

CHALLENGES TO THE EDUCATION FOR PEACE, GALTUNG AND VIOLENCE IN DIGITAL SOCIAL NETWORKS

Retos de la educación para la paz, Galtung y la violencia en redes sociales digitales

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Abstract

The main objective of this article is to provide a categorization of violence on social networks in relation to the Education for Peace project. This categorization is based on Johan Galtung's theory of the triangle of violence and UNESCO's recommendations. First, the UNESCO Guidelines and recommendations regarding Education for Peace are introduced. This is followed by an exploration of the three types of violence proposed by Galtung—direct, structural, and cultural—in a general manner and in the context of how they operate in social network settings. The proposed theoretical framework is considered as a basis for identifying how these forms of violence are interrelated and reinforced in, and because of, social networks. Finally, both Galtung's and UNESCO's recommendations are discussed in the face of violence in these digital environments, highlighting the importance of including this phenomenon in such Education for Peace proposals. As a result, the outline of a conceptual framework that connects the theory of violence with digital dynamics in the context of social networks is proposed as a step in the development of targeted educational solutions for addressing all direct, structural, and cultural violence in digital environments.

Keywords

Peace culture, Digital Technologies, Education, Violence, Citizenship Media, Network Society.

Resumen

Este artículo tiene como objetivo principal ofrecer una categorización de la violencia en redes sociales y su relación con la educación para la paz, tomando como base la teoría de Johan Galtung, específicamente, su propuesta sobre el "triángulo de la violencia" y las propuestas de la UNESCO. En primer lugar, se presentan las recomendaciones de la UNESCO, así como sus directrices de la educación para la paz. Posteriormente, se exploran de manera general los tres tipos de violencia propuestos por Galtung—directa, estructural y cultural— así como su manifestación en el entorno de las redes sociales. Se considera que el marco teórico propuesto sirve como base para identificar cómo estas formas de violencia se interrelacionan y se amplifican en y debido a, las redes sociales. Finalmente, se discuten las recomendaciones realizadas por Galtung y la UNESCO ante el problema de la violencia en redes sociales, subrayando la importancia de incluir este fenómeno en dichas propuestas educativas. Como resultado, se propone el esbozo de un marco conceptual que conecta la teoría de la violencia con las dinámicas digitales en el contexto de las redes sociales, en sus tres vertientes: directa, estructural y cultural, esto se presenta como un paso en el desarrollo de soluciones educativas concretas para atender el problema de la violencia en entornos digitales.

Palabras clave

Cultura de paz, tecnologías digitales, educación, violencia, ciudadanía mediática, sociedad red.

Introduction

The main objective of this article is to incorporate a concrete analysis of violence in digital social networks (SNS) into the theory of violence and the study of its solutions. Given the preeminent place of these digital environments in our communities as spaces for the dissemination of information, expression, interaction, and other communicative phenomena, it is necessary to analyze the ways in which violence is expressed within these sites. In this way, we can identify its causes and forms so that its consequences can be avoided. In this sense, this paper presents a theoretical-



conceptual analysis of the problem that seeks to contribute to the discussion necessary for the construction of peace in the contemporary world.

Social media are digital spaces where internet users can share experiences, ideas, and communicate with other people. Although relationships on social media are different from non-digital ones, there are elements of physical interactions that are replicated or extended on these networks, including: communication processes, information exchanges, argumentative processes, discussions, and debates, some of which have significant political implications. Consequently, social media users, by generating and sharing content and reacting to that of others, have a greater or lesser degree of responsibility for creating informative environments of civility and mutual respect with others (López Farjeat & González Fernández, 2021).

The relevance of the proposal made in this work is framed within the context of the popularization of social media, which, in recent years, has made it the most popular public forum. It is not only a platform that users access, but also a space that they inhabit (Alegria Morán, 2025). They are spaces where citizens inform themselves about politically relevant issues and participate in deliberations that are central to any democracy. Given the preeminent place that these digital environments have acquired in societies, the correct diagnosis of the elements that hinder dialogue and peacebuilding becomes urgent.

From this perspective, it is important for social media users to be aware of how these environments operate, as well as the impact of their actions in these media, so that they take responsibility for their actions, as these, to a greater or lesser extent, contribute to creating peaceful or violent environments in these spaces. For this reason, it is important to develop specific theories of peace education that consider social media spaces. This article presents a conceptual diagnosis of these issues with the ultimate goal of contributing to peacebuilding.

Directly related to the above, one of the most pressing problems in recent years is the increase in violence on social media (Rojas Diaz & Yepes Londoño, 2023; Morales, 2023 and 2024). Due to the complexity of the digital ecosystem, violence manifests itself in various ways and at different levels, making it difficult to address this problem. Among other elements, the role played by network developers, the algorithms they use, and end users must be taken into account. With this understanding of the situation, the main objective of this work is to understand the phenomenon of violence on social media from the perspective of Johan Galtung's «triangle of violence» proposal, which involves three types of violence:

direct, structural, and cultural. The main proposal of this article is that this characterization offers a suggestive theoretical framework to contribute to the international goal of educating for peace as crucial element of democratic political systems.

To achieve this objective, the paper is organized as follows: the first section presents the methodology used. The second section addresses the main elements of UNESCO's proposals on «education for peace.» The third section develops Galtung's triangle of violence proposal. The fourth section presents an overview of social media and what it means to analyze it from Galtung's theory of violence, which allows us to subsequently develop an analysis of how it can be applied to the phenomenon of social media interactions based on the three types of violence: direct, structural, and cultural. Once the above has been presented, a fifth section of discussion is introduced, pointing out the limits of the proposals and arguing how these considerations can be integrated into UNESCO's recommendations on education for peace. Finally, the conclusions of the analysis are presented.

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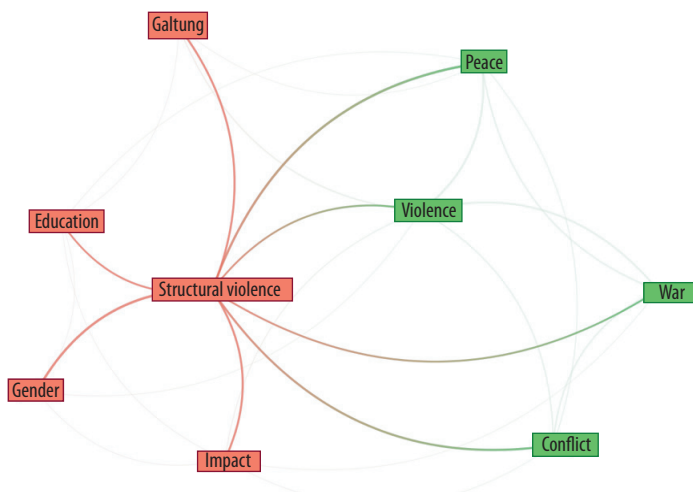


Methodology

This research is theoretical and conceptual in nature, based on the assumption that Galtung's conceptual analysis of the types of violence, applied to social media, it reveals the challenges and opportunities that these environments present for the project of education for peace. To support the argument, a comprehensive analysis has been carried out based on the literature related to the main themes of this study, through a documentary review in indexed databases such as Web of Science and Scopus.

A preliminary search using the keywords «Galtung» and «Violence,» filtered by coincidence in the abstract, yielded a total of 144 documents. UNESCO's recommendations on peace education were also incorporated. To select the specialized literature, an analysis of keyword concurrence was performed using VosViewer *software* (version 1.6.20) on the 144 documents obtained. This identified that the literature on these two topics is linked to the concepts of peace and education through the descriptor of structural violence (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Keyword concurrence in the literature on Galtung and violence



Subsequently, a document search strategy was proposed considering the key concepts of “social networks,” “structural violence,” “cultural violence,” “direct violence,” “Galtung,” “algorithms,” “UNESCO,” “digital communications,” “freedom of expression on social networks,” “digital public sphere,” “democracy and social media.” The search was filtered using Boolean operators (And, Or, Not), combined with relevance criteria. Finally, for the selection of documents, priority was given to primary sources such as UNESCO recommendations, descriptive studies on social media and its functioning, as well as specialized literature on Galtung.

The document review was carried out using the analytical-synthetic method, whose characteristics allow the constituent parts of a problem to be established, its information to be analyzed, and broken down to establish new conceptualizations (Rodríguez & Pérez, 2017). In this case, UNESCO and Galtung’s proposals for peace education were analyzed, the violence triangle proposal was characterized, and an understanding of the three types of violence in Galtung’s proposal in the social sciences was established. Finally, some reflections are presented on how these conceptual elements could be included in proposals for peace education in the social sciences.

UNESCO and peace education

After the armed conflicts of the first half of the 20th century, UNESCO sought to direct efforts towards a culture of violence prevention, prioritizing peace education. In principle, the proposal constituted an effort to direct countries' educational programs towards the prevention of international conflicts by strengthening a culture of peace and cooperation among nations. In this regard, an analysis by Lerch and Buckner (2018) of UNESCO publications showed that this trend continued until at least 1990.

However, from 1990 onwards, a change in the way the concept of peace was presented was observed (Lerch & Buckner, 2018). While in previous documents it was associated with the prevention of international conflicts, in later documents it was related to issues associated with conflict, generally within a local framework such as acts of terrorism or specific situations of violence (Pineda *et al.*, 2019). Thus, a paradigm shift is evident: from international issues to more specific issues such as human rights or specific social conditions in different parts of the world.

In this context, UNESCO presented a series of documents focused on peace education, as well as on the challenges generated by digital technologies, which address the specific problems of freedom, globalization, governance, and international cooperation, as well as issues related to education on artificial intelligence (AI) and AI ethics (Labrador, 2013; UNESCO, 2022, 2023, and 2024). In this way, peace education can be understood as an international effort to harmonize and consolidate different ways of seeing, understanding, and experiencing the world from a comprehensive and globalized perspective (Labrador, 2013).

In summary, the contemporary approach to peace education focuses on local problems from the perspective of conflict with the aim of promoting international cooperation in a globalized context. Within this context, social media appears as an important element of social cohesion that increasingly determines how people understand the world, inhabit it, and even make political decisions. For this reason, this proposal considers it essential to include issues of violence and peace in social media as an integral part of peace education proposals.

It should be noted that, as one of the vehicles for generating this cohesion among the various international actors, UNESCO has issued various recommendations that integrate the guiding principles of peace education. The following aspects of the 2024 recommendation are noteworthy:



- A new understanding of peace, which defines it as «positive, participatory, and dynamic process that nourishes our capacity to value human dignity and care for ourselves, others, and the planet we share» (UNESCO, 2024). This point highlights the importance of self-care and, according to the proposal presented, collective care in social relations can be included in this category.
- Education for sustainable development, where education for peace is aligned with an understanding and knowledge of current environmental issues and action plans for their prevention and mitigation (UNESCO, 2024).
- Education for global citizenship, which contemplates the integration of diversity of opinions based on the teaching of current and past events on the impact of conflicts, as well as the exploration of economic, social, and political links within the framework of empathy and respect for cultural diversity (UNESCO, 2024). At this point, it is important to emphasize the importance of considering social media as spaces where «global citizenship» occurs, so that empathy and respect in social media become a fundamental element in this new proposal for education for peace.
- Gender equality and education, where the need to promote gender equality is conceived as part of the right of access to education, considering the difficulties women face in accessing this right (UNESCO, 2024). As in the previous point, it is necessary to emphasize the importance of including these considerations in interactions on social media.
- Education in the digital age, which highlights the challenges of misinformation and hate speech in digital media. This section addresses the need for both learners and educators to acquire skills, emphasizing critical thinking, empathy, and understanding of privacy, ethics, and digital security (UNESCO, 2024). This point explicitly states the importance of education for peace in digital media, but as will be shown below, an in-depth analysis of what this education means is needed.

Thus, for the purposes of this study, the focus is limited to aspects associated with education in the digital age, an area for which UNESCO has issued a series of guidelines for the governance of digital platforms. These guidelines cover various aspects of these platforms, including the responsibility of actors related to such platforms, such as service provi-

ders or state regulations. In addition, guiding principles such as transparency, accountability, and cultural diversity are included (UNESCO, 2024). In particular, the issue of violence, which will be addressed below, is directly linked to the risks considered by UNESCO, specifically those associated with disinformation, hate speech, conspiracy theories, and the protection of activists, journalists, or marginalized groups in the social environment (UNESCO, 2024).

For its part, in its recommendation on the ethics of AI, UNESCO (2022) addressed some issues related to our subject of study, including the relationship between AI and its impact on disinformation and the proliferation of hate speech. Along the same lines, the recommendation addresses the possibility of increased polarization and stigmatization of vulnerable groups on social media. Considering the above, UNESCO emphasized the need to manage the development of AI from the perspective of a regulatory framework in terms of human rights, data protection, transparency, and accountability of the actors involved in its development.

On the other hand, the International Panel on the Information Environment (IPIE) has conducted several studies in recent years that show that interactions on social media and the use of AI present interesting opportunities to promote peace, but also multiple challenges that hinder this work (IPIE, 2023 and 2025). In particular, they point out that education on these issues should include both a basic understanding of how AI networks and tools work, but also education in ethical, political, and social terms. In this sense, this article proposes a theoretical framework that can help promote the mention and discussion of all these issues in educational contexts.

Given the close relationship between addressing conflict as part of promoting peace education and the potential impacts of the development of digital technologies in this area, it is considered relevant to integrate a characterization of violence, its types, and how it relates to social media and, consequently, to peace education. The framework of violence is addressed below.

Johan Galtung's proposal of the triangle of violence

Johan Galtung devoted most of his academic work to developing a proposal for peace education. It is currently considered one of the different approaches of the peace education movement (García Raga *et al.*, 2019; Labrador, 2013) and one of his main contributions is a theory to charac-



terize violence and to educate for peace in a proactive way, but also in a retributive way, i.e., trying to mitigate the damage when it has already been done (Galtung, 1998). His proposal establishes the existence of a triangle of violence, an expression that refers to three different types of violence that jeopardize the possibility of building and maintaining peaceful societies (Galtung, 1998).

The author defines violence as «avoidable affronts to basic human needs, and more globally against life, which lower the actual level of satisfaction of needs below what is potentially possible. Threats of violence are also violence» (Galtung, 2003, p. 9). Since violence refers to *avoidable affronts*, it is possible to educate people to avoid them, so that, in opposition to what might be called *a culture of violence*, a *culture of peace* should be promoted through education.

Violence arises when it is not possible to fulfill any of the four basic human needs. According to Galtung (2016), these are: «The needs for survival (denial: death, mortality); needs for well-being (denial: suffering, lack of health); needs for recognition, identity needs (denial: alienation); and the need for freedom (denial: repression)» (p. 150). Galtung then adds another need related to ecological balance, understood as the «maintenance of the environmental system» (p. 151). Only when these five factors are met at a minimum satisfactory level can peace be achieved.

In relation to violence, the proposal consists of three types of violence: direct, structural, and cultural. The following sections present an analysis of the three types of violence:

- *Direct violence (DV)*: «It can be physical, verbal, or psychological carried out by one or more individuals to harm or injure another person or people, material possessions, or nature. Due to its manifestation, this form of violence is more visible and easier to identify» (Salinas Arias, 2023, para. 3). This type of violence is usually the easiest to identify and is often considered to be most clearly «punishable» in various justice systems. However, despite being the easiest to recognize, it is also important to understand its relationship with other types of violence, as it is the interrelationships between the three types that give rise to the complex problems of violence faced by our societies.
- *Structural violence (SV)*: «It is embedded in the different structures of social, political, and economic systems, so it can be present in institutions such as schools, the health system, business organizations, etc. This violence has exploitation as its

main harm, because it generates an unequal exchange in the interaction with the structure or institution» (Salinas Arias, 2023, para. 4). This type of violence can be more difficult to recognize because, as it depends on institutions, it may not be clear who is the perpetrator of the violence and who are its victims. It can be difficult both to recognize and to combat.

- *Cultural violence (CV)*: consists of «those aspects of culture, the symbolic realm of our existence (materialized in religion and ideology, language and art, empirical sciences and formal sciences—logic, mathematics—), which can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence» (Galtung, 2003, p. 7). This type of violence can also be difficult to recognize, as it requires the development of adequate critical thinking to be able to detect how ideas can be linked to direct violent acts and to the justification that people may offer to explain their actions. In this area, education plays a fundamental role in addressing this type of violence.

As Salinas Arias (2023) points out, while Vd is an event and Ve is a process, Vc is a constant that allows for transformations in culture. Vc can take various forms in the media, art, religion, science, and all other forms of culture, in which victims are sometimes blamed for the violence they suffer. As mentioned above, violence arises when the minimum requirements for meeting basic needs are not met. The first two general divisions of violence, related to basic needs, produce the eight subtypes of violence (Table 1).

Table 1
A typology of violence

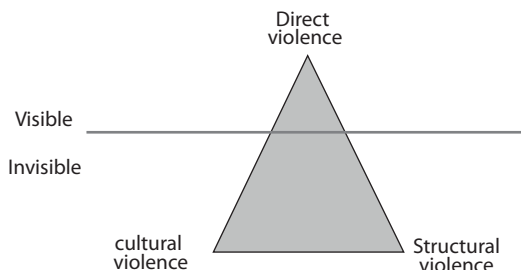
	Survival needs	Needs Well-being needs	Identity needs	Need for freedom
Direct violence	Death	Mutilations Harassment Sanctions Poverty	De-socialization Resocialization Second-class citizenship	Repression, detention, expulsion
Structural violence	Exploitation A	Exploitation B	Indoctrination Ostracism	Alienation Disintegration

Source: taken from Galtung, 2016, p. 150.

However, for the purposes of this paper, it is important to mention that in cases of structural violence, exploitation A and B refer, above all, to cases in which social structures cause those who are disadvantaged to lack of access to services or care, which can lead them to the extreme of losing their lives in very precarious conditions (exploitation A) or to living in permanent states of misery, which may include malnutrition or serious illnesses (exploitation B). As will be seen below, when analyzing the case of digital social networks, virtually all of the types of violence listed here can appear to a greater or lesser extent.

Galtung (1998) proposes that the relationship between the three types of violence can be understood using the image of a triangle, in which the top point represents Vd, and the two ends of the base represent the other types of violence: Ve and Vc. In addition, approximately halfway up the triangle, Galtung proposes a division between *the visible* part at the top of the triangle and *the invisible* part below (Figure 2).

Figure 2
Triangle of violence



Source: adapted from Galtung, 1998, p. 15.

With this image, Galtung proposes that the most clearly perceived violence is direct violence; however, cultural and structural violence also play an important role by supporting or justifying direct violence.

Violence can occur in three time periods, so we can talk about moments or life cycles of a conflict: before, during, and after. When it is not possible to avoid violence in the first two time periods, the 3 Rs can be followed to end the conflict and build peace. The 3 Rs refer to:

- Rebuilding the culture and structure of society.
- Reconciliation between victims and perpetrators, and eventually the whole of society.

- Peaceful resolution of outstanding conflicts. This final stage should be approached in a nonviolent manner, with creativity and empathy (Galtung, 1998).

The many faces of violence in the social sciences.

This section presents an analysis of the types of violence in the context of the social sciences. This analysis will lead to the conceptual discussion that follows in the next section.

What are social networks?

They are spaces on the internet where people can interact with other people and institutions. They are Web 2.0 digital platforms that allow users to participate in content creation. In other words, people not only passively receive information, but also create and disseminate it. Possible interactions include sharing content such as photographs, images, and words; viewing content that other people present publicly; expressing different types of «emotional reactions» to others' posts; and engaging in synchronous or asynchronous dialogue with other people within the network (Tutt, 2014).

Some features of interactions on social media have to do with the environment of coexistence, the interface, the formats, and the ways in which the algorithm mediates interactions (Oremus *et al.*, 2021). Interactions on social media, unlike those that occur in analog environments, do not require simultaneous physical presence for the interaction to take place. This leads to the possibility of interacting with people and communities from different states, countries, and regions. While in analog environments the body is our interface (although it is not a simple interface, but something constitutive of our being), in digital environments we do not have the restrictions of the body or the affective and cognitive possibilities that it opens up (Vallor, 2015). In digital environments, it is possible to show parts or representations of the body, but it is not the medium through which one enters the environment and is not always a constituent of the identity formed in such environments.

These differences in the ways and conditions for interacting in one space or another open up different possibilities for facilitating violent interactions or others that allow for the construction of peace. While in an analog environment violent interaction involves the use of the body, either through physical violence or presence, in a digital environment



violence can be exercised without being recognized and without the possibility of a physical response. Similarly, violent interactions on social media can expand beyond the circle of acquaintances and even beyond physical borders.

At the same time, social media is still embedded in specific social contexts, and in many cases, the people with whom we interact in the digital sphere are also frequented in physical environments. Similarly, much of the discussion that takes place on social media corresponds to a particular social reality that is shared beyond the digital realm (such as political discussions). For these reasons, digital social media is considered an “extension” of non-digital social media (Vallor, 2015). In this article, the focus is on the particularities of digital social media.

Among the most widely used social media platforms today are Facebook, WhatsApp, X (Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok (Castro Higuera *et al.*, 2024). Although social media has been around for a relatively short time in our social environments (Boyd & Ellison, 2007), some studies have made significant advances in understanding this phenomenon, how these networks are designed, and how people interact on them (Castro Higuera *et al.*, 2024).

Social media has already played an important role in certain significant political events such as the Arab Spring (Wolfsfeld *et al.*, 2013), the 2016 US presidential election, and Brexit in the United Kingdom, the latter two related to the Cambridge Analytica case (Rehman, 2019). Both events have had significant global repercussions and are just one example of how social media actually contributes to changing our environment in that it can generate *cultures of violence* or *cultures of peace*. This can be observed on a large scale, as in the cases just mentioned, but also on a smaller scale, such as in the interactions of smaller groups of people within these networks. Given these considerations, the main proposal of this article is that it is possible to present social media from the frameworks of violence proposed by Galtung. The following section will be dedicated to showing this relationship.

Social media from the perspective of Galtung's frameworks of violence

As noted in the first section, violence emerges when the minimum conditions for meeting basic needs are not met. At first glance, it might seem that social media is not linked to basic needs, but when it presents itself as a place where people can work, on the one hand, and interact, on the other,

the conditions are set for environments of violence to be generated from these digital spaces. For example, according to the IPIE report (2025), based on a survey of researchers from 76 countries, it was found that:

- 34% of participants admit to having self-censored on social media due to concerns related to their professional development. Furthermore, in the case of developing countries, the likelihood of self-censorship increases to 40%.
- 23% of participants fear losing their research funding, reporting situations of harassment such as the leaking of personal information due to their work.
- 73% report inhibiting situations such as self-censorship, harassment, political intervention, or fear of losing funding (IPIE, 2025).

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As can be seen, violence and the threat of direct violence in digital environments translates, in this case, into fear of losing research funding and fear of losing jobs. On the other hand, this report also refers to the case of journalists, who generally face very high risks in exercising their profession.

According to the analysis presented here, dynamics of direct violence can be identified in social media, but also a structure for violence and factors that contribute to cultural violence, more generally, inside and outside these spaces.

Direct violence in social media

Direct violence refers to actions carried out specifically with the intention of harming or injuring other people. Although this type of violence has a very clear physical component (although it is not the only component, as this type of violence also includes verbal and psychological harm), it is possible to find an equivalent within the context of social media.

Here, we propose to understand direct violence on social media as actions carried out there that involve:

- Sharing verbal expressions that seek to offend or insult other people.
- Sharing information about other people without their consent.
- Generating and disseminating false data, such as photographs, videos, or audio recordings, based on other people's information.
- Making false statements about other people on different platforms, including actions such as incorrectly reporting other pages.

- Actions in *offline* environments that are related to *online* actions and that violate people's freedom or basic rights.

In some of these actions, the violent component is very clear and similar to how this type of violence is usually understood in non-virtual contexts, such as in the first and last cases listed, for example. However, there are some cases of this type of violence that may not be obvious. For example, based on the definition given so far, sharing information would include harmless acts such as sharing a photograph with family or friends without first asking their permission.

At first glance, this may not seem to be a case of violence, but considering that data uploaded to social media acquires a public reach that is difficult for those who generated it to control, in addition to blurring the boundaries between the private and the public, it is possible that the data could be used in harmful activities by third parties.

Considering the above, it is important to reflect on the very definition of direct violence, specifically, what concrete actions could be considered part of it or not. Furthermore, in the context of peace education addressed in this article, it is necessary to reflect on how to contribute to raising awareness about the importance of each person's actions on social media and to encourage reflection on these actions, considering their possible consequences.

On the other hand, the label of direct violence can include some other aspects of the different manifestations of violence on social media that have been analyzed by other researchers. For example, Mary Jackman (2002) defines violence in a very similar way to Galtung, and although she does not specifically refer to social media, she emphasizes the importance of the different elements that make up the social environment that generates violence, and not only the role of the perpetrator or the victim.

With regard to research on *online* violence, there is also some research on violence in digital environments that could be included in this category. For example, Polyzoidou (2024) discusses whether it is necessary to create a specific category of digital violence against women, and as a framework for the discussion, she presents an interesting analysis of the differences between *offline* violence and *online* violence, which in both cases can be considered direct violence.

As Polyzoidou (2024) points out, this type of violence is determined by the specific characteristics of computer technology and the internet, which allow, for example, unlimited access to a virtually infinite flow of information from anywhere in the world and a certain degree of



anonymity for the perpetrators of violence, who can also generate content to be shared on social media. This type of violence is also what is being attempted to be stopped with clearer rules within the platforms and in legal and judicial terms, as exemplified by the Guidelines for the Governance of Virtual Platforms (UNESCO, 2023).

Other interesting approaches to phenomena related to direct violence on social media can be found in Teo (2024), who presents an analysis of how digital environments create what is called «slow violence» against human rights, and Schultz *et al.* (2025), who propose the term «algorithmic dehumanization» to refer to different processes related to the general digitization that is taking place in society and causing damage on different scales, some as basic as, once again, human rights.

Although several of the elements presented by these authors can also be considered in the type of structural violence that will be discussed in the following section, many of the specific facts discussed by these authors fall into the category of direct violence.

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Structural violence in social media

Structural violence has to do with the conditions that allow aggressive acts to develop (Galtung, 1964). Unlike other environments, social media has very obvious structures that determine and shape what can be expressed and the forms of expression. This structure is the algorithm. Beyond the structures inherent in different social contexts—which are less obvious—the algorithm imposes a fairly defined structure on what can and cannot be shared and on the forms of interaction between people (Tutt, 2014). In this sense, to identify the elements that allow violence to develop in social media, we must look at the algorithms.

By algorithm, Floridi (2023) means the implementation of mathematically organized structures capable of ordering data to achieve a specific task or result. In the case of social media, algorithms structure the presentation of information, rules of conduct, metrics for promoting and hiding content, controls on misinformation, and all the specific features that make social media spaces for sharing information and expressing ideas or emotions (Oremus *et al.*, 2021).

While a technical analysis could be made of the mathematical structures on which social media algorithms operate, this article focuses on the results produced by such structures. That is, on the ways in which the algorithm shapes interactions and content on social media. Thus, for the present analysis of the development of violence in these spaces, the

structure is conceived in two ways: as the conditions that foster it and as the medium in which it occurs.

Conceiving the algorithm as a medium, following Morales (2024), allows us to situate the current discussion within the coordinates of *media studies*, from which we explore the ways in which communication technologies, in this case social media, shape human relationships. First, media studies suggest that interactions are never completely direct, as there is always a medium, whether it be language or the technology on which language is used (Morales, 2024). This is why analyzing the medium is so important, especially when it comes to a medium such as an algorithm, which not only serves as a format but also conditions the possible forms of expression and interaction.

The ways in which social media has become a new medium for the expression and development of various acts of violence are most evident in contexts of armed violence (Morales, 2024). This allows us to visualize how social media has become another platform for violence. However, when studying structural violence in social media, what is interesting to analyze is not the violence that comes out of social media, but how the algorithm, by shaping interactions and determining content, gives rise to violent expressions within these digital spaces.

The algorithm as a medium is not a simple vehicle, but rather limits and determines the scope and forms of expression. In this sense, it sets all the conditions for expression, but also the rules that determine how that expression will or will not be disseminated. To illustrate the scope of the algorithm as a space of possibilities, we must consider the effects of algorithms on the most popular social media platforms. The case of Facebook, according to Lima-Strong (2021), is particularly illustrative and significant because of the number of users and the opacity with which they sought to manage their algorithm until a few years ago.

In 2021, the Facebook Papers were leaked, a set of internal company documents that served to expose how both the structure of the algorithm and some specific decisions by Mark Zuckerberg (owner of Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp) have allowed the platform to play a role in a series of global political conflicts (Lima-Strong, 2021). The *papers* revealed that, since 2018, the platform's algorithm has presented two crucial aspects to users: highly personalized content and posts that strategically encourage interaction (Oremus *et al.*, 2021). Some of the strategies to encourage interaction include showing posts from close contacts, viral memes, and divisive content, i.e., expressions on which users would take a strong stance and reject the opposite.



In this regard, authors such as Lima-Strong (2021), Oremus *et al.* (2021), and Tutt (2014) argue that the algorithm seeks to promote radical positions, polarizing expressions, and discussions on sensitive issues. The aim is to promote content that seeks to provoke strong emotions and thus capture users' attention. Information that elicits positive feelings is shared more than information that causes slightly negative emotions. However, information that is overly negative—the most concerning—is shared the most. In particular, articles, videos, memes, or comments that generate surprise, amusement, or anxiety are shared.

At this first level, social media algorithms such as Facebook encourage violent expressions to the extent that, in order to capture users' attention—a key element of their business model—they will sometimes seek to arouse concern and rejection (Tutt, 2014). These emotions, combined with other elements of the algorithm that allow affinity groups to form to the point of creating echo chambers, shape sides with affections and, sometimes, enemies (Habermas, 2023). Then, the encounter between sides can lead to expressions of direct violence.

Returning to Galtung's typology (2016), it could be said that simply capturing attention in this way already lays the groundwork for violent acts insofar as it can interfere with the satisfaction of our needs. The simple fact that algorithms serve, according to Véliz (2021) and Coeckelbergh (2024), as devices to capture people's attention and the possibility of deciding where to direct it can constitute forms of manipulation which, following the present analysis of types of structural violence, in turn lead to indoctrination, ostracism, alienation, and disintegration (Table 1; Galtung, 2016).

But the impact of the algorithm as a facilitator of violence is broader. Content moderation, ranging from the selection of posts that would cause more interactions to the censorship of other posts, can lead both to the dissemination of violent expressions in certain spaces and to the hiding of relevant content, thus silencing underrepresented voices or slogans (Vallor, 2015; Morales, 2024). These expressions hidden by the algorithm can be of many types, including calls for peace by groups under attack.

For example, users have noticed that Facebook's algorithm often classifies certain artistic expressions as pornography or some types of political discourse as harassment or intimidation (Tutt, 2014). In addition, a report by Human Rights Watch showed that Meta's algorithms (on Facebook and Instagram) censor accounts and posts that support the Palestinian cause or denounce the actions of the Israeli government (Human Rights Watch, 2023).



The partial moderation of violent content, i.e., the possibility of overexposing certain expressions of violence and hiding others that are presented in the form of denunciation, can have a significant impact on how people conceive violence, their sensitivity to condemning it, or the invitation to replicate it (Morales, 2024). In this sense, the algorithm becomes another arm of structural violence outside social media and, in turn, constitutes the internal structure for violence within these spaces.

Finally, the algorithm achieves all this by capturing sensitive private data which, although users grant access to, they do so without full knowledge of the purposes and consequences this may entail, which could constitute violations of privacy (Véliz, 2021). The business model of these platforms is to sell their users' data, which could be considered a type of exploitation that again refers to Galtung's typology of structural violence (Table 1; Véliz, 2021). In turn, to the extent that private data is used to manipulate users, it constitutes a violation of individual and political freedoms (Véliz, 2021; Coeckelbergh, 2024).

Cultural violence and social media

As noted above, CV is related to cultural aspects that is part of the symbolic realm. In relation to social media, this exercise of violence can take different forms. However, a recent phenomenon has had a growing impact on the symbolic resources that legitimize other types of violence and that also find their main manifestation in social media, namely *fake news*.

Fake news as a subject of study and its relationship with social media has been addressed in multiple studies (McIntyre, 2018; Del Fresno García, 2019; Wu *et al.*, 2019; García Marín, 2020), where it is defined as information that is deliberately manipulated and presented in the form of news (Sanz Blasco and Carro de Francisco, 2019; Guallar *et al.*, 2020), with the aim of obtaining some economic or ideological benefit; and, generally, the topics are related to controversial issues such as climate change, gender, the economy, and electoral contests (Guallar *et al.*, 2020).

Fake news is also deeply related to a phenomenon known as post-truth, in which a distorted representation of the criteria of truth in facts has developed and, in the worst cases, facilitates a scenario of radical skepticism regarding institutions such as scientific ones (McIntyre, 2018; Aparici & García Marín, 2019; Solis, 2024).

Post-truth is a phenomenon in which evidence is less valuable than opinions when it comes to establishing beliefs, which favors the proliferation of dogmatic, strongly ideologized entities that can have negative

impacts on public life, including anti-vaccine communities and climate change deniers (McIntyre, 2018).

In relation to the above, social media, as a technology of the digital age, has worsened the problem because it allows the creation of channels where information spreads rapidly (González, 2019). Furthermore, due to its structure, it encourages the creation of echo chambers that ultimately reinforce people's beliefs in post-truth situations, showing content in line with their beliefs even when this content is false.

For example, during the 2016 US elections, the usefulness of *fake news* in shaping the beliefs of potential voters became evident, as it was shown to specific audiences according to their preferences and other population segments using *big data* algorithms. This case became known as the Cambridge Analytica scandal.

Now, the relationship between these phenomena, from the perspective of cultural violence, is the following. First, there is the ability to shape public opinion through metadata analysis, as well as to exploit the susceptibilities of individuals or groups in post-truth circumstances and/or to manipulate information with *fake news*. All of these are examples of the use of technologies for private gain, to the detriment and through coercion of the public who use these technologies.

Second, the manifestation of these phenomena deals a heavy blow to the citizens of democratic states, as one of the consequences of post-truth is that the exercise of democracy is compromised due to the manipulation of information for political and ideological purposes (McIntyre, 2018; Rubio, 2018).

Thirdly, the manipulation of information on social media also affects the formation of identities, judgments, and opinions on generally disputed issues; and to the extent that information, in its different discursive dimensions, is distributed on social media, it encourages different justifications for all kinds of discourse, including hate speech or discourse with potential harm to public health.

However, it is important to note that, at the same time, social media can be a tool for minimizing the effects of misinformation when it is used ethically within the limits of critical thinking. Some alternatives to the coercive power of social media lie in source-based journalistic practices, such as *fact checking*, which promise to be an alternative to mitigate the role that misinformation plays in justifying untruthful discourse (Shin, 2023).

Finally, the seriousness of the problem requires the development of strategies on multiple areas (technological, scientific, social, educational, etc.) that promote the responsible use of social media, both to mitigate its



harmful use (for example, in the modeling of beliefs for malicious purposes) and to encourage its use toward the construction of better-communicated and more developed societies, both to mitigate its harmful use (for example, in the modeling of beliefs for malicious purposes) and to encourage its use aimed at building better-communicated and developed societies within an adequate culture of peace.

Discussion

This section will present some of the limitations identified when applying Galtung's theoretical framework for the analysis of violence in social media. Based on the discussion focused on each type of violence, a series of general proposals for the construction of peace education in digital social environments will be put forward. The aim is to problematize the proposal, delimit its scope, and glimpse its horizons. However, this analysis does not aim to formalize a strategy for peace education, but only to present a series of guidelines that point in that direction.

Galtung's characterization of violence allows us to point out the ways in which social media algorithms promote violence beyond these platforms, but also within them. First, it is considered very valuable to be able to pinpoint the reasons why a series of seemingly innocuous characteristics of their algorithms and dynamics can become harmful to individuals and entire societies. In this sense, it is necessary to point out the ways in which social media contributes to the development of violence, its visibility and invisibility—sometimes disproportionate—and its execution.

Given the state of violence on social media described in the previous section, peace education measures would have to be considered from a framework of post-violence peacebuilding (Galtung, 1998; UNESCO, 2023). Under this assumption, the two proposals for peace education presented in this article are discussed. It should be noted that the purpose of this research is not to compare the two proposals, but to use them in the discussion on how to address the problem of violence in the SSR.

Galtung's (1998) framework can be summarized in the three Rs mentioned above: rebuilding culture and social structure; reconciliation between victims and perpetrators; and peaceful resolution of outstanding conflicts. On the other hand, UNESCO's recommendations (2023) illustrate a series of necessary aspects on the path to peace education. These are: understanding peacebuilding as a participatory process; thinking from the coordinates of sustainable development, cosmopolitanism, and

gender education; and promoting digital literacy based on ethics and critical thinking.

In this sense, the set of proposals can be satisfactorily integrated. Following this analysis, peacebuilding in social media would have to address Galtung's (1998) first R: the reconstruction of social and cultural structures, with the understanding that this must be achieved through a participatory, inclusive process that is aware of its global dimensions (in line with UNESCO, 2023). As seen, algorithms segment the population, promoting alienation, polarization, and division (factors that fuel violence). It is therefore necessary to promote the use of these digital spaces in a way that is conscious of these dynamics so that users avoid falling into strategies that break them away from others.

It is important to mention that Galtung's framework was not originally designed to analyze digital environments, so it has some limitations, including the difficulty of identifying new forms of direct violence or new dynamics for violence. In this sense, a specific approach is required to adapt it to the analysis of digital social media. This proposal is aimed at that objective.

To address the structural causes of violence, social media providers would have to modify their algorithms to promote peaceful dialogue and thus lead us toward peaceful conflict resolution. In addition to addressing the problem of resolution, digital environments would have to be created to avoid potential conflict. If divisive content favors social media companies because it captures people's attention better, then the business model needs to be reconsidered more broadly. Users, for their part, must pursue constructive dialogue and avoid falling into aggressive, divisive arguments.

Measures to prevent violent interactions on social media (those that constitute acts of direct violence) are similar to those that would need to be taken in non-digital environments. However, the fact that digital environments offer new ways to inflict violence on others requires greater emphasis on self-awareness about how our expressions or shared content could harm others. For example, Wyrer and Black (2023) show how gender-based violence can be present in third-generation *chatbot* models and also offer an analysis of the various implications caused by this type of violence. Like this, there are multiple cases of digital violence, which is almost universal. Consequently, it is essential to promote digital literacy focused on empathy and critical thinking, as suggested by UNESCO, specifying that it starts from a structure and context that favors violence.

With regard to direct violence, it is important for all social media users to reflect on the implications of their actions in digital environ-



ments, however small or simple they may seem (for example, reacting emotionally to a post or sharing content without verifying the sources). In addition, it would be important to discuss and reflect as a community on each of the points presented at the beginning of this document, because, as noted above, there are actions that, without reflection, may not seem to be related to direct violence, even though they may be.

Regarding this type of violence, Galtung's theoretical framework is limited in some respects, as he did not consider digital environments as possible generators of violence. Consequently, it would be important to conduct a more detailed analysis of how direct violence in social media should be understood, considering its particularities in relation to the digital environment.

As for structural violence, Galtung's proposal allows us to point out at least two factors that are worth highlighting. First, the possibility of labeling as violent the way algorithms work, with their goal of capturing attention to manipulate their users. It is important to note that, as we lose control over what we want to know, consume, and share, we are not only passive subjects of manipulation, but we also suffer a form of violence that can lead to indoctrination, alienation, and social disintegration.

Likewise, cultural violence, in which the victim is blamed as a means of legitimizing the perpetrator, plays an important role in indoctrination and becomes a vehicle for alienation and the disintegration of social cohesion. Based on the impact of algorithms, these are not only manifested from a structural perspective, but the use of *bots* to generate artificial disputes on polarized issues is an example of how structural and cultural violence are integrated, i.e. the algorithm allows for the segmentation of communities based on ideological differences on highly polarized issues. Thus, these types of violence undermine the needs for identity and freedom, respectively.

Along the same lines, the social media business model that profits from its users' private data undermines the needs for survival and well-being according to Galtung's theoretical framework. This is because data theft constitutes a form of exploitation in which users are forced to provide their private data for the benefit (economic, but also power) of social media owners at the expense of their own freedom and security (Véliz, 2021). With this data, users can be incriminated, extorted, and manipulated in ways that can threaten not only their mental well-being, but also their physical and material well-being (Coeckelbergh, 2024).

This helps us understand why UNESCO has a specific recommendation on the protection of sensitive data and its responsible use in the

creation and development of both digital platforms and AI. Specifically, the manipulation of data extracted from social media has created an environment in which the three types of violence described above converge.

Another example that illustrates the manifestations of violence across its different dimensions is the case of *fake news*, which can be used to damage a person's public image (direct violence) or to manipulate information on highly polarized issues (cultural violence), all by taking advantage of the benefits that social media algorithms give to content with high data traffic (structural violence).

In this way, Galtung's proposal allows us to point out more precisely the ways in which the very structure of social media exercises and allows the exercise of violent acts against its users. Based on this diagnosis, the scientific community is urged to think about strategies for building education for peace in and through social media. For this purpose, two different levels of responsibility can be considered: that of those who own, create, and sustain social media, and that of users.

The first group of responsible actors would have to follow not only UNESCO's recommendations, but also those derived from the analysis of forms of violence in social media. Following this line of argument, their current business model is illegitimate because it is violent, particularly in the ways it captures users' attention and profits from their personal data. This implies that the proposed changes would create digital discussion environments that are completely different from those that have become popular until now.

As long as the first group of responsible parties continues to do business using violence, users have the responsibility to protect each other's data as much as possible. In addition, educational efforts should be made to inform other users about the ways in which social media algorithms promote these forms of violence. An example of how this could reduce violent interactions would be to identify how the algorithm seeks to generate hostility between groups and individuals, inform all those involved, and promote the creation of digital environments where reconciliation and peaceful conflict resolution are sought, as proposed by Galtung.

Conclusions

This article has taken a journey that began with the need to consider actions on social media as actions with relevant ethical and political implications. Just as in non-digital environments, violence or peace emerge on



social media according to a complex web of factors that favor the emergence of one or the other.

The importance that social media has acquired in recent years as a public forum makes it essential to research the dynamics that occur within it in order to propose policies, in this case educational ones, that contribute to making social media spaces where violence is avoided and peace is understood as a goal to be achieved in interactions on these platforms. However, social media has particular characteristics related to its digital nature, which calls for the creation of theoretical frameworks that adequately capture the different relationships and interrelationships that exist between its designers, users, and the infrastructure necessary to sustain it. This article has argued that Galtung's proposal for peace education, which begins by proposing three types of violence—direct, structural, and cultural—and then builds peace as a way of overcoming them, is a proposal that can contribute to a better understanding of how violence is presented in social media and, therefore, can also help to provide guidelines for proposing peace education as a solution to the types of violence analyzed.

An in-depth analysis of what is happening on social media is currently necessary, as it is in these spaces where public discussion predominantly takes place today. Our work shows how violence can occur in three ways, as proposed by Galtung: in some interactions that occur on social media, it also shapes the very structure of these platforms and thus contributes to the formation of a violent culture. With this analysis, it is possible to show that violence has become a structuring condition of current public discussion on social media.

From this perspective, the value of this work lies in the diagnosis and problematization of the theory of violence (under Galtung's theoretical framework) as a tool to adequately identify the obstacles we face on the path to peace education. As part of the effort to move toward this goal, we suggest revisiting UNESCO's recommendations on peace education in the area of digital education. The approach to these new forms of violence is presented as a challenge and an opportunity to generate digital literacy programs that include the recognition of these forms of violence, as well as strategies for their prevention and eradication.

Finally, while this article provides an approach to the problem of violence on social media, further research is also needed to expand Galtung's theoretical framework to cover other particularities of digital environments. It is also recommended that the categories described here be considered for future analyses of the phenomenon from both empirical and theoretical perspectives.



The greatest value of an analysis and discussion such as this one lies in the fact that it contravenes the popular way of conceiving and experiencing forms of interaction in digital environments. Hence, it has been emphasized that the analysis of violence on social media should not be limited to considering direct violent attacks between users, but should also consider the types of violence that emerge from the algorithmic structures of social media and the culture that is generated within them. It is important to properly consider these three types of violence in order to propose an education for peace that avoids confrontations between users, understands how the algorithmic structure of networks works, and is able to contain and limit it with the specific aim of preventing violence. This will contribute to creating a better integrated, better informed, more inclusive, and more understanding culture of difference. To the extent that these conditions are necessary for building peace, this article offers new ways of conceiving, identifying, and exposing the forms of violence that interfere with this goal.

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Declaration on the use of artificial intelligence
The authors Karen González Fernández, Tatiana Lozano Ortega, and Omar Solis Ramos of the article entitled «Challenges to the Education for Peace: Galtung and Violence on Digital Social Networks» DECLARE that the preparation of the document was not supported by Artificial Intelligence (AI).

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