OCNOS
Revista de Estudios sobre Lectura

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Revista de Estudios sobre lectura
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Article

Young writers on the web: an exploratory study on *Wattpad* profiles

Jóvenes escritores en la red: un estudio exploratorio sobre perfiles de *Wattpad*

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Abstract

This article explores the profiles of people who use *Wattpad*, a reading social network which includes a self-publishing section for young writers. The analysis focuses on voluntarily written interviews between platform users reflecting on the creative process and the construction of their personal reading canon. A non-experimental descriptive research has been carried out, with a total of 146 interviews with writers published in this affinity space. The results obtained provide a detailed account of the identity traits of *Wattpad's* members and why they are motivated to participate in this form of literacy practice.

Resumen

Este artículo explora el perfil general de usuarios de *Wattpad*, red de lectura social que cuenta con una sección de autopublicación para jóvenes escritores. El campo de interés está centrado en el análisis de las entrevistas escritas voluntariamente entre usuarios de la plataforma en las que se exponen sus reflexiones metaliterarias sobre el proceso creativo y la construcción de su canon de lectura personal. Se ha realizado una investigación descriptiva no experimental para la que se ha contado con un total de 146 entrevistas a escritores publicadas en este espacio de afinidad. Los resultados obtenidos proporcionan una relación detallada de los rasgos identitarios de sus miembros y de las motivaciones que los animan a participar en el marco de las prácticas letradas.

Introduction

This work follows research that is focused on vernacular literacy practices generated in digital environments. The internet and the emergence of new technologies accommodate the creation and expansion of reading and writing spaces where young people, motivated by similar interests, informally participate (Cassany and Hernández, 2012). Therefore, ICT provides a motivating framework of interaction among peers and, in general, this framework is outside of the parameters of traditional school culture.

In these scenes, users can produce, share or spread joint creative projects, as well as build their social identity and develop new ways of managing their relationships (Gee and Hayes, 2011; Vargas, 2016). They create a community when commenting on, or discussing, the meaning of texts in any format, means and modalities (Torrego and Gutiérrez-Martín, 2018). In this way, reading becomes social conversation of a marked horizontal nature (Lluch, 2014). These affinity spaces promote dialogic literary gatherings, book recommendations and creative writing consequently improving the development of reading, writing and literary competences of young people (Vliegheand Rutten, 2013) and the promotion of reading (Rovira-Collado, 2015). In this sense, school stops monopolising books and reading (Lluch, 2017).

Nevertheless, knowledge developed by young people in these scenarios does not have the same institutional considerations than learning promoted in the classroom (Pereira, Fillol and Moura, 2019). A study carried out by García-Canclini (2015), among university students interacting with electronic devices and socialising through social networks, highlights that reading on a screen is 'genuine' reading; while, by contrast 'legitimate' reading is reserved for those that require privacy, deep attention, concentration and codex format. There is tension between school practices and those promoted in virtual communities (Cassany, 2013). In this sense, young people often separate the competences used for the construction of contents in *fandom* from the activities and skills developed in the classroom (Tirocchi, 2018).

Common ways of using literate devices in virtual scenes include narrative extensions in the form of *fanfics*. These are defined as hyper-textual practices in which users appropriate texts and play with them by extending, modifying or filling possible hermeneutic gaps (García-Roca, 2016). This is an activity to extend the reception experience beyond the canon, official universe, or authorization of the author (Scolari, 2013).

In these scenes, new agents of literary communication are generated. Alongside traditional writers and readers, figures or hybrid instances emerge such as commentators, graders, diffusers or beta readers (García-Roca, 2019). These different ways of participation generate self-organised, collaboration structures based on the feedback of users playing different roles. Following this trend, digital platforms such as *fanfiction.net*, *Archive of Our Own* or *Wattpad* stand out. .

From this perspective, this research follows developing research on the description and explanation of the character traits and ways of behaviour that make up group identities of reading and writing communities on the internet. Identification of the collective interaction mechanisms in these socialisation scenes has practical uses. Evidence on these issues supports training possibilities by opening up exploration into the transference of online competences into educational fields, as well promoting innovative education proposals. Such proposals pioneer changes in connected learning based on the creative, productive and collaborative potential of students in virtual communities.

Wattpad

Wattpad web, and its mobile application, is not only a book repository but also a social network for fans of reading and creative writing. On one hand, readers have the possibility of reading many texts, classified by main topic and grouped by literary subgenres (Establés, Guerrero-Pico and Contreras-Espinosa, 2019). Structured by algorithms working on readings, comments and voting, the platform provides personalised recommendations and general rankings.

Content creators can publish and share stories in a fast and easy way, receiving feedback or comments of their texts while also being in contact with other authors or readers. There are no specific requirements to publish, or censorship, because there is not economic benefit. Users are given substantial creative freedom (Bold, 2018). Furthermore, as they share their chapters once they finish them, writers reduce vertical communication. From this point of view, readers can directly influence the development of the plot, character characterisation, or deepening of specific aspects related with expression. The platform facilitates and promotes these types of interrelations through the creation of communities and integrated forums.

Wattpad has more than 100 million downloads just from *Google Play*, with three million users providing an overall review of 4.6 stars (out of 5). In addition to this, *Wattpad* has more than 6.6 million followers on *Facebook* and 600,000 on *Twitter* and *Instagram*. According to data from *Wattpad*, more than 130,000 new users register every day and the platform receives more than 55 million visits are received every month. These figures demonstrate the popularity of this space of social participation and place it as one of the most visited and active reading and creative writing communities on the internet.

Furthermore, many stories published gain renown and are translated into other languages and published by prestigious, international publishing houses. The *After* saga is one example of the rise of a *Wattpad* story. When its writer, Anna Todd, was 25 years old she began to share on *Wattpad fanfic* about Harry Styles, the singer with pop boy band *One Direction*. These stories have since become best-sellers and turned into a film which premiered in 2019.

Despite the high participation of young people in this and other platforms, the educational institutions have yet to include it within curriculum proposals, possibly because reading in printed texts and the designation of a select literary canon continues to be seen as legitimate literary education (García-Canclini, 2015).

However, there are many convergence points between the activities developed on *Wattpad*, and other virtual communities, and those promoted in school. These are ecologic spaces where more democratic interaction processes are generated (Bold, 2018) and reading and literary competences are developed (Polo, 2018). The epistemological convictions referred to reading or legitimate knowledge or worthy of being learnt block, in a certain way, the integration of the vernacular literacy practices (Cassany, 2013) into the education system: they are considered products of poor symbolic and cultural capital and, above all literary. Young people feel that the skills and actions mobilised and developed during participation in the *fandom* do not have any link with the academic world (Tirocchi, 2018). In this sense, it is necessary to carry out research that reviews the underlying belief system supporting educational institutions (García-Canclini, 2015) and analyse the reality of online communities.

Recent international studies agree that *Wattpad* is a privileged space for the encouragement and promotion of reading and writing (Jiménez, 2017; Tirocchi, 2018). Its users are young people who are studying at Compulsory

Secondary Education level (Botzakis, 2014; Jiménez, 2017) and develop a wide and varied range of interactions among peers. Through the promotion of these social exchanges, the platform favours meta-literary reflections, the social construction of a shared knowledge around literary code and the ability to discuss the meaning of what has been read.

Quantitative and qualitative research is required to focus on the phenomenon of reading in a hyper-connected world and, particularly, to analyse the distinctive traits of reader and writer groups (Millán, 2016). Such research will provide valuable knowledge on: the influence of digital mediums on the identity construction of individuals; the experimentation and collaborative learning mechanisms that these spaces promote; and how positive attitudes towards literacy are generated.

Having established the theoretical basis of the study within the context of the previous research, the general objective is defined as:
– Identifying the user profile of the *Wattpad* community.

This is specified in the following particular objectives:
1. To extract socio-demographic data from *Wattpad* users.
2. To analyse the motivation and reasons why they write on the creative writing platform.
3. To analyse writer profiles as means of promotion of their works.

Method

In this research a descriptive exploration has been carried out in which a not very known phenomenon has been analysed. To describe the user profile permits giving an answer to the questions that have given rise to this work and that are related with metaliterary processes of creative expression of the participants, as well as the communicative interaction mecha-

nisms developed in the platform (McMillan and Schumacher, 2005).

Furthermore, this research consists of descriptive and non-experimental research that is linked to the analysis of current situations and the relationships, attitudes, behaviours, as well as other specific characteristics of a participating group.

With respect to the data collection and analysis instrument, a mixed or hybrid methodology has been used in which interviews have been coded and classified through a discursive analysis with emerging categories and codes. To do this, ATLAS.ti 8.4.2 software has been used. This coding and classification has been exported and analysed with the help of the SPSS 25 statistical programme.

The object of study is Spanish language, written interviews that users of the virtual platform of creative writing, *Wattpad*, voluntarily complete. Some members act as interviewers with the purpose of other members of the community, in this case, writers, participate. In this way, amateur writers not only increase their visibility on the web, but also provide more personal information to their readers and reach the desired status of 'true creators' with social recognition. However, there is a problem because the possibility of selecting the questions in the interviews has not been given, so that it must browse among the different interventions and select those with higher relevant information to achieve the proposed objectives.

The questions revolve around three main topics: a) Relationship with *Wattpad*; b) the profession of writer and c) cultural preferences. The first group focuses on issues related with literary preferences, feeling of belonging, type of interactions with followers and training functionality of the platform. Questions included in the second group are related with the creative process: selection of genre, use of techniques

and narrative resources, literary examples, inspirations, and future projects. The last group focuses on the habits and cultural preferences of the interviewees (books, films, music, and so on.). This network of topics shows the specific interests of the writers who are members of this literary community.

The classification of the interviews and the data processing have permitted us to establish the following variables, whose order will be followed in the exposition of results:
– Socio-demographic data: age, sex, country of residence, etc.
– Reasons and motivations to write on the platform.
– Position occupied in the social group: number of readers, followers in social networks, etc.
– Reading and writing disposition: number of works published, reading lists, dedication time, etc.

Although the platform produced more than 8,000 different results during a search for the keyword "interview", this research focused on Spanish speaking countries. The corpus analysis is made up of 146 interviews with *Wattpad* users. To select the interviews a non-probability sampling based on the convenience sampling has been followed, because the most satisfactory interventions for the specific needs of the research have been chosen (Cohen and Manion, 1990).

Results

Even though different interviewers use an, apparently, formal register in their questions, the interviewees' answers show a more colloquial tone, demonstrated by the abundant use of emoticons, colloquial expressions of oral language, interjections and giving little attention to adapt to the situations and communicative context. Nevertheless, this informality does not mean that users have a low level of development of writing competence: in their personal profiles in the platforms and their published

stories, higher levels of correctness, connection, coherence and textual correction are confirmed. In this sense, the communicative register of interactions change in context to their texts and the interviewees' answers contain much correctness and seriousness: inspirations, common elements, analysis, advances, explanation of the creative process, etc...

Socio-demographic data of writers

Data on writers is taken from 19 Spanish speaking countries. The following countries highlight in the sampling: Spain (18.89%), Argentina (17.48%) and Mexico (17.48%); these three countries add up 53.8% of the total interviews. All users, independently of their origin or country of residence, express a feeling of belonging to the same group or virtual space where they develop their creative potentiality (table 1).

With respect to the interviewees' gender, less diversity has been found: 87.9% of the interviews are answered by women compared with 12.1% by men. There is a clear difference between men and women with respect to the involvement, commitment and participation of women on the platform.

It should be highlighted that they are young writers, with ages between 9 and 33 years old

Table 1

Distribution of the participants according to their country of residence

Country	N	Percentage
Spain	27	18.89
Argentina	25	17.48
Mexico	25	17.48
Peru	9	6.29
Chile	9	6.29
Colombia	8	5.59
Others	29	20.29
Not specified	11	7.69

Table 2
Central tendency indices according to the current age and beginning age on the platform

		Current age	Beginning age in Wattpad
Mean		16.93	14.54
Median		16	14
Percentiles	25	14	12
	50	16	14
	75	18.75	16.75
N	Valid	124	48
	Lost	22	98

Table 3
Central tendency indices according to the beginning age for creative writing

		When did you begin to write (age in years)?	How long have you been writing (months)?
Mean		12	55.61
Median		12	48
Percentiles	25	10	24
	50	12	48
	75	14	81
N	Valid	63	64
	Lost	83	82

(*R*=24). The mean is 17 years old. With respect to the median, the value m_e=16 years has been obtained, which implies that at least half of the participants are studying Compulsory Secondary Education, according to the Spanish Education System. The analysed interviews were made by users with some experience on the platform, determined on the grounds that they self-published more than one work. For this reason, once the starting age on *Wattpad* is taken into account, the mean drops 2.5 years. In this case, the median is found at m_e=14 years and the third quartile at 16.75 (table 2).

Likewise, users stated that they began to write even before knowing *Wattpad*-some of them on different platforms, other in private. The average entry is placed at 12 years old and the median at m_e=12. For most of these experienced users, their entry into the web or application was subsequent to their desire to write (table 3).

Reasons and motivations

From a qualitative point of view, it should be stated that young people's motivation for writing on the platform is determined, to a large extent, by a feeling of belonging to a group

which is passionate about literature. Identity traits are constructed around the literary traits. When users interact on the platform, they establish positive associations with literary creation, text interpretation and comprehension processes, as well as other ways to create contents on the internet. *Wattpad* is a social network that promotes horizontal and symmetric literacy actions without coercive proposals. Its members feel they are an integral part of a prestigious community of social relevance. They establish emotional ties from individual and collective experiences between peers who foster mutuality and share common values. An atmosphere of inclusion, confidence and support atmosphere is promoted, which favours a higher degree of commitment and involvement. Participation gives members a social and symbolic value: *wattpaders* achieve fame, reputation, standing or influence when, inside the network of relationships, they develop creative proposals with increased visibility and that get the support of the higher numbers of users.

Position occupied within the social group

With respect to the number of published stories, it can be stated that these users have an average of seven published works. A statistically

Table 4

Central tendency indices according to written works, favourite readings and followers of the participants

		Works	Readings	Followers
Mean		6.98	4.14	9242.41
Median		5	4	550.5
Percentiles	25	3	2	132
	50	5	4	550.5
	75	8	6	4725
N	Valid	130	129	146
	Lost	16	17	0

Table 5

Frequency and percentage of the main reasons why they are Wattpad users

What do you like most about writing in Wattpad?			
		Frequency	Percentage
Valid	Freedom. To be the creator of the story.	15	10.3
	Feedback. To get votes and comments	2	1.4
	Intrinsic motivation	15	10.3
	Total	32	21.9
Lost	System	114	78.1
Total		146	100

significant and positive correlation has been found at level 0.000 with a significance level of 0.366 (r_p=0.366, *p*<.000) between the number of works and the number of indexed social networks. The social networks serve as a social promotion medium for written works.

Writers draw attention to social networks in order to increase the number of potential readers. From this perspective, two different models have been found: users with few followers share their personal social network, while social networks created only for the dissemination of texts have been removed, abandoned or kept with little activity. Writers who have achieved fame on *Wattpad* use specific profiles for their promotion, and they focus on one of their works or on their role of writer. In total, more than 64% of users link their social network with the platform. *Facebook* is used by 42% of the interviewees, *Twitter* by 33%, and personal Blogs or *Instagram* by 17%. There are other less visited social networks such as *YouTube* (in which promotional trailers of written works are shared), *Pinterest* or *Tumblr* (in which they spread *fanarts* of their stories) and *Ask* in which they answer the questions set by their readers.

The interviews have been made by members of the community that have between 16 and 154,000 followers. The average number of followers is 9,242. They are *wattpaders* with experience not only depending on how long they have been members of the platform, but also for their active participation and the influence they have on their great number of readers (table 4).

As it has been revealed, researchers have not had the possibility of selecting the questions due to the interviews carried out and published by the users have been analysed. In 32 out of the 146 interviews responses explained the reasons why they like writing in *Wattpad*: 15 interviewees said that they were motivated because they could be creators of a story that would not be evaluated by hierarchically higher users. This creative freedom and the lack of rigid power structure are characteristics of this reading social network. Additionally, two users have stated that they are motivated when they receive feedback from the readers in the form of extrinsic motivation, for example, votes, comments, and recommendations. Finally, 15 interviewees have stated that they write just because they like it, without any additional reason (table 5).

Table 6
Frequency and percentage of the answers about how they found out the community

How did you find out about Wattpad?		Frequency	Percentage
Valid	By chance. Looking for readings. Looking for apps.	38	26
	Friends	60	41.1
	Social networks	20	13.7
	Other similar webs	7	4.8
	Total	125	85.6
Lost	System	21	14.4
Total		146	100

The study also considered how users knew about *Wattpad* and the reasons they became amateur writers. 26% of the interviewees found *Wattpad* by chance while they were browsing the internet or looking for similar applications. 41.1% of users were introduced to the platform by other *wattpaders* of their inner circle, for example, "A friend talked me about it" [7:3], "Thanks to my sister :D"[7:5] "Thanks to my best friend" [7:6]. Furthermore, 13.7% of the participants found the platform through social networks: "I saw in Facebook that a girl published something in Wattpad" [7:8] and "I found Wattpad thanks to a girl that uploaded fancies in Youtube and here in Wattpad" [7:10]. Therefore, for more than the half of the interviewees, the introduction to *Wattpad* is due to the direct recommendation of friends. This reinforces even more the social character of creative writing (table 6).

Reading and writing habits

Throughout their long period of participation and in a holistic process of self-assessment, writers showed a progressive interest to constantly improve the stories they published.

Sometimes, they even get rid of projects that they had previously published. The interviewees state that, throughout their participation in the platform, they have matured and developed their reading, writing and literary competences. An interviewee confirmed that she deleted some stories for the following reasons:

"I published five works but I decided to delete four of them because your writing level when you are 14 is very different from your level three years later. There are some works that can be amended, making some corrections and edition, but some of them cannot be amended, they need complete rewriting. [1:2][1]

The interaction with other users also has an influence on this process through overt participation (comments and votes) or in a more silent way (readings or visits).Writers use this qualitative and quantitative feedback, for example, to develop the plot, deepen characters, or embellish the style. In this way, more horizontal ways of literary communication are encouraged.

They even reject their first texts: "It was one of the first ones I wrote.... it makes me cringe" [3:3] and "It was VERY Cliché, I deleted it so … Better not to mention it" [4:14]. One of the main reasons why they get rid of previously published texts is due to the (self)identification of common places in their literary production that generate predictive narrative structures. The cliché, within this context, is understood as a narrative process in which a successful formula is reproduced (or plagiarised). Some users attribute that processes with a negative load: "I know that as time goes by (as experience and maturity are gained) they will realise that writing the same as others is wrong" [2:9] or "In fact, I do not like it at all. The cliché is something that unfortunately is very common here in *Wattpad*, and although it is sad for many people, it is the most read story" [6:11]. Nevertheless, it is considered as a starting and inspiration point or an initial stage of training in writing. Moreover, according to

the interviewees, these stereotypical stories also attain more reading success on the platform.

The answers given by writers referred to the topics that they preferred to write about were classified: as they are young (on average 17 years old), stories about love relationships among their characters prevail meanwhile stories are adapted to the genre conventions of fantasy literature.

In this affinity space, creative writing becomes a real passion that unites its members. This hobby is influential. When participants were asked about their future career, 22% said that they would like to do something related with reading and writing, for example, writers, journalists, editors, or studying philology. Furthermore, 29% of the participants do not rule out the possibility of their current hobby becoming their job later on.

Discussion and conclusion

This study verifies that *Wattpad* is a virtual community of writers and readers made up of mainly young and teenage girls, who join the platform when they are only 14 years old. This result is consistent with research conducted by Black (2008), Jiménez (2017) and Botzakis (2014). They are young people of school age who voluntarily devote their free time to writing and literary readings in a fun manner and in informal contexts.

Although *Wattpad* is a varied community made up of people from different nationalities, the study sample is located mainly in Spain, Mexico and Argentina. As it is a virtual space which gathers users who share tastes, interests and a passion for reading, variables such as country of residence, sex, and age are not necessarily relevant. As Gee and Hayes (2011) concluded, the members of the affinity spaces are not grouped by ages or levels of achievement or academic training.

It should be highlighted that, in this community, reading and writing have a social aspect (Vliegheand Rutten, 2013). Qualitative results corroborate that participation of young people in *Wattpad* delimits their social identity and expands ways to manage their personal relationships. Their identity traits are built on interests, objectives and common values: all related with literature. They are members of a community where interaction is not conditioned by a vertical structure that restricts their creative freedom, but by confidence and mutual help between peers, as well as by social capital (visibility, fame, or relevance) generated by their work among the members of the network. Therefore, strong emotional ties are created with the platform and with users, which motivate them to acquire higher commitment and involvement in literacy practices. Vizcaíno-Verdú, Contreras-Pulido and Guzmán-Franco (2019) reached similar conclusions in their study about *BookTube*, defined as an affinity space linked to opinions between peers and reflections on literary production, in which the production of informal learning is related with reading training.

Additionally, when developing their creative production, they connect to new people they know and invite their closer peers to join the literary community. These results are consistent with the conclusions obtained by Davies (2017), where collaborative production in *Wattpad* is analysed. Similarly to other creative writing platforms, such as *fanfiction.net*, romantic and fantasy stories prevail on the platform (García-Roca, 2019; Jenkins, 2008).

With respect to the expression field, it has been verified that users not only make an effort to tell their stories in a correct way, but also they try to develop their narrative competence in different ways, for example, feedback with their readers, creative writing tutorials, interaction in social networks. In this sense, they constantly self-assess, edit and improve their stories (García-Roca, 2019).

The promotion and dissemination task of their texts through the use of social networks is included in the textual creation functions. It should be highlighted, the preparation of paratextual elements such as *booktrailers*, book covers, interviews, etc. (Lluch, Tabernero-Sala andCalvo-Valios, 2015; Rovira-Collado, 2017).

The results obtained demonstrate that the platform favours reading and writing training in informal contexts. Reading on the internet becomes strong, fun, intellectual and social and has emotional implications. This finding is consistent with that by Tirocchi (2018) in which he states that *Wattpad* is a medium that satisfies the emotional, social and cognitive needs of participants. During the process, writers follow a personal learning path based on feedback among readers, writers and hybrid characters. A self-regulated complex system of collaboration is generated in *Wattpad* in which its members play different roles within the reception process and textual creation (García-Roca, 2019; Rebora and Pianzola, 2018). In addition to the classic figures of literary communication (writer and reader), there are mediators, commentators, followers, and transmitters.

Limitations of the study include, as previously highlighted, the fact that the questions of the interviews could not be chosen. However, this restriction has not prevented knowing the users of this platform to begin the elaboration of an *ad hoc* instrument. Furthermore, future research lines have been opened that offer knowledge derived from:
– In depth in reading and writing habits of users.
– Descriptions of the personal reading canon.
– Defining which motivation (intrinsic or extrinsic) leads them to write.
– Analysing the personal learning process of amateur writers.
– Finding out the role that school has played in participants' process and the relationship, if any, with the dynamics of the platform.

Notes

1 All data is anonymised to prevent identification of the analysed users. It is important to highlight that users are minors and do not have problems sharing their personal data in public.

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