstration in "defense of Public University Education"; 58.7% would actively participate in a "campaign against political corruption", and 47.6% would become personally involved in a "campaign to defend social services in their locality or neighborhood". It seems that when issues are close to young people or directly affect them, these issues become a motive for mobilization outside the networks. In fact, with regard to defending public university education, only 22% of the young respondents said that their participation would be exclusively online, which reflects the fact that when a situation is important to them (the sample is made up of university students), and it worries them, they realize that the activism must be face-to-face.

Previous participation in online social networks was, for some people, a first step toward considering "doing something more", and often compelled them to take part in other types of participative activities and offline volunteer endeavors that went beyond a simple click on "*I like it*", and to attain a higher degree of social commitment: "It's true that it's very easy to say '*I like it*' on a Facebook page. Personally, it happened to me when I was 21 years old, maybe 20, when I started to say, 'hey look', I really want to do something more than what I am able to do in my city or on my Facebook profile ... / ..." (Female, 23 years).

Global events, which are more distant, generate lower percentages of face-to-face participation, yet are strongly supported by social networks, with action against climate change (41.3%) and the campaign against the Syrian War (39.7%) being the two events that have prompted the most participation. These are followed by the campaign to discover a vaccine against the Ebola virus (36.5%) and activism against the death penalty in the world (33.9%). In the opinion of young people, these situations prompt them to avoid considering a higher level of participation, such as offline support in the same cause, due to the fact that the perceived costs of "physical" or face-to-face involvement in terms of time, dedication, effort, or level of commitment required, are believed to be too high: "Clicking on '*I like it*' is a lot easier" (Male, 21 years).

After offline mobilization and activism in social networks, donations come in third place with an average of 23.2% participation. Financial support, which may be online or offline, generates greater interest in cases specifically linked to a lack of resources, such as campaigns against hunger in the world (59.3%) or poverty in Spain (55.6%), followed by possible action in support of a neighbor with a rare disease (46%). The initiatives that prompt the least monetary support are those against political corruption (0.5%) and those in favor of public universities (2.1%).

As explained above, young people also had the option of responding "I would not participate" in any of the events that were suggested to them. At first, only 13.4% of the respondents marked that option, which means that at least 86% of young people would become involved somehow in the selected proposals in the questionnaire. In this context, actions against the death penalty in the world (35.4%) or against climate change (18.5%) were the causes that generated the least amount of interest, and in which a higher percentage of young people stated that they would not participate. The arguments that appear among young people when critically analyzing the effectiveness of online activist campaigns are those related to the persistence of the organizations that promote them and the repetition of the themes that are usually the focus of these types of campaigns. At times the insistence of organizations in launching campaigns to encourage participation is considered excessive: "It seems like it has stopped for the most part, because before there was far too much of it.

All the pictures that say *'Help*! For me, I just can't take any more in. And in the end you feel like they should stop doing so much of that because it leads nowhere" (Male, 21 years); "There's so much information out there that you don't have time to see it all" (Female, 20 years); "You reach a point where you get so much information, so many requests, and so much of everything, that you end up saying, that's enough." (Female, 19 years).

For the purpose of knowing their true commitment, young people were asked in the survey about social mobilization actions in which they themselves had participated. Rates of participation were high. 64% stated that they had signed an online petition, this being the most common action, followed by "I click on 'I like it' or I frequently share information about social causes" (62%). In third place was offline mobilization, as 44% of young people surveyed claimed to have attended a demonstration.

Thus, it seems initially that online mobilization surpasses the offline activity in civic actions by young people. However, a certain commitment that goes beyond action can be observed in virtual environments, as 39% stated that they had made a monetary donation to an NGO, and 33% said they had volunteered in a campaign. Moreover, 31% said that after the attacks in Paris they put some distinctive French elements in their profile. That was followed by another online action in which 10% reported participating in the act of throwing a bucket of ice water over themselves, recording it, and uploading the video to Internet in support of ALS research (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis). 2% stated that they had carried out other types of solidarity actions, but 14% said they had not participated in any actions recently.

Although the majority of the participants consider themselves to be aware of social movements and claim they do not need social networks to channel their commitment (43%), another 30% believe that they are also people who have always empathized with social causes yet recognize that the networks have helped them to channel these values effectively. In the same positive sense, 20% of the respondents of this group acknowledged that they were not concerned about social issues before, but believe that social networks have helped them to become aware of these causes and to participate. Only 7% did not feel concerned about social causes, and in this regard, the networks have not brought anything new to them. Thus, the results show that 50% agree that these platforms play a positive role because they serve to promote commitment that did not exist before, and they have also assisted in channeling the previous commitments of participants.

However, depending on the data and discourse of young people, a double typology of potential online participants can be identified: a) Non-committed individuals whose participatory actions are considered to begin and end with a click on 'I like it': "There are people who are interested or like to get involved and sign their names, but do not help in other ways"; b) Truly involved individuals whose actions are characterized by "the fight", participation in "events", or attending demonstrations, when appropriate, and who "feel good" about these actions: "I prefer not to do anything, but then I start to see the situation differently and realize I want to get involved in a ...'real' way by going to a place and really doing something, not just giving fifty signatures to fifty events when I don't know where they will end up. It all depends on what each person wants." (Male, 22 years).

Figure 2. Self-reflection of young people regarding their social commitment and use of social networks.
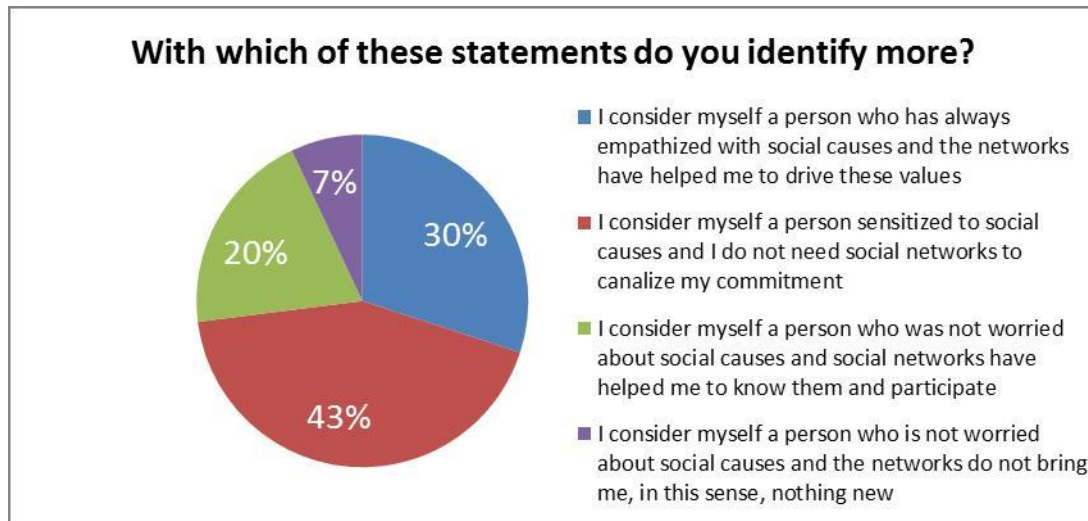
Finally, young people were asked what factors mobilised them most when it came to taking sides in a social campaign. 50% indicated that it was "the cause itself; the reality of the data behind the issue", or in other words, purely rational aspects. Further down on the survey, the emotional aspects of the cause were pointed out, with a 23% response rate, and the ease of participation in the movement was selected by 11%. Other reasons that were indicated received very low percentages of support: the creativity of the campaign (3%), participation of friends (2%), or the importance of the Non Governmental Organization behind the campaign (2%). Only 1% mentioned that a recognized prescriber or influencer prompted them to action.

Figure 3. Motivational factors for young people when it comes to participating in a social mobilization campaign.
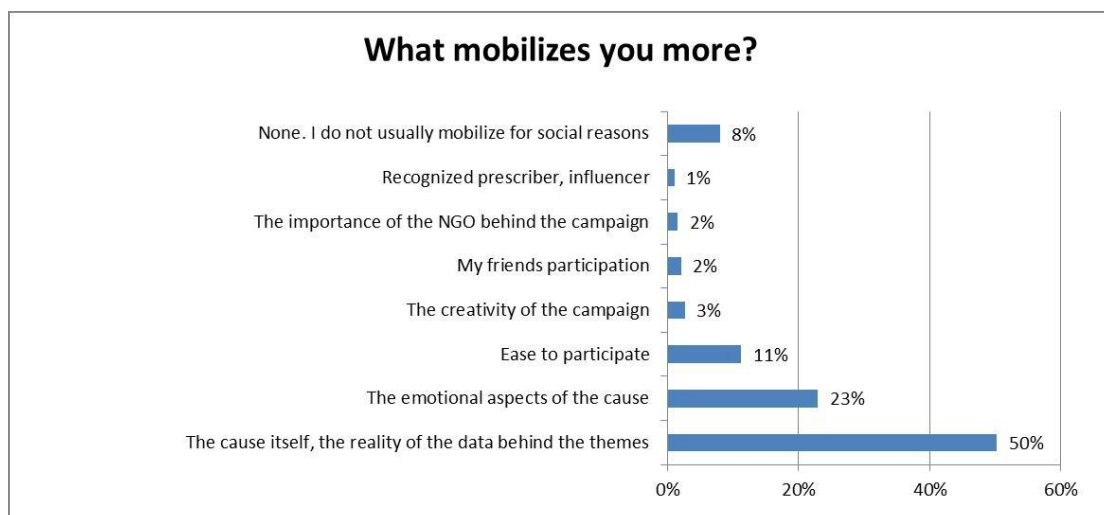
5. Conclusions

Although in social networks young people place a higher priority on aspects such as peer communication and information gathering rather than on commitment and social

mobilization, it is also true that motivation generated by social causes seems to carry considerable weight compared to mere entertainment, which is initially perceived to be the main use of social networks.

The present study demonstrates that networks allow young people to channel and extend their social commitment to others. Due to the results obtained, it can be affirmed that approximately 50% of youth believe that networks play a positive role in their lives, insofar as these networks have allowed them to develop a commitment that did not exist before, or to channel previous civic concerns. In fact, a third of the young people see in social networks a means of calling others to participate in solidarity causes.

Although some authors point out that beyond a "click" on social networks young people do not show a commitment to causes or social movements, this research points out that we are facing the coexistence of diverse modes of active social participation. Despite the ease of supporting certain causes using social networks, young people are especially interested in being mobilized offline in matters that are truly compelling to them, that worry them, and that affect them directly or in a close way. The results indicate that when issues are close to young people or affect them directly, these matters provide strong motivation for mobilization outside social networks, whereas global events, further away, generate a higher percentage of participation, but only in the networks.

Finally, it is interesting to note that the most rational aspects that are linked to the cause itself are the factors that are best at convincing young people and gaining their participation. It seems that the very essence of social campaigns and the emotional aspects linked to them are the most determining elements in this mobilization, ahead of other factors such as the creativity of the actions, the NGO that drives the initiative, or the presence of famous prescribers or influencers.

For young people, transparency and authenticity are essential elements of a society, and these, together with the immediacy and interactivity that are hallmarks of social networks, create an equation of paramount importance. For these *millennials,* the issue is not only having a permanent connection, which is not just a novelty but a necessity that allows them to interact in any social, political and family setting. What is truly important to them is that principles, commitments, etc., does not mean simply making comments on social networks, but should be manifested in actions as well. In this sense, getting to know young people in a deeper way, along with their concerns and expectations, is indispensable for the purpose of aligning education with citizenship, and for placing a value on the real possibilities of social and civic participation that will allow our society to foster a new digital social communication that is genuine and truly valuable for all citizens.

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