

REVIEW

Social media and disability: the impact of influencers on building digital citizenship

Redes sociales y discapacidad: el impacto de los influencers en la construcción de ciudadanía digital

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ABSTRACT

The study analyzed the role of social media in the construction of digital identities and its impact on the inclusion of people with disabilities in Argentina. It explained how these platforms, especially Instagram, had evolved from simple spaces for interaction to arenas for social activism. The research showed that the definition of disability shifted from the medical model, which understood it as an illness, to the social model, which recognized the need to eliminate barriers, subsequently giving rise to the biopsychosocial model. Data from INDEC confirmed the magnitude of disability in Argentina, with more than 3,5 million people presenting some form of difficulty. In this context, Instagram has established itself as a key space for raising awareness of functional diversity and encouraging the participation of people with disabilities. Hashtags were presented as useful tools for classifying and disseminating messages, strengthening the construction of online communities. The analysis showed that influencers with disabilities did not limit themselves to seeking popularity, but used their profiles to normalize disability, promote empathy, and challenge social stereotypes. Their messages, characterized by authenticity and relatability, had a positive impact on their audiences and became contemporary forms of opinion leadership. In conclusion, it was noted that social media offered new opportunities for inclusion, although barriers linked to the digital divide still persisted. Nevertheless, influencers with disabilities were key agents in transforming social perceptions and building a more inclusive digital citizenship.

Keywords: Social Media; Disability; Instagram; Inclusion; Influencers.

RESUMEN

El estudio analizó el papel de las redes sociales en la construcción de identidades digitales y su impacto en la inclusión de personas con discapacidad en Argentina. Se explicó cómo estas plataformas, y en especial Instagram, habían evolucionado de simples espacios de interacción a escenarios de activismo social. La investigación mostró que la definición de discapacidad transitó desde el modelo médico, que la entendía como enfermedad, hasta el modelo social, que reconoció la necesidad de eliminar barreras, dando lugar posteriormente al modelo biopsicosocial. Los datos del INDEC confirmaron la magnitud de la discapacidad en Argentina, con más de 3,5 millones de personas que presentaban alguna dificultad. En este contexto, Instagram se consolidó como un espacio clave para visibilizar la diversidad funcional y fomentar la participación de las personas con discapacidad. Los hashtags se presentaron como herramientas útiles para clasificar y difundir mensajes, fortaleciendo la construcción de comunidades en línea. El análisis demostró que los influencers con discapacidad no se limitaron a la búsqueda de popularidad, sino que utilizaron sus perfiles para naturalizar la discapacidad, promover la empatía y cuestionar estereotipos sociales. Sus mensajes, caracterizados por la autenticidad y la cercanía, lograron generar un impacto positivo en sus audiencias y se constituyeron en formas contemporáneas de liderazgo de opinión. En conclusión, se señaló que las redes sociales ofrecieron nuevas oportunidades de inclusión, aunque aún persistían barreras vinculadas a la brecha digital.

No obstante, los influencers con discapacidad representaron agentes clave en la transformación del imaginario social y en la construcción de una ciudadanía digital más inclusiva.

Palabras clave: Redes Sociales; Discapacidad; Instagram; Inclusión; Influencers.

INTRODUCTION

Social media had transformed the way people communicated, interacted, and constructed their identities in the digital sphere. From the initial notion of social media proposed by John Barnes in the 1950s to the research of Christakis et al., it was understood that these platforms functioned as a network of links between individuals, shaping spaces for daily interaction. In Argentina, recent studies showed that WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook were consolidating their position as the most widely used platforms, with usage rates exceeding 85 % of internet users.⁽¹⁾

Among them, Instagram stood out for its dynamism and ability to integrate various content formats, such as photos, videos, reels, stories, and live streams. These features enabled the creation of communities around common interests and facilitated the dissemination of social messages. The use of hashtags, for example, made it possible to classify and viralize posts related to specific topics, creating a space conducive to digital activism.⁽²⁾

At the same time, the concept of disability evolved over time. The World Health Organization defined it as a limitation in activity or participation resulting from the interaction between a health condition and contextual factors. From a historical perspective, disability had been interpreted under two broad models: the medical model, focused on the rehabilitation of the individual, and the social model, which emphasized the importance of removing structural and cultural barriers.⁽³⁾ From both of these emerged the biopsychosocial model, which integrated medical and social components into the understanding of disability.

In Argentina, the National Study on the Profile of Persons with Disabilities⁽⁴⁾ revealed that more than 3,5 million people aged six and older had some form of disability, highlighting the magnitude of this condition in society. Against this backdrop, social media began to play an important role in providing visibility to experiences related to inclusion, access to rights, and the fight against stigma.

Influencers with disabilities, in particular, emerged as social actors who used these platforms to normalize functional diversity, denounce barriers, and promote equal opportunities. Their communications, far from focusing on idealization, were characterized by authenticity and closeness to their audiences. Thus, they became a contemporary version of the “opinion leader”,⁽⁵⁾ with the ability to raise social awareness and mobilize their followers around inclusive causes.

The study analyzed the role of influencers with disabilities in Argentina and the impact of their messages on Instagram, with the aim of providing evidence on the relationship between social media, digital activism, and social inclusion.

DEVELOPMENT

When we talk about social media, we are referring to the various platforms through which users publish and share content created in different formats. Although anthropologist John Barnes introduced the term social network in the early 1950s, the article by Christakis et al., adds the following:

A social network is an organized set of people made up of two types of elements: human beings and the connections between them. Real, everyday social networks evolve organically from the natural tendency of all people to establish relationships and to make few or many friends, to have a large or small family, and to work in places where bland or welcoming relationships are established.

Some of the most widely used here in Argentina are Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and TikTok. It is important to highlight the study carried out by Statista Research Department, which concluded that in Argentina, specifically in 2021, WhatsApp was the preferred social network among Argentine internet users, with nearly 95 % of users interacting on the platform. Instagram and Facebook were the next most popular social networks, with a share of more than 85 % of users.

One of the benefits of social media is that it invites us to create, disseminate, receive, and exchange information. The communities that have been created through interaction between people who share the same interests are very explicit on these platforms.

For this research, Instagram was defined as the social network to be analyzed. The founders of this platform are Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger, who created it on October 6, 2010, as a platform where users can share images with effects. The main function was to post videos or photos to share with friends and family, but over time it was updated and new forms of content were incorporated.

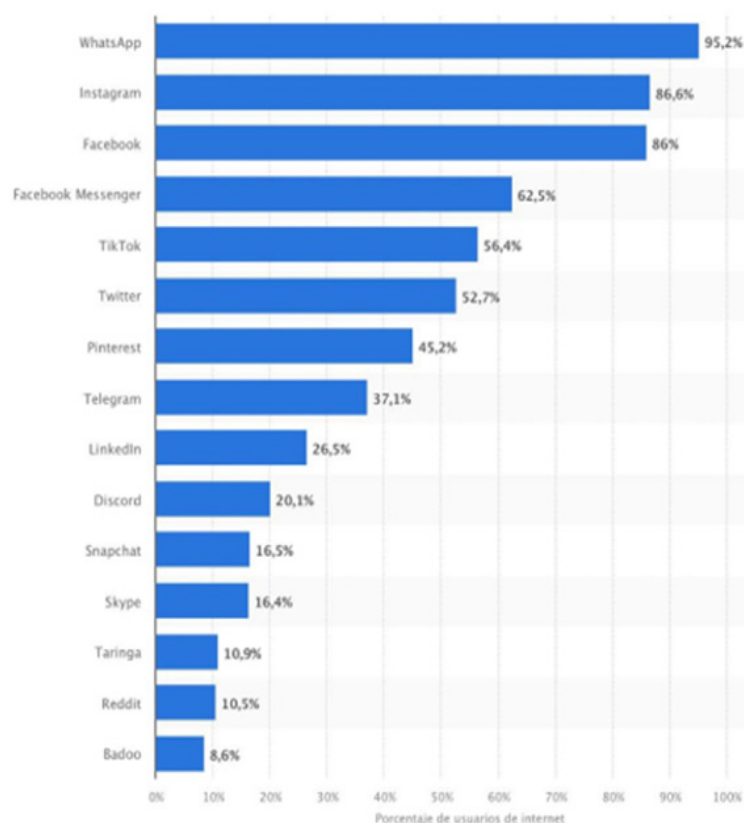


Figure 1. Percentage of users of some social networks in Argentina in 2022

Currently, users can upload stories that last 24 hours, IGTV (videos that allow for longer duration and another image format), live videos, and reels. On the other hand, it is important to clarify that it has a direct and private messaging system with other users, public comments can be made on posts, and mentions and hashtags can be used, some features that were unthinkable a while ago.

According to Skaf⁽²⁾ the use of hashtags (#) has increased on social media, with the aim of classifying posts shared by users. The Oxford Dictionary defines a hashtag as “a word or phrase preceded by a number sign (#), used on social media and in apps, especially Twitter, to identify messages about a specific topic.” Hashtags are widely used by influencers, as they link different platforms and refer to a particular topic. For example, if Instagram users make a post that includes the hashtag #disability, when we click on the word, we can find countless pieces of content related to that topic, including photographs, audiovisual content, texts, and more.

In this paper, we will use the definition of disability published by the World Health Organization (WHO) in the 2001 document “International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health” (ICF):

Disability is any limitation in activity and restriction in participation, originating in the interaction between the person with a health condition and contextual factors (physical, human, attitudinal, and sociopolitical environment), to function in their daily life, within their physical and social environment, according to their gender and age.

As Seoane⁽³⁾ mentions, disability has been conceived in different ways throughout history, with society’s attitude and the position of persons with disabilities in the social context being the most appropriate criteria for differentiating between them. However, recent history revolves around the dialectic between the medical and social models, which are seen as the main conceptual references for disability.

In the medical model, disability is referred to as an illness, and it is considered that people with disabilities can contribute to society as long as they are rehabilitated and manage to resemble others in order to have value as people.

On the other hand, the social model involves correcting the omissions and gaps in the medical model.

Disability is a social construct, and the response must come from interventions in the environment that remove the various barriers that led to the exclusion or marginalization of people with disabilities and make their integration and participation in social life possible.⁽³⁾

A synthesis of the two models was proposed, called the biopsychosocial model. In this model, the medical part seeks to contribute scientific elements and the social part seeks to provide recognition and open up opportunities.

The figures below show the data obtained in the 2018 census:

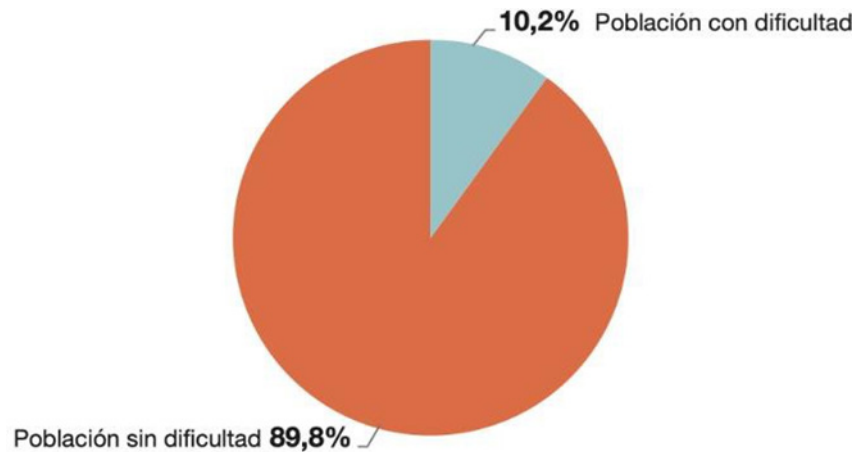


Figure 2. Percentage of the population aged 6 and over with difficulties

In Argentina, there are 3 571 983 people aged 6 and over with disabilities.

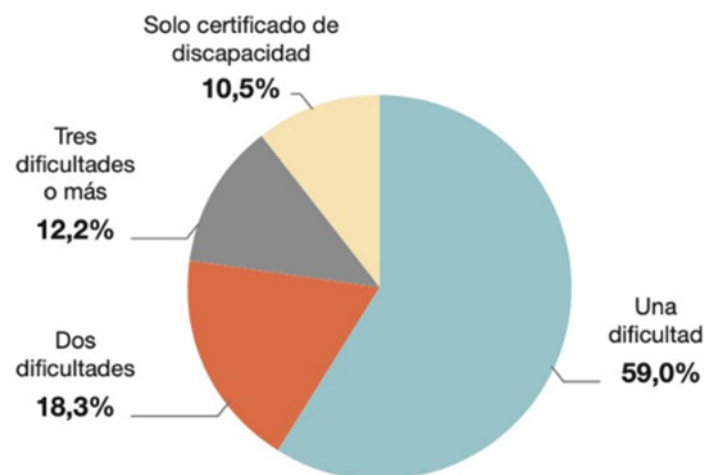


Figure 3. Percentage of the population aged 6 and over with disabilities, by number of disabilities

- Six out of ten people aged 6 and over have a single difficulty.
- Two out of ten people aged 6 and over have two difficulties.
- One in ten people aged 6 and over has three or more difficulties.
- One in ten people aged 6 and over did not respond to how many difficulties they have, but they have a disability certificate.

Due to advances in social media and the growing focus on technology, there has been an improvement in the quality of life of people with disabilities, facilitating their access to education, improving their leisure time, and strengthening their relationships with others. However, there remains a challenge to achieve the full participation of this group in an society that is increasingly focused on technology, as digital inclusion is influenced by multiple factors and a diversity of experiences.

Although people with disabilities are increasingly using social media, moving from being simple users to protagonists and increasing their opportunities for social participation, in some cases these platforms still present barriers to access and usability that translate into a digital divide that is difficult to overcome.

The digital divide is determined by the ability or difficulty of social groups to take advantage of information and communication technologies to transform the reality in which they live and improve their living conditions.

There is a social group with a liberating ideology that seeks to create a positive image of disability, valuing abilities and needs, opportunities and difficulties, and most importantly, personal circumstances and limitations.

Taking as a reference the analysis "From loneliness to solicitation: How people with intellectual disabilities or autism spectrum disorder use the Internet" by Sallafranque-St-Louis et al.⁽⁶⁾ we can see how young people with intellectual disabilities experienced discrimination when using social media and turned to their friends,

family, and professionals for support in overcoming it.

Studies on the participation of people with intellectual disabilities in social media in South Korea, by Kim, K et al., have shown that people with intellectual disabilities who use these platforms can reap certain benefits, such as improved social capital, increased self-confidence, and a positive self-image. Social media are tools for social inclusion, but they require support from these individuals' environment to ensure safe use.

Every day, there is an increase in the number of people with disabilities who use social media to make their lifestyles visible, communicate messages, influence their followers, and show their identity. This allows them to break certain labels, emphasizing other aspects of their identity.

Instagram has established itself as a platform for young people to develop their identity and self-expression, fostering community building in both social and online environments.

Many of these users are influencers, yet they do not seek to portray a perfect life, nor are they focused on gaining followers and getting more than 10K likes. However, their ability to overcome challenges and their optimism cause their communities to grow organically at an astonishing rate. They achieve this thanks to their drive to raise awareness and normalize disability.

To define influencers, we refer to Fernández Gómez et al.⁽⁵⁾ who see influencers as “an updated version of the traditional opinion leader.” Following Díaz Iglesias⁽⁷⁾ we understand that choosing influencers based on the number of followers they have is the most common mistake brands make, since “it is more effective to target niches through influencers with fewer followers but greater influence over them than through influencers with a large number of followers but less influence.” According to HypeAuditor, a company specializing in social media and marketing, there are 78 800 influencers in the country who generate content on Instagram.

In the study “When less is more: the impact of macro and micro influencers” by Kay, S et al., they mention the categorization of micro-influencers as those profiles that obtain between 1 000 and 100 000 likes and therefore exert a more intense influence on their followers than those who obtain a greater number of likes. In other words, as an influencer's audience grows, their power of persuasion decreases. This is because there is less interaction between them and their followers, and users are more vulnerable to the commercial intent behind these individuals' behavior. The relationship between influencers with a smaller audience and their followers is closer, and this is how they achieve a greater impact on them.

Many influencers are activists for inclusion and share a wide range of experiences related to accessibility on their profiles. Today, there is an impressive struggle to combat the way people with disabilities are referred to. As influencer Daniela Aza⁽⁸⁾ mentions in an article for Clarín, her goal is to normalize disability in different discourses of everyday life. She raises the feeling that people still fear and reject them. She suggests that there is goodwill, but a lot of ignorance and omissions on the part of advertising and the media when it comes to incorporating disability and talking about the issue. In addition, there is a great deal of protest about the lack of representation; their bodies are not visible in moments of enjoyment or in advertising campaigns.

This lack of inclusion is where the stigma of disability merges with gender stereotypes. Daniela Aza⁽⁸⁾ mentions a clear and accurate example in the interview: “... summer is coming, a very complicated time for all those who have different bodies. We have made progress, but women with disabilities are still being categorized or labeled for having a different body.” These are things that she highlights as minor, but they are part of the discourse that shapes people's imaginations. If we do not show and normalize this content, it will be very difficult for people to internalize it.⁽⁹⁾

Over the years, people with disabilities have been so stigmatized and labeled that a view of inferiority has been created about them. This stigma comes from stereotypes that have been passed down through many generations, due to a lack of understanding of disability.⁽¹⁰⁾

One of the first definitions of the concept of stigma was developed by Goffman, who defined it as a totally discrediting attribute or social identity that turns a person who was considered normal into someone who is contaminated or tainted.⁽¹¹⁾

Therefore, we find that people with disabilities inevitably face a double challenge. On the one hand, there are characteristics of disability that in themselves limit the individual. In this case, the individual struggles with themselves to maintain the strength necessary to overcome the obstacles they face on a daily basis. On the other hand, they struggle against discrimination and social prejudice, as many people with disabilities feel they have to prove their abilities in order to be recognized as people.⁽¹²⁾

As sociologist Antonio Jiménez Lara mentions, information and communication technologies have contributed to economic growth and technological development in recent decades, and have also had a significant impact on society. Their spread across all social and economic levels is transforming society and generating profound changes in the way we work and in the way we live and interact.⁽¹³⁾

The term “information society” was coined to refer to the new society in which the creation, distribution, and processing of information constitute an increasingly important part of cultural and economic activities. According to Antonio Jiménez Lara, the Information Society is the successor to the industrial society, with the distinctive features of the importance of information, knowledge, and the networks through which that

information and knowledge are transmitted.⁽¹⁴⁾

All of this can provide endless opportunities that contribute, for example, to an increase in the employment rate for people with disabilities. This is because new technological tools make it easier for people with disabilities to perform many traditional jobs in a simpler way.⁽¹⁵⁾

Below is an excerpt from an interview with Carolina Buceta, psychologist and member of the Network for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (REDI), in ISalud Magazine.⁽¹⁶⁾

The challenge ahead of us is that we must be part of an inclusive society, coordinating the actions of organizations and working across the board on

issues related to disability, incorporating them into schools and all curricula related to the training of professionals. REDI has worked on gender issues, crossing the issue with disability and participating in various women's forums. Activities and campaigns must be carried out to promote the defense of the rights of people with disabilities under universal design, that is, under a model that is enjoyable for everyone.^(17,18)

As Araceli López, Marita Domínguez, and Yanina Zanarini mention, in order for this to be achieved in a complex and challenging world, certain training is needed:

- Training to implement inclusive state policies.
- Training to give everyone access to the same rights and opportunities.
- Training to manage the economic resources allocated to the services that people with disabilities require.
- Training so that organizations working on a daily basis can transform their services to the community.
- Training to bring about a real transformation in the quality of life of people with disabilities, in line with the principles of the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

There is a view that people who have a high level of influence on social media are there to fulfill the role that the media has had over the years. According to Carrasco Muñoz, a large number of influencers have audiences that exceed those of traditional media, which makes them a valuable communication channel for raising awareness of social causes.

The vast majority of influencers have emerged from their personal interests, and over time they have incorporated this into their routine. They usually engage emotionally with their followers and post personal stories and images. As mentioned above, there is a pattern that repeats itself in all the profiles of influencers with disabilities, and that is the fight for inclusion. It is essential to highlight this post by Florencia Cambareri (@repensari.la.discapacidad) to illustrate the pattern we are talking about:

Disability is a condition that can be permanent or temporary. But we are not sick, therefore, we do not need to be “cured.” Do you know what we need? Equal opportunities, to be included, to be able to study, to be able to work.

We need our health insurance to provide and facilitate, without any “buts,” what we are entitled to by law.

That spaces have reasonable accommodations and universal design.

Politicians to put public policies on disability on the agenda.

That the necessary measures be taken in all areas so that we can live autonomous and independent lives.

That society stops treating us as “sick, weird, strange, little angels” and accepts that we are individuals with rights like anyone else.

That disability be discussed in kindergartens, schools, and universities.

That we are respected, because before our condition or diagnosis, there is our person.

More awareness and more empathy, please.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis carried out allowed us to understand the central role played by social media, particularly Instagram, as spaces for interaction and meaning-making for people with disabilities in Argentina. These platforms have established themselves not only as channels for entertainment and communication, but also as arenas for digital activism, in which influencers with disabilities have managed to raise awareness of historically silenced issues, promote social inclusion, and challenge deep-rooted stigmas in society.

The results showed that disability, conceived under medical, social, and later biopsychosocial models, had historically been interpreted in a limited way, placing people with disabilities in positions of vulnerability and dependence. However, the emergence of social media allowed this condition to be redefined, offering this group tools to express their experiences, share knowledge, and demand equal opportunities. Instagram, in particular, offered versatile formats—photos, stories, reels, and live streams—that facilitated closeness with audiences and the building of active and engaged communities.

Likewise, hashtags played a key role as a communication resource that facilitated the classification and viralization of messages related to disability, becoming a strategy that allowed users to transcend digital boundaries and connect with others who shared similar interests and struggles. In this way, influencers with

disabilities became contemporary opinion leaders, capable of mobilizing their followers, encouraging reflection, and, in many cases, inspiring collective action in favor of accessibility and equality.

Despite these advances, it was recognized that the digital divide remained a significant obstacle. Factors such as accessibility, usability, and technological inequality limited the full participation of people with disabilities in the digital sphere in some cases. This highlighted the need to promote inclusive public policies and universal design strategies that guarantee equitable access to information and communication technologies.

Finally, the study showed that influencers with disabilities in Argentina were not only seeking popularity or recognition, but also using their platforms as spaces for social advocacy. By sharing personal and collective experiences, they normalized functional diversity and helped to demystify disability. Their messages, full of authenticity and closeness, succeeded in generating active digital communities that became a source of support and a driver of change.

It was concluded that social media, and Instagram in particular, represented a fundamental resource for transforming the social imaginary around disability. These platforms, when appropriated by influencers with disabilities, became tools for empowerment, inclusion, and the construction of digital citizenship, contributing to the strengthening of a more just, empathetic, and egalitarian society.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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