

Gender, intimacy and power: digital media usage in romantic interactions in Chilean youth¹

Género, intimidad y poder: uso de medios digitales en interacciones románticas en jóvenes chilenos

Gênero, intimidade e poder: uso das mídias digitais nas interações românticas entre jovens chilenos

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This paper explores the practices and meanings Chilean university students (N = 60) deploy in their digitally-mediated romantic relationships and the gendered normativity that governs these interactions. We use a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews. Our results evidenced the persistence of gendered codes that restrict the expression of female sexuality, which demonstrates how inequalities of symbolic power are reinforced in the virtual realm.

KEYWORDS: Youth, personal relationships, gender, Internet use, qualitative analysis, technology.

Este trabajo explora las prácticas y sentidos que jóvenes universitarios chilenos (N = 60) despliegan en sus relaciones románticas mediadas por Internet, así como la normatividad de género que se instala en el espacio virtual. El enfoque es cualitativo y utiliza entrevistas semiestructuradas. Los resultados muestran la persistencia de códigos de género que restringen la sexualidad femenina, lo que evidencia cómo las desigualdades de poder simbólico se ven reforzadas en el ámbito de la virtualidad.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Juventud, relaciones personales, género, uso de Internet, análisis cualitativo, tecnología.

Este trabalho explora as práticas e significados que jovens universitários chilenos (N = 60) implantam em seus relacionamentos amorosos mediados pela Internet, bem como a normatividade de gênero que se instala no espaço virtual. A abordagem é qualitativa e utiliza entrevistas semiestructuradas. Os resultados mostram a persistência de códigos de gênero que restringem a sexualidade feminina, o que mostra como as desigualdades de poder simbólico são reforçadas no campo da virtualidade.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Juventude, relações pessoais, gênero, uso da Internet, análise qualitativa, tecnologia.

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INTRODUCTION

Digital media are an indispensable part of daily life, even in the most intimate spaces, such as the establishment of romantic relationships. A study with young people in the United States showed that, even in 2013, the traditional way of meeting partners (i.e., through the closest circle of friends, family and acquaintances) was being displaced by digital platforms. These platforms surpassed traditional means as the privileged medium for meeting partners just a few years later (Rosenfeld et al., 2019). The massification of the Internet has allowed individuals to expand geographically and temporally the spaces in which it was common to meet other people and has become an integral part of the romantic repertory. This is especially the case for young people between 15 and 29 years old (Instituto Nacional de la Juventud de Chile [INJUV], 2017), a group that was born in a digitalized society and are regular users of these technologies.

As Chambers (2013) and boyd (2014) point out, being born in a world where instant and constant communication is a daily fact does not mean that the way these devices are deployed in the context of romantic sociability is obvious; many young people navigate this new technological environment and have to learn to negotiate definitions of gender, sexuality, and intimacy during the very process of establishing Internet-mediated romantic relationships. More importantly, power relations implicit in the normative codes of couple relationships –based mainly on how societies conceive gender relations and sexuality– must be reworked in the new digital spaces. Far from the representation of romantic relationships as spontaneous (a common view in popular culture), the literature (Miguel, 2018; Pangrazio, 2019a; Pinsky, 2019) has documented how these types of relationships are crossed by a normativity that includes issues of class, ethnicity and, of course, gender, which govern everything from courtship to the socially accepted ways of ending a relationship.

Indeed, prior literature (Courtain & Glowacz, 2018; Malhi et al., 2020; Nydegger et al., 2017) speaks of cultural scripts that indicate to participants in a romantic relationship the acceptable ways to express romantic interest and behave in each stage of the relationship (Pinsky,

2019). This normativity and the scripts in which it is expressed assume symbolic resources differentiated by sex that replicate a hierarchy based on heteronormative and gender assumptions that grant more freedom and power to heterosexual men than to other social groups.

From this perspective, the present work explores the practices and meanings that Chilean university students establish in their Internet-mediated romantic relationships, as well as the gender normativity that is installed in the virtual space and that supposes differentials of symbolic resources and power. This implies that existing normative frameworks must be reworked and situated in the online space, in the context of a learning process that young men and women must undertake about romantic sociability, which will have implications for their adult life. Indeed, previous researchers (Hochberg & Konner, 2019; Wood et al., 2018) point out the importance of this stage of life –identified as *emerging adulthood*– as one of exploration and learning in the field of interpersonal relationships, including romantic relationships, which can shape the beliefs and behavior patterns that individuals will display in subsequent relationships.

Hence, the investigative interest of this study lies in questioning if and how university students (re)elaborate the codes that govern romantic relationships in the online space and how this contributes to reproducing (or not) asymmetric power relations between the sexes for heterosexual couples. We focus particularly on the use of Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram, the most used digital social networks by young Chileans (León & Meza, 2018; Tello & Gómez, 2017).

YOUNG PEOPLE AND ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS IN CHILE

Those who are now beginning their adult lives (18 to 29 years old) in Chile grew up in a society that, since 1990 –with the country’s return to institutional democracy– has raised the issue of gender equality in the public sphere, while practices in the private space of sexuality and family showed clear signs of transformation (Besoain et al., 2017; Gómez-Urrutia & Tello-Navarro, 2021; Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas de Chile [INE], 2019).

Despite the persistence of conservative legal norms around sexuality and family, the country has experienced significant social and demographic changes since 1980, leading to the diversification of family and partnership models available to younger generations. Recent research with this age group (Besoain et al., 2017; Universidad Católica de Chile-Adimark, 2019) suggests that sexual relationships outside of marriage are widely accepted, as are a range of romantic relationships ranging from traditional dating (known as “pololeo” in Chile) to casual hookups, without the expectation of emotional intimacy (Barrera-Herrera & Vinet, 2017), with nuances between one extreme and the other. This exploration of one’s own sexuality is a part of emerging adulthood: a period that mediates between the end of adolescence and the beginning of roles associated with adult life (Arnett, 2015; Tillman et al., 2019). The concept of *emerging adulthood* should be used cautiously in highly unequal societies, like those in Latin America. Here, it is the economically privileged groups, especially white men, living in urban areas and with greater educational and employment opportunities who most often exhibit the characteristics of emerging adulthood (Barrera-Herrera & Vinet, 2017; Galambos & Martinez, 2007).

The above is combined, moreover, with a growing questioning of traditional gender norms. Although equality between the sexes in paid work is increasingly accepted, the same is not true in the spheres of partnership and sexuality, where ideas with a marked gender bias persist, even between young people. Among these are the valuation of masculine assertiveness, but not of feminine assertiveness; the supposed greater closeness of women to the emotional aspects of the relationship, while men would be more sexual; and that it is “normal” for men to be the ones who lead the relationship, as being dominant would be part of male nature (Lara & Gómez-Urrutia, 2021; Oxfam, 2018). Thus, entry into the adult world occurs in a context in which the norms that guided the behavior of previous generations in the field of romantic sociability are being questioned, but not discarded nor clearly replaced by a new normativity.

In parallel, communication and information technologies have made possible the emergence of a series of practices and norms in

the field of couple formation that are socially unprecedented and that derive from the technological possibilities of digital media (Rodríguez & Rodríguez, 2020). These have come to complement face-to-face interactions. For example, the expansion of the geographical and social scope that the Internet allows, in which individuals meet potential partners, has, according to Rosenfeld et al. (2019), disintermediated the process, partially detaching it from the circle of family, friends, and acquaintances in which subjects have traditionally found their partners (Rodríguez & Rodríguez, 2016). This introduces new uncertainties that coexist with forms of in-person courtship (Arévalo & Cuevas, 2022). For instance, the possibilities of concealment or partial distortion of identity that digital media make possible (Cardon, 2009; Ellison et al., 2012) have forced users to develop identity verification strategies based also on digital “fingerprints” or “footprints” (Pangrazio, 2019b).

The literature suggests that the very notion of intimacy—a key element in interpersonal relationships, particularly those of a romantic nature—has been transformed (Miguel, 2018; Rodríguez & Rodríguez, 2020). Traditionally, intimacy implied physical and emotional closeness, which involves excluding the “others” (i.e., the non-intimate) from a significant part of personal life and everyday existence (Miguel, 2018). Modes of intimacy developed through digital technologies usually constitute a blend of online and offline practices that include various levels of exposure, in which what will be made public, for whom, and how must be negotiated (Cardon, 2009).

This negotiation is undertaken to achieve the desired goal without exposing oneself to potential risks such as bullying or stalking, which, although already existing as practices, can reach unprecedented levels thanks to social networks, as demonstrated by the Covid-19 pandemic (Rodríguez & Rodríguez, 2020). Undesirable practices specifically linked to the technological possibilities of these media, such as cyberbullying or digital dating abuse, have also emerged (Reed et al., 2018). These behaviors often exhibit a gender bias, given the cultural characterization of male sexuality as uncontrollable and potentially predatory. Thus, the use of technologies in romantic relationships brings into play cultural dynamics and associated power relations, influencing the way digital sociability spaces facilitate

the modification of traditional power patterns or, conversely, contribute to their reproduction. These dynamics of gender and power include the ability of participants to negotiate issues such as the pace of courtship, levels of intimacy—including the possibility of sexual contact, but also access to personal information—and the way one member of the couple responds to the needs of the other.

While it is not possible to associate information and communication technologies solely with young people, it is they who establish the patterns and trends regarding their use, in a process not devoid of doubts and contradictions (Echauri, 2016; Feixa et al., 2016; Pangrazio, 2019b). Since they are at a stage of life where sexuality and couple formation are being explored, it can be hypothesized that it is young people who have more actively integrated new technologies into romantic relationships and, in doing so, must reappropriate the gender and power norms that govern these types of relationships.

Although emotions and sexuality are universal human traits, the ways of expressing them are carefully normed, including what is considered legitimate expression of sexuality (Layder, 2009). An important part of these norms is influenced by gender, as societies typically characterize male and female sexuality in very different ways and grant individuals degrees of power and freedom in the exercise of their own sexuality that are also quite disparate: typically, male sexuality is perceived as uncontrollable and associated with pleasure, while female sexuality is thought of as contained and associated with reproduction (Layder, 2009).

Consequently, norms about sexuality—and the cultural “scripts” derived from them—tend to be much more restrictive for women than for men. For example, it is expected that men take the initiative (asking out, calling) or decide the pace of the relationship (when to move to the next stage). Although these ideas have been questioned through public discourse, they persist among young men and women in Latin America (Oxfam, 2018). This poses a significant asymmetry in the resources and power that men and women can mobilize when engaging in a romantic relationship. From this perspective, it is worth asking about the ways in which university youth rework the norms of love in this scenario where there is social questioning of gender norms and a growing incorporation of digital media into the repertoire of romantic interactions.

METHODOLOGY

Our research focused on university students in the central-southern region of Chile (Metropolitana, Maule, and Biobío regions). Given the inequalities inherent in Latin American societies, young men and women with higher education are more likely to exhibit characteristics of emerging adulthood than their peers without tertiary education.

The students were invited to participate in this research through an open call during authorized visits to the universities. The inclusion criteria were to be between 18 and 29 years old, currently enrolled in a university program, and to be a regular user of Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp. Those who were taking classes with any member of the research team were excluded for ethical reasons. Participants who agreed to take part in the study signed an informed consent form which clarified the voluntary and confidential nature of their participation. Although it was a non-probabilistic sample, an effort was made to recruit similar numbers of men and women. Sexual orientation was not considered a criterion of interest, and most participants declared themselves heterosexual.

In total, 60 students accepted the invitation, and four focus groups were conducted with between eight and ten participants each. Twenty-six individual interviews were also conducted (12 men and 14 women). In all cases, transcripts were stripped of any data that could identify the participants.

Data analysis was conducted using Atlas.ti software (v8). An initial open coding process allowed for the identification of recurring ideas in the students' discourse, as well as the meanings and valuations associated with them (Saldaña, 2009). This analysis also considered the frequency with which each idea (norm) appeared in each participant group, rather than in the entire corpus, as an indicator of the idea's relevance (Elliott, 2018).

Once patterns were identified, a second cycle of coding was conducted with conceptual order categories (Bazeley, 2021), such as "Gender roles in romantic relationships" or "Risks of Internet use", to name just a few examples. In each stage, a guide was developed to direct the analysis, which was first carried out independently by each

of the authors and then reviewed together, as a mechanism for intra-team reliability (Syed & Nelson, 2015). Finally, a matrix was created to systematically compare the discourses of men and women, specifically to establish points of convergence and divergence regarding the most relevant categories and the type of relationship between these by gender.

RESULTS: INTIMACY, EMOTIONS, AND POWER

One of the first differences that emerged by gender was the use of clues to establish the identity and intentions of a potential partner. Whether they had met face-to-face or through social networks, intentions were key to socially situating and assessing individuals. Women tended to use many more judgment elements than men (both online and offline) to decide whether to respond to a communication or accept a social media friend request. This is related to the perceived risk implicit in the idea of disintermediating social relationships and the need to move towards establishing intimacy both inside and outside the virtual world (Miguel, 2018). This is achieved through online and offline practices that allow for emotional connection with the other person and minimize the dangers inherent in establishing a relationship of trust. The narratives of young women were constantly punctuated by the possibility of facing deceptions or predatory behaviors, whether digitally or face-to-face. This perception of risk hardly appeared in male narratives, or, if it did, it referred more to the possibility of falling for false flirtation (i.e., that aiming to gain financially through the pretense of romantic interest).

Women declared adhering more to the romantic ideal linked to feelings and expressed difficulty in *pelarse* (a term used by Chilean youth for intense flirting with one or more people at the same time) on the Internet, as their male counterparts did. Notwithstanding, most of the women declared knowing someone who did.

There were likely elements of social desirability that made it difficult for women to openly admit to having engaged in these behaviors, as such behavior would expose them to a degree of social condemnation. Therefore, although flirting digitally with several people before deciding on one to move forward with (for example, proposing to meet in person) was an accepted part of the partner-seeking process, women were much more cautious, as the following quotes show:

At least in my case, I think maybe the first contact is usually in person, but I'll tell you that almost the entire process of *joteo* [courting someone with romantic intentions] is done through WhatsApp or Instagram, almost entirely, especially when you don't see that person in your everyday life... So, you talk to them, and if they respond, you respond to an Instagram story, you talk again... (23-year-old man, Law student, individual interview).

The first thing is to check the profile picture, but if there's only one [photo], that's suspicious. But of course, you have to investigate their friends, who they hang out with, what's in the background [of the photo], who follows them... Because one can believe they are talking to one person and the reality might be different, it could be that person doesn't exist or is someone completely different (24-year-old woman, Education student, focus group).

Obviously, you have to go slow, because obviously [you can't assume that what's on Facebook is true]. You're not going to approach the person and say, "Hi, what's your name? What do you do?", no. What are you going to do? You're going to get on Instagram, check out their stories, their Facebook, and then you create an image, but not only from what he shows (22-year-old woman, Law student, focus group).

Despite the recognized risks associated with Internet use, many participants also acknowledged the possibility of exploring their own identity and partner preferences in a more controlled and less exposed way with digital media. The ability to maintain anonymity, defer communication, or simply suspend it indefinitely when the other person does not meet personal expectations without having to give explanations –a practice known as *ghosting* (Freedman et al., 2019)– were highlighted as attributes of digital media that make it possible to explore a larger number of potential romantic partners with a lower risk of gaining a “reputation”. For men, this can be convenient, but for women, it also makes it possible to evade some of the social castigation to which women whose sexual or romantic behavior do not conform to social norms are exposed.

Most participants reported having received or knowing someone who had an aggressive response from a person they had met digitally

when trying to end an emerging relationship. This falls under traditional gender logics that blame women for “having put” themselves in an inappropriate situation or for having given equivocal signals about their intentions (for example, suggesting the possibility of romantic relationships or sexual contact that is then not realized), as shown by the following quotes:

But still, I find it shocking that it’s the first time [meeting someone in person from an Internet contact] and that, on top of that, they have those [sexual] intentions, it’s like, “hey, we hadn’t even seen each other before”, like, “hey, calm down, let’s take it step by step”. So, that depends on the person, but there are men who get angry, become somewhat aggressive (25-year-old woman, Dentistry student, focus group).

[I have] male friends who even check photos [of women they don’t know] and say, “look, this girl added me, I could probably hook up with her...” I don’t know men who don’t add or who don’t accept friend requests from women they don’t know. Men are like, they always have to be like, “I want to hook up” or “they want to hook up with me...” But really, they get taken aback when a woman responds [in the same way] (23-year-old woman, Education student, individual interview).

The above led women to deploy a wider variety of strategies (most of them aimed at avoiding open conflict) than men in situations such as cutting contact when no interest in continuing is clear. Men, on the other hand, were more direct and asserted the validity of their preferences in the romantic realm, as exemplified by the following quotes:

I mean, if he told me, “hey, let’s get together again” [but I didn’t want to], I would make excuses. “Hey, you know, I can’t, I have to study, I have other things to do”, and I think that would eventually bore the person. That you don’t have the time so, in the end, he’s going to get bored of me... And if he asks me directly, “hey, you don’t want to meet with me”, that’s when I would start trying to make something up. In a way, deceive him. And tell him “no, I really don’t have time...” (22-year-old woman, Agronomy student, focus group).

[Interviewer: *And suppose you already met, but you realize that you actually don't like her...*]. Ugh, that's difficult too... but if there's no chemistry, there's no chemistry, and well, I'd try to be subtle, like, telling her that we can be friends, that maybe she's a super nice person, but no... I think it's better to be clear about that from the [beginning], because otherwise the other person might get their hopes up and then it's worse. Without being rude, you know? But no, I wouldn't talk to her again, at least for a while, so that it's clear... (26-year-old man, Sociology graduate, individual interview).

In general, women implicitly assumed the task of maintaining the fluidity of relationships or minimizing conflict and showed more concern for the effects of their actions on the feelings of others. This would correspond to what the literature identifies as *emotional labor* (Curran et al., 2015), understood as the time, intelligence, and energy dedicated to monitoring the emotional states of others, which also implies the responsibility to try to mitigate situations where those individuals may be affected by negative feelings (Curran et al., 2015). Although emotional labor is part of all human relationships (for example, initiating conversations to clarify misunderstandings, looking for the most appropriate way and time to solve problems, trying not to hurt the other person's feelings), gender socialization implies that it is women who should develop this skill to a greater extent.

From the point of view of power relations, women are often expected to prioritize the emotional well-being of others, even if it means postponing their own preferences to satisfy the emotional needs of others (Fahs & Swank, 2016). This trait appears in our data. It was much more frequent for women to report a greater number of resources to monitor the state of the relationship or to gauge the mood of their partners. At the same time, women generally showed more willingness to tolerate invasive behaviors, under the assumption that these would be an expression of intense feelings, romantic interest, or desires for protection.

Although behaviors such as sharing e-mail passwords or social network accounts were generally questioned by all participants, there was a certain acceptance of situations, such as the partner having

access to and/or reviewing personal cell phones. While having lived with these practices was a generalized experience, men described them as annoying but part of a requirement for reaffirmation of the status of the relationship. A need, according to men, that was more typical of women, which would be based on the ideal of total transparency in the couple's life. Women, on the other hand, tended to describe this behavior more as the expression of intense feelings, to which they had to react to ensure the emotional well-being of the other, as shown by the following quotes:

So, there is trust that each one can access the other's electronic device, but understanding that things are private, that we don't have to check each other's things and messages and that. But the trust is there (26-year-old man, Political Science student).

[I] actually have no drama [with my partner checking my phone] because I have nothing to hide. I think it's because when I had a best friend, this girl sent me some photos that were [intimate photos] of another guy... I hadn't even seen the message from my best friend, nothing. So, [my boyfriend] went into my gallery and started checking the photos and that photo appeared and I don't know if it's because of distrust, but since that time [he takes my phone and checks it]. [*Interviewer: And that doesn't bother you?*]. It does bother me, but I think it's more than that and, in fact, thinking about it, I've never asked him if he still has insecurity or something (21-year-old woman, Social Work student).

At this point, a very frequent justification was not having anything to hide and/or understanding that they have given rise to distrust, for which in some way they must "repair" the relationship by yielding in their personal boundaries. The women reported having more difficulty in negotiating issues such as the right to privacy or to cultivate friendships independent of their romantic relationship, and they offered much more elaborate reasonings than men, often focused on reducing the emotional discomfort of the other. Although these dynamics are not new and also occur in the offline realm, their re-elaboration in the online one reinforces power inequalities because it assumes that women

must be effectively willing to give up a greater part of their privacy in order to maintain the relationship.

Given the huge amount of personal information that can be stored on an electronic device, the portion of privacy that is ceded could also be enormous, which facilitates control strategies over the partner. On the other hand, it also facilitates situations of abuse such as harassment or violence when, for example, a relationship ends badly or one of the members of the couple does not want to accept the breakup. In situations like this, digital media facilitate and amplify behaviors such as harassment or stalking, since they can be carried out from anywhere and leave much more subtle traces (Reed et al., 2018), given the ease of making multiple profiles or accounts:

We were already not doing well, but since I was the one who ended it, he, like, didn't accept it... he actually dedicated himself to sending me messages at any hour, and when I blocked him, he would create another [Instagram] profile and start, like, harassing me again... I would say I suffered psychological violence from my ex (24-year-old woman, Agronomy student, individual interview).

While both women and men reported having known or even experienced situations of *psicopateo* (partners or ex-partners acting like psychopaths, seeking to intimidate or force the other to maintain an unwanted relationship), they considered that, in general, it was much more difficult for men to accept that their partner decided to end the relationship, due to cultural mandates indicating that men should take the dominant role in romantic relationships. Reed et al. (2018) showed that there would be a relationship between adherence to traditional gender stereotypes and behaviors of violence via digital media.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Our data showed that a significant part of the existing gender codes in face-to-face relationships have been transferred to the virtual environment and retain much of their normative charge, although they

adapt to new technological possibilities. In the field of erotic-affective relationships, these norms are much more restrictive for women. Women tended to avoid situations of open conflict, e.g., telling someone that they no longer wished to advance in the relationship, to avoid aggressive behaviors by men, which can translate into forms of harassment through digital media. This outcome, even if it means concealing or postponing their own desires or preferences, suggests that men and women enter the virtual space with symbolic and power resources that are already disparate due to gender norms, and which reinforce not only traditional roles and identities, but female subordination relationships in the field of intimacy.

For example, women were more selective and cautious in the search for potential partners (e.g., if they “flirt”, they must do it discreetly). Likewise, they gave up more privacy or personal preferences to maintain the relationship or to avoid the emotional discomfort of others, since it is assumed that women should prioritize emotional intimacy and value committed relationships on that level. Men, on the other hand, privileged their preferences in terms of physical attractiveness. In doing so, men and women translated a significant part of the cultural scripts that have traditionally governed offline relationships to the virtual realm (Pinsky, 2019, 2022). The digital world is far from being a “cultural zero space”, although it does open up new and sometimes unforeseen possibilities.

In principle, these same technological possibilities also offer a margin to subvert these norms. For example, women could be enabled to exercise higher levels of sexual assertiveness, minimizing the risks of being criticized, or giving them the possibility to explore their own preferences while controlling the risks of exposure (Chambers, 2013). Our data suggest that university students are still negotiating these issues, as although the participants report knowing men and women who use technology to subvert traditional gender codes, none indicated having done so personally. This shows the weight that these cultural constructions still have, even among the youth; in this sense, it is necessary to remember that a limitation of this work is that it has only examined the perceptions of one group: university students. Therefore, these conclusions are not necessarily extrapolative to all Chilean youth.

This group of young people recognized the inherent ambiguity

in mediated interactions, and perhaps they can now use them to their advantage to build more equitable romantic relationships in the future. Corona and Rodríguez (2000) point out that, in a field as vast as love, any effort to encompass it would be impossible and, even more so, would lack meaning. This work shares this impression, although it adds that the attempt to make such an effort is nonetheless fascinating.

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