Animal Welfare on Instagram: Trends and Public Discourse of Uruguayan Eco-Influencers[1]

Bienestar animal en Instagram: tendencias y discurso de eco-influencers uruguayos

Bem-estar animal no Instagram: tendências e discurso dos ecoinfluenciadores uruguaios

VICTORIA GÓMEZ MÁRQUEZ[2]
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4015-3776
CAROLINA GARZÓN DÍAZ[3]
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3093-8174

Multimodal discourse analysis was conducted on a sample of 200 Instagram posts, wherein 17 Uruguayan eco-influencers engaged with the evolving discourse surrounding animal welfare over the course of one year of social media activity. The study identified a predominant discourse of protectionism advocating for the conservation of wild animals, coupled with a notable emphasis on consumer action. Thus, the findings contribute to the understanding of the terms in which new influential voices in new digital contexts express themselves about these topics.

KEYWORDS: Influencers, animal welfare, public discourse, social network sites.

Se realiza análisis del discurso multimodal en las publicaciones de un año (n = 200) de 17 eco-influencers uruguayos en Instagram, con énfasis en los posts que abordan la agenda emergente del bienestar animal. Así, se encuentra un predominio del discurso del proteccionismo en defensa de animales silvestres y un foco en la acción de los consumidores. El estudio contribuye a la comprensión de los términos en los que nuevos actores influyentes en nuevos contextos digitales se expresan sobre estas temáticas.
PALABRAS CLAVE: Influencers, bienestar animal, discurso público, redes sociales.

A análise multimodal do discurso é realizada em postagens de um ano (n = 200) de 17 ecoinfluenciadores uruguaios no Instagram, com ênfase em postagens que abordam a agenda emergente do bem-estar animal. Assim, há predomínio do discurso do protecionismo em defesa dos animais silvestres e foco na ação do consumidor. O estudo contribui para a compreensão dos termos em que novos atores influentes em novos contextos digitais se expressam sobre estes temas.
PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Influenciadores, bem-estar animal, discurso público, redes sociais.

INTRODUCTION

The analysis of public discourse affords the opportunity to track the evolution of societal values and traditions, while also enabling the identification of emergent or problematic issues. The consolidation of a network society (Castells, 2013), together with the interpretations of media as not being consumed, rather than "living within" it (Deuze, 2012), imposes the need to look at a new scenario where discourses unfold: the digital public sphere (Keane, 1995).

The massification of digital social media amplifies and multiplies the possibilities for citizen expression while compartmentalizing the public agenda: citizens-users have an audience for their discourse and those of other people on the platforms, and at the same time can select which messages they expose themselves to and react critically to others in a logic of active audience (Fiske, 1987; Stuart Hall, 1980). Undoubtedly, this new communicational environment produces remarkable consequences on public debates around values: in a short period, the enunciators, the utterances, the social situations of enunciation, and the possibility of recording utterances have multiplied (Cannata, 2016).

The debate on animal rights and animal subjectivity has become entrenched and expanded within mainstream Western culture over the past 15 years (Centro de Estudios en Comunicación Aplicada [CECAP], 2019). Animal welfare is depicted as an emerging sensitive agenda, one of these "latent or incipient social trends whose development will redound on important reconfigurations within relationships, structures, and institutions, typically consolidating a process of social change that activates a new system of consensus and dissensus and, in turn, new moral judgment paradigms" (CECAP, 2019, p. 2).

The emerging animal welfare agenda has been especially propelled by the younger population (Severo et al., 2019), who tend to associate it with another emerging agenda: the broader environmental cause and climate activism in particular (Brereton & Gómez, 2020; Gómez, 2021).

It has been observed how globally influential figures, such as activist Greta Thunberg, effectively shape public discourse (Erviti Ilundáin et al., 2023) and engage young audiences through consistent calls to action on social media platforms (Sabherwal et al., 2021). Her messages include advocating openly for a plant-based diet instead of

animal meat production as a means to combat climate change (Thunberg & Mustill, 2021). This adds to the scrutiny of lifestyles in the context of anti-speciesism or animalism by activist organizations (Méndez, 2016). All of these discourses resonate with their audiences of followers: it has been observed that exposure to proveganism messages, specifically on Instagram, predicts a greater intention to become vegan (Phua et al., 2020).

Without necessarily constituting social organizations, other opinion leaders emerge and are cultivated within the digital realm –microcelebrities (Marwick, 2015)– or use their fame gained on other stages of entertainment culture inside it –ecocelebrities (Brockington, 2009)– to champion environmental causes to the point of provoking behaviors (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022) and to promote the animal welfare agenda in particular (Amico et al., 2020). Uruguay also follows this trend, with locally recognized figures referred to as eco-influencers (Bentley et al., 2021; San Cornelio et al., 2021) on platforms such as Instagram: ecocelebrities, ecoactivists, and ecoprofessionals, more precisely (Garzón & Gómez Márquez, 2023). In regards to these new actors, scientific production remains scarce, particularly concerning the Latin American region, thus justifying the need to begin exploring this terrain and providing evidence to broaden the discussion.

Audiences of these influencers on Instagram or TikTok are largely Centennials, who find on digital social networks a broad space of expression and activism regarding these emerging agendas (Halpern et al., 2013; Gómez Márquez & Besada, 2022). Furthermore, "39 % of social natives (18 to 24 years old) use social media as their main source of information", according to the Reuters Digital News Report (Eddy, 2022, p. 42), a report in which influencers are recognized as increasingly important.

In Uruguay, according to figures from the Perfil del Internauta [*Internet User Profile*] (2022), 97 % of the population is connected to the Internet and the digital divide is non-existent as of today. According to this measurement, Instagram is the only social network that has duplicated users between 2017 (40 %) and 2022 (74 %). Moreover, it is regularly used by 88 % of young people between 12 and 19 years old, and 86 % between 20 and 29 years old. Additionally, the "*Centennials:*

Lifestyles, Projection and Consumption" report (Equipos Consultores, 2022) indicates that the environment (52 %) and animal welfare (35 %) are among their three most concerning issues, placing higher than other agendas such as gender (10 %).

Environmental communication and animal welfare

Environmental communication (Aguiar & Cerqueira, 2012; Anderson, 1997) within all participants engaged in message exchange is permeated by what Julia Corbett refers to as "environmental ideologies" (2006), which are shaped over one's lifetime according to geographic and cultural contexts. These ideologies provide an interpretative framework for events, encompassing both personally experienced and mediated occurrences, thereby constituting a "way of thinking about the natural world to which an individual turns to justify actions towards it" (Corbett, 2006, p. 26). Although implicit in conservationist and preservationist ideologies, the relationship with non-human animals is primarily addressed within the ethical or value-oriented environmental ideologies described by the author, which adopt more of an ecocentric approach rather than an anthropocentric one.

According to the latter environmental ideologies, which encompass land-based ethics and animal rights, non-human entities possess an intrinsic value that transcends utility, scientific, aesthetic, or even religious considerations. Therefore, humans would have moral and ethical duties towards these entities, which have a "right" to exist. Nonetheless, it is only within transformative environmental ideologies positioned at the most ecocentric end of the spectrum —including ecological sensitivity, deep ecology, social ecology, ecofeminism, and Native American ideologies— where a radical questioning of the moral hierarchy within the biotic community occurs, with all species being regarded on equal footing, as advocated by anti-speciesism (Méndez, 2016).

In Latin America, Andean cosmovision (Acosta, 2013) can be placed on the ecocentric pole of Corbett`s spectrum of environmental ideologies. However, it should be noted that the region's environmentalism has had a clear focus on the social and political aspects of the environmental crisis –the "ecology of the poor" (Martinez Alier, 2011)–, with the

defense of human rights at the forefront instead of the biological community (Vanhulst, 2015).

These long-duration interpretative frameworks about the link between humans and non-human nature can contribute to a better understanding of the different discourses articulated around the relatively new concept of animal welfare. Animal welfare, as defined by the *Organización Mundial de Sanidad Animal* (OMSA), entails "living free of hunger, thirst, and malnutrition, free of fear and distress, free of heat stress or physical discomfort, free of pain, injury, and disease, and free to express normal patterns of behavior" (OMSA, 2006, art. 3.7.1.1).

Recent findings reveal differences marked by age relating to the moral vision about certain animal species compared to others (McGuire et al., 2022), which leads to justifying damage inflicted on them or not. The study reveals that animal-categorization and moral hierarchy based on species –speciesism (Caviola et al., 2019)–, develops and changes throughout the upbringing. Children showed less speciesism, while teens and adults tend to distinguish more in their treatment between animals, with a larger propensity to view farm animals as food.

In this context, this article reports on a study aimed at analyzing the public discourse of non-traditional Uruguayan eco-influencers on the social media platform Instagram. The study sought to describe the extent and the characteristics by which the emerging agenda of animal welfare is reflected in their posts.

Environmental discourse on social media

Analyzing online public discourse, especially the one that pertains to emerging agendas such as environmental sustainability, in their diverse aspects, is a recent and growing trend (Anderson, 2021; Pearce et al., 2019; Pearson et al., 2016). Nonetheless, a review of the literature around climate change communication –one of the environmental issues related to animal welfare– concludes that "popular platforms, such as YouTube and Instagram, remain to be scarcely studied" (Pearce et al., 2019, p. 3). The study of influencers also has a brief history in academic literature, even though this character updates the role of the "opinion leader" already conceptualized during the forties by Lazarsfeld et al. (1944), some authors refer to them as "digital opinion leaders" (Schmuck et al., 2022).

Social media discourse analysis of antispeciesism organizations revealed that social networks had become "the interactive support for constructing a network of networks and transcending traditional communication channels where the subject [of speciesism] remains expelled" (Méndez, 2016, p. 181).

Additionally, the analysis of vegan influencers on Instagram discovered that they focused on nutritional alternatives associated with a healthy lifestyle; they do not necessarily possess specialized professional education nor do they consult expert or scientific sources (Romero-Cantero et al., 2022). This is a trend that also manifests in the environmental activism of individuals on other social networks: "Non-experts, including teens, youngsters, and adults, use TikTok to express their concerns, frustrations, and personal interest on what they perceive as issues of their time" (Hautea et al., 2021, p. 12).

Research by Ardèvol et al. (2021) about environmental activism on Instagram reveals that eco-influencers tend to approach the issue from the perspective of individual action and with an imperative tone. Supplementary studies by the same authors highlight that eco-influencers promote a particular type of activism based on a lifestyle and resort to personal narratives to mobilize and generate change (San Cornelio et al., 2021).

Methodology

The sample of eco-influencers drew from a multiple strategy that included public reports from the past year, press, and digital search tools. The survey provided almost 1 300 Instagram accounts, later filtered to focus on influencers at a national level and recent discourse: the sample was shortened to 345 accounts of Uruguayan individuals with audiences mainly in Uruguay, active between June 1st, 2021, and June 1st, 2022. Revision of the posts led to discarding accounts without references to environmental problems, resulting in a final sample of 17 influencers that published 200 environmental posts during that period.

The research team built the 30 analyzed variables and their categories in an iterative process between the theoretical framework and the exploration of the analyzed work. The environmental problems

considered were those related to the triple emergency addressed in the Making Peace With Nature report (2021) by the *Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Medio Ambiente* (PNUMA): climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss. Posts related to animal welfare achieved one of the following criteria: explicit mention of animal welfare or abuse, a leading image of an animal, use of hashtags related to the subject –such as #CrueltyFree–, implicit or explicit mentions of one of the argumentative dualities identified by Renzi et al. (2016). These authors propose categorization based on the discursive priority of each group and identify six supra-groups with their respective argumentative dualities, which were also taken into account for this sample analysis:

a. "Entertainment-based protectionism (zoos, sports, circuses, etc.), based on the freedom-confinement discursive dynamic.
b. Protectionism focused on urban fauna (pets), based on the adoption-profit discursive dynamic.
c. Protectionism focused on consumption (nourishment, clothing, experimentation, etc.), based on the life-death discursive dynamic.
d. Protectionism focused on animals' new legal rights, based on the subject of law-object of law dynamic.
e. Protectionism in defense of wild animals, based on the preservation-devastation dynamic.
f. Protectionism focused on animal rehabilitation, based on the welfare-abuse dynamic" (Renzi et al., 2016, p. 5).

To take account of the discursive possibilities in a platform like Instagram, multimodal analysis (Jewitt, 2016; Kress & Leeuwen, 1996), framed from the perspective of social semiotics, becomes relevant. The analysis of eco-influencer publications was articulated according to the dimensions Jewitt (2016) regards as part of multimodality: mode, semiotic resource, modal affordance, multimodal ensemble, and meaning functions.

For the sake of testing the coherence in the coding of the 30 analyzed variables on the 200 environmental posts, including the 45 that refer to animal welfare, Cohen's κ coefficient was calculated, resulting in κ =

0.978, IC 95 % [0.973;0.983], p < 0.005. This indicates a 95 % total coincidence rate. To ensure consistency, the coding was revised and adjusted, with emphasis on the tree variables where the index showed differences among the coders (never less than 85 % of coincidence).

RESULTS

Profile and activity of eco-influencers who refer to animal welfare
22.5 % (45) of the sample of 200 environmental publications were published on Instagram during the studied period reference animal welfare and refer to nine of the 17 Uruguayan eco-influencers identified in the study. The Instagram accounts' public information provided demographical and socio-economic data that allowed to characterize them (see Table 1).

TABLE 1

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ECO-INFLUENCERS WHO ADDRESSED
ANIMAL WELFARE ISSUES

Influencer	Gender	Age range	Residence	Profession
Influencer 1	Feminine	35 to 44 years old	Uruguay	Cook and communicator
Influencer 2	Feminine	45 to 54 years old	Uruguay	Communicator
Influencer 3	Feminine	25 to 34 years old	Uruguay	Communicator and environmental activist
Influencer 4	Feminine	Undetermined	United Kingdom	Fashion designer
Influencer 5	Masculine	Undetermined	Uruguay	Photographer
Influencer 6	Masculine	Undetermined	Uruguay	Photographer
Influencer 7	Masculine	Undetermined	Uruguay	Photographer
Influencer 8	Feminine	Undetermined	Uruguay	Photographer
Influencer 9	Masculine	18 to 24 years old	Uruguay	Social entrepreneur

Source: Own elaboration.

None of the eco-influencers on Instagram show evidence of education in disciplines related to animal welfare in their biographies or publications. Furthermore, most do not identify as animalist, vegetarian, or vegan, except for Influencer 9, whose publications promote vegetarianism and veganism through actions on the street. In the case of the nine eco-influencers who expressed opinions on animal welfare, it can be observed to what extent they did so compared to their environmental posts and total posts during the one-year period under consideration (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1

NUMBER OF NON-ENVIRONMENTAL, ENVIRONMENTAL, AND ANIMAL WELFARE PUBLICATIONS
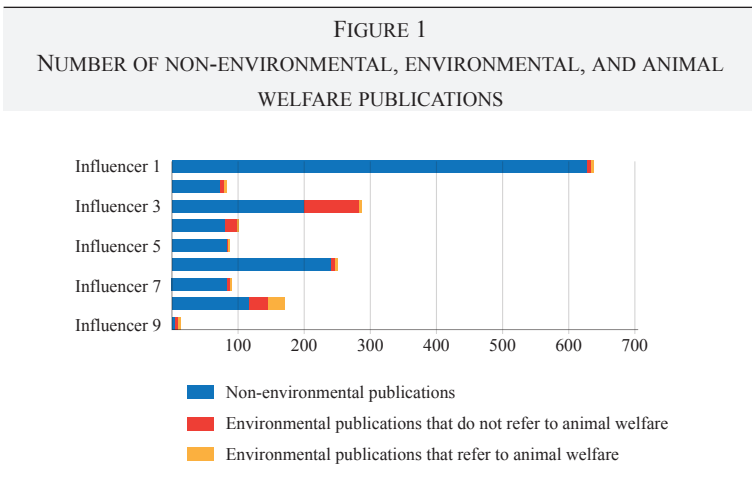
Source: Own elaboration.

Proportions show that animal welfare is not a recurring subject, even among those who accumulate more publications about the issue, and that most eco-influencers dedicate less than a third of the annual posts on environmental problems to animal welfare.

Multimodal analysis of the publications

The 45 publications about animal welfare that form the sample were subject to multimodal analysis (Jewitt, 2016) to characterize environmental discourse and its intersection with the sensitive animal welfare agenda on Instagram.

Mode and semiotic resource

The analysis of these Instagram publications about animal welfare identified different communication modes, such as writing, spoken word, images, and emojis. Audiovisual modes are predominant, although all publications include text in the description. A balance was found between using videos (21 reels) and still images (19), with some cases incorporating additional elements like infographics or texts and logos on the image.

The semiotic resource in the Instagram publications manifests through the utilized words, the text, the image composition, and the elements integrated between them. Most publications (31 out of 45) focus on wild animals in their natural habitat without human presence, while the remaining images referring to animal welfare focus on the influencer or a specific product.

Emojis were utilized in 28 of the 45 publications, but their use wasn't uniform. In the analyzed publications, emojis serve different functions, such as supporting the statements, expressing emotions, captivating attention, or organizing the text in the description. A specific use pattern was not identified, even though some emojis are used repeatedly (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2

EMOJIS THAT APPEARED MORE THAN ONCE IN THE
28 PUBLICATIONS THAT USE THEM

Source: Self-made collage. Images taken from "WhatsApp Emoticon Dictionary: Meaning of Each Emoji", by Valero (2023).

37 of the 45 publications about animal welfare used hashtags to highlight the text's central ideas or related concepts. They do not correspond with campaigns or joint actions, except for some publications by Influencer 8, who uses the "#*ConocerParaConservar* [#KnowToPreserve]" hashtag in 10 of her 25 publications. Another

semiotic resource used in various videos by the four photographers was the presence of animal or natural environmental sounds: the croaking of frogs, the singing of birds, or the sound of the waves, for example.

Modal affordance and multimodal ensemble

95 % of publications include photos or videos authored by the influencer, transmitting their direct experience to the audience. When analyzing the publications' multimodal ensemble, certain repetition is observed in some of them, although there is no predominant trend. In such cases, the spoken discourse (of the videos) or the information provided by the still image is ratified by the written text in the description box.

Other publications, which are the majority, go for complementarity, where the video or still image illustrates the description text's information, even reversing the traditional Instagram "hierarchy" of image over text. Such publications are the ones centered around animals, ecosystems, and natural sights.

FIGURE 3

PUBLICATIONS WHERE SEVERAL SEMIOTIC

RESOURCES CONVERGE

Source: Self-made collage. Screenshots taken from Influencer 8's Instagram account.

Influencer 8's multimodal ensemble stands out in the sample. In five of her publications, she creates carousels (galleries) where photos, text, and elements such as color blocks and logos are integrated (see Figure 3).

Meaning functions

On an ideational or representational level, two predominant thematic axes are identified in the analyzed publications about animal welfare:

- Protection of wild fauna and its ecosystems: 35 out of 45 publications refer directly or indirectly to the preservation of native animals, such as capybaras, Pampa's deers, frogs, whales, sea lions, crested caracaras (*caranchos*), storks, rheas (*ñandúes*), horners and hummingbirds, among other species.
- Cruelty-Free and responsible consumption: Nine publications focused on advertising products (mainly for personal hygiene and care) elaborated without being tested or tried on animals.

The most widespread environmental issue is represented in these eco-influencers' discourse as associated with the personal use of more sustainable products. Notwithstanding, when the issue of animal welfare is introduced, ecosystem and animal conservation prevails.

In light of the six supra-groups of animal welfare subjects identified by Renzi et al. (2016), 36 publications (80%) were aligned with Protectionism in defense of wild animals, based on the preservation-devastation discursive dynamic.

A considerable distance away, five of the 45 publications about animal welfare belong to Protectionism focused on consumption (nourishment, clothing, experimentation, etc.), based on the life-death discursive dynamic; three belong to Protectionism focused on animals' new legal rights, with its subject of law-object of law dynamic; and one to Protectionism focused on urban fauna (pets), that distances from the adoption-profit argumentative duality towards advertising a product destined to sedate dogs and cats suffering from stress.

The sample did not contain any publications referring to Entertainment-based protectionism or Protectionism focused on animal rehabilitation, an indicator that this group of eco-influencers is not associating these issues with any environmental concern (see Figure 4). Neither veganism nor vegetarianism were relevant subjects in the sample.

FIGURE 4

NUMBER OF PUBLICATIONS IN EACH SUPRA-GROUP OF
THE PUBLIC DISCOURSE ANALYZED

Protectionism focused on...
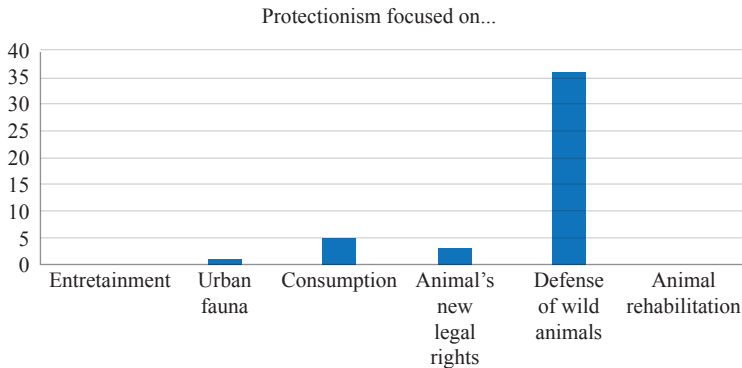
Source: Own elaboration.

The issue's treatment variable accounts for the communications's tone and allows to approach the feelings and the intention of the influencer's communication. Most analyzed publications (32 out of 45) have a *descriptive* tone. Among them are multiple publications that show and simply describe wild animals, their habitat, and their importance, with the call to action only appearing on hashtags like "#*ConocerParaPreservar*", where the publication's persuasive intention is revealed.

Another group of nine publications utilizes a celebrative tone, where a favorable action towards animal welfare, the beauty of a species or, mainly, the product's qualities, are highlighted. Four publications carry a predominantly imperative tone, where a direct and urgent call to action is made around two subjects: the use of single-use plastics and their disposal, and the urgency to preserve oceans in order to ensure the survival of marine species such as the southern right whale, the Franciscan dolphin, the Commerson's dolphin, sea lion colonies and occasional specimens such as elephant seals and various species of birds and sea turtles. No publications treated the subject as critical (see Figure 5).

FIGURE 5

TREATMENT OF THE SUBJECT
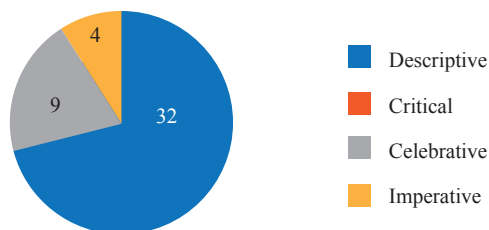
Source: Own elaboration.

The publication's function identifies the objective that the influencer apparently has with the multimodal ensemble they generate. In the analyzed sample, 31 of 45 publications focus on providing information and educating their audiences, under the premise that knowledge is the motor of change and action. Secondly, eight publications were placed in the consumer awareness category, where the main focus is on the use of cruelty-free products and fashion with alternative materials. Thirdly, seven publications spoke about recent actions or events, such as the rescue of a beached whale, and three of them focused on veganism (see Figure 6).

FIGURE 6

PUBLICATIONS CORRESPONDING TO THE ANALYZED FUNCTIONS
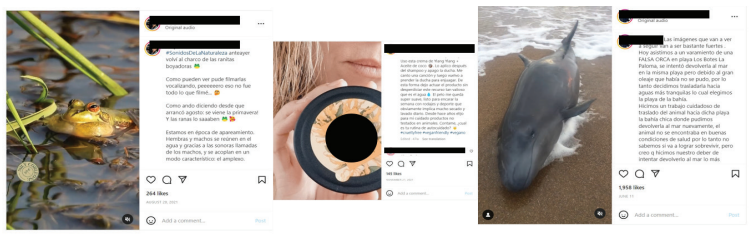
Note: Publications are categorized into educational function (left), conscious consumption (center), and event or action (right).

Source: Self-made collage. Screenshots obtained from the Instagram accounts of Influencers 8, 1, and 6.

Although the predominance of the educative function in the publications and the persuasive approach on others is evident, only eight of the 45 posts mention information sources qualified to support data, information, or certain assertions. The other 37 do not specify any source of information.

The variable named Scope of development of the subject refers, via any semiotic resource, to the place where the influencer sets the subject of the publication or the call to action. The vast majority place the agenda of animal welfare on the sphere of individual lifestyle, with decisions on the domestic level and consumption choices that prevent negative effects on animal welfare and preservation, although without a large emphasis on vegetarian or vegan practices (only three of the 45 publications make direct mention and three others mention vegan beauty products). Trailing far behind is the community aspect, with two publications referring to actions that imply joint effort at the social-community level, such as the rescue of a beached whale. Lastly, there is one publication on the political area where a trip to *Isla de Lobos* with a tourism agency, a congressman, and national and departmental authorities is mentioned.

As more concrete evidence of meaning through interaction, there is explicit mention of other stakeholders' Instagram accounts in 28 of the 45 publications. Nine were directed to commercial brands or ventures, with four of them being the same hair cosmetics brand, as part of their alliance, and three others to state stakeholders.

Hand in hand with the scope of the development of the subject and the mention of other Instagram accounts, the attribution of responsibility of the publications was analyzed, identifying who the influencers deem responsible for acting on the situation. The responsibility attributed to the individual as a consumer is emphasized (22 allusions), in line with the predominant placement of the subject in the individual's lifestyle. Mentions of corporations, NGOs, and the State only appeared in a reduced number of posts, whereas public figures and the media were not mentioned as stakeholders with a duty or responsibility towards the problem or its solutions.

Discussion and conclusions

The present research allowed us to identify and characterize the place the emerging agenda of animal welfare occupies on the environmental discourse of Uruguayan eco-influencers on Instagram. Even though explicit mention of the concept is scarce, the spirit of the definition given by multiple international organizations, such as the WOAH, and the concern around animals are identifiable in the narrative of several eco-influencers. A quarter of its publications concerning one of the three environmental crises of the century –pollution, climate change, and biodiversity loss (PNUMA, 2021)– on the period allude one way or another to animal welfare and are done by almost half of the mapped influencers. Therefore, a certain convergence of the environmental and animal welfare agendas already identified in previous studies (Brereton & Gómez, 2020; Gómez, 2021) is confirmed.

The animalist public discourse supra-group (Renzi et al., 2016) that prevailed in the vast majority of the analyzed environmentalist publications was Protectionism in defense of wild animals, based on the preservation-devastation argumentative dynamic. The presence of wild animals is highlighted compared to others, such as the pets category (cats and dogs) or farm animals (identified by some groups as production animals).

Livestock production, strongly questioned in other contexts by climate activists and environmentalist movements, does not provoke generalized criticism among Uruguayan eco-influencers, even though it is a predominant economic activity in the country. A new dissensus underpinned by environmental concerns or some sort of Greta effect is not installed in this case. Instead, the most recent identity discourse that echoes the influencers' speech is *Uruguay Natural*: the natural sights' beauty, the exaltation of local fauna and flora. Contrary to studies that find an essential space for vegetarian or vegan conduct articulated with anti-speciesism (Caviola et al., 2019; McGuire et al., 2022), the analyzed Uruguayan eco-influencers do not promote this discourse.

From a wider perspective, focused on how people articulate a relationship with the Earth and its creatures, it can be concluded that eco-influencer discourse in publications about animal welfare mainly

corresponds with conservative environmental ideology, on the middle point between the anthropocentric and ecocentric extremes of the spectrum defined by Corbett (2006). There is a recurring allusion to the moral duty of the human being to protect, preserve, and care for animals, especially native ones. A non-utilitarian vision of animals predominates one that suggests the conservation of non-human environments for their scientific and aesthetic value, going beyond the purely instrumental or economic aspect. An explicit defense of non-human entities' rights is not emphasized by these eco-influencers' discourse either, although the second most prominent one, centered around consumer awareness, implies attention to the pain, harm, and death of concrete animals. Lastly, despite the geographical proximity with indigenous Andean tradition (Acosta, 2013), there is no predominance of the criticism of speciesism characteristic of transformative and radically ecocentric ideologies.

These issues are articulated from a personal perspective within the posts of eco-influencers. Firstly, they assume authority on the subject based on their firsthand experience as consumers, witnesses, or –for the case of veganism– practitioners. There is little mention of qualified information sources to support data, information, or certain assertions, which coincides with previous studies that put the validity of the enunciation of the message on interest rather than knowledge (Schmuck et al., 2022; Romero-Cantero et al., 2022). Secondly, these digital opinion leaders tend to place the animal welfare agenda on the sphere of individual lifestyle, which alludes to actions that a person can include in their routine to protect animals, in line with previous studies (Ardèvol et al., 2021; San Cornelio et al., 2021). In fact, the consumers are the most attributed with some type of duty given the situation exposed in the publication. The most explicit cases of action to prevent animal cruelty (#CrueltyFree) refer to consuming certain products and brands. The propensity to stay within the limits of consumption culture and the role of the consumer contrasts with the emphasis of the tradition of Latin American critical environmental thought (Escobar, 2000; Leff, 1995; Svampa, 2008) –and Uruguayan thought in particular (Galeano, Gudynas, Zibechi)– in politically motivated and collective action.

Neither does it reflect, regarding political ecology (Alimonda, 2011; Martínez Alier, 1991), an analysis of power relations that may be mediating the society-environment relationship. Nonetheless, those who have dedicated themselves to studying the phenomenon of influencers in social networks exhort the non-trivialization of the lifestyle dimension in terms of the ability to mobilize and activate social change (San Cornelio et al., 2021). The predominance of the educative function in the eco-influencers' publications may be an argument to consider this more positive view on what is sometimes pointed as an immobilizing depoliticization due to the focus on individual action.

Public-ness does not appear, in this sample, as a synonym of a common ground, but of a movement to make public what are originally private and personal choices, with no indication of a resistant response (Stuart Hall, 1980) from the followers. It does not resemble Habermas' public sphere, where citizens carry out a rational debate, weigh options, and deliberate. It is not a space of explicit collective agenda negotiation but one of self-expression on the creator's side, and apparently one of inspiration for the followers. Nevertheless, the trust and proximity that sustains an influencer's following community (Nieto González, 2019) suggests an invisible and potent meaning negotiation process.

In this sense, the analysis of the publications also sheds light on the presence and absence of other stakeholders involved in the sensitive animal welfare agenda. Such is the case of the state and governments, who do not appear as relevant agents. In the third sector, the only mention of a civil rights movement was a veganism-impulsing collective, which indicates the disconnection between the mapped eco-influencers and the social and community movements that work on the subject from a street activism standpoint. A panorama like this one coincides with the results of previous investigations about where Uruguayan young adults place responsibility and agency on environmental problems and the necessary answers to tackle them (Gómez, 2021). On the contrary, brands possess a larger space in the animal welfare discourse on Instagram, even as drivers of it in articulation with responsible consumption, water care, and recycling. Thus, instead of setting eyes on the great stakeholders in causes that concern eco-influencers, there is a democratization of responsibility.

Results obtained from this research invite to deepen the inquiry on this field, focusing on content creators, to complete the panorama of animal welfare in Uruguayan Instagram accounts with an analysis of activists, individuals, and collectives that focus on animal welfare without linking it to environmental problems. In addition, they invite to inquire from the audience's perspective on their responses and demands, which may lead to building a puzzle that includes digital opinion leaders from other areas that approach animal welfare and to obtain empirical evidence about if a more significant conversation on platforms such as Instagram may derive in greater activism, as previous studies suggest (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022; Halpern et al., 2013).

This investigation, focused on Uruguay, provides empirical data for reflection on the emergent, sensitive animal welfare agenda on the public discourse and its relationship with the environmental agenda. Thus, it contributes to widening the comprehension around the frameworks and terms in which the new generations articulate these concerns under the influence of the current digital references and the online arenas where a considerable part of their life experience occurs.

Bibliographic references

Acosta, A. (2013). *El Buen Vivir. Sumak Kawsay, una oportunidad para imaginar otros mundos*. Icaria.

Aguiar, S. & Cerqueira, J. F. (2012). Comunicação ambiental como campo de práticas e de estudos. *Comunicação & Inovação*, *13*(24). https://doi.org/10.13037/ci.vol13n24.1474

Alimonda, H. (Comp.) (2011). *La Naturaleza Colonizada – Ecología Política y Minería en América Latina*. CLACSO/Ciccus.

Amico B., Oliveira A. & Zeler I. (2020). La comunicación de la emergencia climática en las redes sociales de los activistas ambientales: el caso de Greta Thunberg, Leonardo DiCaprio y Arturo Islas Allende. *Pensar en la Publicidad. Revista Internacional de Investigaciones Publicitarias*, *14*(2), 281-290. https://doi.org/10.5209/pepu.72129

Anderson, A. (1997). *Media, culture and the environment*. Rutgers University Press.

Anderson, A. (2021). Sustainability in Environmental Communication Research: Emerging Trends and Future Challenges. In F. Weder, L. Krainer & M. Karmasi, *The Sustainability Communication Reader: A Reflective Compendium* (pp. 31-50). Springer Nature.

Ardèvol, E., Martorell, S. & San-Cornelio, G. (2021). El mito en las narrativas visuales del activismo medioambiental en Instagram. *Comunicar*, *69*, 59-70. https://doi.org/10.3916/C68-2021-05

Bentley, K., Chu, C., Nistor, C., Pehlivan, E. & Yalcin, T. (2021). Social media engagement for global influencers. *Journal of Global Marketing*, *34*(3), 205-219. https://doi.org/10.1080/08911762.2021.1895403

Brereton, P. & Gómez, V. (2020). Media Students, Climate Change, and YouTube Celebrities: Readings of *Dear Future Generations: Sorry* Video Clip. *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, *27*(2), 385-405. https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isaa021

Brockington, D. (2009). *Celebrity and the environment: Fame, wealth and power in conservation*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Cannata, J. P. (2016, July). *Escándalos, discurso público y agendas sensibles emergentes.* Ponencia en el Congreso ALICE. Universidad Austral, Argentina.

Castells, M. (2013). *La sociedad red: Una visión global.* Alianza Editorial.

Centro de Estudios en Comunicación Aplicada. (2019). *El bienestar animal en el discurso público: polarización y representaciones sociales del concepto zoológico en Argentina.* Facultad de Comunicación, Universidad Austral.

Corbett, J. (2006). *Communicating Nature: How We Create and Understand Environmental Messages.* Island Press.

Dekoninck, H. & Schmuck, D. (2022). The mobilizing power of influencers for pro-environmental behavior intentions and political participation. *Environmental Communication*, *16*(4), 458-472. https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2022.2027801

Deuze, M. (2012). *Media Life.* Polity Press.

Eddy, K. (2022, June 15th). *The Changing News Habits and Attitudes of Younger Audiences*. Reuters Institute, Digital News Report 2022. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2022/young-audiences-news-media

Erviti Ilundáin, M.C., León, B., Urruchi, P. & Martínez García, A. B. (2023). ¿Está Twitter en una emergencia climática? La difusión de los términos "crisis climática" y "emergencia climática" y la influencia de Greta Thunberg en el discurso público. *Observatorio (OBS*)*, *17*(3). https://obs.obercom.pt/index.php/obs/article/view/2130

Escobar, A. (2000). *El lugar de la naturaleza y la naturaleza del lugar:¿globalización o postdesarrollo?* CLACSO.

Equipos Consultores (2022). *Centennials. Estilos de vida, proyección y consumo*. Uruguay.

Fiske, J. (1987). *Television culture.* Methuen.

Garzón, C. & Gómez Márquez, V. (2023). Análisis multimodal del discurso de ecoinfluencers uruguayos en Instagram. *Contratexto*, (39), 115-136. https://doi.org/10.26439/contratexto2023.n39.6141

Gómez, V. (2021). *Mediations of Environmental Risk: Engagement of Young Audiences in Uruguay and Ireland*. DCU.

Gómez Márquez, V. & Besada, I. (2022). Cambio climático y comunicación en clave juvenil. In V. Gómez Márquez, I. Besada, J. Gari, C. Garzón, A. Gómez, D. Jurburg & A. Pérez, *Comunicación y respuestas al cambio climático en Uruguay* (pp. 14-35). Universidad de Montevideo.

Halpern, D., Rosenberg, A. & Arriagada, E. (2013). Who are those Green Guys? Understanding Online Activism in Chile from a Communicational Perspective. *Palabra Clave*, *16*(3), 729-759. https://doi.org/10.5294/pacla.2013.16.3.3

Hautea, S., Parks, P., Takahashi, B. & Zeng, J. (2021). Showing they care (or don't): Affective publics and ambivalent climate activism on TikTok. *Social Media + Society*, *7*(2), 1-14. https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211012344

Jewitt, C. (2016). Multimodal analysis. In A. Georgakopoulou & T. Spilioti (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Digital Communication* (pp. 69-84).

Keane, J. (1995). Structural transformations of the public sphere. *The Communication Review*, *1*(1), 1-22. https://doi.org/10.1080/10714429509388247

Kress, G. & Leeuwen, T. (1996). *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design.* Routledge.

Lazarsfeld, P., Berelson, B. & Gaudet, H. (1944). *The people's choice: how the voter makes up his mind in a presidential campaign.* Columbia University Press.

Leff, E. (1995). *Green production: toward an environmental rationality.* Guilford Press.

Martínez Alier, J. (1991). Ecology and the poor: A neglected dimension of Latin American history. *Journal of Latin American Studies, 23*(3), 621-639. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X0001587X

Martínez Alier, J. (2011). *El ecologismo de los pobres: Conflictos ambientales y lenguajes de valoración.* Icaria.

Marwick, A. (2015). You May Know Me From YouTube: (Micro)-Celebrity in Social Media. In P. Marshall, & S. Redmond, *A Companion to Celebrity* (pp. 333-350). JohnWiley & Sons.

McGuire, L., Palmer, S. B. & Faber, N. S. (2022). The development of speciesism: age-related differences in the moral view of animals. *Social Psychological and Personality Science, 14*(2)*,* 228-237. https://doi.org/10.1177/19485506221086182

Méndez, A. (2016). La emergencia de nuevos imaginarios socioambientales. Críticas y alternativas al especismo institucionalizado. *Apuntes de Investigación del CECYP*, (27), 159-185. https://www.aacademica.org/anahi.mendez/50

Nieto González, J. (2019). *Microinfluencers en Instagram: estudio de popularidad y engagement* [Final degree project]. Univesidad de Valladolid. https://uvadoc.uva.es/handle/10324/40392

Organización Mundial de Sanidad Animal. (2006). *Código Sanitario para los Animales Terrestres*. https://www.woah.org/es/

Pearson, E., Tindle, H., Ferguson, M., Ryan, J. & Litchfield, C. (2016). Can we tweet, post, and share our way to a more sustainable society? A review of the current contributions and future potential of #socialmediaforsustainability. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources, 41*, 363-397. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-environ-110615-090000

Pearce, W., Niederer, S., Özkula, S. M. & Sánchez, N. (2019). The social media life of climate change: Platforms, publics, and future imaginaries. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change, 10*(3). https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.569

Phua, J., Jin, S. V. & Kim, J. (2020). Pro-veganism on Instagram: Effects of user-generated content (UGC) types and content generator types in Instagram-based health marketing communication about veganism. *Online Information Review*, *44*(3), 685-704. https://doi.org/10.1108/OIR-06-2019-0213

Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Medio Ambiente. (2021). *Hacer las paces con la naturaleza.* https://www.unep.org/

Renzi, J., Cannata, J. & Fitz Herbert, A. (2016). *Discurso público de los grupos protectores de animales enfocados en instituciones zoológicas*. CECAP.

Romero-Cantero, T., González-Díaz, C. & Quintas-Froufe, N. (2022). La comunicación de los influencers veganos en Instagram: el caso español. *Cuadernos.info*, (52), 307-329. https://doi.org/10.7764/cdi.52.38267

Sabherwal, A., Ballew, M. T., Van der Linden, S., Gustafson, A., Goldberg, M. H., Maybach, E. W., Kotcher, J. E., Swim, J. K., Rosenthal, S. A. & Leiserowitz, A. (2021). The Greta Thunberg Effect: Familiarity with Greta Thunberg predicts intentions to engage in climate activism in the United States. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *51*(4), 321-333. https://doi.org/10.1111/jasp.12737

San Cornelio, G., Ardèvol, E. & Martorell, S. (2021). Estilo de vida, activismo y consumo en *influencers* medioambientales en Instagram. *Obra Digital*, (21), 131-148. https://doi.org/10.25029/od.2021.326.21

Schmuck, D., Hirsch, M., Stevic, A. & Matthes, J. (2022). Politics – Simply Explained? How Influencers Affect Youth's Perceived Simplification of Politics, Political Cynicism, and Political Interest. *The International Journal of Press/Politics, 27*(3), 738-762. https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612221088987

Severo, E., Guimarães, J., Dellarmelin, M. & Ribeiro, R. P. (2019). The Influence of Social Networks on Environmental Awareness and the Social Responsibility of Generations. *Brazilian Business Review*, *16*(5), 500-518. https://doi.org/10.15728/bbr.2019.16.5.5

Stuart Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/Decoding. In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, & P. Willis (Eds.), *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies* (pp. 63-87). Hutchinson.

Svampa, M. (2008). La disputa por el desarrollo: territorio, movimientos de carácter socio-ambiental y discursos dominantes. In *Cambio de época. Movimientos sociales y poder político* (pp. 1-31). Siglo XXI.

Thunberg, G. & Mustill, T. (Director). (2021). *For Nature* [Película].

Valero, C. (2023). *Diccionario emoticonos WhatsApp.* ADSLZone. https://www.adslzone.net/esenciales/whatsapp/significado-emojis-whatsapp/

Vanhulst, J. (2015). El laberinto de los discursos del Buen vivir: entre Sumak Kawsay y Socialismo del siglo XXI. *Polis. Revista Latinoamericana*, *40*. http://journals.openedition.org/polis/10727

PROFILES

Victoria Gómez Márquez, University of Montevideo
Coordinator of Research and Public Opinion at the School of Communication. BA in Communication from the same university, a Master's degree in Social Policy and Community Mediation from the Universities of Barcelona and Autonomous of Barcelona (Spain), and a PhD in Communication from Dublin City University. She specializes in environmental communication, communication for development and educommunication.

Carolina Garzón Díaz, University of Montevideo
Professor and researcher at the School of Communication. BA in Social Communication from the Central University of Colombia. She holds a Diploma in Digital Communication Management from FLACSO-Uruguay and a Master's Degree in Communication Management from the University of Montevideo. Her areas of research include environmental communication and educommunication.