Audiovisual Pills as a Tool for Training and Professional Preparation †

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Abstract: The social and cultural context after the COVID-19 pandemic is on many levels very different from the previous context. Studies carried out during 2020 and 2021 point to an unprecedented increase in the use of social media. This research delves into this new paradigm to take advantage of it in the teaching and learning of university studies of communication, studying in particular audiovisual pills and their possibilities. The main hypothesis is that they are a challenge but also an opportunity, in terms of: (1) updating and supporting teachers; (2) motivation and development of a professional portfolio for students; and (3) breaking the digital divide. This article focuses on the results of the qualitative questionnaires, which collected the students’ opinion about the project.

Keywords: social media; audiovisual pills; university education; communication; journalism; advertising; COVID; digital gap; student empowerment; professional training

1. Introduction

The social, economic, and cultural context, almost a year and a half after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic respiratory disease, has changed on many levels beyond health. The events that unfolded forced half of the world’s population, 3.9 billion people, into some form of confinement. In this context of confinement, studies conducted during 2020 and 2021 point to an unprecedented increase in the use of social networks and the number of users who use them. All highlighted TikTok as the fastest growing social network, or the ‘social networking revolution’, of 2020.

The Chinese social network, formerly Musical.ly, has turned out to be the social network that has benefited the most from the socio-health lock-in. Its success has led Instagram to quickly implement reels, short videos similar to TikTok, as well as stories and videos on IGTV, so that its number of followers does not decrease.

The keys to TikTok’s success are many and varied: (1) No account or registration is required. By downloading the app, anyone can watch videos, download them, forward them, like or report them; (2) it has videos on every topic imaginable; (3) the algorithm suggests “For You” videos and has a memory: it not only offers you video topics you have watched in the last hours, but also in the previous weeks or months, in case you have forgotten them; (4) a video can go viral without the user who created it being an influencer or having thousands of followers; (5) the humorous and cathartic component has been fundamental, as a pastime during sanitary confinement; (6) it is a very simple network to use and does not offer navigation tutorials, promoting precisely its simplicity; (7) the videos are very short, up to one minute long, and can be watched at any time and occasion of the day; (8) it offers simple and viral challenges, seeking the co-creation of the public, so that they imitate it following the original idea; (9) it does not demonize plagiarism, but virality: you can make a video with the background, audio, and music of another user, or
you can make a duet with him/her with a shared screen; and (10) video editing is very simple, with numerous filters, always free and completely openly available. They are in the platform itself and the user does not need any other image-, video-, or audio-editing software. No previous technical knowledge is required, either [1].

Leveraging the TikTok platform for knowledge transfer is an attractive challenge that universities can take advantage of. Competing for the attention of young people and adolescents is a complicated task in postmodern society [2,3]. However, there is a need to improve the quality and social utility of readily available and freely accessible audiovisual content.

2. Educational Use of Audiovisual Pills

In this new context, the digital gap became more visible than ever. University students were forced to follow their studies remotely, sometimes without a computer or Internet connection that would allow them to continue learning. Teachers, for their part, have had to suddenly abandon face-to-face teaching, without previous online experience, updating or acquiring digital skills to educate children, adolescents, and adult prosumers. Thus, social media have transcended communication or entertainment to adapt to the new distance education. Specifically, most of the university students at the Complutense University of Madrid and its Faculty of Information Sciences are part of Generation Z or centennials. Made up of young people born between 1994 and 2010, they are digital natives who came into the world in the middle of the spread of the Internet and social networks. Different international studies point out that TikTok is one of the most preferred and most used social networks by these young people.

The audiovisual consumption of the most part of the population is nurtured by video on demand (VOD) and video-sharing platforms. Taking advantage of these tools for knowledge transfer is an attractive new challenge for universities. Trying to capture the attention of young people and teenagers is a tough task that must be faced by teachers. To this end, it is necessary to enhance the quality and didactic utility of audiovisual content that is easily available and freely accessible. It is also necessary to take into account this transformation in students’ habits when developing teaching plans and new educational models. It is therefore proposed to take advantage of other types of format with less structure than an open online course, but with more proximity and possibility of participation as offered by audiovisual pills.

Despite the recent boom in audiovisual pills, some successful formulas have already been noted in the classroom. König (2020) highlights that teachers’ passion when creating podcasts in class increases the enthusiasm, interest and motivation of students [4]. Gil-Villa et al. (2020) called for greater communicative and pedagogical capacity on the part of university institutions to generalize the new digital tools among students [5]. An example of these new technologies is 360° video; Shadiev, Yang, and Huang (2020) point out that few academics have addressed this gap and it has hardly been introduced in education [6]. This educational use of audiovisual pills can be used in different educational areas. Chiu (2020) demonstrates how professors can support young people in the creation of audiovisual content with free and open resources on sustainable development [7]. In the field of medicine, Garip and Sakallioğlu (2021) point out that YouTube videos from reputable sources can be helpful for added educational information [8]. In the field of science, Chan (2021) examples how videos can be used to display teachers’ knowledge [9]. Thus, audiovisual content has great potential in education. Fassbender (2020) concludes that videos can provide newer orientations and approaches in research and education [10].

In this sense and with a look to the near future, Barrientos et al. (2021) point out that correct communication and good use of technology, mainly in tutoring interviews, boost student participation and autonomy, fostering inclusion in the classroom [11]. Pas-santino (2021) focuses on the experience acquired to think about the nearest education [12]. According to the author, the pandemic has shown us what loneliness, isolation, and disconnection are—and teachers, when the world is rebuilt, will have to become aware of
the need for a diverse and inclusive education, where human communication is the key (Passantino, 2021).

3. Methods

According to these circumstances, the present research delves into this new paradigm of digital social communication, to take advantage of it in teaching and learning in university studies—studying in particular the audiovisual pills or mini-videos in social media and all their possibilities. The main hypothesis is that these audiovisual pills are a challenge but also an opportunity because they can have positive effects in three areas: (1) updating and support for teachers; (2) motivation and development of a professional portfolio for students; and (3) breaking the digital divide.

Under the title “Podcasts and Sound Pills: Innovative Teaching Recipes for Equality”, the team of this Innova-DocenciaUCM Project number 375 is formed by an interdisciplinary team of professors from several public and private, Spanish and foreign universities: Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, Universidad Nebrija, Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, ESIC Business & Marketing School, Universidad Camilo José Cela, Universidade Tecnológica Federal do Paraná (Brazil), and Universidad Metropolitana del Ecuador. In addition to the faculty, there are master and doctoral students, two pre-doctoral fellows with an FPU contract and a UCM-Banco Santander contract, administrative and service staff, and former students.

All its members experienced the obligation to implement virtual teaching during the COVID-19 crisis. This environment made it possible to observe the growth in the use of social networks for photography and short videos, such as Instagram and TikTok, and the didactic potential of audiovisual pills. The project proposed the production of these videos, between 5 and 15 min long. They were to be made by the two parties involved in the classroom: (1) the teachers, as a fragment of the theoretical and practical teaching of the subject and (2) the students, as a tool for self-learning and evaluation, applying the knowledge learned in the subject of information theory applied to current examples, which were to be commented on in these audiovisual pieces.

Specifically, this work focuses on the results of the qualitative questionnaires, with open-ended questions, which collect the students’ opinion about the project. The sample is composed of 252 students, men (62) and women (190). All of them are undergraduate students at the Faculty of Information Sciences of the Complutense University of Madrid, aged between 20 and 25. Their studies are Bachelor’s Degree in Journalism and Bachelor’s Degree in Advertising and Public Relations. The questionnaires were shared between second-year students (in a compulsory subject) and third- and fourth-year students (in an optional subject). They answered the questionnaires at three different times, coinciding with the completion of the subjects: May 2020, January 2021, and May 2021.

4. Results

The answers agree on a very positive evaluation of the use of these audiovisual pills. Many students describe the project as an “entertaining” and “different” way of evaluation, and also agree that it provides “real experience to develop professional competencies” (Respondent 4). Taking into account that the professional portfolio offers real work samples, in order to prove the skills and abilities that one possesses, there are students who point directly to the usefulness of the exercise as part of a future portfolio: “The video, besides allowing us to experiment on the topic we want, forces us to do a good job of research and personal analysis”. Another student underlines that “it is a way of evaluating in symbiosis with the new expectations in terms of professional skills, which allows a full understanding of the concepts and implies a familiarization with concrete examples” (Respondent 3).

Regarding these professional skills, students value positively the methodology of creating videos to develop them within the defined topic: “You give your opinion and collect information to, at a certain point, choose a topic and express it on your own to be able to talk about it as a professional” (Respondent 4). In addition to considering the
mini-videos as an opportunity to assimilate the contents of the subject in a practical way, several of the students agreed that this evaluation allows them to grow in their abilities as future professionals: “I really liked this type of evaluation and I am very happy with the result; so much so that now every time I see something on the networks, series, or television I remember the subject. It has certainly helped me to grow professionally and as a critical person towards external things and my own” (Respondent 18).

The motivation to pursue other aspects that they develop emphasizes non-verbal communication, the use of platforms for communication, content creation and video editing. Creativity is a key element in the students’ perception of the evaluation process, being valued positively compared to the traditional methods of exams for final grades; “It helps a lot to develop our creativity, since in Advertising it is very important in all aspects” (Respondent 37). Exploring new professional features within one’s career has also been mentioned by students as a positive factor, supported by the social networks which they are accustomed to use; “to know new facets of our work in the communication sector, in this case, through social networks” (Respondent 42). They also point out the learning tools that they will use as communication professionals: “Beyond the day-to-day personal stories, this rating system is great for training in one of the activities that we will perform as professionals in the future: talking in front of a camera, editing content and making use of tools and platforms that are the order of the day among all advertisers” (Respondent 53). “The format is ideal because it allows us to familiarize ourselves with platforms with which we may not have so much contact and makes us explore new territories in terms of both media and creativity” (Respondent 2).

It is positively noteworthy that, in addition to the knowledge of the social networks themselves as users, students are concerned with developing skills with other specific tools in the area of audiovisual communication and highlight the use they can make of them in their professional future: “I also think it is very useful for our career, as it forces us to learn to use tools like IMovie, VivaVideo . . . which we will surely need in the professional future” (Respondent 10). It is important to note that the students were invited to use tools from the social platforms themselves, so that they would not have to use tools that may be of limited access to some; however, the students themselves sought tools or programs voluntarily to achieve the highest quality in their evaluations.

5. Conclusions

It is shown that this project benefits the professor by requiring a continuous recycling process to learn about the new features and analyze their possibilities of curricular integration. The audiovisual pills specifically force the university professor of Communication Studies to handle the technical aspects and functionalities of these tools, as well as their narrative possibilities and didactic applications to the plan of each subject.

This requirement is compensated in a new collective pedagogy, where the student becomes a co-creator of content, with an important role in the collective narrative that marks the development of the class. In view of this dynamic, the teacher goes from playing the role of mediator between the text and the student, to that of a conductor and agitator of the dynamics created in class. It takes advantage of the ICT skills that students already possess, but also encourages the development of new competencies.

The benefits that students gain from the exercise include the availability of a wide variety of tools for content creation. These are provided by the networks themselves, free of charge, and allow the development of creativity in autonomous and motivating learning. The work confined to the academic field now also has a diffusion in networks, which allows the student to build a professional portfolio, acquiring and working with skills and competences in a practical way towards the field of communication. It combines the acquisition of academic skills with professional skills.

Finally, this exercise helps to reduce the digital divide: the realization of audiovisual pills only requires a cell phone, a profile on a social network (free of charge), and sporadic access to the Internet. This minimal infrastructure tries to reduce the technological gap
in almost all its facets, as mentioned above: for economic reasons (students in vulnerable situations do not have to own equipment, connections or editing programs), for age reasons (teachers with less technological or digital experience can be trained or recycled easily, because social networks and their editing programs are very simple), or for gender reasons (Communication Studies programs have more female students than male students and no inequalities have been perceived between them, as they are all digital natives).

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