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Playing to be influencers: A comparative study on Spanish and Colombian young people on Instagram

Abstract

This paper explores and describes how Colombian and Spanish young people present themselves on Instagram according to the social game and the symbolic capital that they infer as normative from influencers. The methodology used combines the focus group technique (seven groups) with a content analysis of the profiles of the informants (N = 651). In total, 53 first-year creative industries university students participated. The results show that the work developed by the influencers has given rise to an aspirational narrative genre that young people tend to emulate according to the Instagram habitus in order to be recognised as leading players. Their self-presentation has three main features: a) a preference for showing 'in-classifying' practices such as leisure and tastes for freedom; b) the predominance of a specific type of profile and gestures that avoids self-production markers and aspires towards a global audience; and c) the normalisation of self-promotional discourse. Most informants experience Instagram as a game in which they compete to accumulate visibility conceived as relational validation, although in the case of Colombian informants there is a more professional outlook towards the platform. Finally, for all of them, Instagram constitutes a serious game, and many of them admit to feeling too exposed. As a result, they have implemented self-surveillance practices, such as consulting with peers before posting photographs, using secondary accounts and deleting posts.

Keywords
Social media, identity, influencers, aspirational work, self-surveillance, self-promotion, creative industries.

1. Introduction

Instagram is one of the main spaces in which today's young people socialise (González-Ramírez & López-Gracia, 2018; Jang *et al*., 2015; Prades & Carbonell, 2016). Existing for others on a platform like this requires: a) the conveyance of an individual identity by means of visual or audio-visual content or text and b) visibility by means of affordances that arise from the assembly of an identity made up of the infrastructure, users, and activities. The push by social media towards an interactive design in which the *like* button is simultaneously a tool for social interaction and the evaluation of content has made visibility a prerequisite for interaction as well as a sign of user endorsement (Hallinan & Brubaker, 2021). Visibility has, therefore, become the main symbolic capital which is interpreted as an indicator of centrality and the

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influence of the user. In accordance with Bourdieu's (1998, 2006) theory of social fields, fields are spaces of conflict in which agents compete to accumulate important capital to gain positions of power. This can either be material or symbolic capital. Instagram is understood to be a subfield (Sandford & Quarmby, 2019) on social media which superimposes on and interacts with physical spaces. Using Instagram is not limited to mere entertainment; people on it understand that their position –evaluated in terms of links and accumulation of visibility (Lindell, 2017)– may affect their access to other types of capital both on and outside the platform. Therefore, when a post does not obtain the number of interactions the sender deems to be the acceptable minimum, it is normally deleted (Almansa, Fonseca & Castillo, 2013; González-Ramírez & López-Gracia, 2018; Hermida & Hernández-Santaolalla, 2020; Jang *et al.*, 2015; Martínez, 2021) since the lack of likes and interactions indicates a low position in the visibility game.

Maintaining a constant flow of online content also requires engagement in offline activities, such as photography sessions with friends (Lasén, 2012) or self-produced photos (Martínez, 2021), in which young people usually imitate the hyper-ritualised repertoire seen in the cultural industries to create a type of snapshot. This is what Martínez (2021) termed 'modelling' photography, and it is typical on Instagram. Young people often seek attention by conventional means in keeping with the cognitive bias for 'good is beautiful' (the halo effect) and show beauty on their profiles both in terms of their own physiques and the aesthetics created on their accounts (Harris & Bardey, 2019). This links the canonical value of the physical with the symbolic capital on Instagram. The result is that young people may start new diets, begin going to the gym or start using products that may be harmful to their health in order to change their appearance (Sandford & Quarmby, 2019, pp. 126-127).

1.1. *Seeking attention on Instagram*

Although Instagram was founded in 2010 as a photography app for following the lives of others with your own stylised stories (Frier, 2020), it did not take long for it to become a space for self-promotion and of competition for popularity (Abidin 2014, 2016; Duffy, 2017; Marwick, 2015; Mavroudis, 2019). This attention-seeking leads many users to behave in a way that Dumas *et al.* (2017) characterised as normative (using filters, labels, posting at times most likely to earn *likes*, etc.) and deceptive (buying followers or *likes*, using labels to exchange visibility, etc.). Among the practices engaged in by influencers to capture attention are self-promotion activities (Abidin, 2016; Marauri-Castillo *et al.*, 2021), the use of language that addresses an audience in a friendly manner, thereby seeking to create an illusion of connection and shared intimacy (Abidin, 2017; Hurley, 2019), and the display of lifestyles that revolve around leisure and luxury (Marwick, 2015).

Apart from the interest they have in presenting themselves and seeking attention and personal endorsement, university students in the creative professions are often concerned with creating an online reputation (Duffy & Chan, 2019; Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016). The notion of being observed by unforeseen audiences nurtures what Duffy and Chan (2019) termed 'imagined surveillance,' and their informants respond in three ways: self-control in their presentations, privacy settings and the use of pseudonym accounts.

1.2. *The strategic presentation of the private self on Instagram*

In the theatre metaphor put forward by Goffman (1999), performance areas are distributed between the stage and the auditorium or the front region, which is where subjects show their more public faces, and the backstage area or back region where the actors may relax and leave aside their stage personas. This is not to say that the backstage presentation of identity is not strategic, but rather that the actors take on a different role since only equals or people in whom they have more trust may access this space. Goffman's proposal has been reviewed in the last decade to analyse how Instagrammers use their profiles on social media to create an

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illusion of access to this more private area of their lives, whether they be celebrities (Marwick & Boyd, 2011) or influencers (Abidin, 2017; Hurley, 2019; Mavroudis, 2019).

In this context, the selfie, understood as an expression of amateurism (Baishya, 2015) in which there is no mediation in presenting oneself (Jurgensson, 2019) and there is a symbolic opening to others (Frosh, 2015), has been proposed as a type of key photography to convey a sense of intimacy to followers and of backstage access on Instagram. The aim of this is to be perceived as more authentic, a strategy which Abidin (2017) in his study on influencers called 'calculated amateurism.' In creating a private self, not only is what is shared important but also from where it is shared since temporary content is associated with the anecdotal and everyday (Sandford & Quarmby, 2019). Therefore, according to Mavroudis (2019, pp. 87-88), influencers choose Instagram to add banal and less stylised content through the use of stories (posts which last just 24 hours) as a way to show their everyday lives to their audiences and keep in touch with minimal production effort.

1.3. *Influencers and aspirational work*

The hypervisibility of people in the public eye and of celebrities has become a means of power nowadays (Driessens, 2013). That is, of symbolic capital, which provides access to other types of capital (social or financial). This concept, which has been established in a context of precarious employment growth, has made it normal for such capital to be a reasonable key objective in some professional sectors (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016). From this perspective, influencers are those who have reached the peak of visibility by means of social media and have exploited their fame for financial gain (Abidin, 2016; 2017; O'Meara, 2019) as opinion leaders for brands and lifestyles (Castelló-Martínez & Del-Pino-Romero, 2015; Marauri-Castillo *et al.*, 2021; Segarra-Saavedra & Hidalgo-Marí, 2018, 2020) or as creators of social audiences (Marwick, 2019).

In the words of Duffy (2017), influencers have given rise not only to a flourishing industry (Abidin, 2016) but also to a specific narrative of identity based on showing conspicuous consumption and luxury activities in their posts, something that is commonplace in celebrity culture (Marwick, 2019). These figures have adapted the aspirational narrative of celebrities to the online world, connecting it with a discourse on entrepreneurship and personal branding since they often present themselves as entrepreneurs (Duffy, 2017; Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016; Hurley, 2019).

Finally, Cotter's contribution (2019, pp. 9-10) is especially remarkable in stating that the visibility game is expressed by influencers based on their interpretation of the Instagram algorithm. This idea represents an important difference with the *doxa* of Bourdieu (1998) because these players have not previously been steeped in the rules of the game field. According to Cotter (2019), influencers carry out their experiments in an attempt to discern how the algorithm works. Based on their interpretations, they also end up creating trends on the platform in so far as they are the players who have become leaders by accumulating visibility.

2. Research objectives and questions

The main objective of this project was to explore how first-year Columbian and Spanish creative industries university students present themselves on Instagram. Since the start of the field work, the informants from both countries indicated that influencers are key figures for explaining how they interpret the platform, present themselves and relate to others on Instagram. These are the specific objectives that were defined:

O1. To find out how to interpret the platform and the role of influencers.
O2. To describe how the informants appear on their profiles.

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To reach the objectives, the following research questions were defined:

RQ1. Do the informants emulate influencers when they present themselves?
RQ2. Do they engage in activities to improve their positions on Instagram?
RQ3. If they do, do they conceive these tasks as work or as enjoyment of the media?

3. Methodology

The research design followed a mixed methodology which combines the focal group technique with content analysis of the Instagram profiles of the informants. The field work was structured in two phases. In the first phase, focus groups enabled the discovery of how these young people give meaning to their own communicative activities on Instagram by means of their own discourses. In the second phase, the non -intrusive technique of content analysis was chosen (Krippendorff, 2004) so that the qualitative information collected in the first stage could be compared with the quantitative descriptions of the profiles.

In total, 53 students participated in the seven groups (4 COL, 3 ESP) between October 2018 and May 2019. After the sessions had been transcribed, the inductive approach was used to delimit the conceptual categories of the study by following grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). Nvivo 12 was used for open encoding of the transcriptions, the field notes and the posts. Once the study categories were defined, they were operationalised into variables which were then applied in the content analysis.

As for the second technique, one of the 53 participants in the focal groups never responded to the request to be followed on Instagram and another three volunteers deleted their profiles before data capture began (all from the Columbian sample). For this reason, content analysis was performed on just 49 accounts. The Instagram data was collected over two periods, May 2019 and August 2020, enabling the trend in the number of items in each account to be seen. In total, out of the 4,643 posts collected, 651 were encoded with 15 items taken from each profile by means of a table of random numbers (although some profiles did not provide 15 permanent posts). For the analysis, an *ad hoc* codebook was drawn up (Table 1). To ensure encoding was reliable, the intracoder agreement coefficient was assessed by means of a test–retest for 10% of the random sample selected, and a value equal to or higher than 93.8% agreement was obtained for all variables. Finally, the Chi-squared distribution test was applied to the combinations of the variables analysed in the results.

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Table 1. Codebook.

Variables	Categories
Username	
Date	
Gender	
Nationality	
University	
Type of support	Photography
	Album
	Video
Areas of activity represented (Goffman, 1999)	Social stage space
	Social backstage space
	Formal stage: theatre, screen
	Formal backstage: dressing rooms, preparation areas before performance
	Undefined
As shown by the subject	Alone
	Accompanied
	Does not appear
In what type of photography is the subject shown on appearing	Photography looking at the camera (without semiotic markers for the *selfie)*
	Selfie
	'Unprepared' photography or *paparazzi*
	Professional photography (there is some element which conveys a professional label)
	Detail photography
Space shown on the post	Urban space and monuments
	Leisure spaces
	Beach or swimming pool
	Natural setting
	University
	Means of transport
	Photography studio or artistic space
	Indoor space (public)
	Room in a house
	Bedroom
	Unidentified
Textual elements and pictograms	Just text
	Just emoji
	Text and emoji
	Without textual elements or pictograms
Language	Spanish
	English
	English and Spanish
	Other languages
	Spanish and another language
	Without textual elements
Tactics for capturing attention and self-positioning	Use of *hashtags*: descriptive, for exchanging visibility (Dumas et al., 2017), retaining our attention (*hijacking*) (Abidin, 2014), own corporative, ritualistic (#ThrowBackThursday, for example) and aspirational
	Self-promotion of performances or artistic creations
	Adding tags on the post which redirects to a product, brand or shop
	Artistic performance is shown
	Study photography (with the photographer mentioned, for example)
	'Behind the scenes' tactics (shows how the photograph or video was taken)
	Other formulas
	No tactics for capturing attention and self-positioning are found

Source: Own elaboration.

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3.1. *Participants*

Colombia and Spain were chosen for the creation of a transnational sample for three reasons: a) they have a similar population (49.66 and 46.42 million inhabitants, respectively); b) they have a similar penetration rate for use of the social networks (68% and 60%; Kemp, 2019a, 2019b); and c) they have a common language, which enables the presence of English on the posts in the assessment of an entirely Spanish-speaking sample.

The participants were first-year university students for creative industries degrees (Cinema and Television Direction, Audiovisual Communication, Social Communication, Journalism and Advertising and Public Relations). This profile was chosen as it concerns a professional area in which the creation of reputation and visibility on social media is seen as a supplementary way to pursue a career (Duffy, 2017; O'Meara, 2019). It was thus understood that it would be especially active on Instagram. The platform was chosen due to its growing popularity among the 18- to 24-year-old age range (Fondevila-Gascón *et al.*, 2020) and its intense use by both university students (Duffy & Chan, 2019; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016) and creative industries professionals (Cotter, 2019; Duffy, 2017; O'Meara, 2019).

Prior to participation in the focus groups and along with the document for informed consent, the participants answered an individual questionnaire on features in terms of sociodemographics and the use of social networking sites. This questionnaire was based on the following criteria: 1) first-year creative industries university students; 2) daily use of Instagram; and 3) similar distribution of gender. Regarding the last criteria, women were overrepresented in the sample (60%), something that must be put into context as they are more abundant in the branches of the social sciences both in Spain and Colombia[1]. The age of the participants ranged from 16 to 24 years old, although over 80% of the sample was concentrated in the 18–21-year-old range, with an average age of 18.7 years. The informants declared that they had an average of 6.7 accounts on different social media platforms, with Instagram as the one that was most used (56.3%), followed by WhatsApp (27.1%). The identities of the students were pseudonymised.
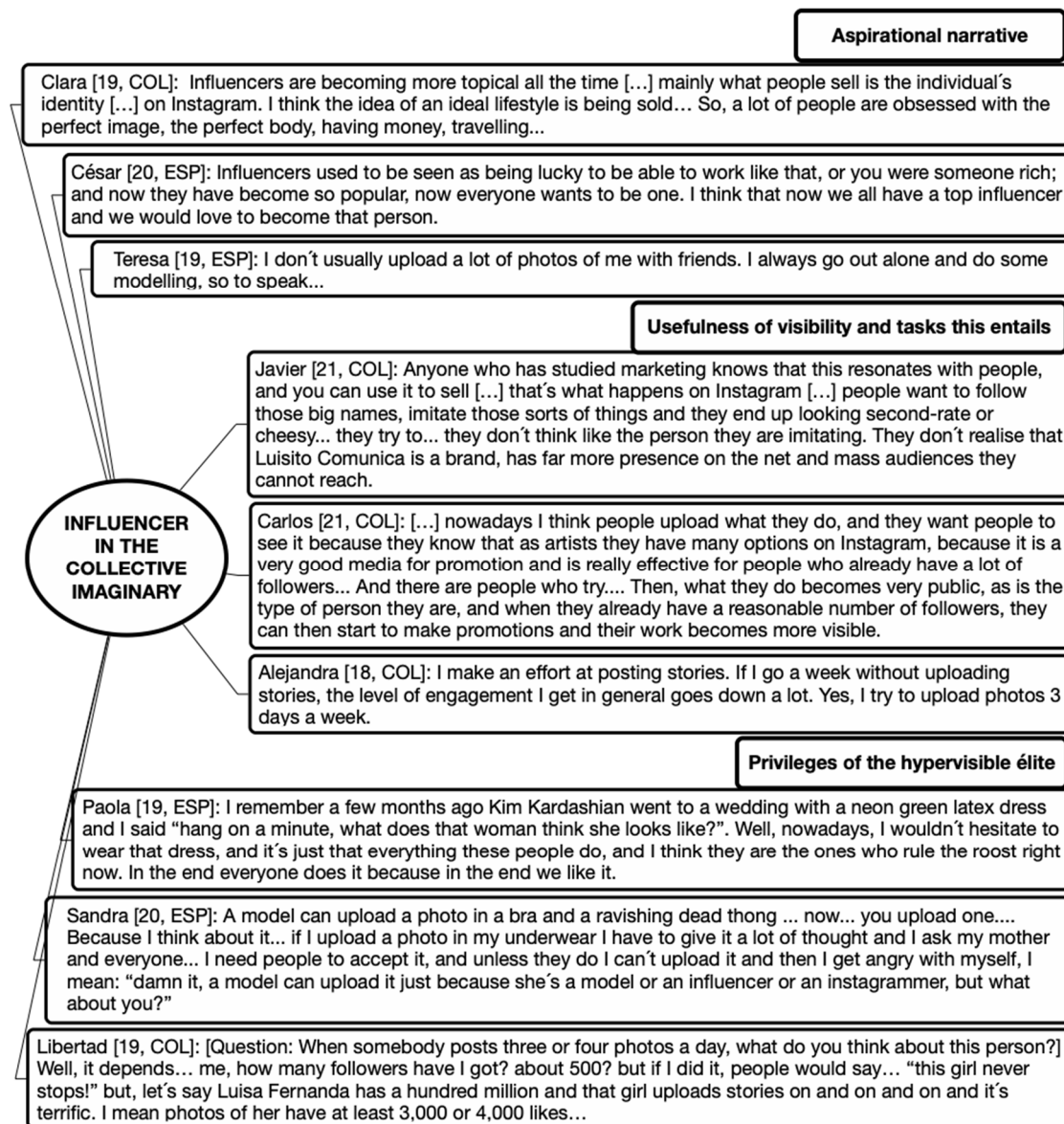
4. Results

The figure of the influencer is so widespread in the collective imaginary that the informants associated Instagram – and the symbolic capital by which they compete – with visibility, and some of them used the terms interchangeably: 'I'm going to upload a photo, it's influencer time' [Sergio, 19, ESP]. Figure 1 contains a summary of the three sets of shared ideas about influencers which arose from the encoding of the focus groups.

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[1] In the academic year 2018–2019, 59.8% of students in Spain who were enrolled in the Social Sciences were women (Ministry of Universities, undated), while in Colombia, this figure rose to 64% in Social Sciences and Humanities for the 2018 academic year (Ministry of National Education, undated.).

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Figure 1. Ideas revolving around influencers.

Source: Own elaboration.

4.1. *Influencers as self-presentation models*

Influencers operate as role models for informants in two senses: as suitable models for presenting themselves on Instagram, with a focus on expressing status by means of lifestyle and consumption, and as a profession or a way of pursuing a career. Therefore, Clara (Figure 1) seems to criticise them for their focus on consumption as a material expression of identity and their influence on their followers. Conversely, César claims to admire them. In his view, they represent a kind of democratised access to visibility as a means of professional development, a classical idea in discourses on celebrity recognition (Rojek, 2001). César refers to the influencer as a type of work and a type of person –'we would love to become that person' (Figure 1)– expressing how the notion of personal branding has been normalised as the most suitable way to achieve success on Instagram. In a similar vein, Javier [21, COL] remarked that 'Instagram is selling oneself… I mean, that whether one may or may not have a reason to, it is selling oneself,' which concurs with the view of Carlos (Figure 1): '[…] as an artist you have a great opportunity on Instagram because it is a great media for promotion.' The metaphor of

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the market constantly appeared in the collective imaginary associated with Instagram and influencers.

The practice of imitating poses and types of photographs or the tests used to check on how their followers and the algorithm respond to their posts are generally experienced by them as fun learning in which they compete to obtain and accumulate visibility. However, the game is not free of worry or even frustration:

> César [20, ESP]: Sometimes I say, 'I'll pass on this one,' I'm exhausted and I delete everything and I start again, because sometimes I think to myself 'I don't like the way I'm doing this at all,' and I delete it all [...].
> Moderator: What is making you so tired?
> César: Not having an attractive *feed* [profile].
> Moderator: But you've taken care of it so well, how come, out of the blue, you don't like it anymore?
> César: Well, because one day you see an influencer and you think 'well, I like their style' or 'I like how they edited the photo,' and you say to yourself 'I want that ... to be like him/her' and then I say 'umm' [face of disapproval] ... and I delete [laughter] and it's back to the drawing board!
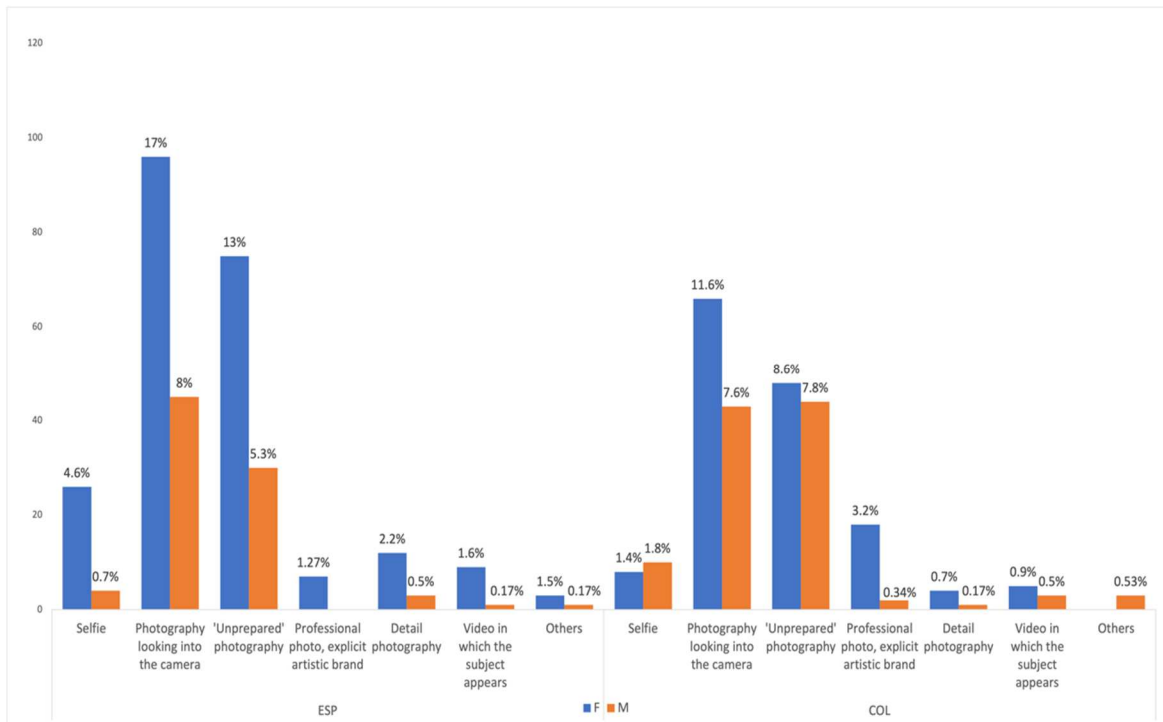
Something remarkable in the type of profile the informants used in permanent posts (graph 1) was the lack of selfies (7.5% of the total). Indeed, some participants even described selfies as anti-aesthetic and the people who take them as insecure. The lack of selfies on the profiles is also coherent with the communicative use they give to the feed and to temporary stories; since the stories expire by default, they are encouraged to post content that they believe is less aspirational. As Alejandra put it [COL, 18]:

> We say that selfies... are for stories. In fact, we sometimes talk with a friend about the photos we have planned to upload onto our profile but we end up saying, 'No, this one is for stories' because it was not great quality and the stories are like the dustman from whom nothing good came out of [laughs].

Selfies migrate from permanent posts to stories, with connotations of authenticity, amateurism and intimacy that are more appreciated in order to convey the sensation of access to the private and intimate self. As Paola explained [19, ESP]: '[in] the feed you show your best side, and in the stories you show your everyday life. The story is for them to get to know you and the feed is for creating an image for you.' However, the contents shared on the stories are just as strategic, as Lola suggests [19, ESP]: 'I do work hard on the stories except if I post *close friends stories*, I don't worry about these stories, with people close to you it's not as if I were exposed to the public eye, they're your friends.' That is, only with the *close friends stories* –in which the user may limit access to pre-selected people– does Lola feel like interacting backstage (Goffman, 1999).

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Graph 1. Type of portrait according to gender and nationality.

Source: Own elaboration.

The posts mainly show the subject looking into the camera (19.2% COL and 25% ESP) in a kind of picture that either has been taken by someone else or shows no selfie markers. The second most widespread type of photography in this project was called 'unprepared photography' (an expression used by one of the participants) to refer to a photographic cliché in which participants pose as if they are unaware their photos are being taken (16.4% COL and 18.3% ESP). The participants stated that they did this to resemble influencers.

> Sofía [20, ESP]: When you go somewhere you no longer take the typical tourist photo [...] when you go, you try to take photos as if you were strolling around your town [...] Two years ago, I went to New York and I stood next to the Statue of Liberty as if I were a born and bred New Yorker (or at least I tried to). You take a photo on the Brooklyn bridge, but you do other things to make you look like you are not posing because, as influencers are such jet setters, you also want to seem like that is in the order of the day for you.

In this way, 78.7% of the total sample responded to a type of portrait in which the informant either avoided the self-portrait markers or directly resorted to a photographic cliché from the tabloid press: *paparazzi* photography (Frier, 2020). Figure 2 shows an example in which Ricardo [18, COL] used irony by means of the text on this photographic cliché while he acted as protagonist.

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Figure 2. Example of 'unprepared' or paparazzi photography. Caption: 'Take a photo of me as if I was unaware of the camera.'

Source: Instagram.

The participants stated that normally the photos posted are taken by friends, a partner or relations, and it has become common practice to mutually take individual photographs to keep their accounts up-to-date in any encounter.

> Patricia [22, ESP]: I meet up with Ana, for example, and go there with taking a photo in mind... maybe I'll have a coffee and then I say, 'hey, look... take a photo of me here...' and practically whenever I go out I have pictures taken of me.
> Moderator: Might you say that it is normal in your everyday life to be with friends you think of taking photos of each other?
> [They all agree.]
> Marta [19, ESP]: There always, always has to be some photo...
> Moderator: But I suppose it wasn't always like this, was it?
> Marta: Well, the truth is now you ask... it's a bit weird, that whenever we meet there needs to be a photo... but it's true...
> Ana [21, ESP]: It's just that it's what we end up doing...
> Moderator: I would like to understand what do you mean by 'end up doing'?
> Ana: Well, I, for example, meet Patricia and we go for a stroll in the town centre and one of us sees something we like and says 'hey, take a photo of me there,' we do it without thinking...
> Patricia: Personally, I like to upload one almost every day. Then I take advantage of the time I'm outside to have my picture taken and upload it.
> Ana: Yes, and it's how you dress up and prepare yourself, really just in case...

According to this excerpt, the expectations of having one's photograph taken to update the Instagram profile implies previous preparation (styling, make-up, meeting in visually attractive areas, etc.) which has a direct effect on their behaviour in the physical world to be

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prepared in case the photo 'arises.' The interest in controlling one's online public image would also explain the low number of posts out of the total sample in which they are accompanied by someone (19% with someone as opposed to 65% alone). As Carla explained [17, COL], 'there is always somebody who tells you: "no, don't upload that because I don't look good".'

The preference for a snapshot which imitates the poses and types of photos taken by influencers and celebrities must be analysed along with the types of spaces in which the subject is photographed. The overall results of the content analysis show that the preference of the informants is to show a leisure-focused lifestyle and a taste for freedom (73%). Within this percentage range, there are photographs taken in urban settings and by monuments (20%), indoors but not at home (15%), beach/swimming pool (14%), outdoor leisure (14%) and natural areas (10%). The unprepared photo in Figure 2 also exemplifies the type of content that expresses the lifestyle and taste for freedom conveyed by informant profiles.

> Ricardo [18, COL]: I went on a trip to England and let's say before that I wasn't into taking photos, but before going my friends told me to take lots of them and that seemed really idiotic... like really silly, then it was like 'yes, I'm here and I want to save it. Suddenly, not just for me but also so that others could see that I was there...' It's something stupid people do and everyone does it but, yes... you feel like... that satisfaction...

The post shows a trip to Europe, an in-classifying activity –one which symbolically expresses your class (Bourdieu, 2006, p. 173)– of special significance in Colombian culture as a status symbol. Therefore, it concerns a type of valuable content, both in the competitive game of Instagram and among the peer community. This has led Ricardo to reassess his position on posting selfies. In a similar vein, some informants admitted that they sometimes played with the geolocalisation option on Instagram to tag their photographs in places which seemed more glamourous than where they actually were. This may be classified within what Bourdieu (1998) termed bluff strategies: symbolic practices which help to simulate the possession of certain social or economic capital.

Showing status by means of leisure and luxury pursuits, as well as by choosing photographs which avoid selfie markers and the copying of modelling poses (Martínez, 2021) –as Teresa also called it [19, ESP] (Figure 1)– show how the aspirational work of the influencers (Duffy, 2017) has led to a narrative genre of the self that young people tend to imitate as a useful strategy to improve their positions on Instagram by earning *likes* and interactions. As Gabriel explained [17, COL], the informants conceive of the platform as a space with its own rules and on which visibility is the symbolic capital in competition: '[Instagram is] like another dimension which has its own identity, and is a global identity in which all the ideas from other places are copied [...] and these popular cultures are followed all over the whole world in order to become famous, and to be seen.'

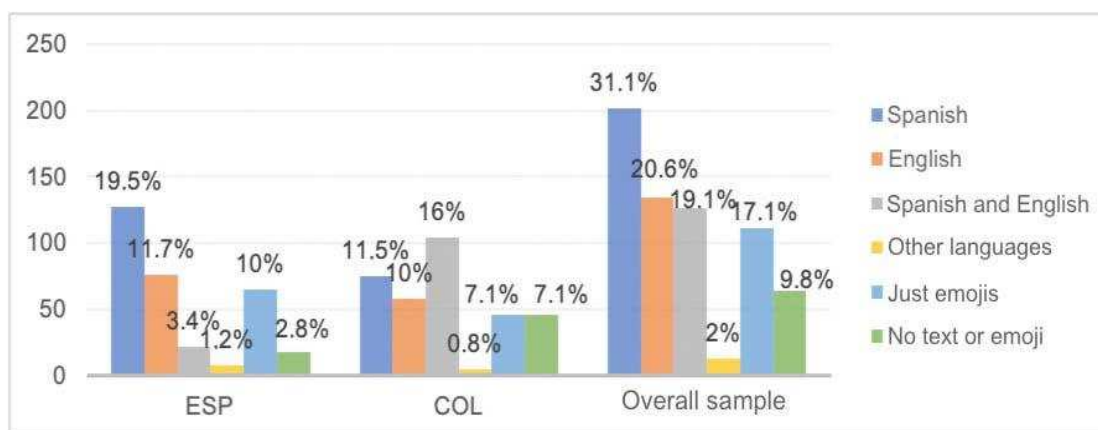## 4.2. *Tactics for capturing attention and self-positioning*

Of the analysed profiles, 67.3% used at least one search tactic to gain visibility or self-positioning, although it is not constantly applied over time, since out of the total number of posts analysed, 51% of Colombians and 82% of Spanish did not display these tactics. Using tags is the most common tactic and they appear in different variations, such as a descriptive use in which the tag describes the content of the post (5.9% COL and 2.3% ESP) or the use of deceptive hashtags (Dumas *et al.*, 2017) to change visibility (1.8%), for example, #likes4likes and hijacking attention (Abidin, 2014) in which the sender uses hashtags which are trendy on Instagram at the time even if they bear no relation to the post (3.6% COL and 2.4 % ESP). Several participants said they had used external services, such as TagsForLikes.com, to choose tags which enabled them to reach a larger audience. However, this use may be penalised by the platform and so some respondents admitted deleting the tags after a few hours. 'This [TagsForLikes.com] mustn't be used, Instagram, the algorithm, bans you [delete]

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and the photo' [Raúl, 18, ESP]. Similarly, on some Colombian profiles, the use of their own hashtags to work as corporate tags (2.6%) was found. Participants also encouraged their followers to post with the same tag as a means of building a community. Apart from this, they used self-positioning tactics with aspirational *hashtags* such as #fotógrafosinfluencers [#influencersphotographers] or #talentocolombiano [#Colombiantalent]. Some informants explained that they constantly carry out tests to understand the rules governing the visibility game on Instagram. 'I wanted to know how many people are active and the kind of things they do, so I see this as experiments you have to make […] I feel important interacting with this audience' [Javier, 21, COL].

After the use of tags, the use of hashtags or links to brands and clothing shops (1.5%) was found, especially in the Spanish sample and almost exclusively among females, as well as the posting of studio photos in which the professional photographer was tagged (1.5%). In the Colombian sample, along with professional photos (4%) –overwhelmingly posted by females and in which they were posing– were posts in which they were seen engaging in an artistic pursuit (2.6%) and self-promoting their creations (1.65%) as previews of a song or a music video. The latter two tactics were almost exclusively used by males.

Another decision which may be connected to the desire to become more visible and to reach an international audience is the choice of languages or emojis in the posts. As seen in Graph 2, in 31.1% of the analysed posts, Spanish is used, while English is the second language (20.6%) followed by the use of both languages (19.1%). The preferred formula from the Colombian sample is to combine both Spanish and English (16%), while in the Spanish sample, this option barely reaches 3.4%. The young people indicated that when they use tags, they understand that the logical option is to use English since it provides more potential to reach a larger audience. A second reason for posting in English was the cultural aspect since the post sometimes comes with photographs of verses of English-language songs or set phrases which are 'typical expressions used in English' [Silvio, 18, ESP]. Moreover, the percentage that used emojis without a text (17.1%) once again results in the notion of making the message universally understood, even though some participants admitted using emojis because they did not feel confident enough to write: 'at times I felt very awkward about putting captions, I mean with the descriptions, and I don't put them anymore' [Claudia, 18, COL]. One of the reasons for this insecurity is the fear of being seen as pretentious or of not knowing how to comment on an image in which they are just seen as attractive: 'if a photo seems good but is meaningless, then I add the arm icon with the one flexing the muscle [laughter]' [Daniel, 18, COL].

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Graph 2. Use of languages.

Source: Own elaboration.

As for the Chi-squared test, there was a statistically significant distribution for a significance level equal to 0.05 in all of the crossed variables analysed in the results: nationality and type of profile (x^2=84.382, p=1.7538E-15); gender and type of profile (x^2=30.22, p=8.668E-05); nationality and tactics (x^2=94.52, p=6.5347E-15); gender and tactics (x^2=88.193, p=1.1039E-13); and nationality and use of language (x^2=85.98, p=2.0697E-16).

4.3. *Influence and privilege of the hypervisible*

The informants attributed to influencers a great capacity to influence style and communication trends both on social media and in the physical world. This is what is seen in, for example, the statement by Paola (Figure 1) in which he talks about the influence of Kim Kardashian, a star who spontaneously appears in various groups in both countries. All groups acknowledged that they could imitate the poses, types of photos, filters, etc. observed to be in use by the influencers but that they mustn't saturate the attention of their followers by posting too frequently. This is reserved for the leading players (those who have mass audiences). The participants agreed that it is not acceptable for an obscure user to post more than one photo a day on their profiles on Instagram. This is because saturating their updates wall would annoy their followers, as Libertad (Figure 1) explained, and would make them look egocentric or attention-seeking. Tania [20, COL] had a similar view with regard to making more than one post a day, as she said it makes 'the *likes* divide.' That is, there is less interaction with the profile, and the informants believe there are two reasons for this: followers rejecting the sender for too much attention-seeking and what the algorithm has sensed.

Another difference found between the freedoms of the hypervisible elite and that of the participants on Instagram was the potential that they and others have to show a certain amount of nudity, as Sandra (Figure 1) put it. Although showing genitalia and nipples (female) on Instagram is censored, young people agree that revealing a body with less than a bathing costume beyond the beach or swimming pool context exposes them to criticism. Among females, nudity could lead to harassment or give the impression of being sexually available. As for heterosexual males, they are concerned with being viewed as homosexuals.

Finally, it should be stressed that some informants are annoyed that their peers use self-promotion tactics, interpreting this as a means of social climbing, something that is incompatible with their visibility status. This emerged from Claudia's complaints that [18, COL] 'There are people who tag the clothes brands they are wearing, if the blouse is from Zara, then they tag Zara [...] they think they are bloggers, and that people are hanging onto their every word.' With regard to non-famous users who post too much content, Adriana [18, COL] stated, 'I see ones I know and they take photos all day long and they upload them all and I always think. So, this one wants to be a blogger, or this one wants to be famous, so I click on

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unfollow, because it gets boring.' This type of criticism shows that there are relationships and rules of power which govern user-behaviour on Instagram according to the legitimacy recognised by other users.

4.4. *Self-surveillance strategies*

The awareness of being exposed to any kind of audience on Instagram has made most of these young people incorporate different strategies to feel they are in control of their images. Therefore, when permanent posts are concerned, most informants usually send their partner or friends the content they are planning to post by WhatsApp in order to ask for their advice: 'One sends a friend the photos, 10 photos, asking her, "which one should I upload?"' [Lourdes, 18, COL]. This practice shows both a desire to control the impression they give to others and a continuous expectation of validation since asking peers is not limited to photography but also covers texts or the photos that should be deleted. In this respect, this interest in controlling impressions has grown with the use of the platform, as Paola explained [19, ESP]: 'Now my boyfriend uses Instagram more [...] and he sometimes asks me to edit their photos, which he didn't use to. He deleted all his previous photos because they no longer suited the *feed*.'

Another strategy which is more widespread is to delete or file photographs. The number of posts from the profiles diminished in a large proportion of the analysed accounts, going from 5,367 posts in May 2019 to 4,643 in August 2020 (even so, participants kept on posting). This practice is common among informants, except for those who claim to be building their professional identities on Instagram. In these cases, it seems there has been a focus on projecting a professional image which lets them feel better adapted to the Instagram *habitus*. The main reasons for deleting or filing are a growing concern for looking after the profile design as a whole and a desire to show an image which is suitable for any audience. As Carla explained [17, COL] on being asked whether she had profile images of her in a bathing costume: 'I realised that those photos had more *likes* and I started deleting all the body shots [...] they didn't seem right because I was accepting more people... and I wanted to control what they could see.' Here there is some contradiction with the competitive game the platform poses since Carla values controlling her public image more than improving her visibility status. However, the content analysis revealed that Carla continued posting this type of photography. This means that – as with Ricardo (Figure 2) and his initial reluctance to post pictures of himself – these young people find it hard to maintain their preferences when they perceive that these behaviours are not the most suitable for the competitive game on Instagram.

The third strategy found was the use of secondary accounts or accounts under a pseudonym. These profiles enable them to have differentiated performances with their identities conceived to target specific audiences. The variety of uses the informants made of these accounts show how complex social media is in socialisation spaces. Here, a desire can be seen to communicate in a situation restricted to peers, who are normally their closest friends. On these secondary accounts, content may be posted which ranges from scatological to nudity, with sociability more focused on maintaining and creating social capital with their contacts than on creating image and visibility.

5. Discussion and conclusions

In response to the general objective of this research ('to explore how Colombian and Spanish first-year creative industries university students present themselves on Instagram'), the results show that influencers are seen by the informants as the leading players, whose observations enable them to understand the competitive game on the platform. These young people interpret Instagram as a market for grabbing and retaining attention in which the accumulation of *likes* shows the position of the person within the social field (Lindell, 2017). In

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this way, the aspirational work (Duffy, 2017) carried out by the influencers to not only create content and narrate glamorous and desirable lives but also intimate ones (Abidin, 2017; Mavroudis, 2019) and to gain visibility and engagement (Cotter, 2019; Duffy, 2017; O'Meara, 2019) have given rise to a kind of narrative genre of identity.

In this way, and going back to O1 ('Know how to interpret the platform and what role the influencers have') and RQ1, the results show these young people tend to emulate these figures as a way of conforming to the Instagram *habitus* (Sandford & Quarmby, 2019) and to be recognised as authentic players. This genre poses a way to conceive of and present individual identity. This is based on producing an aspiration which is characterised by three points responding to O2 ('Describe how informants are shown on your profiles'). First, there is a clear preference to show oneself on the profile engaged in 'in-classifying' pursuits (Bourdieu, 2006), such as leisure and tastes for luxury (Abidin, 2016; Hurley, 2019; Marwick, 2015), and participants may even resort to bluff strategies (Bourdieu, 1998), such as the fake use of geolocalisation, the addition of aspirational hashtags (#talentocolombiano [#Colombiantalent]) and generally the overrepresentation of tastes for freedom in the identity narrative. In this respect, the results matched those from a study by Sandford and Quarmby (2019) in which young people were seen to use the potential the media has to express a *habitus* that on occasions differed from their actual conditions in the physical world.

Second, the informants admitted to taking great care in styling their profiles, preferably adopting a type of photography and gestures that echoed the clichés of *paparazzi* or 'unprepared' photography, as one of the students explained, and which generally had 'modelling' poses (Martínez, 2021). This preferred way of self-presentation is interpreted as a way of positioning oneself as famous players according to Instagram game rules and thus as recognised players. Producing this type of content entails tasks which affect the offline lives of these young people and transcends the new means of leisure, as Lasén (2012) puts it, with 'photography meet-ups.' Preparing oneself in case a photo 'arises' at any meet-up with friends or family requires, according to the informants, taking care of certain aspects of their appearance (make-up, wardrobe, etc.). Contrary to this type of image in which self-production markers are avoided, the selfie conveys a rhetoric of intimacy and access (Baishya, 2015; Frosh, 2015; Jurgensson, 2019) and goes on to temporary stories to portray a more private and intimate self. Posting selfies in stories also avoids the awkwardness of being considered as egocentric or insecure for posting them on the profile, which is something also detected by Harris and Bardey (2019). The informers, therefore, conform to visual rules by which permanent content reveals an aspirational identity while temporary content provides more banal content and has a more amateur appearance in order to recreate the backstage region (Goffman, 1999) and to convey authenticity. They thereby replicate the narrative strategy found by Mavroudis (2019) and Abidin (2017) in their studies on influencers.

The third characteristic aspect of this narrative genre is the normalisation of self-promotional discourse. In response to RQ2 ('Do the informants engage in activities to improve their positions on Instagram?'), 67.3% of the informants at certain times on their accounts used attention-seeking tactics. The most common tactics used tags: descriptive, attention-seeking (Abidin, 2014), exchanging visibility (Dumas *et al.*, 2017) or advertising, such as corporate tags. This shows the interest these young people have in improving their positions by means of the visibility game (Cotter, 2019). In addition, the use of different languages on their profiles reflects their desire to gain followers and interaction since they often use English or a combination of Spanish and English to express themselves. The marked frequency of this language in a Spanish-speaking sample indicates it is considered to be a lingua franca for social media. In the collective imaginary of the informants, the English-speaking world also has a cultural hegemony. This idea may be linked to the work by Brough, Literat and Ikin (2020), who stated that for young people in the Spanish-speaking world, information on their own cultural legacy was not valued content on social media.

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Moreover, and going back to RQ3 ('Do they conceive these tasks as work or as part of the fun in the media?'), informants found that the intangible work they do to keep their profiles up to date is lived as a playful experience but related to potential professional benefits in the future, especially among the Colombian sample. This may lead to the inference that their concern for not showing their most attractive side, for not reaching the visibility which would endorse them as recognised players and for the difficulties they have in keeping their personal preferences (not posting travel photos or showing photos in bathing costumes) is indeed detrimental to obtaining more *likes* and, therefore, improving their positions in the game.

Although most informants use the aspirational narrative described, all agree that the hypervisible players on Instagram are free to show themselves in ways that are different from how they themselves do. Decisions about how much they should post in one day, how much they should reveal of their bodies (especially in terms of nudity) or which business tactics they should use will either be praised or penalised by others in terms of their visibility status.

Moreover, the perception people have of Instagram as an open and global platform sometimes makes them feel too exposed. They respond to this with different self-surveillance strategies: previous consultation with their peers on WhatsApp before posting, deleting or filing profile posts –a practice observed in other studies (Almansa *et al.*, 2013; Duffy & Chan, 2019; Hermida & Hernández-Santaolalla, 2020; Jang *et al.*, 2015)– or by using secondary accounts (Duffy & Chan, 2019) which enable them to express a self that is adapted to specific audiences.

This work has shown that these influencers are pivotal to understanding how students in the creative industries field present themselves on Instagram and why they seek visibility and engage in certain in-classifying practices. It is clear that the rules of the game are identified in the same way by the Spanish and Colombians, although the latter appear to have an interpretation more focused on future benefits for their careers. From this point onwards, one of the most important points to discover is what effect does performance have on identity by virtue of constant involvement in this competitive game and the engagement in an aspirational and promotional discourse beyond Instagram: in short, how does its use affect the definition of an imaginative horizon for what the contemporary subject must or must not be.

6. Limitations and future lines of research

The general findings and conclusions from the results of this work are limited by the specific nature of the sample. In this respect, it would be interesting to replicate the research with other students in other areas as well as with non-university young people in order to find out whether they perceive the Instagram *habitus* the same way and if they are involved in this type of aspirational work. Likewise, and going back to the new questions that have arisen from the research, the suitability of longitudinal studies should be considered as a means to enable the assessment of the impact of social media in the medium and long term on how users conceive individual identity.

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