



Creative writing on Wattpad: analysis of users and training possibilities

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Received: 2021-1-18

Accepted: 2021-5-18

<https://doi.org/10.51698/aloma.2021.39.2.35-42>

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Abstract. *The Internet has given rise to new affinity spaces where important learning occurs in informal educational contexts. Previous research shows the important educational potential of creative reading and writing platforms like Wattpad. The aim of this study is to become familiar with and describe the writers of the most popular reading and writing social network: Wattpad. To these ends, an adhoc questionnaire with a range of questions has been designed and administered to 351 participants who are users of the platform. The results show the international character of the literacy practice carried out by young people and adolescents. In addition, it is evident that the platform favours the development of certain reading and writing habits which can have specific social, intellectual and emotional implications are attributed. The study shows that both the initial use of the platform and persistence of use over time can be explained fundamentally by social factors. It is worth adding that the platform generates a feeling of community among users based on processes of feedback among readers, writers and hybrid figures. The article concludes that Wattpad functions as a unique space that has potential for transfer to use in institutionalized education, likely bringing with it numerous implications for reading, writing and literary education.*

Keywords: *Wattpad; reading; creative writing; informal education; literacy.*

Escritura creativa en Wattpad: análisis de usuarios y posibilidades de formación

Abstract. *Internet ha dado lugar a nuevos espacios de afinidad donde se producen importantes aprendizajes en contextos educativos informales. Investigaciones anteriores muestran el importante potencial educativo de las plataformas de lectura y escritura creativas como Wattpad. El objetivo de este estudio es conocer y describir a los escritores de la red social de lectura y escritura más popular: Wattpad. Para ello, se ha diseñado y administrado un cuestionario adhoc con una serie de preguntas a 351 participantes que son usuarios de la plataforma. Los resultados muestran el carácter internacional de la práctica de alfabetización realizada por jóvenes y adolescentes. Además, es evidente que la plataforma favorece el desarrollo de ciertos hábitos de lectura y escritura que pueden tener implicaciones sociales, intelectuales y emocionales específicas. El estudio muestra que tanto el uso inicial de la plataforma como la persistencia del uso en el tiempo pueden explicarse fundamentalmente por factores sociales. Cabe agregar que la plataforma genera un sentimiento de comunidad entre los usuarios a partir de procesos de retroalimentación entre lectores, escritores y figuras híbridas. El artículo concluye que Wattpad funciona como un espacio único que tiene potencial de transferencia para su uso en la educación institucionalizada, probablemente trayendo consigo numerosas implicaciones para la lectura, la escritura y la educación literaria.*

Palabras clave: *Wattpad; lectura; escritura creativa; educación informal; alfabetización.*

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Introduction

It is still early to gain a full grasp of the cultural changes that the digital age is promoting in school. However, it is already beginning to review the main learning theories (*behaviorism*, *cognitivism* and *constructivism*) and develop new explanations adapted to the complex reality, uncertain and changing as the current: *connectivism* (Siemens, 2004), *navigationalism* (Brown, 2005), etc. Be that as it may, interesting research into on online education is being carried out by a range of scholars who are examining issues such as *eLearning*, mass open online courses, to name only a couple.

Connected learning would cease to be viewed as a mere complement to formal education, being seen instead as a true opportunity for the integral development of students (Ito, 2013). Such learning currently often occurs in the context of informal education, where, unlike in institutional settings, there is no definition of the content, organization criteria, established objectives, or specific spaces and times set aside for learning (Lázaro, 2001).

Adell and Castañeda (2010) classify internet services into three major kinds of tools and strategies: reading, reflection and relationship services. However, our interest in this article has focused especially on the latter of the three. Social networks allow for the creation of what Gee and Hayes (2012) have called spaces of affinity, virtual settings that both foster and enhance the formation of groups of Internet users around a shared interest, goal or passion. The convergence of these users, therefore, is an affinity that acts as a cornerstone for the group (García-Roca, 2019).

One of the primary objectives of the Didactics of Language and Literature is to promote reading. In Spain, this is particularly relevant for young people and adolescents, as from the age of 14 there tends to be a steep decline in the amount of time Spanish teenagers spend reading for leisure (Federación de Gremios de Editores de España (Spanish Association of Publishers Guilds), 2018). This is also an age group that is especially likely to use new technologies. In fact, 95.4% are Internet users, and 35.5%, digital book readers.

Although there is a good deal of evidence for the potential of digital literature in educational contexts (Kalir, 2020), in ordinary educational centres, reading (literature) is usually limited to printed works (González, 2018; Cassany, 2013). However, studies such as the one carried out by Moral, Villalustre and Neira (2016) show the educational potential of digital storytelling. This confrontation between vernacular/popular activities on the one hand and dominant or institutional practices on the other has been studied by Cassany (2019:12), who compares the main features of these types of reading practices.

In this context, it is already a shared assumption that school is no longer the only or main space where an individual learns. The latest research proposes and underlines the need to break down the walls that separate the traditional school from the broader society

Table 1. Differences between vernacular and dominant literacy practices

Vernacular	Dominant
Self-regulatory	Regulated by institutions
Personal, free choice	Required
Private sphere	Social sphere
Informally learned	Formally learned
Socially despised, criticised	Socially legitimised, prestigious
Linked to identity, emotional nature	Linked to institution, informative nature

into which it should be integrated (Krishnan, Yim, Wolters & Cusimano, 2019; Tyner, Gutiérrez & Torrego, 2015). Thus, it is necessary to interweave formal, non-formal and informal learning settings and teaching contexts.

From this point of view, it is not only necessary in formal education to approach and consider the interests and needs of the students, but also to be aware that these vernacular literacy practices or new literacies. From a social and cultural perspective, these new activities require a great deal of knowledge (Knobel & Lankshear, 2010) and call on the kinds of competences that are generally developed in parallel to formal education, abilities that Cobo and Moravec (2011) call invisible learning.

In this line, we highlight the concept of Personal Learning Environments (PLE) and Personal Learning Networks (PLN). These concepts effectively describe the continuous and individual nature of learning (Attwell, 2007), highlighting that it can occur in different contexts and situations (Attwell, 2007; Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012). In this sense, the tools of the network that allow a continuous and self-regulated learning.

There are no universal resources for these kinds of individualized, informal learning. Instead, each individual chooses platforms and builds their own learning network. In these times when the Internet is becoming more important than ever as an interactive, eminently social space for meeting and exchange, such tools end up serving as virtual communities, spaces where people can connect with strangers with whom they share interests, objectives or affinities, etc. The Personal Learning Network takes shape in social networks and other platforms such as *Wattpad*.

Under these changing circumstances, concepts such as literacy, a term directly linked to the context, must be constantly revised. Numerous specialists are developing lines of research focused on digital, informational, mathematical, scientific and cinematographic literacy. In this work, following some of the pioneering studies in this field (Cassany, 2005; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; New London Group, 1996), the term multiliteracies is employed. This concept encompasses the development of the diverse competences required to produce, understand and value any kind of information in different languages and communication mediums (Area, 2010).

Research using a multiliteracy approach has focused on such issues as *fanfictions* (the hypertextual practice

of amateur creative writing) (Black, 2008; Guerrero-Pico, 2014; Scolari & Guerrero-Pico, 2016; Thomas, 2011, etc.), *remix* (Knobel & Lankshear, 2008) and constructive hyperfiction (Pajares, 1997), etc.

However, there is little *Wattpad*-related research despite the fact that the figures that demonstrate the platform's overwhelming popularity. *Wattpad* is a social network of amateur readers and writers. It has been downloaded from *Google Play* alone more than 100 million times (according to *Google Play* data), with an average rating of 4.6 out of 5 stars resulting from the opinion of nearly three million users. The website boasts 65 million monthly readers with an average duration of 30 minutes per session. It stores more than 400 million stories that are mainly read (90%) on mobile devices. In short, it is the largest amateur reading and writing community in the world (Jiménez, 2017). Apps like this one are unique tools for teachers, librarians and others interested in promoting reading and writing as recreational and educational activities (Rovira-Collado, 2017).

In terms of research on *Wattpad*, it is worth mentioning Ramdarshan's work (2018), which analyses how digital culture is modifying the (traditional) concept of authorship. In this regard, the *Wattpad* website is presented as an alternative for writers to the existing publishing model. Thus, the ease of publishing on the platform allows users to share their texts, as there is no need for economic investment or for the development of paratextual elements.

From this point of view, Davies (2017) emphasizes the educational potential of horizontal learning within the context of informal learning and collaborative production and looks at the interaction between readers, writers and hybrid figures (commentators, assessors, reviewers or beta readers, collaborators, etc.). All this, according to Sainz (2017: 205), 'constitutes an aesthetic experience through the work as a cultural good of symbolic nature; consequently, the process developed has this cultural nature', as well as social nature.

Botzakis (2014) found that *Wattpad* has a great deal of motivational and educational potential to promote literacy of adolescents and young adults. Furthermore, the use of the application has implications directly related to formal education and, specifically, to classes in creative writing and poetry.

Similarly, this work is based on the García-Roca (2019), in which analysed the website's technical features and the resulting affinity spaces for readers and writers, as well as its educational potential. Additionally, a pilot and exploratory study analysing 153 interviews conducted among *Wattpad* users was carried out. This research concluded that the platform constitutes an affinity space for readers and writers where important lessons can be learned in informal contexts. Most of the interviewees, and thus most platform users, were young people (14 to 18 years of age), and majority were women. This study opened up new research lines which we have taken up again in this work. Specifically, we

have sought to investigate the socio-demographic and family profiles of the writers on the platform.

The purpose of this study is to carry out a descriptive exploration aimed at answering the following research question: Who are the user-writers that are active on this most important digital creative writing platform, and how do they use it? The answers to these questions will inform teachers in their efforts to design and develop educational innovation proposals based on the actual interests of their students. To achieve this, this general objective has been divided into the following operative objectives:

- To describe the user of creative writing platforms.
- To explore the reasons and motivations behind these reading and writing practices.
- To analyse the platforms' educational potential for the Didactics of Language and Literature and the promotion of reading.

Method

Wattpad users make up a large community with common interests and passions. In light of this, this study has sought to investigate the sense of community or membership that unites users. Do *Wattpad* users feel part of a community (writers, *Wattpaders*, etc.)? In order to achieve the proposed objectives, and considering the literature review described above, the choice was made for descriptive research (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). This work is about what people do, how they behave, and how they interact with each other. An ethnographical approach is well suited to this topic, then, as it 'aims to find out their beliefs, values, motivational perspectives and the way they develop over time' (Bisquerra, 1989: 146).

In addition, 351 questionnaires were administered. A mixed data analysis was performed, as the questionnaire included both quantitative items and qualitative questions in which the opinions, beliefs and assumptions of the users were investigated. The questionnaire was prepared based on the results of a previous investigation in which 146 interviews published by writers on *Wattpad* were analyzed (García-Roca, 2019). The answers were coded and categorised using the *Nvivo 12* data analysis programme. Afterwards, this data has been entered into and processed with the *SPSS 23* software. It should be noted that the questionnaire was applied to users whose profiles and works are written in Spanish, so most participants in the sample are from Spanish-speaking countries. The central objective of the project is to understand the motivations and reasons why the users enjoy sharing their writing on the Internet. Therefore, they were directly asked why they had decided to publish their stories. It is important to determine whether the platform itself aroused the interest in creative writing of young people and adolescents who had not written before, or whether, on the contrary, *Wattpad* merely reinforced users' prior fondness for and interest in literary creation. For this purpose, the following question was included: *Would you*

write if there were no websites like *Wattpad* (or similar)? (see table 7).

The population under study were Spanish-speaking writers (with published texts) with an active profile on *Wattpad*. A simple random sampling method was used on the basis on the principle of equiprobability (Bisquerra, 1989). The goal was to gather data that allowed us perform descriptive and inferential statistical analysis, as the sample was selected from the global population (active Spanish-speaking writers) in such a way that all members of the population were equally likely to be selected (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). In the message sent to the participants, information about the present research was provided, and potential members of the sample were informed that if they were minors, their participation was contingent on the consent of their legal guardians to the processing of data for scientific purposes.

The sample comprises participants with characteristics similar to those of the population (*Wattpaders*) as a whole, which reduces external variance (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011). Random selection allows the researcher to generalise the results beyond the immediate group under study, since it helps to control for error related to the characteristics of subjects in different groups (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

After reviewing the previous research, no suitable and specific tool was found that would allow us to meet the proposed objectives, so there was a clear need to create an *ad hoc* questionnaire. This was the result of an elliptical validation process adapted to the different models of Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) and Bisquerra (1989:128).

Variables such as the language of publication have been controlled, with only authors writing in Spanish selected. In order to improve the internal validity of the design, particular attention was paid to those factors (external variables) that may have an impact on the results or conclusions of the study.

Given that this is generally an unrestricted questionnaire featuring open-ended questions exploring users' beliefs and arguments, the validation of the answers was not required. Open-ended questions allow in-depth answers in which the participant discloses his or her frame of references and possibly the reasons for his or her answers (Best, 1982).

Results

Firstly, socio-demographic data is shown in order to illustrate the profile of *Wattpad* users. The size of the sample and the obvious gender imbalance indicates that the users of the platform are mainly female (see Table 2). In fact, 88.6% of the sample are girls.

Regarding the mean age of the users of this platform, it is worth noting that young people predominate. The mean age was $M_{age}=16.36$ years old, with a standard deviation of 4.27. Thus, 75% of the participants are 18 years old or younger, meaning most are adolescents of an age to be enrolled in Compulsory

Table 2. Frequency and percentage distribution of users according to sex

		Frequency	Percentage
Valid	Men	35	10
	Women	311	88.6
	No response	5	1.4
	Total	351	100

Secondary Education in the Spanish education system. An analysis was carried out to determine whether there were significant differences in ages according to sex. In order to analyse the normality of the data, the Shapiro-Wilk test ($N < 50$) was performed, showing that the variables analysed ($p < .01$) did not fit a normal distribution. The Mann-Whitney U test for independent samples (significance level $p < .05$) made it possible to prove the existence of a statistically significant difference in ages between the sexes. Specifically, the boys in the sample were slightly older ($M_{age}=18.12$ and $SD=6.39$) than the girls ($M_{age}=16.16$ and $SD=4.27$). Outliers generally correspond to adults over 25 years old.

These writers tended to begin to share their output (stories and comments) on *Wattpad* (or similar web-pages) as children, at an average age of 14 years $SD=4$: the median age is 15 years old and the third quartile was $Q3=15$ years old. Thus, on average, the participants have a platform experience of more than 2 years.

As for the country of residence, 22 different countries were represented. The most common countries were Mexico (33.3% of the total), Spain (11.1%), Chile (8.8%) and Argentina (8.3%). Therefore, the platform is an international phenomenon.

The close connections between literary reading and creative writing have been well established, this is reflected in the results of the study. Only 3.1% of the participants say that they like reading only a little or not at all. Meanwhile, 73.2% of the respondents state that reading is an important activity in their leisure time (see Table 3). It is worth noting that *Wattpad* is not a mere repository of texts, but rather a social network based on user feedback. In other words, users can act as readers, writers, and hybrid figures (commentators, assessors, beta readers, etc.).

Another variable under study is academic achievement. *Wattpad* users are generally young people who do not have difficulties advancing within the education system. However, the bulk of the participants are not among the brightest or most outstanding students

Table 3. Frequency and percentage distribution of the taste for reading

		Do you like reading?		
		Frequency	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
Valid	No reply	3	.9	.9
	A little	11	3.1	4
	Quite a bit	80	22.8	26.8
	A lot	257	73.2	100
	Total	351	100	

Table 4. Frequency and percentage distribution of the grade obtained in secondary school

What is the average grade obtained in secondary school?			
		Frequency	Percentage
Valid	No reply	7	2
	Fail	2	.6
	Pass	45	12.8
	Very good	169	48.1
	Outstanding	128	36.5
	Total	351	100

in their classes. Most tend to be “B” students (see table 4).

We were interested in finding out how users had discovered the *Wattpad* platform. More than half (51%) of the participants found the website or application by recommendation of peers and, to a lesser extent, relatives. This is particularly relevant because the social aspect can be seen beginning with the very first access to the platform (see Table 5). In addition to this, another 12.3% initially accessed the platform from their social networks (which are more or less directly related to their peers). Finally, 29.9% accessed *Wattpad* by chance (surfing the net).

In previous research, some users indicated that people around were unaware of their fondness for creative writing. This was sometimes intentional on the part of users, meaning that they hid this activity from others. This fact is significant because it could be a barrier to educational innovation activities. In this study, however, 81.2% of the participants stated that the people around them were aware of their fondness for creative writing.

The qualitative data analysis has allowed to take a deeper look at this issue. In this study, 17.1% of the participants acknowledged that only their closest friends or relatives were familiar their facet as a writer. Why are they trying to hide it? 55.2% of the users who hide their writing activities argue that it is private (either because they feel embarrassed or because they view it as a personal matter), and another 24.1 keep their writing a secret from those around them because they think friends and family might not value it or understand it. It should be noted that the platform allows users to be anonymous.

With regard to social relationships on the platform, the vast majority of the participants report having

Table 5. Frequency and percentage distribution of the ways in which participants found out about Wattpad

How did you find out about Wattpad?			
		Frequency	Percentage
Valid	By recommendation	179	51
	By chance	105	29.9
	I found it through social networks	43	12.3
	I was aware of other similar websites	8	2.3
	Other	12	3.6
	Total	348	99.1
Lost		3	.9
Total		351	100

Table 6. Frequency and percentage distribution of the reasons participants published their stories.

Why did you decide to publish your writing?				
		Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage
Valid	To become known and to meet people	157	44.7	47.4
	Feedback	42	12	12.7
	Freedom	35	10	10.6
	Leisure	39	11.1	11.8
	Practical	43	12.3	13
	Anonymity	15	4.3	4.5
	Total	331	94.3	100
Lost	Not valid	14	4	
	Do not know	6	1.7	
	Total	20	5.7	
Total		351	100	

made friends on *Wattpad* (83.1%). This proves that the website or application for mobile devices is not a mere repository of stories created by amateur writers, but a space for meeting and interaction between young people who love reading and literature.

One of the central goals of this study was to find out what motivates people to post on this platform. They were therefore asked directly why they choose to publish their stories. The process of categorising the answers given to the corresponding question is particularly complex due to the variety of arguments (see Table 6). Most often, they share their texts in order to be read by many more readers (47.4%). This also allows them to become known and to establish relationships with other writers. Meanwhile, 12.7% asserted that they publish their stories to receive feedback, both by means of *Likes* or simply by increasing the statistics of their user profile. Another 10.6% explained their posting by saying that they feel free to write what they want (without censorship, filters or copyright). In similar terms, 4.5% indicated that the platform allows them to maintain their anonymity.

Users are sure that their interest in writing goes beyond *Wattpad* platform. 87.6% of them indicated that they would continue to write, although 27.6% acknowledged that they might not do it as regularly.

Most of the participants, 73.2%, said they felt they were part of the *Wattpad* community, had a sense of community and shared a number of values, characteristics, interests, affinities, etc. with other users. If you look deeper into this feeling, 33.9% of those who feel

Table 7. Frequency and percentage distribution of the taste for writing

Would you write if there were no websites like Wattpad or similar?				
		Frequency	Percentage	
Valid	No	42	12	
	Yes	304	86.6	
	Maybe	1	.3	
	Total	347	98.9	
Lost	Not valid	4	1.1	
Total		351	100	

part of a community pointed out that, on the platform, they find other people who share a passion for reading and writing. This allows them to establish new relationships and friendships much more easily. A further 28.4% stressed the value of (both direct and indirect) interactions between users. For instance, they cited feedback (comments, beta readers, etc.), recommendations, support, and encouragement in comments, views, votes, etc.

The results obtained indicate that *Wattpad* writers do not only have a well-developed reading habit, but also that they write regularly (see Table 8). In fact, 65.8% of the participants write every day or almost every day. This shows that literature is an important part of the leisure time of these young people and adolescents. In terms of the roles they play in the literary world of the platform, only 28.5% of the participants considered themselves specifically to be more readers (11.8%) writers (16.7%), while 71.6% pointed out that both roles are equally important for them.

Discussion

The data analysis leads to the conclusion that *Wattpad* functions as an international community of amateur readers and writers. The platform no longer features operational socio-demographic characteristics such as sex, age, country of birth and residence, credentials, etc. This is to help ensure anonymity. In this respect, the nexus between this large number of users is the passion for literature. It is, therefore, an affinity space, as defined by Gee and Hayes (2012).

Despite this anonymity, some general features can be extracted about the sex and age of the writers. The platform is mainly female, with the largest group of writers aged between 14 and 18. These results are consistent with previous research by Black (2008) in *fanfiction.net*, and Botzakis (2014) in *Wattpad*. Most are young people and adolescents with a good record of academic achievement in the formal education systems of their respective countries.

In addition, the majority are adolescents with well-developed reading and writing habits. Literature is one of their hobbies, and they devote a significant amount of time to it every day. This is in line with the conclusions of Jimenez (2017), who found that *Wattpad* is the favourite application for reading among the participants of his research. It is worth highlighting again that most participants do not position themselves and either more in the role of readers or of writers. In the community, traditional roles that have separated the producer and consumer become blurred, and the theoretical concept of prosumer is put into practice (Toffler, 1980). These conclusions are consistent with the results of Muñoz's (2017) research work.

Taking part in this community is hardly a fleeting activity, as most participants have been writers on *Wattpad* for more than two years. Both the continued use of and the access to the platform are driven by social motivations or peer recommendations. Users

develop a sense of belonging to a community, in which relationships are established based on their shared passion for reading and writing.

These affinities result in different types of feedback (comments, *favs*, text dissemination, fan art creations, etc.) that blur the traditional roles of writers and readers and lead to the emergence of hybrid figures (García-Roca, 2019). This is in line with the results of the research by Davies (2017), who analyses the collaborative production on *Wattpad*, and by Ramdarshan (2018), who analyses the figure of the social author and (self-)publishing on *Wattpad*. That is to say, the website is not a mere repository of texts, but acts as a social network. The platform plays a key role in promoting the participation of the contributors, and the users in this study are aware of this.

To conclude, it is worth pointing out that these literate practices are unique opportunities for the development of a reading habit and for the reading and literary training of Secondary Education students. The motivational and educational potential of these spaces of reading affinity is undeniable (Anggitasari, Tarwana, Febriani, & Syafryadin, 2020). Therefore, proposals for educational innovation related to reading promotion should include and adopt the vernacular practices of their students.

Teachers should always be aware of the true reading and writing habits of their students, and of their potential literary interests, in order to incorporate them into their teaching practice. Cassany (2013) highlights the gap between the institutional and vernacular practices of young people and adolescents. It is formal education that must formalize informal learning, structure the knowledge and skills that are promoted in affinity spaces, and, ultimately, appropriate the literacy practices of its students (Scolari, Lugo & Masanet, 2019).

This study leaves new questions unanswered and, with them, points the way forward for new lines of research:

- How do *Wattpad* users learn and try to improve their writing?
- What is the sense of community that they develop?
- How could the vernacular practices developed in affinity spaces and the institutional practices be linked?

Author's Disclosure Statement: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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