



# Learning on Social Media: Vernacular Literacy and Academic Literacy in the Digital Production of School Students

## Aprendizaje en las redes sociales: literacidades vernaculares y académicas en la producción digital de jóvenes escolares

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### Abstract

Social media play a leading role in the daily lives of young people, especially such media where images are central. There has been a significant increase in the production and circulation of multimodal digital texts in current times. This article addresses the potential and complexity of digital production on Instagram from the perspective of learning and literacies. Based on ethnographic research in a public secondary school in Santiago, Chile, this paper presents the digital practices of eight young people. The materials analyzed come from interviews with young people, teachers, and mothers, in situ and digital ethnographic observations, and visual pieces produced by young people. The findings show different learning, the level of complexity of which is associated with the intensity of text production, and the orientation and motivation. Vernacular literacies are related to practical knowledge, where English, hashtags, images, and humor are significant in digital production. The findings also show some cases of production that transcend personal use with an expressive function, guided by strategic orientations of communication, politics, and education. For the latter, the interaction of academic and vernacular literacies is crucial. Finally, the paper identifies certain gaps in digital literacy, where the school could contribute.

**Keywords:** digital production; social media; learning; vernacular literacy; academic literacy

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## Resumen

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Las redes sociales juegan un rol protagónico en la vida cotidiana juvenil, en especial aquellas donde la imagen es central. La producción y circulación de textos digitales multimodales ha aumentado significativamente. Este artículo aborda las potencialidades y complejidades de la producción digital en Instagram desde los aprendizajes y las literacidades. A partir de una investigación etnográfica en un liceo público de Santiago de Chile, se presenta el estudio de las prácticas digitales de ocho jóvenes. Los materiales analizados provienen de entrevistas con jóvenes, docentes y madres, observaciones etnográficas in situ y digitales, y piezas visuales producidas por los jóvenes. Los resultados muestran distintos aprendizajes, cuyo nivel de complejidad se asocia a la intensidad de la producción de textos y la orientación y motivación. Las literacidades vernaculares dan cuenta de un saber práctico donde el inglés, el *hashtag*, la imagen y el humor son significativos en la producción digital. Los hallazgos también muestran casos de producción que trascienden el uso personal con función expresiva, guiados por orientaciones estratégicas de comunicación, política y educación. Esto, gracias a la interacción de literacidades académicas y vernaculares. Se concluye con la identificación de vacíos en la alfabetización digital donde la escuela podría aportar.

**Palabras clave:** producción digital, redes sociales, aprendizaje, literacidad vernacular, literacidad académica

Our daily lives are mediated by digital technologies, a situation that has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Health control and social restriction measures have intensified the use and dependence on social media for people to remain connected to work, studies, and social life in general. This global phenomenon has led to an increase in the use of platforms that rely on images and video (Kemp, 2020; Shum, 2020). It could be argued that we are experiencing the radicalization of the cultural transformations that began more than a decade ago, particularly in our communication and learning practices.

The digitalization and massification of social media as participatory platforms has gone hand in hand with vernacular literacy practices that have transcended local and private spaces for the first time, converting them into essential knowledge and ways of doing things in order to participate in society (Barton, 2010; Barton & Lee, 2012). These reading and writing practices are sustained by multimodality, with images taking on a central role as a trigger of the senses (Jurgenson, 2019; van Dijck, 2008; Valdivia, 2021), hence the power of visuality for the younger generations. The digital vernacular literacies that are part of young people's daily lives tend to contrast with those of the school. However, as I intend to show in this paper, the two forms interact, sometimes in a complementary manner, in the digital practices of schoolchildren.

### Social media in young people's practices of digital production: the case of Instagram

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For a large part of the younger generations, experience associated with the internet is shaped by their practices on social media (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2021). The most widely used applications share certain characteristics: the centrality of images, ease of use, and tools for interaction and rapid content production. Instagram is one of

the most popular of these networks and young people value it for its appeal and simple resources for self-expression and self-documentation (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). This social network has contributed to the massification of production of homemade visual and audiovisual content that does not require any specialized technological resources. It is possible to record, edit, and share content through the network at the same time.

High levels of production of content on image-centered digital platforms, such as Instagram, requires mastery of visual and multimodal languages and various kinds of communication skills: production logics and content curation, audience shaping (Barton, 2018; Buckingham, 2006; Mills, Stornaiuolo, Smith, & Pandya, 2018; Valdivia, 2021), and strategies for creating affinity spaces (Gee & Hayes, 2011). All of these are skills that are based on ongoing learning processes.

### **Learning, Literacy, and Digital Literacy**

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Learning involves changes based on the acquisition, production, and appropriation of knowledge and cultural tools (Vigotsky, 1978). From this sociocultural perspective, while language brings life to the human experience by shaping meaning and significance, learning is what allows us to be and exist in society. We learn to live throughout our human experience and going beyond educational institutions. The term learning lives (Sefton-Green & Erstad, 2017; Erstad, Gilje, Sefton-Green, & Arnseth, 2018) is interesting, as it carries a notion of a constant, open-ended, and multi-situated process. We learn to participate in different social spaces, developing skills and promoting changes in those spaces, which has implications for our personal and social lives.

Learning from this perspective is a cultural practice (Lave, 1996; Lave & Wegner 1991; Rogoff, 2003) characterized by systematic and recurrent action, an orientation towards human needs, and a normativity that facilitates the stability of actions (Postill, 2010). This involves a series of routinized activities that include actions, objects, and uses (the dimension of doing); a set of practical knowledge and meanings associated with what is being learned and about learning itself (the dimensions of know-how and meaning) and, ultimately, learning as practice has certain orientations and motivations (the dimension of what for) (Valdivia, Bossi, Cabalin, & Pinto, 2019).

If all practice involves shaping sense and meaning in relation to what one does, the mastery of the languages that mediate the practice is essential. This is where literacy becomes relevant. Following the contributions of the *New Literacy Studies*, mastery of reading and writing is not only associated with the development and acquisition of a specific skill, but of multiple literacies resulting from participation in various scenarios and social institutions (Gee, 2012). The term literacy emphasizes the social dimension of the practices of reading and writing and highlights the situated value of the skills that develop from any social experience mediated by texts (Cassany, 2016; Zavala, 2002). Recognizing diverse literacies allows us to distance ourselves from the legitimization of a single way of participating appropriately, based on written literacy. This also makes it possible to examine the political and ideological dimension of literacies (Hernández, 2019), as it addresses the links, sometimes of complementarity, sometimes of conflict, between literacies and their implications in social life.

Literacies as social practices reveal common patterns of the use of reading and writing in particular spheres and activities in which we deploy our cultural knowledge with various motivations. Specific literacies are traditionally assumed for different spheres of participation such as school, family, and work. Nowadays, the reality seems to be more fluid, as we see how diverse literacies present in the same sphere and the boundaries between spheres have become blurred (Barton 2010; Barton & Lee 2013; Gee & Hayes, 2011).

## Vernacular literacies and literacy in the digital world

Vernacular literacies are all informal practices of reading and writing that have no obvious rules or procedures, are totally voluntary, and are oriented by personal aims. As a consequence, the associated learning is practical and informal (Barton & Papen, 2010). These types of practices have traditionally been linked to oral expression and written texts present in private spaces and shared locally.

If an important part of everyday life that occurs in digital spaces is centered on leisure and interaction (Valdivia, 2021), the reading and writing practices that occur in those spaces can be considered vernacular. However, these literacies have particularities that differentiate them from traditional practices: mass circulation with potential global reach, the hybridization of genres, and multimodality with a focus on the image (Barton & Lee, 2012).

Digital literacies are closely linked to reading and writing practices that take place in the media or in relation to them (Buckingham, 2006; Livingstone, 2004). In addition to characterizing everyday practices, the literature in this area points to a series of skills and knowledge necessary to participate in digital spheres. It is here where it is pertinent to introduce the notion of digital literacy, since it implies the definition of what skills and knowledge are most appropriate for participating in these spheres, guiding their development. As Montes and López (2017) argue with regard to the discussion on disciplinary language, while literacy covers the skills to participate in semiotic social practices, it specifically accounts for intentional processes of development of the reading and writing skills that enable adequate participation.

Buckingham (2006) proposes four dimensions to organize the skills and knowledge that ensure optimal participation in the media/digital space: representation, which involves the ability to interpret and produce certain selections of reality; languages, which involves the mastery of multimodality, rhetorical, and aesthetic forms and the textual construction of interactive communication; audience, in terms of recognizing the different positions assumed in participation; and, finally, the dimension of production, which, in addition to entailing the technical skills for the creation and circulation of texts, also involves understanding the social, economic, ideological, and ethical implications in production. Examples of the latter are the dilemmas posed today by fake news, the algorithms that determine the content we access, the limits of privacy, and *datafication* (Livingstone, Stoilova, & Nandagiri, 2019; Pangrazio & Selwyn, 2019).

In the discussion on literacy and digital literacy, it is therefore essential to address the ethical, economic, and ideological aspects of our digital practices, in addition to the technical and communicative dimensions (Buckingham, 2019; Gee & Hayes, 2011; Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 2018).

## Academic and disciplinary literacy

School, university, and work have traditionally been the spheres associated with the literacy practices with the greatest legitimacy. Academic language, school language, and advanced literacy are all names by which the languages present in school are known and which are characterized by a formal register that is predominantly verbal. Their use is intended to promote the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge and the development of cognitive and social skills, and conceptual understanding (Snow & Uccelli, 2009). Unlike vernacular literacies, the practices associated with school language involve pedagogical knowledge for the design and production of activities that drive learning processes.

Montes and López (2017) propose a distinction between disciplinary literacy and academic literacy, insofar as the former refers to highly specialized and domain-specific reading and writing practices. Academic literacies, on the other hand, are more general practices associated with formal spheres of teaching, learning, production, and

application of knowledge. The latter involve the development of skills that allow impartial positioning and the production of an authoritative voice, the use of a specific vocabulary and discursive genres, and the deployment of argumentative reasoning strategies (Snow & Uccelli, 2009).

As I have stated, digital practices could drive crossovers between spheres of participation and the concurrence of vernacular and academic literacies. Based on findings from an ethnographic investigation conducted with students at a public secondary school in Santiago, Chile, in this paper I analyze and discuss the learning present in digital production on Instagram and the ways in which literacies interact to promote the participation of young people. The questions that guide this paper are: What are the characteristics of the learning associated with the digital vernacular literacies of Chilean secondary school students? What are the characteristics of the relationship between vernacular and academic literacies in this learning?

## Method

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The ethnographic research examined learning and aesthetics associated with the digital practices of schoolchildren based on their routines in four scenarios of participation: school, home, digital sphere, and peer groups. These scenarios were identified in accordance with the proposal of Livingstone and Sefton-Green (2016) and they were intended to organize the fieldwork and look at their relationships based on the daily lives of the young people. In methodological terms, I followed the contributions of educational ethnography (Anderson Levitt, 2006) and digital ethnography (Pink, Horst, Postill, Hjorth, Lewis, & Tacchi, 2016).

In this paper, I focus on learning as an object of study and on eight cases of young participants with various levels of digital production on Instagram. The analysis centers on the routines implemented in the digital sphere and at school, as they are the most relevant to the problem addressed here.

Access to the group of young people was gained through the secondary school, an educational community with which I have conducted various research and collaboration projects since 2013. The municipal school is located in a middle-class community in the center of Santiago de Chile and it has an average population of 1,400 students, who come from different districts of the capital.

The fieldwork was carried out between 2018 and 2019 and entailed various research strategies and techniques. First, I conducted two periods of on-site ethnographic observation. The first was done between April and August 2018, and involved following each young person in their daily routines at school, at home, and in their peer group. The second period took place in April 2019 and was exclusively situated in the high school. Secondly, during the 18 months of fieldwork, digital observation was carried out of the social media of the young participants and the Instagram accounts of students, organizations, and teachers at the secondary school. In-depth interviews were also conducted with each young person (two sessions), in addition to ethnographic interviews with the teachers and mothers of the young people. Each participant was also asked to select Instagram posts for subsequent analysis.

Various different materials were also analyzed: the transcripts of 30 interviews, digital visual pieces, and ethnographic reports based on the field notes. The reports were prepared based on three units of study: the young people, school, and Instagram. The strategy of analysis for the first two units combined ethnographic analysis with grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 2002), which made it possible to inferentially configure the routines in the various scenarios and categorize and conceptualize the meanings, knowledge, and orientations regarding learning and literacies. In the case of the study unit associated with Instagram, the analytical strategy combined categorical and dialogical analysis to reveal the positions and configuration of audiences (Valdivia, 2017). The software program NVivo 12 was used to organize and categorize of all the information.

The research ensured ethical treatment for all of the participants, both young people and adults, through informed consent and assent. Anonymity was ensured, so all the names of the young people have been changed, and explicit authorization was obtained from each of them to cite the selected digital content.

## Cases

The selection of the eight cases was intended to illustrate the diversity of the digital production practices that were observed. For purposes of characterization, I have organized the young people into three groups according to the intensity of their production.

Table 1  
*Participating cases and level of digital production*

Level of production	Cases		
		Age	Grade
Occasional production	Esteban	15	10th
	Ramiro	17	12th
Active production	Andre	15	10th
	Isabel	17	12th
	Claudia	17	12th
	Gustavo	17	12th
Advanced production	Ana	18	11th
	Mario	15	10th

*Source: Prepared by the author.*

Esteban and Ramiro are young people with occasional digital production on Instagram; neither photography nor publishing posts are frequent activities in their routine. They do follow the profiles of friends, artists, political organizations, alternative media, memes, and their courses.

Andre, Isabel, Claudia, and Gustavo are the most active users on Instagram. In addition to the activities observed in the previous group, these young people publish constant stories and posts about their daily lives and memes. Two of them, Isabel and Claudia, have more than one profile on Instagram; a personal one and a secondary account devoted to their hobbies: Justin Bieber and Doramas<sup>1</sup>. Gustavo, meanwhile, is an active Instagram user. He posts content on his account documenting his daily life with friends and reposts content from the accounts of alternative media and political organizations, such as DGS, the feminist student organization in which he participates.

Ana and Mario are the cases of advanced production. Both have more than one profile on Instagram and each of them has clearly differentiated curatorship. In their production, we can observe digital communication and aesthetic criteria that underpin their curatorship. The non-personal profiles are considered professional: one is dedicated to landscape photography, in the case of Mario, and the other is the digital platform of DGS, where Ana is responsible for digital production and management.

1. Japanese television dramas.

## Results

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### Young people's learning on Instagram

The daily lives of young people are spent with a cell phone at hand, like the majority of people. Chatting on WhatsApp, checking Instagram, and listening to music on Spotify or YouTube are all routine and automated actions which they only halt for certain classes or when they have no internet connection. At home, their main activity is consumption of visual and audiovisual content. Online games are another favorite activity during leisure time at home. Observation of their routines quickly showed that the spheres of participation—home, school, peer groups, and the digital environment—coexist with blurred boundaries. Participation in the latter sphere has enabled and enhanced such crossovers.

The production and publication of content for these young people mainly takes place via the Instagram platform, and the frequency and intensity of this activity depends on the type of user profiles described in the previous section. The diversity and complexity of the activities, and the degree of knowledge and reflexivity about digital practice varies, as does the associated learning.

Esteban and Ramiro use Instagram to follow other people's content. Both of them produce and post content infrequently, and when they do so it is to document something special or which they like. These posts generally involve situations from their daily lives that are recorded in a "very random" manner.

I thought 'ah it's ages since I posted something' and I had an urge to post something. It's not like ... you know, I have friends who post a lot every week, and I'm like, I don't even care, it's only when I feel like it .... I have no problem posting, but only if it has meaning. I'm not going to post a photo of something just because it looks pretty (Esteban).

I'm not posting all the time. I post whatever things, if something catches my attention or if it's something funny I post it, songs sometimes ... I post a lot of lyrics in stories (Ramiro).

In both cases publication on Instagram is associated with snapshots in the feed (home screen) or certain stories (section located in the profile icon for 24-hour publications). This type of use does not seem to require specific knowledge or resources, as is the case of the practices of young people who have greater posting activity. Reflections on what and how they learn in relation to their practices in social networks are limited with Esteban and Ramiro. As the former states, defining the skills needed to use social networks is somewhat difficult, as they are naturalized in his mind.

The thing is that it's hard for me, because I was born with this and I've had this since I was small. I don't know what skills I have to develop because it's like I already have them (Esteban).

The motivations to use and participate in Instagram are focused on entertainment, staying in touch with friends, and being informed about their interests in terms of music and political activities.

The cases with more active production and management of more than one profile on Instagram show diverse learning, in terms of the use of tools, strategies, and knowledge. Claudia, Isabel, and Andre have large numbers and varieties of posts in their feeds: their own photos, mostly of themselves and with friends, downloaded or reposted memes, photos of artists, or favorite television series, among others. Editing with Instagram filters is a recurrent feature, as well as stories of everyday situations, where the school and the bedroom are common scenarios. In addition to this type of content, Andre also shares posts with photos of his drawings, all inspired by Japanese anime.

On the accounts dedicated to hobbies (Justin Bieber and Doramas), Isabel and Claudia only upload visual content downloaded from other accounts or websites, as well as some with text and image editing by the girls. Claudia has recently expanded the type of thematic content of her account dedicated to Doramas. On this profile, several of the posts are memes such as the one in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Meme posted on the Kdrama Instagram profile of Claudia (2017)<sup>2</sup>

This post combines several key aspects for the participation and learning of young people on social media: the reference to global pop culture, humor, and the inclusion of English in memes and verbal pieces.

The use of hashtags to label, classify, and achieve visibility of the published content is a strategy that Isabel uses, in addition to English, in several of her posts. This function is not something that she makes explicit as strategic knowledge, as can be seen below:

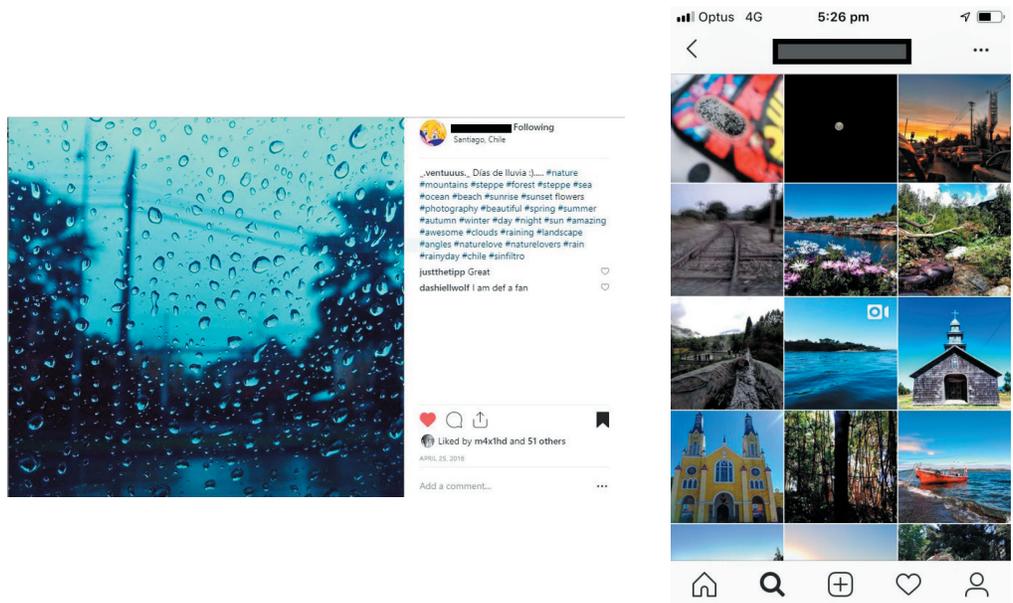
When I started following Justin Bieber and seeing what the celebrities were doing or looking at, I don't know, look, the hashtag is used here, we're going to use hashtags, I don't know, emoticons, your statuses, ok we're going to use emoticons (Isabel).

Isabel acknowledges the adoption of production patterns on social media based on the imitation of highly popular strategies of participation. There is implicit knowledge of what performance aligned with a certain norm is assumed to be. In this case, the motivation for learning is to aligned with the trend. However, it is not possible to configure knowledge or meanings developed from what is involved in participating by producing content and texts on Instagram.

We can find strategic knowledge on Mario's professional account, a space where he shares his work on digital landscape photography. Hashtags and English are the strategies he uses most frequently to attract the attention of followers and expand his audience. In order to choose the categories to include in the hashtags, Mario uses internet search engines that provide a daily ranking of the most popular tags. The popularity of the hashtag may be more important than direct coherence with the image. For example, in Figure 2.i, of the 31 hashtags included

2. The exact reference of the publication is not included in this figure or in any of the following ones, in order to protect the anonymity of the participants.

in the post, the only ones in Spanish are ‘Chile’ and ‘sin filtro’<sup>3</sup>. Several of them are categories associated with landscapes and nature, while some are not necessarily related to the image (*ocean, beach, sunset, flowers, mountain, sea*), to the seasons of the year, to photography, and to ratings (*amazing, awesome*).



i. Publication 22/04/2019

ii. Home screen, February 2019

Figure 2. *Digital production on Mario's professional Instagram profile.*

Mario uses different communication and digital marketing tools to obtain followers and achieve greater reach for this profile. In addition to hashtags and the use of English, he tracks the statistics on views, followers, and likes that the application provides for accounts that are registered as professional.

This young man defines himself and is defined by his teacher and mother as a photographer. This identification has developed from his participation in the high school's television channel (an extracurricular initiative coordinated by the visual arts teacher) and by the creation of his professional profile on Instagram. As Mario says, "it all started with Instagram." Considering himself a photographer implies having an aesthetic notion and visual language that manifests itself in curatorship and photographic creation. Early on, he defined the curatorial line of his profile: only landscape, instant, and digital photography using cell phones. The latter is important, as Mario reiterates the value of spontaneity in the photographs several times.

It's not like I go out with the camera because one day I wanted to take photos, no. What I take photos of is what I see and what I like. I take a photo of what I'm seeing. It's not like I say 'I want a photo similar to this one', but I get to a place and if I see something nice, I get the same angle and take the picture (Mario).

Spontaneity at the moment of taking a photograph, but expertise in the photographic eye and editing. Mario plays with and values the different framing, focus, and light in his photographs. In the photographs on this profile, there is color, interplay of angles and compositions, and use of filters, which is present in several of the posts, as can be seen in Figure 2.ii.

3. No filter, in Spanish.

An aesthetic notion can also be observed in Ana's posts, both on her personal profile and on the one she manages for DGS, the feminist organization in which she participates. On the former, although there is not an obvious invariable curatorial line, some of the posts on the feed are photographs that she particularly likes, because, as she says, "they were photos of days when I was inspired". Figure 3 shows one of the photographs that she selected for the analysis.

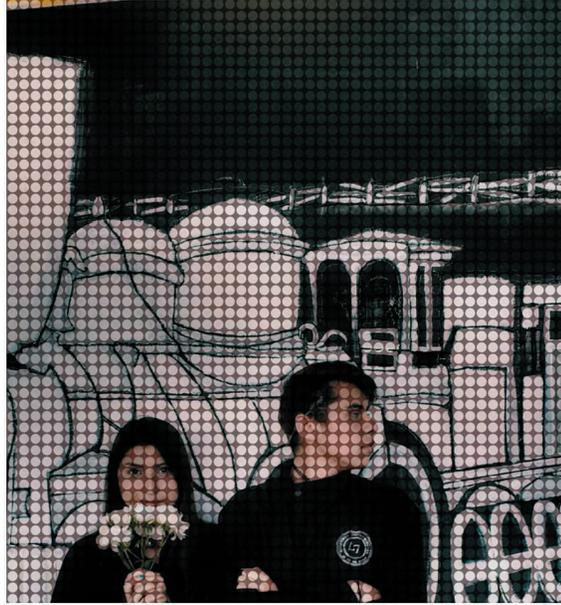


Figure 3. *Post on Ana's personal Instagram account (2018).*

The photograph was accompanied by the following text: "There's a crack in my window/A bird in my room/ Angels all over", which are part of the lyrics of a song. Although this type of image is not common on Ana's personal profile, she likes it, because in her post there is a sense of staging and because the "editing was really successful". These are examples of her artistic and aesthetic sense, elements that she highlights as part of her identity. The editing she applied to the photograph does not involve the filters provided by Instagram, nor are they the most popular. This, in addition to the dialogue that begins with the excerpt of the song lyrics in English, shows an intentional publication that invites shared intimacy and sensitivity on the part of an audience that is attuned to that aesthetic.

Ana deploys her aesthetic and communicational knowledge with greater emphasis on the DGS profile, the feminist organization in which she participates. The administration of this account involved a leap in both personal and organizational learning.

We started deciding this. It all started from what we were posting on Instagram. [The first post] was like 'Hello, this is the department', then it was like 'I think these can be our functions'. It all sort of started through Instagram and then we got the issue of the testimonials [allegations of harassment and abuse at the high school], so we were like 'ok, we have to upload this and people have to see that it's recorded'. Then the whole abortion issue came up, and with Zita we approached an "8M" coordinator that we met through Instagram" (Ana).

As can be seen, Instagram is a learning scenario, a source of information and connection, and a precursor of learning that is external to it, although the latter is not explicit in all cases. What is evident is that most of the learning associated with digital literacies occurs on or through social media.

“How did I learn? Like I’ve learned almost everything, by getting involved.” This quote from Mario reveals the sense of learning that these young people associate with mastery and knowhow in social networks. It is a practical learning process that combines observation and imitation, as Isabel mentioned above, but also “trial and error” and research on the internet or with their peers.

[And what did you do when you didn’t know, for example, how to tag in Stories]?

I searched on Google or YouTube ‘what does this mean’, ‘how to use it’ and then, when I didn’t understand anything, I asked a friend” (Andre).

Learning by doing is also associated with exploring creative experiences, as in Ana’s case when she describes how she started taking photographs and editing for her Instagram profile:

How did I learn? I think I wanted to channel my feelings in the right way. I could, as a basic example, feel very happy and put together a photo that way and then try to reflect that happiness in my creation and, ok, if it makes me feel this and start modifying it to create what I want to show in the end and channel my feelings (Ana).

Interest and necessity are the basis of learning, in Ana’s case, to create, express, and channel her emotions, and in the cases of all of the participants, interest and the need to be there and part of it. The necessity to produce texts is not something ubiquitous to young people’s digital practices, as we saw with Esteban and Ramiro, who are not motivated by that interest.

### **Moving from documentation and personal expression to the creation of school media**

Cell phones and social media have been present in schools for some time now. As some teachers say, trying to ban them is an unwinnable battle, although some teachers do this in their classes. Instagram began to dominate the social networking scene at school in 2016, when it became popular and started being the means of communication used by young people and various student organizations.

During the research fieldwork, Instagram profiles arrived in the classes. The most popular were the *Vendi’as*<sup>4</sup>, profiles without a public administrator where pictures of students in amusing or unflattering poses or situations were published. In Esteban’s words “the *Vendi’as* are like the photos when you look bad, someone says ‘ah you embarrassed yourself there’, that’s why they are called like that on Instagram”. The publications in these accounts are concentrated in the feed, which allows users to document and preserving the amusing moment. The quality of the photos is unimportant, but rather capturing the moment and sharing it to laugh at, or laugh with, the fellow student. The reactions in comments are not extensive and are mostly emoticons. These profiles are part of the everyday life of a classroom, where joking and teasing have always existed in face-to-face interactions between students. In the courses that I observed, the *Vendi’as* did not seem to be a source of conflict or experiences of abuse on the part of the young people, nor were they perceived as such by the teachers.

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4. A Chilean expression that roughly translates as someone who has ‘embarrassed themselves’.

What did prove to be a source of concern and discomfort for the adults were the profiles of political organizations, especially those without an identified administrator. This school, like many of the country's publicly-run high schools, has been involved in the cycles of student demonstrations and protests that began in 2006. In 2018, the political action was led by the feminist movement and its main focus was reporting abuse and gender violence within educational establishments, and social networks were key to young people's political activity.

They [the students] communicate through social media all the time, and they believe that what's on Instagram is law. There's a huge gap between the way we see reality and how they see it. So, everything was organized through there, the strikes through Instagram, so we were kind of disoriented. Someone said something on Instagram, and that was it, it was rumored and that was it, everyone thought that way, they were established as truths (History teacher).

As the teacher states, there is a great distance between adults and young people in terms of how they see reality and with respect to the criteria of truthfulness in information. Instagram as law assumes that it has legitimacy as a source of information and as a space for collective decision-making. However, with regard to the former, the problems of truthfulness and misinformation associated with the consumption of political-social content on social media were found in both young people and adults.

Instagram became the main means of communication between students, not only for daily interaction and digital participation, but also to communicate the events of the community as a whole. As mentioned above, Ana assures that the creation of the Instagram profile was key for the formation, establishment, and visibility of the feminist organization. In the presentation of DGS's Instagram profile (Figure 4), it is stated that its mission is to "educate, mediate, and raise awareness" with regard to issues of sexual and gender discrimination. As Gustavo points out, they were "against all inequality and abuse of power".



Figure 4. Home screen of the Instagram profile of the Department of Gender and Sexuality (DGS).

Source: Departamento de Género y Sexualidad (n.d.)

Instagram profiles as a means of communication with an informative function is something that became established in the high school in 2019. During that year, several accounts appeared without any explicit link to an organization or group, all with the purpose of reporting on the events and daily life of the school and each course: “i.p.e.l7” (inform yourself, think, express); “l7\_todoseptimos\_”; “cosasdel7”; “l7.informa”, are some examples of these accounts.

DGS can be seen as a precursor of these informative media. However, this platform has a more complex approach. The organization not only sought to inform the community, but also to educate and raise awareness on issues of gender, sexuality, and feminism.

Instagram was the strategic positioning and action platform for DGS. Its leaders agree that the need to generate content prompted them to define themselves as an organization, to create a kind of manifesto with its objectives and vision. The post *Comunicado oficial Departamento de Género y Sexualidades. Infórmese* includes six images with an extensive PDF document containing their statement. The first post on the feed, along with the image of the logo, reads as follows:

The main function and objective is to create an environment of optimal development for the student, where respect, coexistence, and support are encouraged among the different members of the school community ... hoping to contribute at the national level, with individuals who are aware of and informed about the following topics: Sex education, Sex and gender, Sexuality from the perspective of our peers, Sexual harassment and abuse, LGBT+ diversity, objectification and sexualization of women in society, sexism, and non-sexist education” (Departamento de Género y Sexualidad, 2018).

The use of an academic register with an impersonal voice to define the organization and its mission is interesting. A discourse that repositions the student, as a school actor, from their traditional position of subordination. The use of academic language confers a certain authority and legitimacy to the educational mission of DGS and, as we will see below, is key to the action of this organization.

### Articulation of vernacular and academic literacies for digital production

Moving beyond the use of this social network as a source of personal entertainment to this strategic use has meant that young people have expanded their repertoires of genres and discursive resources. This is what is observed in the production and curation of the DGS Instagram account. There is not an abundance of publications on this profile, but we can observe that special care has been taken with regard to the visuality and the written texts that accompany them. In the latter, the register is formal and is longer than the usual posts on personal profiles. As we saw in the post *Comunicado oficial*, these are extensive documents that present the organization in detail, clarify certain facts, and explain the position and decisions of the organization in an argumentative way. This is consistent with the political intentions of its leaders to position themselves as legitimate leaders before teachers and authorities. When explaining the professional tone of their documents—as described by Ana—Gustavo pointed out that this was the only way to gain respect and be taken seriously. Their aim was to influence the school curriculum and make DGS a permanent unit at the school.

In the visuality and digital production strategy of DGS, we can also observe management of knowledge and disciplinary languages. For Ana, as the person responsible for the creation of digital art, the quality of the image is key to delivering a good message.

For people to really understand. That’s what I like about the work in my area, because I’ve always talked about how images, documentaries, and videos can always make you emotional, and that’s key to getting people hooked (Ana).

When Ana assesses her work and comments on the criteria used for the poster design, her literacy and disciplinary knowledge of Visual Arts and Language and Communication are clear. The young woman, while explaining why she chose one of the digital posters that were included in the campaign to denounce harassment, states:

I find it professional in some way, but at the same time not closed. I think I never go too much for dark colors. At the beginning I went for dark colors because I said “hmmm, it’s a serious subject” .... It’s my color theory that I developed in Technology. I did an assignment on the theory of color and form, how they were related to each other (Ana).

It is interesting how Ana and Mario, the two young people with the most complex and diverse production on Instagram, not only demonstrate more elaborate learning and practices, but also enrich their digital vernacular literacies from academic and disciplinary languages and knowledge acquired and developed at school. In Mario’s case, Visual Arts and, above all, his participation in the TV channel, have been the main source of expansion of his experience, knowledge, and visual repertoires, which have allowed him to develop his hobbies with expertise. During one of the interview sessions, while talking about his influences and sources of visual inspiration, Mario mentioned Marvel productions. In order to better explain to me which of these productions he liked and valued, he turned on his computer and searched for images, and for a long period he described and justified the visual quality of the photograph selected with a series of concepts and distinctions typical of expert knowledge.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The results show that the learning associated with participation in social media such as Instagram varies according to the type of use and motivations of the young people, but not depending on the frequency with which the medium is used, since all of them, without exception, have a high degree of connection to this application. The more limited the activities are, the more difficult it will be to identify practical knowledge and meanings related to doing and learning. This is especially true in cases of low production and circulation of content, where the main motivation is to be connected to friends and interests. It could be considered that the factor of content production and multimodal texts on Instagram is associated with more complex learning, but the results do not show this. It is the dimension of orientation and motivation that makes a significant difference between the types of learning. As we have seen, most of the young people had more than one profile, but only those who clearly differentiate the management of a personal account from a professional or collective account possess practical and expert knowledge. Moreover, these cases show orientations of strategic communication, where they see the Instagram account as a medium or platform for a larger project.

The vernacular literacies associated with this learning confirm what Barton (2010, 2018) states: the presence of multimodal and visual resources and texts, along with the use of English and hashtags, are key for a shared sense of belonging with a global reach. Humor can also be added to this as a resource that motivates participation and reading in all cases. Memes are one of the types of content most frequently consumed by these young people; as a discursive genre they are read and circulated, but not produced, even in cases of advanced production. Humor is also present in the collective account *Vendi’as*, where students go beyond the space of the classroom, recording and preserving the moments that make up the daily life of a class group.

In the group of young people with more complex practices of digital production, we can clearly observe the idea that participating in a social sphere requires specific learning and literacies (Barton & Lee, 2013; Gee & Hayes, 2011), but, at the same time, enhances others that transcend that space. As Sefton-Green and Erstad (2017) contend, these are ongoing, open-ended, multi-sited processes. Posting professional photographs or turning an Instagram profile into an informative, educational, or political medium drives the development of

knowledge that is not directly related to the administration of digital platforms, as was the case of the feminist organization and Ana, in particular. It is here where the spheres of the school and digital platforms showed their full permeability, and where vernacular and academic literacies combine and complement each other. We saw how the DGS leaders use formal language learned at school to legitimize their discourse, creating their digital content on Instagram with formal lexicons and conceptual, argumentative tones that are typical of academic language (Snow & Uccelli, 2009). We can also appreciate how practical knowledge resulting from learning by doing is based on knowledge of visuality and communication learned at school.

The research shows us how young people turn Instagram into a platform for student debate, community information, and peer education, and how they draw on the disciplinary knowledge and languages learned at school to assume a position as multimodal experts, and to critically challenge the authority of the school.

Lastly, the learning of these young people shows the development of varying degrees of significant skills and knowledge for digital literacy (Buckingham, 2006). However, these skills and knowledge are concentrated in the dimensions of representation and language. Aspects that are typical of the dimension of audience and production with a critical perspective (Buckingham, 2019; Gee & Hayes, 2011; Luke, 2012; Pangrazio, 2016) are barely observed. These types of skills allow not only the mastery of languages, but also enable one to understand social media as communication platforms that are part of ethical, economic, and ideological logics, where access and circulation of texts is mediated by algorithms that guide experience and participation (Kotilainen, Okkonen, Vuorio, & Leisti, 2020).

As the history teacher pointed out, it seems that “Instagram is law” for the young people, and that leaves no room for doubt or suspicion regarding the quality and veracity of the content they can access, the design and architecture of the platform, or the intentions behind it. This critical position was absent from the digital literacies of this group of young people, even those with high levels of production. It is here where the school can contribute by promoting different learning and other ways of participating in the digital sphere, through a critical digital literacy that, while recognizing the diversity of young people’s learning, enhances the articulation between vernacular and academic literacies to enable reflective and clear production and participation with respect to all the complexities of social media.

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