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Digital communication to tackle invisibility: A project to enhance communication capacities of transmale organizations in Peru and Central America

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Abstract: Transmale / Female to Male (FTM) people and their problems are mostly invisible for public policies, the media and academia around the world and in Peru. To help address those issues, we conducted a social responsibility project to develop digital communication capacities of FTM groups in Peru and Central America in 2021. This paper highlights the issues surrounding the FTM community and its use of digital media. Then, it presents the findings from the project's experience.

Keywords: Transmasculine, FTM, community organizations, social media, capacity building

1. Introduction

We present the experience of a university social responsibility project, developed during 2021, that sought to develop digital communication capacities of organizations of youth trans male people from Peru and Central America. The reconstruction of the experience is a reflective effort in order to identify the learnings of the project to provide insight that can help other similar initiatives. To accomplish this, the main question to be addressed is how the project's methodology was useful to promote the capacity building of transmale activists? The second question we seek to answer is which new research topics arise from this experience?

First of all, we want to describe the project. It was built with transmasculine organization leaders, who talked with us about the problems and necessities of transmasculine people and validated our proposal taking into account its usefulness. On that basis, the project main objective was to contribute with the visibility of transmasculine population and the respect of their rights through:

- Identifying communication abilities and capacities
- Developing digital organizations' capacities for campaigns design
- Accompanying the design of a digital campaign

Then, we have divided the paper in 5 sections: i) literature review, there we establish some practical concepts to understand trans phenomena, then present how big and important is the trans male invisibility in Peru, and lastly present other concepts related to the use and appropriation of social media by transmale people and organizations. ; ii) methodology of the systematization; iii) the project, where we narrate its development in 3 phases; iv) results, learnings and reflections, where we present the project achievements, what we learnt from it and present the research in project as an outcome of the project; finally, v) we summarize our learnings in the conclusions.

2. Literature Review

This systematization is nourished by concepts of appropriation of technologies and identity. Firstly, it is necessary to describe trans male problematic.

The concept of trans gender can be used as an umbrella term which considers different variants, stages or embodiments to realize a transit impulse, intention or action (1,2). Trans male or Female to Male (FTM) people are subjects considered as women at birth, based on biologizing considerations of sexuality (1, 3).

The transition for them implies an intervention on the body. The importance - real and symbolic - of hormonal and surgical interventions is highlighted, but also social practices —such as dressing or behaving— and reflexivity about the body (4–7). This transition is seen as a rebirth (8), which also includes a change of name. What those trans men want is to be recognized as men (7), therefore they behave and act as men.

2.1. Invisibility of the trans masculine

For trans men it is necessary to make their existence explicit since they are an underrepresented and invisible community in public policies, in the media and in academia. Regarding public policies in Peru, there isn't a Gender Identity Law, which means that changing name and / or sex in the ID must be done judicially, which takes time and money, and is not always successful (9,10). The lack of a proper legal identity produces violations of the right to vote, access to public services and generates violence from various sectors including police; as well as limitations in procedures for reporting discrimination and / or violence (11), as far as access to education and health (12). Furthermore, during the pandemic some government actions that not considered trans people directly affected their rights, as when there were days to get out by sex.

Regarding the media, it can be said that when “trans” is heard or read, what is being thought or what is being talked about is trans women. Moreover, the quantity of films including transmale as characters or participants (in documentaries) is scarce according to Peruvian LGTB annual film festival (R. Salazar, personal communication, January, 12th 2022). As stated by the LGBT Human Rights Observatory (H. Amat y León, personal communication, November, 13th 2021), news about trans men are just a small part of those which report on human rights violations.

Additionally, trans men or trans-masculine are almost invisible to academia. What has been found in Peru regarding trans is recent and most of it focuses on trans women.

A psychology thesis (13) is the first study in Peru on “women who perform as men”, this because, following Lamas (1), it is about “transgender” people and not transsexuals since they only modify their appearance according to how the “other sex” is socially conceived. The visibility of trans men in Peru began with a study by a LGBTI organization (14), for this, trans men would be the smallest sex-generic group among those considered (2.8%) and in which there are higher percentages of depression and victimization in general. It relates with findings by Gallegos Dextre who states that the corporality and identity of transmasculine people is built against discourses of power coming from the family, school or medicine (15). These discourses of pathologizing and imposing 'normality' lead trans men to suffer torture, rape and murder.

Additionally, “Existimos” (“We exist”) is the title of the first diagnosis on the situation of the male trans population in Peru published in 2018, which analyzes the process of identity construction, among other topics (2). It underlines that isolation and the lack of information affect FTM youth people, while the Internet is identified as a resilient tool.

The most recent report on the situation of the transmasculine and non-binary population (11) finds that the negative impact on the rights of this population begins at home and the prejudices against them are supported or explained by the virtual absence of information and almost zero visibility. They report that only in 28% of cases the families support or accept gender identity, as well as that this population suffers discrimination at health and education services, and in the workplace. For this reason, they find the existence of meeting spaces with peers and support networks important; in the same way, they identify the relevance of political participation and collective action.

There are also studies related to legal issues and the exercise of rights (16–22), others related to health (12,23–25) or related to communication issues (26–28).

The aforementioned invisibility and the scarcity of information about being trans make it difficult for adolescents and young people to identify themselves as such. As a consequence, in Peru the majority come to recognize themselves as trans and start transition processes as young adults (11,26). For this reason, many times the social networks publications of trans young people try to ease the way for adolescents due to the same identity crises and lack of references that they went through years before (26). It is important to highlight that this situation has been observed in another Latin American country (5).

2.2. Transmasculine community and social media

The Internet is identified as a space for affirmation to carry out multiple activities related to the construction of transmasculine identity and its dissemination (29–34).

In the first place, it is a space to find peers: young people who go through similar situations (5,35). Young male trans men select profiles to follow and authors to establish ties (30). They also use different social media services for different purposes, often with different pseudonyms (36).

Thus, the Internet is seen as a potentially safe space that might help to escape street violence and the construction of support networks that contribute to resilience (29,37,38). However, the Internet is also a terrain in which they can experience bullying (18,38,39). For this reason, self-care strategies such as anonymity or the use of various accounts on social networks are analyzed (40).

The Internet is preferred for searching and accessing various information —legal, health, etc.- required by trans people or in the process of becoming trans (40–42). Some seek public support for their transition medical procedures through fundraising campaigns (43).

There are also studies on the characteristics that a social medium should have for trans people, such as anonymity, security, privacy settings, community rules and warning or content filters (40,44) or a health information service (45).

Communication, connection, information search and the disclosure of personal information related to the transition allow to produce feelings of collective identity and community (29,30,38,40,41,46). This is seen as something that develops empowerment among these young people (29,38) and that also encourages them to organize and develop collective actions, developing tactics and using appropriate repertoires for that environment (47).

In addition to showing that they exist and should be visible, the action of posting on social media by these young people also seeks to generate community (28,48–52). We can see this in the use of identity hashtags such as #FTM or #Transmasculine with which they seek to develop ties with others (5,26). This is also reflected in the profiles of male trans organizations on networks such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. At this point, a connection can be found between the individual political action of young people publishing on networks and the collective action of a contentious political nature of their organizations and collectives.

Those organizations, as other various civil society organizations, have tried to empower traditionally excluded groups through the use of ICT (53). The use of ICTs would help to strengthen the capacities of grassroots social organizations (54) considering technologies as amplifiers -not producers- of capacities (55). The capacity building has been recognized by many institutions as an important strategy to promote sustainable development inside the organizations and to help them solve their problems (56). Some of the capacities related to the project we are presenting are: capacity to use electronic media, plan projects, evaluate project's results, diagnose problems, access to information, recognize the necessity of using ITC, communicate (access to communication networks), use effective ways of communication and communicate their needs and achievements externally.

Finally, it is important to consider that, going further from its designer's purposes, technologies' usages and functions change over time following users' lead improvisation and adaptation (57).

As it has been mentioned before, the literature about transmasculine people is scarce in Latin America and Peru. Thereupon we have identified that this lack of studies include the ones related to the experience of transmale and the utility of online spaces to build capacities that can help them to fight against the discrimination and violence they daily live. In consequence, this paper tries to fill that gap.

3. Methodology

In order to systematize our experience to get some learnings we started by analyzing our first diagnostic and data baseline, and the partial and final reports sent to the University. Then we reviewed the plans and materials we produced for every workshop session. Lately we visualize the workshop videos. Furthermore, we share our findings with the other two members of the project team and the leaders of participating organizations to get their feedback.

4. The Project

We worked with trans guys and LGBTIQ organizations from Peru, Honduras, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Mexico and El Salvador. The project had 3 phases.

During the first one, we made a diagnosis focused on how they use social networks as organizations and individuals, what they share, which information they look for, which negative experiences they had on the Internet and how do they deal with them. We did that research using social networks profiles analysis and a survey ($n=23$) between members and contacts of the organizations.

We found that, although the organizations had practical knowledge about how to create content, construct communities and manage social media profiles, there were many aspects to improve. First of all, they needed to elaborate a plan (strategy) and define objectives for the content they wanted to publish, taking into account their public (s) and each social media characteristics. Secondly, the graphic style wasn't uniform throughout their different posts. Thirdly, they need to create strategies to generate more interaction and connection with their public. Furthermore, this social networks profiles analysis allowed us to identify that they use social media to provide support, information and make themselves visible.

Additionally, we explore the abilities, capabilities and experiences of the organizations' members or people of interest about social media and other technologies. About the people surveyed, half of them were between the ages of 24 and 31, they worked and studied, 17 were members of LGTBQI organizations and 6 just participated in their activities, 17 are transmasculine and 3 transfeminine.

We found that the most used social media were Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, LinkedIn and Tik Tok. Also, we observed that they approach each one for different purposes: to look for information, they prefer Facebook, Youtube and Instagram; for entertainment, they use Instagram and Youtube; to learn something new, Youtube and Tik Tok; to connect with friends, Facebook and Instagram; and for activism, Twitter.

Related to their abilities to manage social media, the most known tools were video and picture edition, creation of a content grid and creation of digital campaigns. Also, the programs or apps most used to create content for social media were Zoom, Photoshop, Illustrator and Canva; and the least used were ProCreate, Premiere and Color Adobe.

Related to the contents they consume, the most preferred content of the trans organizations they follow were information, life stories, meetings, fight for their rights and interviews. Additionally, more than 70% of surveyed people always or almost always share the content they like.

Moreover, they would like to see content about collective action (dialogue between organizations and struggle stories), capacity building (guides, psychological and hormonal treatment information, collective workshops) and different kinds of content (videos and more interaction). In addition, they recommend to the organizations to post more frequently, have a graphic line, use better pictures and more or better use of hashtags.

Finally, the 60% of surveyed people said that they had been victims of online violence related to their identity or sexual orientation. And, all of them showed interest in knowing more about security in social media.

Then, for the second phase of the project, such information led us to plan a scheme of 8 workshops which included carrying out a diagnosis, definition and measurement of objectives, profile of target audiences, digital communication strategies, care in social networks, Importance of having a graphic line and tools to create one, creation and content grid testing, how to take better advantage of the tools of each social media and devices, and generate a process of creation of content from non-digital tools: crafts, corporality exercises, photography, etc.

We had 23 people enrolled for the workshop, but on average just 7 participated in a synchronic way. During the workshop, the dynamics were oriented to create a secure sharing space, so the participants were able to talk about their experiences with digital media and tools. It is important to highlight that in the first workshop we made a compromise of participation, which included aspects such as security, punctuality and respect to each other.

The third phase was conceived as an accompaniment process, focused on helping the organization's members to design and develop their own digital campaign. However, due to time, we were just able to create a campaign brief.

The project ended with a participative evaluation which provided participants' perception of workshop contents, quality of learning, level of usefulness of the tools and learnings, among others. It also helped to identify different ways in which learning has already been used in digital communication by the organizations and what they were planning to do. In general, they mentioned that it helped them to change their perspective and find opportunities to improve their communication in social media. For example, the content grid helped them to organize and plan their content.

Also, as this project was part of a university social responsibility initiative, we disseminated the project results with the university community in spaces like a student's colloquium, general studies class and a funders' meeting.

5. Results, Learning and Reflections

This project had many results. Firstly, it was an achievement to have the participation of trans guys from 3 Peruvians organizations and many others from Central America and Caribbean countries. Secondly, with the participants of the workshops, we made a campaign brief, which consisted in establishing who was going to boost the digital campaign, the digital campaign main objectives, the public and the call to action phrase. Thirdly, there were cases or situations in which the learnings of the workshops were useful for the participants. For example, one of the organizations applied the knowledge about how to plan a communication campaign (define an objective, how to construct messages, among others) when promoting a health campaign in their region. Another organization member from El Salvador used the content grid and created a plan for the following year.

From all the experience, we learned more about the reality of trans people and the difficulties they face; how to bond with them and getting used to using the appropriate pronouns. Moreover, we strengthen our previous knowledge about the use of digital media from other contexts and problems, which implies enriching our field of action and learning. In addition to that, we test the usefulness of combining tools from various disciplines (relaxation exercises, movement, performing arts and visual creative processes) at workshops. And, we learn not to plan activities during the important dates for the community. This highlights the importance of the co-creation and participation of the organization members for the success of this kind of project.

This project helped us to reflect on the importance of building capacity in the use of digital media for transmasculine people, as it can be really helpful to cope with their different problems and meet their needs in many life dimensions (respect of their rights, visibility, support, among others). Furthermore, to take into account the times and priorities of the organizations and participants prove to be fundamental to achieve their involvement and the goals of the project.

Based on those findings and taking advantage of the contacts developed we submit a research proposal to study how Peruvian and Central American transmale organizations accompany or support the process of identity construction of youth transmale people by means of digital media. This research started in January 2022. After completing the theoretical framework and state of the art we were producing the tools and defining the corpus of publications to analyze and the sample for interviewing, following a mostly online design. However, from March 31th -the Trans Visibility Day- to April 14th there were two very interesting transmale events at which we decided to participate and that allowed us to talk with some activists. The first one was a fundraising event, with the objective of financing the second encounter of transmale and non-binary people in Peru. The second one was a documentary projection and discussion, focused on experiences of trans children. In both events we identified that the term 'trans' is actually used as an 'umbrella' to describe all the spectrum of trans and non-binary people. In addition, this exploratory approach already allows us to mention some findings, such as the awareness of many activists of the strong political content of their struggle and demands, the centrality of the demand for a Gender Identity Law, the potential role of 'influencers' within the community and the strong discursive weight of the concept of the body in relation to issues such as the experience of discrimination and the struggle against it, self-identification, enjoyment, among others.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, we'd like to reinforce the importance of going against the invisibility of transmale people and how this kind of project can be helpful to it. The internet is useful to enhance the capacities of organization members in the creation of digital campaigns. However, to accomplish this, it is mandatory to engage them in the co-creation process. In other words, knowing their necessities and having their participation is the key. Moreover, we were able to see how the concepts of the literature review are applied in daily life. For example, the appropriation of technology, supports networks, the use of the word 'trans' as an umbrella term which identifies the spectrum of trans and non-binary people, among others.

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