NOT NATURAL, NOR NEUTRAL: THE CULTURAL CONFIGURATIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA AFFORDANCES WITHIN CHILEAN INFLUENCER INDUSTRY

Arturo Arriagada
Universidad Adolfo Ibáñez (Chile)

Ignacio Siles
Universidad de Costa Rica

Introduction

This paper explores the configurations of social media's affordances within the Chilean influencer industry. We argue for situating affordances within a wider context in which the features of platforms acquire particular meanings. Our analysis focuses on two dynamics. On the one hand, we examine how the Chilean influencer industry is shaped by a technological frame (Bijker, 1995) that structures the valence of affordances. We show that affordances are not "naturally" or "neutrally" imagined by actors but rather culturally located within technological frames that shape the discourses, values, and practices from which they obtain cultural meaning. On the other hand, we analyze how affordances provide a material support for the temporal and spatial expansion of technological frames. Thus, cultural contexts and platforms' features mutually constitute each other in ways that have not always been recognized in the scholarly literature about affordances. We situate negotiations about what it means to be an influencer in Chile, the role of intermediaries (e.g. branding agencies), communication with followers, and the global influencer industry as part of this mutually constitutive relationship.

Situating Technological Affordances Within "Technological Frames"

Affordances are usually understood as "possibilities for action" that individuals perceive as they interact with artifacts in given contexts (Evans et al., 2017, p. 36). The term "affordance" allows understanding how individuals' sense of agency and the properties of objects mutually configure each other. Evans et al. (2017) identified three main conceptual inconsistencies in how this concept is used in the scholarly literature. First, affordances are neither object nor feature. Secondly, affordances are not an "outcome" of an interaction between users and technologies. Thirdly, affordances are not fixed or binary categories but rather variable across different uses and technological features.

Affordances are not objective. Users can thus interpret them in different ways. Nagy & Neff (2015) showed that affordances are "imagined" by users who variously incorporate the material qualities and technological properties defined by designers. Scolere et al. (2018) noted that the self-branding practices of content creators in different social media platforms are characterized by how people imagine what platforms are for, their audiences, and perceptions of the self. In this paper, we argue that the ways in which users "imagine" these affordances is neither inevitable nor culturally neutral. We argue for situating affordances within what Bijker (1995) called "technological frames", that is, the set of "problem-solving strategies, theories, and testing practices […] [that shape] the way in which members of a [...] social group interact, and the way in which they think and act" (p. 264). Actors in particular contexts thus imagine affordances as they negotiate specific technological frames.

Method

Data for this project come from in-depth semi-structured interviews with 35 social media influencers based in Santiago, Chile. Similar to other studies about digital content creators practices (Duffy 2017), in-depth interviews allowed to explore how users imagine technological affordances. Our sample was mostly women (n= 26) and a few of men (n= 9), all college-educated. Interviews were conducted in person and recorded with participants' consent. Interviews topics included people's backgrounds and expertise; practices of content creation, distribution, and promotion; self-presentation strategies; and their relationships with brands and branding agencies. Interview transcripts were coded and analyzed using a grounded theory approach.

Key findings: the cultural configurations of social media affordances

A specific technological frame shapes how individuals imagine and act on the affordances of social media in this circuit or network of actors. This technological frame is built around the idea of "authenticity". All informants emphasized the "need" to be spontaneous and authentic in front of their audiences. This discourse works as an ideal that allows them to distinguish themselves from other content creators like "ego-bloggers"—people whose content is a form of self-promotion through stylish pictures. This technological frame also constrains the actions of people by imposing demands on those who adopt it. For instance, influencers consider that agencies impose certain beauty standards for the promotion of brands and products. Thus, they negotiate with agencies the type of content they will promote as part of a campaign. As Javiera, a fashion influencer explains: "A brand might buy you an article, but what I do is making that article fun for my followers. That brings the brand closer in the most natural

possible way, not being so aggressive in the end". To meet this exigence, influencers employ specific rules, including how many posts or pictures they can share daily. Content creators in Chile envision the affordances of social media platforms as a means to achieve the demands imposed by specific ideas of how to be an influencer.

There are also demands associated with interactions with followers. For example, Chilean influencers feel the pressure to answer all the direct messages (DM) they receive on Instagram, as a form of "relational labor" (Baym 2015). Informants said they can receive more than 40 messages every day and feel pressured to answer them immediately to keep their audiences loyal to their content. Influencers portray audiences as "consumers" that need permanent attention and who always have the final word.

A key in how influencers play the "visibility game" (Cotter 2019) is how they imagine the role of algorithms in shaping their exposure to audiences, catching audiences' attention, and obtaining reactions (e.g. in the form of comments, "hearts" or "likes"). As Valentina, a fashion influencer, describes: "If you are not uploading content constantly, (Instagram's algorithm) punishes you… before that you upload your picture and you can see it immediately, but now depends on the number of people who 'likes' the picture and my kind of followers".

Finally, Chilean influencers work constantly to draw the attention of audiences on multiple platforms. In so doing, they imagine the affordances of each platform in distinct ways. For them, Twitter allows more "informal" communication. Instead, they consider Instagram to be central: it is the platform that "all the people are watching", as a person described it. Accordingly, they see Instagram's affordances as opportunities for "curation" that requires to create different styles of content. In their view, Facebook affords opportunities to aggregate audiences. In this way, affordances materialize certain interpretations of technologies and thus become a key in the expansion of certain technological frames in the global South.

Conclusion

Chilean influencers draw on a technological frame to make sense of what it means to be a content creator. This technological frame enables and constrains specific actions and imaginations of the affordances of social media. It provides an ideal of how to be an influencer, which is anchored around credibility, authenticity, and spontaneity. This technological frame "imposes" demands to content creators in relation to the industries, brands, and intermediaries with which they work.

At the same time, affordances provide a material support for technological frames that allow them to travel through space and time. In this way, neoliberal ideas of technology and the self find fertile ground in Chile. These affordances function as resources that allow obtaining the ideals of certain technological frames. In this way, technological frames and affordances are mutually constitutive.

References

Baym, N. K. (2015). Connect With Your Audience! The Relational Labor of Connection. *The Communication Review*, 18(1), 14–22.

Bijker, W. E. (1995). *Of bicycles, bakelites, and bulbs: Toward a theory of sociotechnical change.* Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

Bucher, T., & Helmond, A. (2018). The Affordances of Social Media Platforms. In J. Burgess, A. Marwick, & T. Poell (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media* (pp. 233–253). London: Sage.

Cotter, K. (2019). Playing the visibility game: How digital influencers and algorithms negotiate influence on Instagram. *New Media & Society*, 21(4), 895–913.

Duffy, B. E. (2017). *(Not) Getting Paid To To What You Love.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Evans, S. K., Pearce, K. E., Vitak, J., & Treem, J. W. (2017). Explicating Affordances: A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Affordances in Communication Research: Explicating Affordnces. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 22(1), 35–52.

Nagy, P., & Neff, G. (2015). Imagined Affordance: Reconstructing a Keyword for Communication Theory. *Social Media + Society*, 1(2), 1-9.

Scolere, L., Pruchniewska, U., & Duffy, B. E. (2018). Constructing the Platform-Specific Self-Brand: The Labor of Social Media Promotion. *Social Media + Society*, 4(3).