

Peruvian influencers, media citizenship and their social role in the context of COVID-19

Influencers peruanos, ciudadanía mediática y su rol social en el contexto del COVID-19

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32870/cys.v2022.8218>

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The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the digital public sphere considerably, causing influencers to reflect on their work and social responsibilities. Users and virtual communities have articulated the need for information to be provided to them on informal political spaces characterized by the coexistence of leisure and entertainment activities. This exploratory qualitative study is based on in-depth interviews of 13 Peruvian influencers with varying levels of influence and hailing from different regions. Such an exploration facilitates an understanding of the influencers' coping strategies in this scenario as well as their perspectives as media citizens. We conclude that the relationship between influencers and their communities can assume high levels of civility and social commitment in a critical context; such a relationship is further enhanced by means of content that integrates information and entertainment.

KEYWORDS: Influencers, content creators, Peru, COVID-19, citizenship.

La pandemia provocada por el COVID-19 impactó la esfera pública digital y obligó a los influencers a reflexionar sobre su agencia y rol social. Los usuarios y comunidades virtuales ampliaron su demanda informativa hacia espacios políticos informales donde conviven prácticas vinculadas al ocio y al entretenimiento. Este estudio exploratorio de tipo cualitativo está basado en entrevistas a profundidad a 13 influencers peruanos de distintos alcances y temáticas con la finalidad de comprender su proceso de adaptación en este escenario y sus perspectivas como ciudadanos mediáticos. Se concluye que la relación entre los influencers y sus comunidades puede adquirir un nuevo sentido de mayor compromiso cívico y social en un contexto crítico, aportando valor a partir de contenidos que complementan la información y el entretenimiento.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Influencers, creadores de contenido, Perú, COVID-19, ciudadanía.

How to cite:

Mateus, J.-C., Leon, L. & Núñez-Alberca, A. (2022). Peruvian influencers, media citizenship and their social role in the context of COVID-19. *Comunicación y Sociedad*, e8218. <https://doi.org/10.32870/cys.v2022.8218>

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Submitted: 06/30/21. Accepted: 10/08/21. Published: 02/09/22.

INTRODUCTION

Although the classic Habermasian view of the public sphere is based on rational deliberation as a form of participation in political life, this rationality is mediated by digital platforms today; therefore, it is intermingled with activities linked to leisure and entertainment. Such transformation has been fostered by virtual social media, a space wherein the reception and generation of messages and “drills of the self” provides a considerable sense of power to the user (Leone, 2019). In this sense, the current digital culture has obliterated social participation barriers that had been introduced by the need to maintain a formal social conduct. Furthermore, this digital culture unveils potential political agents in *content creators*, whose productions (through memes, videos, stories, etc.) have the ability to influence the public sphere (Burgess et al., 2006).

However, according to Fuchs (2021), the development of this new digital public sphere comprising influential platforms and opaque algorithms distorts the open processes of democratic deliberation and leads to disinformation, together with the creation of bubble filters and a deeply individualistic culture characterized by content production and consumption. From the Habermasian perspective, Fuchs observes that digital media platforms have alienated, colonialized, and feudalized public debate. Thus, in this context, it is important to explore content creators’ perspectives, particularly in the face of the current global crisis.

According to Mendoza (2020), “social networks are redefining the concept of citizenship” (p. 8); consequently, the digital public sphere must be considered an evolving concept in response to the unprecedented crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Today, there is an increasing demand among citizens for informal political spaces wherein interests are realized and opinions formed, particularly among the younger generations. This social media space has emerged as the primary source of information for citizens (Carr, 2021).

In this article, we explore this phenomenon from the perspectives of Peruvian influencers. We shall particularly explore their ideas pertaining to their sociopolitical responsibilities in the context of the pandemic and in terms of the concept of media citizenship.

FROM CONTENT CREATORS TO INFLUENCERS

The term “content creator” is used to refer to cultural producers who create and disseminate information on social media platforms. The factors and motivations driving this creation can be defined in multiple ways. According to Craig (2019), content creators are motivated by an entrepreneurial spirit and the desire to establish their own brands. Abidin (2016) states that these individuals are ordinary users who accumulate a “relatively large” number of followers with whom they share personal stories. In this process, these users end up monetizing their content by integrating advertisements and opinions. According to Ki and Kim (2019), the goal of influencers is to strengthen the relationships between captive communities following these influencers and companies or brands that hire them. This process does not always translate into contracts aimed at the closure of sales; it also facilitates image creation and management of a brand, organization, product, or service.

In this article, we view content creators as Internet users producing or disseminating information through social media platforms. In contrast, we use the term “influencers” for content creators who 1) produce their own material; 2) have a community of varying numbers of followers; and 3) have achieved sufficient credibility to serve as potential agents of change (Okuah et al., 2019).

In this context, the followers of content creators establish virtual communities with which they interact and whose participation is important for the success of the communication process. The influence of these content creators is not determined by the number of followers they have but in terms of the stable relationships that they establish with their community (Zimmermann et al., 2020) as well as the image that the influencers present of themselves to their audiences. Such an image may correspond to certain degrees with their offline personalities (Leone, 2019).

In this unprecedented lockdown situation prevalent in several countries due to COVID-19, the markets for goods and services have undergone tremendous changes; moreover, the demand for information and digital consumption is growing, and content creators are faced with

new challenges in a scenario characterized by poorly regulated digital platforms (Becerra & Waisbord, 2021). One such responsibility is to satisfy consumers' needs based on values such as responsibility and commitment to change (Launchmetrics, 2020).

Some recent works explore adaptation processes under such circumstances. For example, Arriagada and Ibáñez (2020) concluded that, in Chile, content creators feel compelled to understand these changes, adapt their activities to this new ecology, and develop competitive strategies to ensure the success of their activities. The characteristics of digital platforms are not viewed merely as technical factors; rather, they require essential reflection and production activities to be successful among users. Another study in Spain analyzed the changes of Instagram influencers in quarantine and concluded a positive implication in promoting adherence to lockdown rules. However, it revealed a tussle between having to develop sensitive and socially responsible content and reflecting an awareness of "the need to maintain a normality that allows them to maintain their contact with the public and, above all, their influence on it" (Torres-Romay & García-Mirón, 2020, p. 90).

INFLUENCERS IN QUARANTINE: ADAPTATIONS AND CHANGES

Peru was one of the first countries to mandate a lockdown for all of its citizens. Despite the negative economic effects of such an absolute lockdown, this unprecedented situation accelerated digital transformation. Internet access in the country among individuals aged six and above rose by approximately 6.3% during the pandemic, compared to the percentage reported in 2019 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática [INEI], 2020). This statistic implies that a total of about 13.2 million users had been active on social networks during this time. In Lima, 78.5% individuals were found to be Internet users, whereas in rural areas, the percentage of Internet users was 23.8%.

Facebook is the most used social media platform among users (94%), followed by WhatsApp (86%), YouTube (62%), and Instagram (60%). According to a study conducted during the quarantine, as of October 2020, over 70% of Instagram users were aged 18-34. Moreover, TikTok had become the most emerging platform (18%) (Ipsos, 2020).

The growing use of digital media during the first phase of the COVID-19 quarantine increased to almost three hours. Furthermore, a 2% increase was observed in terms of the number of social media posts and a tenfold increase was noted with regard to online sales (Pasquali, 2020). Social media users searched for fun, inspiration, and information, setting an ideal stage for the establishment and growth of influencers. In terms of the number of followers or communities gained by these Peruvian influencers, as of May 2020, there were almost 70 000 *nanoinfluencers* (with up to 10 000 followers); nearly 4 000 *microinfluencers* (10 000 to 50 000 followers); 592 *mid-level influencers* (50 000 to 200 000 followers); 218 *macro-influencers* (200 000 to 1 000 000 followers); and 53 *mega-influencers* (with over a million followers) (Influency, as cited in Statista, 2020).

Thus, Peruvian influencers found a suitable avenue owing to the diversity and number of users. Many companies began increasing the digital advertising spends of their brands on social media, and the monetization of platforms began to gain momentum (Statista, 2018a). A recent study estimated that there are over half a million active influencers on Instagram; over one-third of these influencers have 15 000-plus followers. Globally, in 2018 alone, 5.6 billion dollars were invested in influencer marketing (InfluencerDB, as cited in Statista, 2018a). Instagram has emerged as one of the fastest growing social networks wherein the monthly active users had increased from 100 million in 2013 to one billion in 2018 (Statista, 2018b).

In the context of the pandemic, many of these influencers experienced important changes. For instance, on the business front, the loss of contracts resulted in economic uncertainty; from a social perspective, new demands from followers caused them to change their discourses and incorporate topics of political interest.⁴ Among other foreseeable

⁴ In the Peruvian context, in addition to the pandemic crisis, there have been times of turbulence and political confusion since 2020, including changes of governments and a particularly polarized electoral process. In this scenario, many young people began establishing their political identities. Furthermore, many influencers perceived a sense of responsibility to vocalize regardless of the type of content that they produced. These content

consequences, “in addition to the ability to adapt to the new scenario, a more genuine and personal communicative story allowing a more authentic connection with the demanding community of Instagrammers will be required” (Castelló, 2020, p. 117).

EXERCISING MEDIA CITIZENSHIP

Authors such as Flusser (2017) warned about the emergence of a form of socialization that increasingly relies on the exchange of information through screens as well as the development of visual and audiovisual content, including videos, photographs, animations, memes, live streams, gifs, and podcasts. Furthermore, Couldry and Hepp (2017) observe that social media has emerged as a platform for social representation. Thus, the mediated nature of our relationships defines a level of dependence that also affects the establishment of citizens’ perceptions and identities. According to Frankenberg (2007), “considering the influence of media in individuals’ daily lives, the habits and tastes of media consumers condition their ability to become citizens” (p. 16).

Flusser (2017) believes that this upheaval of mass media culture on social media must be accompanied by a political commitment, i.e., a shift in our perception of these platforms as facilitating self-reflection as opposed to relegating us to passive users. In this sense, it is clear that we are dealing with a leap from the figure of the subject to the figure of the agent that has been socially and politically constituted in media citizenship. The primary mode of interaction and content creation for such an agent is dialogue with other users through screens. Such dialogue enables greater capacity among agents to control their communication with respect to the message being conveyed during its production and reception (Leone, 2019). According to Lochar and Boyer (2004), this dialogue also instills a sense of competence that must be valued. Thus, the powers, responsibilities, and rights of media agents in the platform on which the content is developed and created must be assumed carefully with a consideration of the power enjoyed by these

creators having failed to address the prevalent political issues lost thousands of followers; however, the ones having addressed such issues had to face confrontations and threats from radical mobs (Ledgard, 2021).

agents that culminates (or should culminate) into the responsibilities that they shoulder (Lochard & Boyer, 2004).

Although there exists a theoretical approach to the media's social responsibility (van Dijck et al., 2018), the field of digital citizenship –wherein the citizens play the role of producers– is more or less recent and has not been widely theorized, particularly considering that the differentiating factor between the business and community purposes of digital platforms is blurred. As argued by Burgess and Green (2009), regardless of the initial objectives driving companies to establish their presence on social media, the agency of social media users may ultimately redefine their objectives, steering companies toward community-based, civic objectives. However, according to Polizzi (2021), the commencement of activities in a civic manner requires actors to develop critical content interpretation skills as well as an understanding of the political and economic implications of the digital scenario within which they operate. In this context, UNESCO promotes an understanding of contemporary citizenship linked to exercising the universal rights of information, expression, and opinion based on its model of Media and Information Literacy (AMI). In the absence of such education, citizens become vulnerable and more likely to see our democratic exercise undermined (Grizzle et al., 2021).

In this regard, in a study conducted before the pandemic, Pereira et al. (2018) pointed out that in influencer content typically lacked the consideration of several aspects, including a reflection of local, national, and global issues as well as positive contributions and commitment to social causes and citizen ideals. Such commitment toward these aspects is necessary in the modern context. The authors reflected on the role of these opinion leaders in establishing an awareness of social and political issues. In other terms, the establishment of such awareness may be perceived as an *ethical challenge* (Jenkins et al., 2006).

Consequently, it is essential to study the extent to which the creation and consumption of content produced by influencers in social media constitutes new forms of civic participation among adolescents and young individuals. According to Lange (2014), it is important to explore the ways in which each generation develops its unique *civic style*. Through the recognition of the utility and implications of social media among its users, particularly among young persons, it is important to

consider “a new ontology of citizenship that is now formed from the textual: media citizenship” (Frankenberg, 2007, p. 13). According to García-Ruiz and Pérez-Escoda (2019), the objective of this citizenship is “to increase citizens’ awareness of the messages that surround us, promoting active and critical citizenship in today’s society” (p. 10).

Therefore, the current media ecosystem requires consistency between idea of citizenship and “the emerging needs and the context entailing several discursive possibilities... The concept of autonomous citizenship is created and proliferated in this sociocommunicative framework; it transcends the limits of such adjectives to emerge as media citizenship” (Aguaded & Caldeiro-Pedreira, 2017, p. 11). This study considers the experience of Peruvian influencers to evaluate the extent to which this sense of media citizenship may be developing in the atypical context of COVID-19. It seeks to answer the following questions: Are influencers considered political actors? Do they assume any form of leadership or influence over their followers? Have they had to incorporate topics of social interest? How do their community relationships change?

METHODOLOGY

The present work is the result of an exploratory study entailing a qualitative approach that seeks to delve into the perceptions and experiences of individuals comprising the study sample (Leon & Mateus, 2021). To this end, a guide containing semistructured questions and focusing on the opinion of the interviewees regarding the specific objectives of the study was developed. These specific objectives entailed understanding the interviewees’ perceptions of their responsibilities as influencers in society, together with the changes to and resistance in their production practices and content during the pandemic.

PARTICIPANTS

Owing to the content creators’ low interest levels in participating in academic research, coupled with the difficulties posed by COVID-19 in a country that was most affected by the pandemic at the time of

this study's conduction, the sample selection process for this study was conducted by means of the convenience sampling technique. In terms of the selection criteria, we sought to approach content creators regardless of their genders; the selection process was based on the content creators' involvement with specific types of content –such as education, comedy, and technology– as well as on the time period for which they had been on the platform and the number of followers that they had (see Table 1). These criteria served to reflect the heterogeneity of content creators in Peru. Details on the final group comprising 13 influencers have been provided in Table 1, which specifies the number of followers on the most important platform in each case.

PROCEDURE

The interviews took place between September and December 2020. These interviews were recorded upon the procurement of authorization from the participants through informed consent. The responses were transcribed and coded in the Atlas.ti software. Structural coding corresponding to the focal points of the study and the variables or specific research topics was initially applied. These focal points comprised the influencers' opinions on their social responsibilities and the ways in which these responsibilities had changed during the pandemic. Furthermore, such analysis fueled cross-sectional questions pertaining to the nature of the relationship that these influencers maintained with their audiences. Finally, thematic analysis was conducted to categorize the obtained data into broader emerging themes encompassing the experiences and perceptions of the agents (Saldaña, 2009).

RESULTS

The social role of influencers

All of the influencers having been interviewed recognized, to some extent, their power to influence people; however, some of these influencers preferred to refer to themselves as “content creators” or “cyberactivists”. Influencers who recognized their influential power to a lesser extent view such power as a natural consequence of their work:

TABLE 1
SAMPLE OF INFLUENCERS INTERVIEWED

No.	Influencer (channel name)	Gender	Number of followers and main platform	Type of influencer	Type of content	Link
1	Marco Loret de Mola (MatLab)	M	110K (YouTube)	Medium	Educational	https://bit.ly/3iDIKEY
2	Fabrizio Crudo (Dr. Fit)	M	83K (Instagram)	Medium	Wellness	https://bit.ly/2TYxe8B
3	Jorge Talavera	M	114K (Instagram)	Medium	Comedy	https://bit.ly/3gsiat
4	Mateo Garrido Lecca	M	290K (Instagram)	Macro	Comedy	https://bit.ly/35oMkXy
5	proximaparada.pe (Ana Marcela Suella)	F	53.8K (Instagram)	Medium	Travel	https://bit.ly/3gtHfCf
6	Angela Orrego (Empo- deradamente)	F	55.1K (Instagram)	Medium	Activism	https://bit.ly/3iFcBZA
7	Ana Lucía Mosquera	F	11K (Instagram)	Micro	Activism	https://bit.ly/3gJxJ5V

8	Daniella Acosta	F	104K (YouTube)	Medium	Fashion	https://bit.ly/3pOzNWB
9	Fátima Sotomayor y Daniela Cabrera (Misiones pero viajeras)	F	695K (YouTube)	Macro	Travel	https://bit.ly/3ghN4np
10	Francisco Landa (Franda)	M	1.13M (YouTube)	Mega	Parodies	https://bit.ly/3pOevsg
11	Aldo Barra (El robot de Platón)	M	2.97M (YouTube)	Mega	Educational	https://bit.ly/35uoDgF
12	Paola Gallegos (Calligraphic)	F	520K (Instagram)	Macro	Creative	https://bit.ly/3gINtFm
13	Ronald Heredia (No la mamá)	M	22.2K (Instagram)	Micro	Parenthood	https://bit.ly/3iQHtqb

Source: The authors.

“My goal is not to be an influencer, it is to create a career wherein I can speak about and explain what feminism is, gender issues in the country, in the region, and in the world”, says Angela Orrego.

This power to influence people imposes on influencers a set of responsibilities that are initially associated with their professional roles, including the production of valuable content based on specific topics. However, eventually, this power begins being associated with their agencies as media citizens, including looking for valid and reliable sources for their communities.

Being consulted on specific issues and being prepared to respond are two integral responsibilities of influencers. Aldo Bartra, one of the most eminent science communicators in the Spanish-speaking world, has assumed ownership of the war against disinformation by refuting, when appropriate, “the WhatsApp chats (which are taken seriously only by aunts and old men) as well as the Facebook or Twitter videos that went viral” that he received from members of his community in the form of professional scrutiny.

The majority of interviewees believed that influencers should begin from a premise of social responsibility, whereas a minority (i.e., four influencers) stated that they did not believe so or that they were unsure, adding that, in any case, the level of social responsibility depended on the channel and the type of content being produced as well as the unique requirements of each influencer’s online community.

At this point, they believed that it was advisable not to take a specific position on any issue. They added that notwithstanding requests from their communities, influencers must act as specialists and should vocalize only on certain issues. One such statement is as follows: I don’t think everyone should be involved in everything, because I feel like it would be more of the same... I feel like there is a responsibility, a comedian or actor must be professional (Jorge Talavera).

Those who did not subscribe to this demand qualified it on the side of autonomy, believing that influencers determined their roles, their spaces on the Internet, and the nature of their content. They also reflected on their position in the media ecosystem: “Everyone defines their role in terms of their personality, I don’t think it’s right to demand something from them. Everyone has their space and their vision”, says Franda.

Aldo Barta believes that in the modern context, young individuals occupy a different media space where they acquire information, form their opinions, and interact with others. In this scenario, influencers replace traditional media for these purposes. Along the same lines, Loret de Mola believes that the presence of “digital leaders” to whom millions of followers subscribe to formulate their world views should be discussed.

However, in addition to providing information, influencers also act as entertainers, which is one of their essential responsibilities: “People also need to be entertained, they need to have fun with other things, free their minds. But I believe that (the influencers) have to somehow contribute something” (Mateo Garrido Lecca).

To this extent, influencers can naturally combine both facets (i.e., providing information and entertaining their audiences) because the two aspects are linked closely. An example of a similar opinion held by one such influencer is as follows:

My role is to create comedic content and make people laugh, de-stress from their daily lives. And the other is to raise awareness: this can be related to rallies (civic demonstrations) or political crises, like the ones now (referring to a political crisis in Peru that occurred at the time of the interview), or due to femicides or abuse against women (Franda).

Corresponding to the observations drawn in terms of the specialization of influencers, the study found that the majority of influencers produce content revolving around specific topics; through such content, they fulfill their responsibilities of disseminating information. Among the influencers interviewed, those having larger communities of followers were highly aware of their responsibilities and the potential impact of their messages. This awareness is demonstrated as follows:

We are the number one travel reference source in Peru... Here, we have the duty and responsibility to communicate, we have an audience that depends on us, and making this video can affect the safety not only of our follower, but the other passengers on that plane (Misias pero viajeras).

This sense of awareness prevails regardless of the sizes of the communities that the influencers have built (i.e., medium or small-sized). Jorge Talavera, an influencer with a medium-sized community, believes that “all those who have the opportunity to influence a group of people have a moral obligation to do good”; while Ronald Heredia, micro-influencer, insists that the influencers must be careful: “You can give your opinion or your perspective on a topic, but if you’re not well informed, you have to think about the fact that you have a considerable number of followers who are going to be misinformed”.

Finally, influencer channels can serve as spaces for discussion based on the topic and type of interaction generated among channel users: “A content creator must listen to the community and give them information about what they are looking to obtain” (Dr. Fit), so “they have to take the time to evaluate, identify what type of people follow them, and as a result of that define their niche” (Paola Gallegos).

CHANGES AND RESISTANCE DURING THE PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic has landed influencers in a uniquely complex situation. In the face of the uncertainties characterized by the COVID-19 pandemic, several interviewees believed that they had become important references for their communities. As a result, their responsibilities described in the previous section increase considerably. These changes have also affected their habits and routines in terms of producing content. They have had to adapt or create new content production strategies to respond to unprecedented and uncertain situations such as the lockdown. For example, content creators having previously relied on onsite production (outside a closed recording studio) began depending on onsite production even more.

During the initial stages of COVID-19, most interviewees began producing content to raise awareness in their communities about the importance of preventing infection, including providing information about the most critical forms of care and drawing from close experiences, some of which were rather painful. For example, the channel owned by Franda, a mega-influencer dedicated to comedy and parody content, entailed such content. His video clip *Adentro* (FrandaPerú, 2020) drew

attention to the indifferent behavior of people regarding the crisis. Frada stated that he created this video after the death of a beloved family member; this video went on to become viral, garnering thousands of views and comments on his various social networks:

[I made] stream of consciousness content on how my grandfather, without having had people go out to parties or exposing himself, still got infected. And I had to experience first-hand how the hospitals were over their capacity, so the shock that this caused me made me create this second video. To increase awareness of what I had seen, to make them believe the news because it's real (Franda).

Mateo Garrido Lecca, a macroinfluencer dedicated to entertainment, created content called *Corona Profe*: “It was something I decided to do, (because) in my own family, the issue of quarantine, the pandemic, and care was not really respected”. In the case of *Misias pero viajeras*, their followers initially did not believe in the seriousness of the budding situation and had to stand corrected soon after:

We researched more, a lot of information came out, we realized that it was something dangerous... we said “Okay, we said this, but it wasn't like that, we're sorry, now that we are more informed we know that it's something serious and we're going to give you information on prevention” (*Misias pero viajeras*).

One of the most intensive formats was the conversation with guests (peers or specialists) through *live streaming*. This format requires additional preparation: “It was a wonderful, tiring experience, and also negatively charged because I watched the news every day, I tried to be informed, depending on who I was going to interview” (Mateo Garrido Lecca).

This story also reveals the importance of this dialogue when expressing relevant information as well as translating it into new information that is more accessible and understandable for the influencer's virtual communities. For instance, Mateo Garrido Lecca states: “Sometimes, experts get very technical and want to show

everything they know, and you have to know how to present it on your channel, because I'm still an entertainment platform". For example, in the case of travel, content was created to employ a simple strategy to educate people about the new protocols established by the government:

(So that) people can easily understand it, because they're not going to read the rules from *El Peruano* (the newspaper where the official regulations are published), people normally don't pay attention to the advisories from Jorge Chávez (airport), they don't even stop to take a good look at them, so... we decided to... make a video of what airport departure and entry was like, in the most digestible way possible (Misias pero viajeros).

Angela Orrego converted her channel to a support space for the prevention of domestic violence during the lockdown. Orrego had already set up this online space for her followers prior to the quarantine; however, during the lockdown, she managed to reach out to a larger number of individuals as a result of the live-streaming interactions. Ultimately, Orrego had to pause this activity due to the emotional burden that it imposed on her.

In contrast, for professionals hailing from other areas and who had no training or experience as communicators, the pandemic provided an opportunity to stand out by means of their personal brands and recognize their responsibilities in the media ecosystem:

Since people are more concerned because their health is at stake, doctors and health professionals in general have assumed a much more leading role... if you don't have Instagram now, you don't exist. Because people want to know who you are outside the service (or a recommendation) that you can offer (Dr. Fit).

Ronald Heredia made a similar statement on the responsibilities and opportunities that this situation has provided for his channel:

The pandemic started and I found it interesting to talk about Mapa19, which is an application where you go in and see who needs support. Then, there are topics like work and social support, and I thought it was cool. This is how I found “The Ronald McDonald House”, where I am now an ambassador and I communicate the work they have been doing (Ronald Heredia).

Other interviewees such as Paola Gallegos agreed that the pandemic was a personal opportunity to redefine their interests: “Many (influencers)... have taken advantage of the pandemic to discover themselves and refocus on what they really like and that has translated into changing their content”.

Although Aldo Bartra’s approach entails the provision of scientific information, he managed to bring about considerable dynamism in his approach. Because his audience was keen on learning more about him, he sought to share a “more intimate” space through live streams on Twitch: “I would take out my guitar, start singing and it worked, connecting with people like I had never done before”.

As a result of their inability to travel extensively during the pandemic, Misias pero viajaras utilized this time to bring about several innovations to their content. They began supporting entrepreneurs, helping them formalize their businesses: “The pandemic left you without insurance, without severance pay, it’s important that you have some ‘guarantees’”. In addition, they sought to promote healthy habits:

A day hospitalized in a clinic can cost you 1 500 soles (approximately 400 US dollars), if you stay for 10 days it is 15 000 soles. We wanted to keep our community as far away from the clinic as possible. So we involved our nutritionist, we showed our exercise routines. All to raise awareness about the importance of staying healthy (Daniela, Misias Pero Viajeras).

Daniella Acosta, an influencer dedicated to fashion and with a medium-sized online community, was considered “the queen of Gamarra” (the most important commerce center in Peru). During COVID-19, Acosta had to rethink the strategies that may be used on her digital media platform; ultimately, she collated a content “calendar” wherein she discussed the importance of organization and cleaning

to prevent COVID-19. Through such activities, she aimed to continue providing useful information that could support her followers.

Some influences introduced changes to their content based on a study of the social trends and interests of their followers prior to the pandemic, which has not prevented this awareness and, instead, seems to have been complemented by followers' immediate demands to know more:

Now I see the importance of social awareness, planet awareness, health, it's overflowing on the social networks... Educational content, such as growing on social networks, they talk about financial intelligence (they had 10 000 followers and now they have 100 000), about how to save (Daniella Acosta).

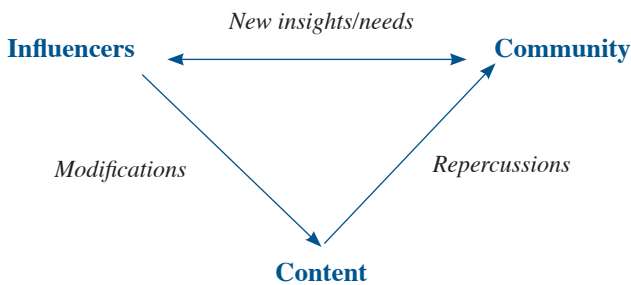
The responses were mixed in terms of the assessment of other influencers' performance. Ana Marcela Suella notes more content creators have been addressing social concerns during the pandemic. However, Ana Lucía Mosquera clearly disagrees with this notion, particularly highlighting the apathy among the most popular influencers: "they have continued to live as if nothing happened, they have been irresponsible with some things that have happened". Mosquera, who deals with social issues such as racism, criticizes the performative activism of some professional colleagues. In some cases, brands and influencers touch upon trending social issues (such as the murder of George Floyd in the United States) and participate in trending initiatives corresponding to the social issue in question (such as posting a black profile image in support of George Floyd) without creating spaces for greater reflection.

DISCUSSION

Before the pandemic, Peruvian influencers had already been concerned with regard to their content and its impact on the community, implying their awareness of their social roles. In this sense, the ethical challenge posed by Jenkins et al. (2006) unearths a material reality pertaining to the relationship that exists between influencers' perceptions of their communities, community requirements, and the content that the influencers create for their followers.

Although the relationship between influencers, communities, and content can be strategic and focused purely on the commercial sphere, it assumes a greater sense of civic and social commitment in scenarios such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Burgess & Green, 2009). This finding contributes to providing an explanation for the critical perspective toward a digital public sphere alienated from public concerns and deliberation (Fuchs, 2021). The following diagram (Figure 1) establishes a system of elements and links confirmed in the interviews of the influencers. This system explains the impact of a singular context, such as the one described in this work.

FIGURE 1
INFLUENCER RELATIONSHIP SYSTEM



Source: The authors.

This reality depends neither on the number of followers that an influencer has (as this system held for micro as well as mega-influencers) nor on the type of specialized content that the influencer creates (fashion, travel, science and technology, activism, etc.). The pandemic context pushed influencers to reflect even more deeply on their social responsibilities; consequently, the nature of their content underwent changes. Sometimes, the influencers carried out such changes because they were unable to continue with their usual content (as was the case with influencers creating content on tourism). Thus, a change in content served as a strategy to deal with *fake news* (as was the case with scientific promoter Aldo Bartra) or a response to their

realization of people's lack of concern with regard to the dangers of the virus (as comedians Mateo Garrido Lecca and Franda pointed out). This finding coincides with the those of studies conducted in Chile and Spain in that influencers perceive and vary their content based on relevant changes while taking care not to distance themselves too much from the conventional content that has helped them establish their online communities (Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020; Torres-Romay & García-Mirón, 2020).

There exists a professional conviction that influencers' content must add value to their communities and that the entertainment and information dimensions are complementary. Thus, some influencers opted to present socially relevant information in a more accessible language, whereas other influencers believed that the saturation of negative news from their users required them avoid neglecting their roles as entertainers. Some influencers chose to integrate both of these trends as a way to safeguard users from information overload, anxiety, and depression caused by the pandemic. This strategy aligns with Carr's (2021) assessment of the informational practices of younger users and confirms a trend observed in other Spanish-speaking countries, i.e., ensuring the integration of one's usual content with the new informational requirements without having to sacrifice one for the benefit of the other (Torres-Romay & García-Mirón, 2020). In short, there exists a sense of awareness among influencers in terms of their roles as media agents in an increasingly digital ecosystem, which dispenses with traditional mass media but introduces the challenge of self-regulation in a space wherein the classic canon of the free market of messages requires urgent reinterpretation (Becerra & Waisbord, 2021).

Therefore, it may be inferred that the pandemic has caused many Peruvian influencers to become increasingly involved with their respective communities. As stated by García-Ruiz et al. (2014), citizens expect prosumers to recognize their responsibilities within the spectrum of the social and political forces coexistent in digital environments. Furthermore, at times, users expect that the prosumers leverage such roles during specific situations to reach out to their followers. However, there also exists a need to correlate these media activities of users

with a more utopian or dystopian understanding of the opportunities offered by the Internet for expression and deliberation (Polizzi, 2021). The sustainability of these adaptations and shifts towards the social realm must also be evaluated, particularly considering the dysfunctions created by digital capitalism (Fuchs, 2021). In this sense, it would also be appropriate to understand whether the interactions between the users of these communities have an impact on the development of their media and informational capabilities, which are perceived as enabling focal points for the exercise of citizenship in line with UNESCO's proposal (Grizzle et al., 2021).

The importance of dialogue, which is the cornerstone of a democracy, finds new force in the midst of the pandemic in the form of the interactions between influencers and their communities. The correspondence between the interests of users or channel followers and influencers' offerings through their content can be determined in a fairly deliberative space, i.e., in the Habermasian style, which complements the deliberative spaces of traditional media without threatening its existence. This socialization strategy assumes the exchange of content in the form of an extensive media dialogue entailing responses to communities having particular desires, requirements, and responsibilities. Such dialogues reiterate the potential of digital media to establish a sense of belonging and civic responsibility, which can eventually translate into a consideration of political issues (Flusser, 2017).

Thus, influencers' practices typically integrate political involvement and civic responsibility in an intermediate space wherein one can expect the activities and attitudes on digital media to have some impact on the social sphere even in situations wherein influencers' reach is reduced to the confines of their virtual communities.

In terms of the limitations of this work, a future study incorporating content analysis, i.e., a consideration influencers' scope and perceptions of their work, is suggested. Such a study must align influencers' scope and work-related perceptions with empirical content on their media content production. Moreover, the study must intend to identify the possible biases in agents' self-perceptions.

Other limitations of this study include the limited sample size and the instabilities prevalent in Peru during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, when this study was conducted. It remains to be studied whether these links between content creators and communities are sustainable and have emerged as alternative modes of sociopolitical participation but with new characteristics. “Nonpolitical” social media content entailing inadvertent political repercussions must also be explored. The analysis of digital interactions before and in the face of the pandemic facilitates the differentiation of causes from consequences and enables the evaluation of the unexpected effects of the messages being conveyed by online content beyond their explicit thematic categories.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors thank Crimson Interactive Pvt. Ltd. (Enago) for their assistance in manuscript translation and editing.

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