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Digital cruelty: The invisible violence of social media
La crueldad digital: la violencia invisible de las redes sociales
Crueldade digital: a violência invisível das redes sociais

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Abstract

We live in an era of instant, relentless connection. Never before has humanity been able to be so present in the lives of others without sharing the same physical space. Social networks, born as bridges to unite us, have also become arenas where our humanity fades and new forms of subtle, normalized violence emerge. You no longer need to shout or insult to wound. A sarcastic sentence, a joke coated in cruelty, a message left on “seen,” or a silence heavier than words can all inflict damage. In these digital territories, absence can hurt as much as presence, and a reputation can collapse in minutes before countless eyes. Everything is exposed, yet empathy seems lost among algorithms that reward what is fast, viral, or aggressive. Digital violence hides behind excuses like “it was just a joke”, or “if you post it, expect criticism.” But its effects are real: it exhausts, humiliates, excludes. More unsettling still, many who behave harshly online would never act that way in person. Why do we do it? What invisible forces sustain this culture of perfection and public shaming? When did the virtual world become an emotional battlefield? This phenomenon does not ask us to demonize social networks, but to recognize that the digital realm is part of life. Behind every screen is someone who feels, and every word -or silence-, holds the power to build or destroy.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, qualitative analysis, network analysis, media literacy, education and culture, social media, social networks, sociology of communication, online violence.

Resumen

Vivimos en una época donde la conexión es inmediata, constante y omnipresente. Nunca antes la humanidad pudo estar tan presente en la vida de otros sin siquiera compartir un mismo espacio físico. Las redes sociales, nacidas como puentes para unir, se han convertido también en escenarios donde lo humano se diluye y surgen nuevas formas de violencia: silenciosas, sutiles y profundamente normalizadas. Ya no hace falta gritar, insultar o golpear para herir. Basta un comentario irónico, una burla disfrazada de humor, un «visto» que dura días o un silencio que pesa más que mil palabras. En

estos territorios digitales, la ausencia puede lastimar tanto como la presencia, y una reputación puede desmoronarse en minutos ante millones de ojos. Todo es público, todo queda expuesto; sin embargo, la empatía parece haberse perdido entre algoritmos que privilegian lo rápido, lo viral, lo agresivo. La violencia digital se esconde tras excusas como «solo era una broma», o «si lo compartes, aguanta las críticas». Pero sus efectos son reales: desgasta, humilla, excluye. Y lo más inquietante es que muchas veces proviene de personas que, fuera de la pantalla, jamás actuarían así. ¿Por qué lo hacemos? ¿Qué fuerzas invisibles moldean esta cultura del señalamiento y la perfección? ¿En qué momento lo virtual se volvió un campo de batalla emocional? Este fenómeno no nos pide demonizar las redes, sino comprender que lo digital también es vida. Porque detrás de cada pantalla hay alguien que siente, y cada palabra -o cada silencio- tiene el poder de sostener o destruir.
Palabras clave: Análisis cualitativo, análisis de redes, ciberacoso, educación sobre medios de comunicación, educación y cultura, medios sociales, redes sociales, sociología de la comunicación, violencia en redes sociales.

Resumo

Vivemos numa era de conexão instantânea e incessante. Nunca antes a humanidade pôde estar tão presente na vida dos outros sem compartilhar o mesmo espaço físico. As redes sociais, criadas para aproximar, tornaram-se também cenários onde o humano se dissolve e surgem novas formas de violência: sutis, silenciosas e profundamente normalizadas. Já não é preciso gritar ou insultar para ferir. Uma ironia, uma piada cruel, um “visualizado” eterno ou um silêncio que pesa mais que mil palavras podem machucar profundamente. Nos territórios digitais, a ausência fere tanto quanto a presença, e uma reputação pode ruir em minutos diante de milhões de olhares. Tudo é público, mas a empatia parece perdida entre algoritmos que priorizam o rápido, o viral, o agressivo. A violência digital se esconde atrás de frases como “era só brincadeira” ou “se postou, aguente as críticas”. Porém, seus efeitos são reais: desgastam, humilham, excluem. E o mais inquietante é que, fora das telas, muitos jamais agiriam assim. Por que fazemos isso? O que sustenta essa cultura de perfeição e linchamento público? Quando o virtual virou um campo de batalha emocional? Esse fenômeno não pede para demonizarmos as redes, mas para entendermos que o digital também é vida. Porque atrás de cada tela há alguém que sente —e cada palavra, ou silêncio, pode sustentar ou destruir.
Palavras-chave: Cyberbullying, análise qualitativa, análise de redes, literacia mediática, educação e cultura, social media, redes sociais, sociologia da comunicação, violência online.

Introduction. Social Media for Beginners… Which Includes All of Us

Social media did not arrive with an ethical manual tucked under its arm. There was no warning label saying: “use with caution, may cause addiction, anxiety, identity confusion, or a virtual lynching.” They

simply appeared -overnight- like all new things do: wrapped in novelty and presented as entertainment. An innocent game. Connect with friends, share what you think. And we -adults, young people, children, and even great-grandparents on Facebook- jumped headfirst into this unfamiliar territory, fascinated and wholly unaware of its effects.

Today we know that this "game" had a far deeper dimension. As Anna Lembke (2021) argues in *Dopamine Nation*: Finding Balance in the Age of Indulgence, the smartphone functions as "a modern hypodermic needle delivering digital dopamine 24/7." Social media does more than capture our attention: it stimulates our reward system so immediately that it becomes difficult to distinguish entertainment from dopaminergic conditioning. The compulsion -the urge to check, refresh, update, post- is not mere whim; it is neurobiology in action. And yet we expect fourteen-year-olds to understand emotional boundaries, digital reputation, and privacy when adults themselves barely grasp the addictive mechanism in which we are all entangled.

The irony is that we demand responsible use from younger generations of something none of us were ever taught to use. A global social experiment, launched without ethical or moral planning, whose regulation -as José van Dijck (2013) explains in *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*- was left in the hands of platforms that not only connect people but also shape a culture of connectivity governed by algorithms, interfaces, and business models. We are not simply "connected": we inhabit an ecosystem engineered to maximize engagement, not well-being. And an algorithm, unlike any human institution, has no understanding of empathy, suffering, or moral limits. It only seeks clicks.

In this context, a new form of subjectivity emerges, one defined by constant exposure. Paula Sibilia (2024) describes a digital morality marked by cynicism, direct attacks, and an overflowing self stripped of interiority. Social media, which initially promised to be a space for expression, has become a stage where performativity, aggressive unmasking, and the narcissistic demand for the other have become routine. It is no surprise, then, that a digital double standard flourishes: we denounce cyberbullying while sharing private screenshots to mock someone; we speak of empathy while ignoring messages that do not serve us; we preach self-care while competing for likes as if they were existential validations.

We must add an even more troubling dimension: digital violence. Silvia Semenzin's (2021) about the non-consensual dissemination of private images, shows how contemporary forms of sexual violence have migrated to -and intensified within- digital environments. These are not isolated incidents but practices structured by dynamics of control, humiliation, and domination, which platform design often enables and amplifies. Similarly, González-Fernández (2018) emphasizes that online violence is neither marginal nor merely "virtual": it is embedded in everyday life and modulated by the

technological architectures that organize our interactions.

This produces a digital divide that is not only technological but also moral and cultural. Generations that never knew life with social media coexist with others who cannot imagine life without them. And still, we place the burden on younger people to "behave properly," while adults continue forwarding WhatsApp chains warning of bad luck if they are not shared ten times. Normalization is the real danger (Foucault, 1977, 1980). We were not born into the digital world; we are not prepared for constant exposure, information overload, the viral nature of rejection, or the dopaminergic circuitry that sustains compulsion. Yet we have normalized all of this at record speed, even forms of subtle violence that we no longer recognize as such.

If we do not acknowledge that we remain beginners -that we are improvised addicts navigating an environment with no ethical compass-, we will continue demanding from younger generations a responsibility we ourselves do not practice. Digital ethics is not inherited; it is built. And the good news is that there is still time.

Digital Violence: When We Become Our Own Worst Enemy

We worry about haters, cyberbullying, and virtual mob attacks -and rightly so- but we overlook one detail: the most constant, silent, and effective form of violence is the one we direct at ourselves. In the mirror of social media, we become judge, jury, and executioner of our own image, our achievements, our failures, and our imperfections (Sibilia, 2024; González-Fernández, 2018).

No one demands perfection from you -except yourself- under the influence of an algorithm that retrains us through cycles of "punishment–reward," signaling what is correct, beautiful, productive, and above all… something quietly Machiavellian (van Dijck, 2013).

Welcome, then, to capitalism 2.0: self-exploitation dressed up as entrepreneurial spirit; the "build your personal brand," "be the best version of yourself" mantra, externally, of course, because whatever happens inside remains unseen. And since what is internal is invisible, it becomes insignificant. So… keep going. Smile and think positive.

And if you are not launching something new, generating content, monetizing your talent, your body, or your time… are you even alive?

We live in a form of self-aggression disguised as motivation. Post everything. Measure everything. Compare everything. It is the sport we practice tirelessly every day without noticing. Each scroll delivers a blow to our self-esteem. Constant overexposure produces a loop of chronic dissatisfaction because we are not seeing other people's lives; we are seeing their best moments, set to music and filtered (Lembke, 2021; Raheemullah, 2022).

And how do we respond? By demanding even more of ourselves. Relentless productivity. We become our own managers, bosses who neither pay nor ever shut down the computer. We exploit ourselves with the smile of an influencer, weighed down with guilt for everything we are not tending to in the rest of our lives. And when we collapse, we hide it… because no one wants to see that. Paradoxically, this only deepens isolation and loneliness.

None of this is accidental or a system glitch. Major social platforms are engineered to make you feel insufficient because an insecure user is an active user, one who posts more, comments more, buys more, self-corrects more, and seeks constant validation (González-Fernández, 2018; Semenzin, 2021).

As Byung-Chul Han (2012) argues in *The Burnout Society*, we inhabit a world in which the subject exploits themselves while believing they are free. There is no greater form of aggression, and we live it daily, normalized alongside our grocery lists.

And amid all this emotional chaos, the word emerges… both as a weapon and as a placebo

Language is an instrument that is profoundly human, noble, and powerful. We use the body of the word as a Trojan horse, turning it into a cheap self-help slogan, a recycled motivational phrase, or a quick judgment.

Language scholars such as Noam Chomsky (1991; Fernández, 1995; Herman & Chomsky, 2008) argue that systems of power restrict not only the physical but also the symbolic: they shape what we think and what we say. In works such as *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (1988) and *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies* (1991), he warned that language functions as symbolic violence, intertwined with propaganda and power. Language does not merely describe the world: it constructs it. And what we say, as well as what we read every day, shapes how we perceive ourselves. It becomes, ultimately, symbolic violence internalized through language. And it can be used maliciously. It is like having an internal coach chasing you with a stick.

We can observe several symptoms of this invisible violence:

- Chronic mental exhaustion without a clear cause.
- Compulsive comparison, almost like a reflex.
- Fear of digital silence: if you do not post, you feel as if you disappear.
- Diffuse existential anxiety: you cannot pinpoint what is wrong, but you feel you are behind, that you cannot keep up.

- Depression disguised as a slump: you assume no one wants to read something sad, so you abstain.

- Self-exploitation and forced emotional confusion: smiling when you want to cry, accompanied by the sensation of "producing" nonstop without knowing for whom or why (Han et al., 2020; Sibilia, 2024).

Below, we highlight examples from empirical studies and specialized literature that support this summary of key consequences. These works help clarify the phenomena described above.

To begin, consider the study by Han et al. (2020), *The Impact of Social Media Use on Job Burnout: The Role of Social Comparison*. The authors selected 530 working adults in China who were active users of WeChat (a social media/digital platform). Through an online survey, they administered a questionnaire measuring social media use -specifically WeChat- its frequency, intensity, and indicators of digital addiction.

The researchers sought to examine how social comparison operates within this context: how often individuals compare themselves to others, the type of comparison (upward or downward), and the ways in which it manifests. To do so, they used an adapted version of the Social Comparison Scale developed by Gibbons and Buunk (1999; Buunk & Gibbons, 1997; Buunk, Gibbons & Visser, 2002; Križan & Gibbons, 2014), revised for a Chinese context. In line with this adapted scale, the study also assessed job burnout -emotional exhaustion- among respondents.

They included age, gender, working hours, and other demographic variables to isolate the effects of the primary predictors. Using hierarchical regressions, they tested their hypotheses (that social media use predicts burnout) and analyzed whether social comparison acts as a moderating or mediating variable. They also conducted subgroup analyses, comparing individuals with high tendencies toward social comparison to those with lower tendencies.

The results revealed a relationship between social media use and job burnout. Specifically, they found a significant positive correlation: higher use -and greater addiction to WeChat- was associated with higher levels of burnout.

Regarding whether social comparison moderates or mediates the relationship between social media use and burnout, the study found that social comparison functions as a moderator. The impact of social media use on emotional exhaustion shifts depending on how strongly individuals tend toward social comparison.

In groups with a high tendency toward social comparison, it can function almost as a mediator: the

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syndrome becomes significant only when heavy social media use coexists with a strong inclination to compare oneself to others.

Social comparison intensifies the effect of social media use

The type of comparison and its associated emotions also appeared to matter. Users did not engage only in upward comparison; they compared downward as well. They felt better when comparing themselves to users who were rated more poorly or who occupied a lower social standing. Paradoxically, this sense of superiority led them to display more symptoms of burnout, increasing their social media use.

The researchers concluded that even downward comparison is not protective, as it can fuel emotional self-exploitation and chronic exhaustion in the effort to maintain that sense of superiority.

Regarding demographic variables, they found that older participants tended to report more exhaustion. Among groups with high levels of social comparison, women tended to display higher levels as well. Educational attainment or occupational background did not always play a significant role.

This study connects directly to mental fatigue and job burnout, including tiredness, emotional exhaustion, and reduced satisfaction. Compulsive comparison -measured here as the tendency to compare oneself with others- captures the ongoing need to gauge where we stand in relation to someone else.

Depression disguised as a slump. Although the researchers did not measure clinical diagnoses of depression, the negative emotional effects associated with these patterns can produce similar symptoms.

Self-exploitation. The idea that heavy social media use, combined with constant comparison, leads individuals to generate their own psychological erosion, perhaps believing they are striving toward more success, acceptance, or achievement.

The second example, predating the one above, comes from Leon Festinger's (1975) Theory of Cognitive Dissonance, and his work on social comparison. Festinger, a U.S. social psychologist, developed social comparison theory, which explains that individuals evaluate their own opinions, abilities, and states of being by comparing themselves with others. In his foundational work *A Theory of Social Comparison Processes* (1954), he expanded on this idea of compulsive comparison -well before the digital era-showing that the impulse to compare, and the sense of insufficiency it produces, are not new phenomena. What we see today is an intensification of these tendencies through social media. This theory is now used to explain digital burnout.

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Festinger (1954, 1975) argued that people have an internal need for consistency among their thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. When there is an internal contradiction (dissonance), we experience psychological discomfort. To reduce that discomfort, we change something: our beliefs, our decisions, or our perceptions. This helps explain how people rationalize contradictory decisions, an insight now applied to understand social media addiction and self-justification.

When objective criteria are unavailable, people evaluate themselves by comparing with others. We compare abilities, opinions, achievements, lifestyles, either upward or downward.

Social media intensifies this comparison constantly and subtly. This leads to self-exploitation, digital anxiety, and comparison-driven depression.

In sum, the discomfort and the search for coherence push us to change, but comparison makes us feel that nothing is ever enough.

As a third example, Christina Maslach and Michael P. Leiter (2008) define burnout syndrome as emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Their work is based on clinical research -internationally recognized for shaping the modern concept of burnout- and on the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), a scale measuring emotional exhaustion and alienation (Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001).

Chronic stress, emotional exhaustion accompanied by a sense of being drained and depleted, depersonalization, a cynical or detached attitude toward work or people, and reduced personal accomplishment, the feeling that nothing is achieved, that nothing makes sense. This syndrome is not mere fatigue: it is a deep emotional and functional disconnection that can lead to anxiety, depression, isolation, and even physical disorders.

Maslach (2008) emphasizes that this exhaustion is not the individual's fault but a consequence of the modern work environment and, in this case, of social media.

Digital self-exploitation, remote work, social platforms, and intense competitiveness expand burnout beyond the workplace, affecting students, caregivers, freelancers, and everyday users of social media. When these pressures combine with the constant anxiety of not performing well enough, difficulty disconnecting, and the sense of failure despite being busy all day, they produce an emotional downturn far beyond ordinary stress.

This connects, once again, with Byung-Chul Han's (2012) critique of the self-exploited neoliberal subject; Maslach (2008) provides the psychological foundation to understand how this dynamic fractures both mind and body.

Including these studies is not a statement against entrepreneurship but a reminder not to romanticize personal sacrifice as the only path forward, especially when the digital sphere is involved.

Entrepreneurship should not be synonymous with sleepless nights, the absence of a personal life, or guilt for resting. Yet on social media, it is.

It seems that if you do not sell your life as a narrative of personal triumph, no one pays attention. And perhaps we should ask ourselves why. Today, everything is framed as struggle, violence, and adversity, when it could simply be called living. Framing it this way makes it seem doubly meaningful, more valuable, more epic, more theatrical.

Perhaps the first step is to stop viewing the problem as something external. Digital violence no longer requires someone else to attack you; your own thoughts, your daily scroll, your self-imposed need to account for yourself, to display yourself, to fit in… these may be enough.

Digital performance culture is making us sick, but it hides behind the language of motivation. And if you fall ill, you are told it is due to a lack of motivation. No one escapes this dopaminergic maze.

Taking care of oneself is not only turning off the phone, recognizing that you cannot always be available, posting less… comparing less. It is remembering that we are not brands, products, or content accounts. We are people. And that is enough.

The Great Digital Circus: Between Freedom and the Algorithmic Cage

We have been sold the internet as humanity's great breakthrough, the twenty-first-century Library of Alexandria. Social media as a gift. A revolution. And, in many ways, it is (van Dijck, 2013).

We were promised freedom, community, and a voice of our own. A public square where everyone could be heard and acknowledged. But it did not take long to realize that this is less a square than a circus. And the audience is ravenous. As Shoshana Zuboff (2019) writes in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*: Real power is not found in what people do, but in what systems can predict and control about them.

The internet has enormous potential. You can receive free education, start a business from your home, connect with people who share your quirks. You can tell your story, show your art, find love. You can even make a living by uploading videos. But beneath this digital utopia lies something deeper, an eye that never blinks.

We are not free. We are observable. Measurable. Manipulable. You are not simply on a social network; you are in a storefront designed to make you forget you are being watched. Judged. And

while you think you are choosing, you have already been chosen by an algorithm that knows more about you than your own mother (Bongiovi, 2019; Zuboff, 2019). As the documentary *The Social Dilemma* (Orlowski, 2020) shows: If you're not paying for the product, you are the product.

Every like, every view, every pause feeds information to a machine that does not seek your freedom. It wants your attention. Your time. And, if possible, your obedience (Lembke, 2021).

The problem is not only the technology, it is what we do with it. Or rather, what it makes of us (van Dijck, 2013). At times you find yourself in a conversation that feels more like combat; if you do not choose a side, you are labeled weak. This is not social dialogue; it is a digital war in which we all carry stones, ready to throw at whoever stands across from us, the different one.

Information overload is another monster disguised as progress. Important news once reached us through radio or television. You sought out information; you chose it. Now it reaches you in bursts -fragmented, multiplied- five versions at a time, creating a reality that is confusing and often overwhelming. You grow exhausted from the constant barrage of bad news -good news rarely makes the cut- and you surrender to the drama. You become a passive spectator, feeling powerless before what you see, hear, and feel. You swallow content without questioning it, because you lack the time and the energy. You no longer look, no longer select, you just consume (González-Fernández, 2018).

And while life becomes pixelated, personal relationships are negotiated through messages. Love is measured in likes. It is difficult to tell whether everything is becoming more fluid or more rigid. These often frustrating experiences push us to relate from fear, distrust, and suspicion. The other person appears less real, less lovable in the true sense of the word (Semenzin, 2021).

If your partner does not show you publicly, it becomes a red flag, and an entire social test. The official seal of love has a new stage; it is no longer parties or weddings but this virtual space.

Desire, too, has become content. The couple becomes an emotional marketing campaign. And the worst part: we accept it (Lembke, 2021). As Byung-Chul Han (2012) said, the burnout society is one in which pressure comes from the subject itself.

There is something profoundly violent in all of this. Hyperconnection is not harmless. It is a new form of aggression, invisible, constant, decorated with emojis. A buzzing that never stops. You cannot disconnect without disappearing. You cannot exist without displaying. You cannot love without proving it. You cannot know whether the person on the other side is performing or simply showing who they are, and the digital barrier feeds misunderstanding. Too many open fronts, all shaking the soul (González-Fernández, 2018; Semenzin, 2021).

We have moved from having a digital world to living in it. But not as free beings, as personal brands

terrified of being forgotten. The network promised connection, and we have it. But we did not read the fine print: under surveillance.

Happiness as a Business and the Self as a Shop Window

We have all posted a photo on Facebook to let others know we arrived safely at our destination. We used to write status updates because we were excited and wanted to share the moment, passing an exam, attending a wedding, our own wedding…

But we have lost part of that early innocence. We have professionalized self-exposure to such an extent that it feels as if there were a television studio in every home, in every room.

Now we share ourselves in order to exist. Because if you don't upload it, it didn't happen. And if it did happen but no one reacts, it was not worth it.

We live through the stories we tell, but above all, through the stories we tell ourselves, and through the reactions we provoke. Those reactions are becoming our internal compass.

As Shoshana Zuboff (2019) notes, users of digital platforms have become information products; their emotions, desires, and behaviors are transformed into data used by others to predict and modify their actions. Social media has not only taught us to look at others; it has taught us to look at ourselves as if we were someone else. We have externalized identity so much that we no longer know who we are when no one is watching. Do you even exist without the spotlight?

And although this may sound like familiar territory, it is a paradigm that keeps generating new lines of research, for instance, the erosion of authenticity when a commercial motive becomes apparent. The pursuit of happiness has always been profitable, and today it seems that everyone -even those with good intentions- wants to climb the ladder toward becoming a kind of supreme guru. Stylishly proactive, offering exercises to help you "focus on your goals."

"What goals?" I ask myself.

Entire platforms overflow with messages from coaches promising that "if you think big, the universe will listen" (Cabanas & Illouz, 2019; Hochschild, 2012; Pasqualini, 2025). The wellness industry has understood something we still refuse to accept: there is no better market than a person who cannot tolerate themselves. And off we go, like good consumers, model clients trying to fix ourselves -because, according to them, we are all broken or wounded and in need of healing- without truly understanding why we supposedly need fixing.

We are sold happiness through trauma, through pain, through a narrative of damaged existence. It is

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almost suspicious if you have not experienced a dramatic episode at some point. It seems implausible. It generates distrust… and envy. As Rosenstein warns in *The Social Dilemma* (Orlowski, 2020), "the architecture of these platforms is designed to keep us addicted and increase our anxiety, feeding the illusion of control over our digital lives."

In the ranking of people worth following, the ordinary does not sell, and it cannot find "true" happiness, because there is also fake happiness, which is usually the one most of us live.

Happiness becomes a goal, an aesthetic, a lifestyle. As if a routine and three positive affirmations could silence the existential abyss. As if sadness were a programming error fixable by a motivational post on a Sunday afternoon.

And so our content becomes the currency. We upload emotions, achievements, crises, inner worlds… without truly engaging with others. We consume the emotions of strangers like popcorn, while never questioning our own. We are working for the algorithm. As Zuboff (2019) writes, users' attention and data are the raw material of the surveillance economy, transforming our lives into merchandise.

Feeding a machine that does not understand nuance or depth, a machine that can turn a breakup into viral content. And the uncomfortable question is: why do we do it?

Are we truly that naive, or are we complicit? Do we need connection even if it means putting on a performance? Are we so afraid of disappearing?

Perhaps it is a combination of all of this, along with many more nuances that are difficult to list. It is a kind of consensual self-deception. A voluntary collaboration between user and system. You reveal your soul, and they monetize it, an idea also explored by Adam Curtis (2002) in the BBC documentary *The Century of the Self*.

But this comes at a price; the process of displaying yourself eventually keeps you from seeing yourself. You become the character you created, the version that receives the most approval. The popular one. The most flattering angle. The most inspiring quote. Yet in the mirror of your bathroom, with worse lighting than any ring lamp, without filters or admirers, you no longer know who is looking back at you.

Or worse: you are no longer sure if anyone can truly see you at all.

And we buy into the biggest trap: manufactured authenticity. When we strip away the digital packaging, what remains is a raw, uncomfortable, deeply human truth: we are not content. We are not our posts, our metrics, or our beautifully crafted captions. Outside the platform -where no one knows us or our ambitions- we are simply another person. Ordinary. And that terrifies us.

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Being Gray in a World of Neon Lights

We are so afraid of leaving no trace that we stomp loudly, even if it means stepping on others. Even if we misstep. Even if we have no idea where we are going. As Shoshana Zuboff (2019) notes in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, every interaction becomes data for manipulating human attention and behavior. This reveals that our fear of not being seen is being used as a mechanism of control.

In this digital era -where everything is recorded, shared, and archived- it seems that the only true death is being forgotten. Dying is no longer about no longer breathing; it is about no longer being seen. No longer appearing. Not showing up in photos. Having no witnesses. Producing no content. Having no followers. So… we shout, push, and tolerate subtle -and not so subtle- forms of violence just to capture attention. As Byung-Chul Han (2012) warns in *The Burnout Society*: Contemporary society exploits the subject through the subject itself, under the illusion of freedom, a reflection of the self-imposed pressure that forces us to stand out constantly.

We swallow humiliation in order to be visible. We censor our complexity to remain understandable, digestible, easy to consume. We are terrified of being ignored. We work so hard to be special that we forget to be real. Nobody teaches us how to live without applause once we become addicted to it. No one prepares you to not excel, to not keep up. As if simply living were a failure. As if the ordinary were synonymous with mediocrity. As if real life were happening somewhere else, in a prettier, more visible, more viral place.

But no. Life is here. It is your eighty-year-old neighbor asking how you are without expecting a like in return. It is your body breathing as you sleep. It is that thought you do not publish. That kiss you do not recount. That silence you do not monetize.

In this virtual sea, everyone shouts, but not everyone is heard. And that is not only acceptable, it is profoundly necessary. Not everyone can shine. Because if everyone shines, who admires? If everyone speaks, who listens?

As José van Dijck (2013) explains in *The Culture of Connectivity*, digital connectivity is not neutral; it shapes our relationships, our attention, and our perception of ourselves, reinforcing that constant exposure creates invisible inequalities in social recognition.

There is beauty in opacity. There is strength in calm. There is value in going unnoticed. There is a secret dignity in living without needing to narrate yourself all the time. We are more human when we stop performing. Not all of us will be successful, not all of us will go far. Not all of us will be viral or legendary or exceptional. And that is not a defeat, it is liberation. It is making communion with life, placing it at the center. It is embracing the ordinariness of existence -the simple, the domestic, the

routine- as an act of rebellion in an age of perpetual spectacle.

Violence begins when we believe that who we are is not enough. When we pressure ourselves to be more, have more, show more. When the smile is forced -the comment, the body, the projects- all shaped by a sense of inadequacy. What if being were enough? We forget that humility is a virtue, not a flaw. That love -the sustaining kind- remains at the center. That the meaning of life is not fame, but connection.

Paula Sibilia (2024) believes that the new cynicisms expressed on social media reveal an overflowing self with no interiority, built on unmasking and on demands made without regard for the other, indicating that this pressure to constantly present ourselves undermines both authenticity and self-worth.

It is not necessary to impress, surprise, or captivate the entire world if you can care for what is yours, for the people who are yours. You do not need to conquer audiences; you do not need everyone to listen, only someone who matters, honestly. Peace is not in arriving, but in not running. In knowing how to live without standing out, without external pressures. In being gray in a world of neon lights. In choosing the soul, renouncing the echo, stepping out of the display window. Returning home to yourself.

Boxed-In Emotion: When One Heart Isn't Enough

Human emotion was once a river. Wide, abundant, sometimes slow, other times fast. Full of bends, eddies, and meanders. It could take days -years- to name what we felt, even when psychological therapy was not widely available. Feeling used to be an art, not a reflex. Sometimes it hurt so deeply that the only way through was to write. Or paint. Or sing with a cracked voice.

As Sherry Turkle (2015) argues in *Reclaiming Conversation*, digital communication has reduced the depth of our emotions and replaced genuine dialogue with superficial interactions.

Today, everything fits into an emoji. A smiling face. A red heart. A little flame. A "Love it."

What was once mysterious, poetic, subtle, ambiguous, ineffable… must now fit into a predesigned virtual template approved by an app. And we accept it. And that acceptance changes us -quietly, naturally- as if being reduced to six reaction buttons were not a form of violence. As if pretending that a life can fit inside a "Like" were not an emotional amputation. According to Turkle (2015), this emotional narrowing contributes to alienation and the erosion of empathy in everyday interaction.

The digital revolution gave us access to everything… except our emotional complexity. It taught us to communicate faster -like primates-, not better. It gave us megaphones but stripped away nuance. It

filled us with reactions but stole our silences. Our emotional language grows poorer from lack of words because the structure we inhabit neither needs them nor understands them.

And slowly, the muscle of the soul begins to atrophy. The muscle that feels depth. We no longer know how to explain what we feel, because it is too deep, and we call that “darkness.” We move along programmed surfaces of bright light, covering every shadow. It must fit in a story; it must perform, generate clicks. Zuboff (2019) warns in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* that digital platforms shape our actions and emotions, prioritizing visibility and clicks over genuine human experience.

This is not merely an individual problem, it is cultural, collective. It is artistic.

Art, too, has been dragged into this precariousness. The immediate prevails over the complex; the unsettling artwork, the poem that pierces you, these no longer have a place. They are not shared. They are dense. They cannot be consumed easily. They lack a hook and cannot be neatly summarized.

As José van Dijck (2013) argues in *The Culture of Connectivity*, digital culture rewards whatever is easy to consume and share, not what challenges the viewer.

This emotional impoverishment becomes a trend. And meanwhile, we talk endlessly about anxiety. Yesterday it was self-love; tomorrow it will be conscious grief. We jump from emotion to emotion as if they were filters, but we do not feel. We do not allow ourselves the time. We no longer feel, we imitate.

Paula Sibilia (2024) also notes that social media fosters emotional performativity and a cynical self-shaped by external validation.

There are no formulas for feeling. No manual that tells us what it means to be human. But we cannot lose our sensitivity in this emotional marketplace, in this industry of ultra-processed feelings and emotional glutamate.

And all of this, though subtle, is another form of violence. A soft, aesthetic, socially approved violence. But violence nonetheless. It separates us from the membrane of our depth, leaving us exposed. Making us believe that feeling is the same as displaying, unable to dwell in ambiguity, doubt, contradiction. As if that were somehow wrong.

Lembke (2021), in *Dopamine Nation*, explains how digital overstimulation generates emotional dependence and erodes the authenticity of experience.

And what happens when the soul grows bored with so much superficiality? That frozen lake that only holds if it never cracks, and when it does, we sink beneath its icy plates, imprisoned beneath them.

Everything begins to hurt, and you do not know why. Because there is no emoji for that. Because feeling everything is uncomfortable, difficult, and we drown it in a colorful motivational phrase.

In a world where emotions have become products, sadness is inconvenient, unappealing. Slow desire frustrates. Waiting is uncomfortable, and silence is useless. We live entertained, vibrating high, repeating positive affirmations and phrases that serve only to expand the market of emotional junk.

The soul asks for slowness, for full words, for time, for emotions that can be understood, savored. It asks to express. The human needs space. And someone on the other side willing to listen, with their soul.

Perhaps our exhaustion comes from forgetting that the other person is not a news broadcast, not a headline… but someone like you and me, needing to share something, needing to be someone, under the attentive and compassionate gaze of another human being. Realizing that nothing meaningful fits in a button.

As Shoshana Zuboff (2019) notes, digital surveillance turns the human being into a performance object, where emotional depth is sacrificed for attention and measurable interaction.

The Art of Becoming Again

There is no algorithm that can teach us how to live. No one will die in our place. That belongs to us alone. No filter can save an empty soul. No like can give meaning to what has never had meaning. And yet here we are, inhabitants of a promised world of connection that so often returns us to ourselves. A world where visibility feels like the new oxygen, and disappearance, the new death.

There is something we must understand -and I am working on it myself- if we do not want to dissolve completely: digital violence does not begin with insults; it begins with our disconnection from ourselves and from others. From our roots. It begins the moment we stop seeing the other as a complex human being. The second we stop seeing ourselves as such. This is not a battle of generations, ideologies, or platforms. It is a subtler, much deeper battle: the soul's struggle against its own fragmentation, its dissolution into the symbolic.

The violence of the digital world is not only the violence shouted aloud, but the one accepted as normal, the one disguised as a trend, as freedom of expression, as content. It is the violence of speaking without listening, judging without understanding, demanding without taking responsibility.

Byung-Chul Han (2012) warned that compulsory positivity disarms us in the face of profound human experience: When exposure is what matters, interiority becomes irrelevant. His idea illuminates a contemporary wound: constant self-display strips the subject of their own voice, leaving them at the

mercy of spectacle.

And against that violence, there is no tutorial. No tips. There is only one path: returning to knowledge without a barcode. To self-knowledge. To sensibility, the kind that smells of patience and tastes of slow words. That waits without showing off. Resisting being used by technology. Inhabiting the platforms with awareness. Because they are not our playground after endless workdays: they are spaces where we also live as human beings.

We must understand that being invisible online does not mean being worth less. That not everything should be shared. That there are deep interests in convincing us otherwise. That there is intrinsic beauty in intimacy, and that if we fail to protect ourselves from the gaze that never sleeps, we stop existing. There is peace in what has no audience.

We are not personal brands. We are not viral quotes. We are not products. We are human beings.

It takes courage not to give an opinion. To take the third lane. To avoid debates. To refuse to craft an identity aligned with dominant trends. It takes intelligence to slow down, think, love, forgive, and stay silent when silence is necessary. Not all noise is meaningful, and not all silence is empty.

The world needs fewer automatons and sincerer questions, awkward, aimless, unanswerable. Less urgency, more permanence. Perhaps we will never be viral; perhaps we will go unnoticed; perhaps what I write will interest no one, not the polished market, not even you. And yet it exists because I created it, because it matters to me. Because you matter to me.

Because I do not want to see you running anymore, I want to see you walking, dignified, with purpose. Because I do not want to see you shouting, I want to see you listening, and healing in the process. Because I do not want you to show everything, I want you to protect your intimacy as a treasure.

The digital world is not going to disappear, nor does it have any reason to for us to live well. It is a valuable tool. But we must learn to use it and to detect the violence embedded within it. It can open worlds and bring countries closer. Everything depends on how we use it. On how we choose to be present in it. On how we treat one another. On how aware we are of what these platforms truly are.

Fighting digital violence begins with shifting the lens, removing the veil of the ideal, and looking behind the curtain. Making peace with the ordinary. Looking into the mirror and saying: I am.

All forms of violence -physical, symbolic, structural, digital- are countered through education, beauty, calm, and emotional responsibility. Through warmth in the face of the algorithm’s coldness. Here Paulo Freire’s words (1967, 1970) echo powerfully: “Education is an act of love, an act of courage. It cannot fear debate, the analysis of reality; it cannot flee from creative discussion, under penalty of

being a farce" (Batalloso, 2004, p. 5). His *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* reminds us that every form of oppression -including digital oppression- is dismantled through critical consciousness.

Michel Foucault (1977) adds that power is not possessed but exercised through social relations, and that surveillance, discipline, and control operate even in everyday spaces. For Foucault, resistance emerges when we problematize and question these power relations, reinforcing Freire's idea: critical education is also a way of dismantling oppression.

We must reclaim pedagogical orality, care, and the transmission of tradition, not as resistance to the new, but as resistance to what colonizes. To safeguard the customs that once connected the individual to a whole greater than themselves. To be family. To cross the threshold back into being with a capital B.

Francesc Torralba (2019) insists that a society is only strong if it educates in interiority: cultivating spaces where the subject can encounter themselves, away from noise. His perspective reinforces your thesis: without emotional education, violence becomes normalized.

Community is the net that sustains and protects us, the wall that slows the digital isolation that devours everything communal. The loneliness we impose on ourselves -born from a system ravenous for productivity- is the perfect tool to deactivate our genuineness.

Perhaps the humanization of these platforms is distant or irrelevant to the corporations that shape our attention. Perhaps we must break the chains of this control, rather than pursuing a naïve "middle ground" without awareness.

To place the human being back at the center of life means cultivating consciousness through actions beyond the virtual, reminding ourselves how much remains to be done as a civilization. Lending more weight to the warmth of oral transmission. Committing to poetry, music, teaching, forms that destabilize ignorance and indifference.

Let us not confuse softness with weakness: we must educate in schools, institutes, and universities with an emphasis on values such as freedom, the right to housing, and dignified work. We must safeguard access to high-quality public education and resist privatization that excludes and narrows futures.

We must cultivate compassion as a profound form of resistance, to detach ourselves from the violence of governments that reduce us to easily replaceable digital entities, heard only when we generate money, power, or trend.

A hope -neither naive nor blind- that does not deny darkness but insists on lighting a candle.

Education as an Antidote to Digital Violence

To sustain this commitment to education, it is essential to draw on contemporary voices that align with the idea that education is the most powerful form of resistance against technological brutality. This is not merely idealistic optimism, it is a strategy grounded in knowledge, training, and social transformation.

Cristóbal Cobo (2011), a researcher on “invisible learning,” argues that education must be continuous, flexible, and connected not only to the digital world but also to the human one: The classroom should not be a factory of answers, but a laboratory of questions and meaning. His vision proposes an educational model that challenges digital consumption dynamics and promotes autonomy.

Inés Dussel (2011, 2022), a pedagogue specializing in digital culture, asserts that schools must acknowledge the mediatic dimension of our lives. Educating within a visual and digital culture means teaching young people to interpret the world, not merely to be interpreted by it, equipping them with critical tools to resist manipulation.

Andrés José Solís (2021), in his work on digital pedagogical mediation to prevent digital gender violence, argues that educational intervention is essential for transforming online relationships, and that well-designed pedagogical mediation can empower students to recognize and reject digital aggression.

Patricia Alonso-Ruido et al. (2024) have documented how education on mobile phone use and ICT is key to preventing digital violence in adolescents’ romantic relationships: Educational challenges must include the teaching of emotional and digital competencies, not just reading and writing.

Rosa María García Navarro (2024), a researcher in emotional technology, proposes that early detection of emotions through digital tools can be used in preventive education: Emotional technology allows for sensitive interventions that reduce aggressiveness online.

Virginia Arango Durling (2025) advocates for a culture of digital peace beginning in schools. In her study on digital violence against minors, she concludes that education grounded in coexistence is essential to preventing cyberbullying and grooming, and that schools must promote values of respect and community, even in virtual settings.

Sandra Suárez Castro (2025), a criminologist, also argues that technology can be an educational ally in preventing digital gender violence, helping to create safe spaces where children and adolescents learn to navigate conflict, digital identity, and technological emotions.

In conclusion, from my point of view, and considering everything presented in this article, returning to

the self is not only a poetic gesture but a profoundly pedagogical one: to educate is not to train people to serve the algorithm, but to teach them to resist it. Protecting intimacy, cultivating empathy, thinking before posting, speaking without digital filters: this is the revolution we propose. An educational revolution. A revolution of the soul.

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