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AFFECTIVE TEMPORALITIES ON SOCIAL MEDIA: WORLD YOUTH DAY 2023

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Background and theoretical framework

Pilgrimage can be defined as a journey inspired by religious, spiritual or cultural motives (Collins-Kreiner, 2010). Practices of pilgrimage are increasingly popular, as a form of post-secular tourism, which “(re)construct[s] pilgrimage places in novel ways, neither sacral nor secular, but rather a hybrid or combination of both” (Nilsson & Tesfahuney, 2018, p. 172). In fact, post-secular pilgrimage brings together people motivated by religion, tourism, leisure, or self-development (Nilsson, 2018). In this context, the concepts of *communitas* – which reflects feelings of intimacy, equality, and community among pilgrims (Maddrell & della Dora, 2013) – and *collective effervescence* – a collective ritual where individuals experience intense social unity and share emotional states (Serazio, 2013) – seem to be important elements of the experience.

Pilgrimage can be augmented by digital media, for instance in the form of blogs, groups, or virtual pilgrimage that support the preparation of the experience; as well as in the sharing of the experience through social media, as a form of 'expressive release', sense-making and community affirmation (Maddrell & della Dora, 2013). During pilgrimage, pilgrims usually limit their access to habitual devices, people, and digital services, while opening up for the use of others that facilitate the mobility and the spiritual, affective, and sensorial experience as a pilgrim (Jorge, 2023).

In this paper, we focus our attention on the pilgrimage of the World Youth Day 2023 (WYD 2023), an international event that occurs periodically in a different city of the world, hosted in Lisbon in 2023. Unlike more traditional pilgrimages, such as Santiago de Compostela, which often relate to historic and holy destinations (Jensen & Løvrød, 2017), World Youth Day happened for the first time in mid-1980s as is currently one of

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the largest public events in the world, with a festival-like atmosphere (Bogacz-Wojtanowska et al., 2019).

Method

We aim to understand how a sense of *communitas* and collective effervescence was built, portrayed, and potentially augmented online before, during and after WYD 2023. We use the notion of affective temporalities (Nikunen, 2023) to understand how digital media sustain pilgrim communities as atmospheres developed through time flows (Hitchen, 2021).

We take an ecological perspective on social media and digital platforms, acknowledging that most people incorporate multiple platforms in their everyday communication practices (Zhao et al., 2016). In trying to better understand how users extend and augment their experience of pilgrimage through each one of them, we conducted online observations on social media – namely Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook –, repositories – Giphy – and on maps and apps directly related to the event, as detailed in Table 1.

Platform (and extraction tool)	Observation details and scrapped material	Duration/Period	Corpus
Instagram (Phantombuster)	3 hashtags: #LISBOA2023 #jnj #estamosacaminho	For a month: mid-July to mid-August/2023	11 158 posts, 644 stories
	2 profiles: @lisboa2023_en @lisboa2023_pt		
Facebook (CrowdTangle)	2 groups: World Youth Day 2023 JMJ SEUL 2027	For a year: August/2022 to August/2023	3148 posts
TikTok (Zeeschuurmer)	1 hashtag: #jnj2023	Scrapped in mid-July	374
Giphy (Manual extraction)	2 profiles: Lisboa2023 JeunesCathosLyon	Scrapped in August/2023	29 gifs
	Keyword searches: JMJ World Youth Day Lisboa2023 Lisbon2023		
Apps (App Scraper)	Google Play Store App Store		2 apps
Maps	Google Maps Official WYD website		

Table 1

We performed a content, multimodal analysis (Bouvier & Rasmussen, 2022) on the material, seeking to identify themes as well as modalities of digital and social media as expressive functions.

Results

Anticipation played an important part in creating a sense of unity, belonging, and community among pilgrims before the event, although not without uncertainty and dispute. Through TikTok the build-up towards the event often included countdowns, adapting popular trends, and focusing on the process of preparation for the event. These feelings of build-up and expectation were also fed by WYD's official Instagram pages, as well as Giphy, as gifs featured the event's official symbols and slogans, one of the most popular being "we are on our way", referring to pilgrims coming to the event. Facebook groups were used to share tips and ask for help with the bureaucratic demands of the event (e.g. visas, registration). Although more static, on Google Maps the WYD 2023 organization headquarters – *Fundação JMJ 2023* – showed images of meetings and preparation for the event associated with the location. There was also a clear effort to build community, as many Instagram and TikTok posts used hashtags (e.g., #catholicinfluencers) to reach a specific target audience. Still, there was tension and backlash online around the event's financial investment and the burden it could represent to its host city.

During WYD, there were both official and unofficial apps available, providing practical information about the event (e.g., restaurants which offered discounts for pilgrims, details about public transport) to spiritual ones (e.g., daily prayers). The official WYD app and website also offered an interactive map which highlighted points of interest to pilgrims and a daily schedule with events across the city.

During the event, Instagram posts and stories showed mostly crowds and a feeling of unity, while on Facebook groups there were posts with international encounters, using flags' emojis. These uses extend both the effervescence of the event and *communitas*. Some of the content focused on the importance of uniting young Catholics as needed for the renovation of the Church and to adapt religion to contemporary demands. During and after the event, new gifs appeared on Giphy, with a lighter, more positive and humorous atmosphere. Some of them appropriated snippets of news media coverage or popular culture references and circulated them as memes among pilgrims and far beyond.

After WYD, digital content focused mostly on expressions of gratitude towards organizers, volunteers, and sponsors across Instagram in particular. It was clear the event was considered a big success and nostalgic content also became prevalent across platforms, highlighting the self-transformative aspect of the experience. Also, a sensation of urgency was expressed on posts and stories focusing right away on the next WYD (2027, in Seoul) reinforcing the idea of a cohesive group which will reencounter in the future.

Overall, social media allowed pilgrims to build *communitas*, augment effervescence and process the emotion of longing. This was true before, during and after the event, as both anticipation and remembering were shared dynamics among pilgrims. While Facebook groups allowed for coordination and peer support and advice, TikTok and Instagram afforded gains of visibility through the use of hashtags. Giphy appears as a repository of humorous content from both official and vernacular cultures. As for apps and maps, they

seemed to be more focused in the present, as they were helpful tools to navigate and manage the logistics of the event, but did not take on a collaborative mode.

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