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Digital construction of the professional identity of Social Work: Networks, discursive communities, and advocacy on World Social Work Day

Construcción digital de la identidad profesional del Trabajo Social: Redes, comunidades discursivas y reivindicación en el Día Mundial del Trabajo Social

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Abstract

Introduction

The professional identity of Social Work is constructed through processes of differentiation, recognition, and collective negotiation that develop both within the profession and in its interaction with society (Dubar, 2002; Payne, 2006; Liu & László, 2007). Its plural and dynamic character is related to the diversity of functions, institutional contexts, and professional traditions that coexist within Social Work (Forenza & Eckert, 2018; Ornellas et al., 2018). Although digital platforms have become relevant spaces for professional visibility, participation, and the construction of shared meanings (Boyd, 2010; Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Zappavigna, 2011), little is still known about the way in which the identity of Social Work is configured relationally and discursively during professional campaigns of international scope. This study analyzes how the professional identity of Social Work is digitally constructed and projected during the 2021 World Social Work Day. Specifically, it examines the structure of the conversation, the actors and communities involved in it, and the narratives through which professional recognition, advocacy, dissemination, and the public representation of the profession are articulated.

Methods

12,729 posts collected on X were analyzed using the hashtags associated with World Social Work Day and the Ubuntu 2021 campaign. A multi-method design was adopted, combining social network analysis, community detection, and netnographic analysis. The relational structure was examined using centrality, distance, clustering, and modularity metrics (Brandes, 2001; Blondel et al., 2008; Latapy, 2008), while the content was classified into five categories: Recognition, Advocacy, Informative/Educational, Characteristics of Social Work Professionals, and Other.

Results

The conversation presented a globally dispersed structure, but organized into differentiated discursive communities. Recognition was the predominant category -36.53%-, followed by advocacy -24.37%-, informative or educational content -19.19%-, and the characteristics attributed to social workers -17.11%-. The communities with the greatest impact tended to reinforce pride, cohesion, and the internal recognition of the profession, while others were oriented toward publicly explaining their functions, questioning stereotyped representations, and linking Social Work with social justice and structural transformation.

Discussion

The results show that the digital identity of Social Work does not constitute a homogeneous narrative, but rather a plural construction produced through the interaction between professionals, students, professional organizations, and academic entities. This finding is consistent with research that questions the existence of a single identity of Social Work and highlights its contextual, dynamic, and negotiated character (Forenza & Eckert, 2018; Ornellas et al., 2018).

Conclusions

World Social Work Day functions simultaneously as a space of internal affirmation and as a stage of public legitimation. However, the predominance of celebratory discourse over critical narratives reveals a tension between the pursuit of professional recognition and the advocacy potential of digital presence. The study contributes to understanding social networks as spaces in which professional identities are not only communicated, but collectively negotiated, reproduced, and transformed.

Keywords

Social Work; Professional Identity; Social Networks; Professional Recognition; Digital Advocacy; Social Network Analysis; Discursive Communities.

Resumen

Introducción

La identidad profesional del Trabajo Social se construye mediante procesos de diferenciación, reconocimiento y negociación colectiva que se desarrollan tanto dentro de la profesión como en su interacción con la sociedad (Dubar, 2002; Payne, 2006; Liu & László, 2007). Su carácter plural y dinámico se encuentra relacionado con la diversidad de funciones, contextos institucionales y tradiciones profesionales que conviven dentro del Trabajo Social (Forenza & Eckert, 2018; Ornellas et al., 2018). Aunque las plataformas digitales se han convertido en espacios relevantes para la visibilidad profesional, la participación y la construcción de significados compartidos (Boyd, 2010; Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Zappavigna, 2011), todavía se conoce poco sobre la manera en que la identidad del Trabajo Social se configura relacional y discursivamente durante campañas profesionales de alcance internacional. Este estudio analiza cómo se construye y proyecta digitalmente la identidad profesional del Trabajo Social durante el Día Mundial del Trabajo Social de 2021. Específicamente, examina la estructura de la conversación, los actores y comunidades que intervienen en ella y las narrativas mediante las que se articulan el reconocimiento profesional, la reivindicación, la divulgación y la representación pública de la profesión.

Métodos

Se analizaron 12.729 publicaciones recopiladas en X mediante los hashtags asociados al Día Mundial del Trabajo Social y a la campaña Ubuntu 2021. Se adoptó un diseño multimétodo que combinó análisis de redes sociales, detección de comunidades, y análisis netnográfico. La estructura relacional fue examinada mediante métricas de centralidad, distancia, agrupamiento y modularidad (Brandes, 2001; Blondel et al., 2008; Latapy, 2008), mientras que los contenidos se clasificaron en cinco categorías: Reconocimiento, Reivindicación, Informativo/Educativo, Características Profesionales del Trabajo Social y Otros.

Resultados

La conversación presentó una estructura globalmente dispersa, pero organizada en comunidades discursivas diferenciadas. El reconocimiento fue la categoría predominante -36,53 %-, seguido de la reivindicación -24,37 %-, el contenido informativo o educativo -19,19 %- y las características atribuidas a profesionales del Trabajo Social -17,11 %-. Las comunidades con mayor impacto tendieron a reforzar el orgullo, la cohesión y el reconocimiento interno de la profesión, mientras que otras se orientaron a explicar públicamente sus funciones, cuestionar representaciones estereotipadas y vincular el Trabajo Social con la justicia social y la transformación estructural.

Discusión

Los resultados muestran que la identidad digital del Trabajo Social no constituye una narrativa homogénea, sino una construcción plural producida mediante la interacción entre profesionales, estudiantes, organizaciones profesionales y entidades académicas. Este hallazgo resulta coherente con las investigaciones que cuestionan la existencia de una identidad única del Trabajo Social y destacan su carácter contextual, dinámico y negociado (Forenza & Eckert, 2018; Ornellas et al., 2018).

Conclusiones

El Día Mundial del Trabajo Social funciona simultáneamente como espacio de afirmación interna y como escenario de legitimación pública. Sin embargo, el predominio del discurso celebrativo frente a las narrativas críticas revela una tensión entre la búsqueda de reconocimiento profesional y el potencial reivindicativo de la presencia digital. El estudio contribuye a comprender las redes sociales como espacios en los que las identidades profesionales no solo se comunican, sino que se negocian, reproducen y transforman colectivamente.

Palabras clave

Trabajo Social; Identidad Profesional; Redes Sociales; Reconocimiento Profesional; Reivindicación Digital; Análisis De Redes Sociales; Comunidades Discursivas.

1. Introduction

Professional identity has traditionally been understood as a dynamic process through which professions collectively construct, negotiate, and legitimize their role within society (Dubar, 2002; Payne, 2006). Far from constituting a stable or exclusively institutional reality, professional identity emerges from the interaction between multiple actors —professionals, organizations, training institutions, and citizens— who continuously participate in the definition of the values, competencies, and functions that characterize a profession (Healy, 2017; Pratt et al., 2006).

During the last two decades, the expansion of digital platforms has profoundly transformed these processes. Social networks have ceased to be simple channels of dissemination to become spaces where professions not only communicate their activity, but publicly negotiate their legitimacy, generate communities of practice, and produce new interpretive frameworks about their role in society (Boyd, 2010; Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Loader et al., 2014). In this context, the construction of professional identity acquires an increasingly distributed, participatory, and relational dimension, in which professional organizations, universities, professionals, students, and citizens simultaneously intervene in the production of the public meaning of the profession.

This change is especially relevant for Social Work. Unlike other professions with high public visibility, Social Work has historically experienced difficulties in consolidating a coherent and widely recognized social image (Gibelman, 1999; Hare, 2004; Hyslop, 2018). The persistence of stereotypes, the limited citizen knowledge about its competencies, and the complexity of its fields of intervention have turned the construction of professional identity into a permanent challenge for professional organizations, academic institutions, and practicing professionals (Morley & Ablett, 2016; Maylea, 2021).

In this scenario, international digital campaigns promoted by professional organizations represent a particularly interesting opportunity to analyze how professional identity is constructed in digital spaces. Initiatives such as World Social Work Day, driven by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), and the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW), annually mobilize thousands of participants from different countries and generate digital conversations of global scope around a shared thematic framework (IFSW, 2021). However, these campaigns do not constitute only institutional communication actions. They also function as spaces where different actors collectively negotiate what it means to be a social worker, what values define the profession, and what image it projects toward society.

Despite the growing interest in the use of social networks in Social Work, the literature has focused mainly on analyzing their use as a tool for communication, learning, information exchange, or professional activism (Forenza & Eckert, 2018; Ornellas et al., 2018; Suk et al., 2021). Research examining digital campaigns as processes of collective construction of professional identity, simultaneously

integrating the relational architecture of conversations, the actors participating in them, and the discursive frameworks they produce, is still scarce.

This absence is particularly significant because professional identity depends not only on the content of the messages disseminated, but also on the way in which they circulate, on who produces them, and on how different communities contribute to legitimizing certain representations of the profession over others. Consequently, understanding professional identity in digital environments requires moving beyond approaches focused exclusively on content analysis or social network analysis, and integrating both dimensions within a single analytical framework.

With the aim of addressing this gap, the present study analyzes the international conversation generated during World Social Work Day 2021 through a multi-method design combining social network analysis, netnography, and content analysis of 12,729 posts disseminated through the campaign's official hashtags. Rather than describing the activity developed during an international event, the research aims to explain how international digital campaigns contribute to the collective construction of the professional identity of Social Work. To this end, the analysis is developed sequentially. First, it examines how the digital conversation is structured and which actors articulate the interaction network, understanding that the relational architecture conditions the opportunities for dissemination and visibility of professional discourses. Second, it identifies the discursive strategies of identity construction that predominate in the conversation and analyzes how these are distributed among the different communities detected, in order to understand whether professional identity is constructed through homogeneous or differentiated forms of representation. Finally, it integrates the structural and discursive dimensions to explain how digital campaigns act as spaces of collective identity production, simultaneously favoring the strengthening of internal cohesion of the collective and the public legitimation of the profession.

Throughout the article, professional identity is understood as a collective process through which the profession constructs and negotiates the meaning of its values, functions, and competencies. In this sense, public recognition does not constitute a concept alternative to identity, but one of its external manifestations. Professional identity refers to the way in which the profession defines and represents itself, while legitimacy and recognition refer to the social validation of these representations. From this perspective, the interest of the study does not consist of measuring the public image of Social Work, but of analyzing how different actors collectively construct and project professional identity in a digital environment.

2. Methodos

2.1. Research design

The present study adopts a multi-method design that integrates social network analysis, netnography, and content analysis to examine how the professional identity of Social Work is constructed and negotiated during the 2021 World Social Work Day international campaign. Social network analysis made it possible to identify the

structure of the interactions, the strategic actors, and the digital communities (Wasserman & Faust, 1994; Scott, 2017); netnography facilitated the interpretation of communicative dynamics and shared meanings (Kozinets, 2020); content analysis made it possible to identify the main narratives of professional identity construction. The integration of these approaches provided a joint view of the structural, relational, and discursive dimensions of the digital conversation.

2.2. Data collection

The research was carried out in the context of the international #WorldSocialWorkDay 2021 campaign, promoted by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), and the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW), under the slogan Ubuntu: "I am because we are".

The sample consisted of 12,729 posts disseminated on the X platform (formerly Twitter) that incorporated one of the campaign's official hashtags (#WorldSocialWorkDay, #WSWD2021, #WSWD21, and #Ubuntu). Data collection was carried out through the X API, with these hashtags being selected as the main official identifiers used to articulate the international conversation during World Social Work Day (IFSW, 2021).

The use of official hashtags made it possible to delimit a specific digital conversation and reconstruct the interaction network generated around the international event under study. Consequently, the objective of the research was not to analyze all existing conversations about Social Work on the platform, but to examine the communicative dynamics developed within this global campaign.

Table 1

Sample size and composition

#WorldSocialWorkDay	
Tweets	12,729
Ties	24,845
Nodes	12,725

Note: Own elaboration

2.3. Data preparation and cleaning

The data obtained through the X API were reviewed to ensure their integrity and standardized for the construction of the graph and the relational matrices used in the network analysis. In the textual analysis, only elements with communicative value (hashtags, mentions, and emojis) were retained, with external links and multimedia content excluded. Since the study analyzed the entirety of the posts retrieved during the study period, it was not necessary to apply sampling procedures.

2.4. Social network analysis

Social network analysis was used to examine the structure of the interactions generated during the campaign. In the constructed network, each node represents an X user and each link represents an interaction (mention, reply, or retweet). The graphic representation and the calculation of the indicators were carried out using Gephi (Bastian et al., 2009). Centrality indicators (degree, betweenness, and closeness) were calculated to identify the most influential actors, along with the modularity algorithm to detect highly interconnected communities (Brandes, 2001; Blondel et al., 2008). These indicators made it possible to characterize the structure of the conversation, identify strategic actors, and analyze the community organization of the network.

2.5. Netnography and content analysis

In order to complement the structural analysis of the network, a netnographic analysis of the main communities identified through the modularity algorithm was carried out.

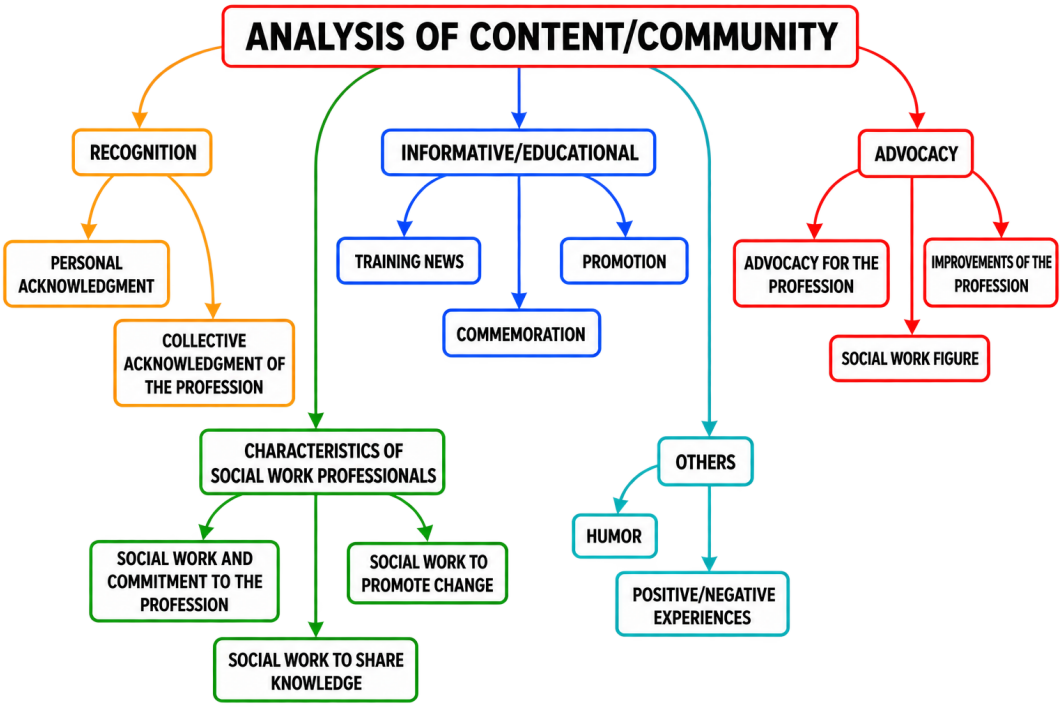
Netnography made it possible to interpret the communicative context of the messages, identify the main participating actors, and understand the discursive practices developed within each community (Kozinets, 2020).

Subsequently, a content analysis was carried out aimed at classifying the posts according to the main narratives present in the conversation. The category system was developed deductively based on the literature on professional identity, public representation, and digital communication of Social Work, and was subsequently refined through an inductive process during the exploratory review of the messages.

The netnographic analysis was conducted by the entire research team. To ensure consistency and reliability throughout the coding process, a codebook was developed prior to data analysis, including operational definitions of the categories and detailed coding criteria. The codebook was developed through a review of the relevant literature and an iterative consensus-building process among the researchers. Each of the seven online communities included in the study was independently reviewed by two researchers. Any discrepancies identified during coding were discussed and resolved through consensus until agreement was reached regarding the final classification of the content.

As a result, the posts were classified into five main categories: recognition, advocacy, informative/educational, characteristics of social work professionals , other.

Figure 1.
Research Design. Coding-categorization system.



Note: own elaboration

2.6. Methodological rigor

Methodological quality was ensured through the triangulation of social network analysis, netnography, and content analysis, making it possible to contrast the results from complementary perspectives and reinforce the credibility of the interpretations. The study is limited to the conversation developed through the official hashtags of World Social Work Day, so other posts about the profession that did not incorporate these hashtags were left outside the analysis.

2.7. Ethical considerations

The research used exclusively publicly accessible information available on the X platform through its official API. No contact was established with users, nor were data collected from private profiles.

The analysis focused on the aggregate behavior of the network and the communicative dynamics developed during the campaign, avoiding unnecessary identification of individual users. The study adhered to international recommendations for ethical research on the Internet and social networks (Franzke et al., 2020).

3. Results

3.1. Structural configuration of the digital conversation

The first research question aims to understand how the digital conversation generated around the 2021 World Social Work Day is structured and what characteristics the interaction network built through the campaign's official hashtags presents.

The social network analysis shows that the conversation was articulated around a network made up of 12,725 nodes (users) and 24,845 links (interactions), generated from 12,729 posts disseminated during the campaign (Table 1). These figures reflect a high level of international participation and highlight the event's capacity to generate a global space of interaction among professionals, organizations, universities, students, and citizens.

From a structural point of view, the network presents an average degree centrality of 1.952, an average distance of 4.78, and a clustering coefficient of 0.28 (Table 2). These indicators show an international conversation with a high capacity for dissemination among geographically dispersed actors, favoring the global circulation of messages and the visibility of Social Work.

Table 2

Descriptive statistics for the study of structural properties

#WorldSocialWorkDay	
Average Degree Centrality	1.952
Average Distance	4.78
Clustering Coefficient	0.28

Note: Own elaboration

Although information circulates with relative ease among communities, the clustering coefficient (0.28) and the high modularity (Q = 0.773) show that the conversation is organized into multiple communities with strong internal relationships and more limited connections between them. The graphic representation (Figure 2) confirms this polycentric structure, with various communities represented in different colors: the main communities remain articulated through the hashtags #WSWD2021 and #WorldSocialWorkDay, which act as backbone axes of the international conversation.

Figure 2

Degree of interactions with community detection, represented in colors, through the modularity algorithm (Blondel et al., 2008) and leadership, through degree centrality (Brandes, 2001)



Source: Gephi (Bastian et al., 2009).

Overall, the results show that the World Social Work Day conversation presents a decentralized and polycentric structure, organized into interconnected communities through shared hashtags. This architecture facilitates the international dissemination of messages and provides the context for analyzing which actors play a strategic role in the circulation of information and in the construction of professional identity.

3.2. Strategic actors and dissemination architecture

Once the general structure of the network has been characterized, the next step consists of identifying which actors and communities play a central role in the circulation of information and in the construction of the digital conversation. Beyond the number of participants, the analysis makes it possible to understand how the capacity for influence is distributed within the network and which profiles contribute to amplifying the messages disseminated during World Social Work Day.

The modularity analysis identifies seven main communities that concentrate most of the interactions (Figure 2), evidencing an international conversation organized into several interaction hubs connected through the campaign's official hashtags. This

polycentric structure favors the coexistence of specialized conversations without losing the overall cohesion of the event, allowing different actors to simultaneously contribute to the construction of professional identity.

The netnographic analysis shows that the communities present differentiated organizational compositions. Some are led by professional organizations and institutions, others by universities and training centers, and others incorporate greater participation from professionals, students, or initiatives that emerged during the campaign. This organizational diversity is also reflected in different ways of representing the profession.

Among the actors with the greatest capacity for dissemination, national and international professional organizations stand out, acting simultaneously as institutional reference points and as intermediary nodes between communities. Their position favors both the international circulation of messages and the articulation of a common narrative framework for the campaign.

The campaign driven by @tsocialdigital, developed by students of the Social Work Degree at the University of Málaga in collaboration with the Professional Association of Social Work of Málaga (@colegiotsmalaga), stands out in particular. Both accounts occupy a prominent position within the orange community, generating content oriented mainly toward reinforcing public visibility and explaining the functions of Social Work. This result shows that influence within the network does not depend exclusively on the institutional weight of the actors. Initiatives emerging from the university sphere can also acquire high visibility when they generate content capable of mobilizing interaction and contributing to the collective construction of professional identity.

Overall, the international conversation emerges from the interaction between professional organizations, academic institutions, professionals, students, and collaborative initiatives. This polycentric structure favors a collective construction of professional identity based on complementary contributions from actors with diverse profiles.

Knowing who structures the conversation makes it possible to understand the architecture of the dissemination, but it does not explain what image of Social Work these actors construct. To answer this question, it is necessary to analyze the content of the shared messages and determine which are the predominant narratives about professional identity. The following section examines precisely these narratives and their distribution within the digital conversation.

3.3. Predominant narratives in the construction of professional identity

Once the structure of the network and the actors who articulate the conversation have been identified, the next objective is to analyze which representations of Social Work predominate during World Social Work Day and how they contribute to the construction of professional identity.

Content analysis made it possible to classify all of the posts into five broad thematic categories: Recognition, Advocacy, Informative/Educational, Characteristics of Social Work Professionals , and Other, made up of different

subcategories derived from the coding process (Table 3). This system made it possible to organize the different discourses present in the conversation and analyze the communicative priorities of the participants.

Table 3

Codebook used in the sample for content/community analysis

Category	Subcategory	Examples of tweets
Advocacy	Advocacy for the Profession	"Today is World Social Work Day; let's celebrate the important role that social workers play in everyday society."
	Social Work figure	"Today is our day; we celebrate our role in building a fairer world."
	Improvements of the Profession	"Without adequate national funding and locally developed systems to incorporate a strengths-based approach, social work is a profession in distress."
Recognition	Personal Acknowledgments	"I am proud to work alongside such inspiring people."
	Collective Acknowledgment of the Profession	"Celebrating social workers and the incredible impact they have in improving the health and well-being of families and communities."
Characteristics of Social Work Professionals	Social work and commitment to the profession	"Being a Social Worker is more than just a job; it's part of my identity. Happy World Social Work Day to all my colleagues."
	Social Work social to share knowledge	"Social workers help children and families thrive through their support and dedication."
	Social work to promote change	"Social work students are learning how to support vulnerable people and make a difference in society."
Informative/Educational	Training News	"Here we share our timeline on the evolution of social work."
	Commemoration	"Celebrating World Social Work Day, highlighting Ubuntu: 'I am because we are' and the importance of human connection."
	Promotion	"Looking for a position in social work? Join us and make a difference."

Others	Humor	"Waiting for that applause from the government... #WSWD2021"
	Positive/Negative Experiences	"Social workers helped me out loads and made me the confidence person I am today... Thanks for all you do!"

Note: Own elaboration.

The narrative of recognition was the most frequent (36.53% of the total) and focused on making visible the contribution of Social Work to society through messages of gratitude, institutional recognition, and the recognition of the profession. These posts reinforced a professional identity based on commitment, social utility, and collective recognition.

The narrative of advocacy, which concentrated 24.37% of the interactions, articulated demands related to professional recognition, the improvement of working conditions, and the strengthening of the role of Social Work in welfare systems. These posts combined the criticism of structural limitations with the demand for greater capacity for professional influence.

The informative/educational narrative was oriented toward disseminating the activities of World Social Work Day, sharing resources, and promoting participation in the campaign. In addition to their organizational function, these contents contributed to reinforcing the sense of belonging to an international professional community.

On the other hand, the category characteristics of social work professionals groups messages focused on describing the values, competencies, and qualities associated with the profession. In these posts, social workers are represented as agents of change, promoters of rights, generators of knowledge, and professionals committed to collective well-being. Rather than demanding improvements or celebrating specific events, this type of content contributes to defining what it means to be a social worker and what traits configure professional identity.

Finally, the category Other presents a clearly minority presence and includes humorous messages, personal experiences, and positive or negative testimonials related to professional practice. Although its quantitative weight is small, these posts contribute a more everyday and experiential dimension of the profession, complementing the predominant institutional narratives.

Overall, the distribution of the categories reveals that the international conversation was oriented mainly toward the positive affirmation of the profession. The sum of recognition and advocacy content accounts for more than sixty percent of all the posts analyzed, indicating that World Social Work Day functions fundamentally as a space for reinforcing collective identity and increasing the public visibility of the profession. However, both narratives respond to different objectives. While recognition messages strengthen internal cohesion through celebration and professional pride, advocacy discourses seek to project a public image of Social Work

as a profession committed to social justice and the transformation of the structural conditions that generate inequality.

This result is especially relevant because it shows that professional identity is not articulated around a single shared discourse. On the contrary, the conversation combines narratives oriented toward strengthening the collective with others aimed at socially legitimizing the profession in the eyes of external audiences. Professional identity thus emerges as a relational process in which celebration, recognition, dissemination, and advocacy coexist within the same digital space.

Although these narratives are present throughout the conversation, their distribution is not homogeneous among the different communities detected in the network. Some concentrate messages of recognition and professional cohesion, while others develop more advocacy-oriented or informative discourses. The following section analyzes these differences in order to understand how each community contributes specifically to the construction of professional identity.

3.4. Discursive differences between communities: models of professional identity construction

Although the international conversation shares the same event and common hashtags, the comparative analysis of the seven main communities shows that the professional identity of Social Work is not constructed homogeneously. Each community develops a particular combination of narratives that reflects different communicative priorities and, consequently, different ways of publicly representing the profession.

In general terms, all communities share a common element: Recognition constitutes the predominant category or one of the most relevant in practically the entire conversation. However, the intensity with which it appears and its combination with other categories vary considerably between communities, configuring different discursive models of identity construction.

A first group of communities is clearly oriented toward recognition and professional cohesion. In these, messages of gratitude, collective pride, and celebration of the role played by social workers predominate. The green and yellow communities constitute the most representative examples of this pattern, with Recognition as the dominant category, accounting for 55.4% and 51.9% of their posts, respectively. In both cases, this content is accompanied mainly by messages describing the qualities and values of the profession. The near absence of advocacy content in both the green and yellow communities suggests an orientation focused on reinforcing the internal identity of the collective rather than promoting external demands.

A second group incorporates, alongside recognition, a clearly institutional and informational dimension. Communities such as the red community use the celebration of World Social Work Day as an opportunity to disseminate resources, training materials, and academic activities, combining professional recognition with knowledge transfer. In these cases, professional identity is not limited to being celebrated, but is also explained and communicated through informational strategies aimed at both professionals and external audiences.

A third group is characterized by a balanced integration of recognition and advocacy. The light blue, dark blue, and fuchsia communities present a relatively similar distribution between both categories, reflecting a conception of professional identity based simultaneously on pride in the profession and on the need to strengthen its social recognition. In these spaces, messages of celebration coexist with references to social justice, human rights, the response to the pandemic, or the need to strengthen the strategic role of Social Work in public policies.

Finally, the orange community presents a clearly differentiated profile with respect to the rest of the network. Unlike the other communities, Advocacy constitutes the dominant category, concentrating almost half of the posts analyzed (47.1%). The content of this community is not primarily oriented toward the celebration of the collective, but toward the public explanation of the profession, the correction of stereotypes, and the defense of greater institutional and social recognition of Social Work. The high presence of informative and educational content reinforces this orientation, evidencing a communicative strategy aimed at broadening social knowledge about professional functions.

This differential pattern is especially relevant because the orange community is largely driven by the campaign developed by students of the Social Work Degree at the University of Málaga (@tsocialdigital), in collaboration with the Professional Association of Social Work of Málaga (@colegiotsmalaga). In contrast to the predominantly celebratory character that dominates much of the international conversation, this initiative incorporates a communicative strategy centered on professional advocacy, aimed at explaining what Social Work is, what its contribution to society is, and why it is necessary to strengthen its public recognition.

Overall, the comparative analysis shows that the communities represent not only structural groupings within the network, but also differentiated ways of constructing professional identity. Some favor internal cohesion through discourses of recognition; others prioritize dissemination and knowledge transfer; while others use the digital conversation as a space for professional advocacy and the defense of social justice. The coexistence of these models shows that the identity of Social Work is collectively constructed through multiple narratives that, far from being mutually exclusive, complement each other to project a broader and more complex image of the profession.

Table 4

Discursive models of professional identity construction in the main communities

Discourse model	Predominant communities	Predominant narratives	Main function
Professional cohesion	Green/Yellow Red	Recognition	Strengthen professional pride and belonging

Institutional dissemination		Informative/ Educational + Recognition	Disseminate knowledge and make the profession visible
Transformative identity	Light blue/ Dark blue/ Fuchsia	Recognition + Advocacy	Link Social Work with social justice and change
Professional advocacy	Orange	Advocacy + Informative	Explain the profession, correct stereotypes, and promote public legitimation

Note: own elaboration based on content analysis

3.5. Between recognition and legitimation: the digital construction of professional identity

The integration of the structural and discursive results makes it possible to answer the central question of this research: how is the professional identity of Social Work constructed during World Social Work Day in a digital space of international scope?

The results show that the professional identity of Social Work is not constructed through a single shared communicative strategy, but through a set of differentiated discursive strategies developed by the different communities that make up the digital conversation. These strategies, far from being mutually exclusive, perform complementary functions in the collective construction of professional identity.

The first of these orientations corresponds to the internal affirmation of the profession. This model is mainly represented by the communities in which messages of recognition, gratitude, and professional pride predominate. In these, World Social Work Day functions as a space of collective celebration that strengthens the sense of belonging, reinforces shared values, and publicly recognizes the everyday contribution of social workers. From this perspective, professional identity is constructed through mutual recognition among the members of the collective themselves and the reaffirmation of the principles that underpin the profession.

The second orientation responds to a logic of external legitimation. In this case, the conversation shifts from internal recognition toward the public explanation of Social Work, the assertion of its role in society, and the need to correct reductionist or stereotyped social representations. The posts included in this orientation present Social Work as a profession committed to human rights, social justice, and structural transformation, using the digital space as an awareness-raising mechanism aimed at broader audiences than the professional collective itself.

Both orientations appear unevenly distributed among the communities analyzed, which confirms that professional identity does not constitute a uniform discourse, but

a collective process of negotiation in which different actors emphasize different dimensions of the profession. While some communities favor internal cohesion through discursive strategies of recognition, others use the digital conversation to project a public image of Social Work oriented toward advocacy, social pedagogy, and professional legitimation. The coexistence of both orientations shows that digital campaigns not only reinforce existing identity, but also generate spaces where this identity is redefined and adapted to new audiences and communicative contexts.

These results suggest that the professional identity of Social Work is not constructed through a single, homogeneous communicative strategy. On the contrary, it emerges from a set of differentiated discursive strategies developed by different digital communities, each of which emphasizes specific functions of the profession. While some communities prioritize the strengthening of internal cohesion through discourses of recognition and belonging, others orient their activity toward dissemination, professional advocacy, or social awareness-raising. This diversity should not necessarily be interpreted as a process of fragmentation of professional identity, but as the expression of a plural identity that is collectively constructed through complementary strategies adapted to different actors, audiences, and communicative objectives.

In this process, the network's structure plays a determining role. The high modularity observed indicates that these discursive strategies do not circulate in an undifferentiated manner, but rather develop within communities with their own organizational and discursive characteristics. However, the shared use of official hashtags and the existence of actors with intermediary functions allow the different discourses to transcend their communities of origin and reach an international audience. In this way, the network's architecture not only organizes the conversation, but also conditions the dissemination and visibility of the different representations of Social Work.

One of the most relevant findings of the study is the role played by initiatives driven from the academic sphere. The campaign promoted by students of the Social Work Degree at the University of Málaga, in collaboration with the Professional Association of Social Work of Málaga, constitutes an example of how emerging actors can acquire a significant position within an international conversation through communicative strategies oriented toward explaining the profession and reinforcing its public recognition. This result reveals that the construction of professional identity on social networks does not depend exclusively on international organizations or professional associations, but can be enriched through collaborative processes involving universities, students, and other actors from the professional community.

Overall, the results make it possible to propose an interpretive model according to which the digital campaigns of Social Work simultaneously fulfill three functions. First, they strengthen the internal cohesion of the collective through the recognition and shared celebration of the profession. Second, they favor external legitimation by projecting a broader and more complex image of Social Work toward citizens. Finally, they generate spaces of collective identity production, in which professional

organizations, academic institutions, professionals, and students negotiate and update the public meaning of the profession in a global digital environment.

4. Discussion

4.1. Social networks as spaces for the construction of professional identity

The present research contributes to expanding knowledge about the role played by social networks in the construction of the professional identity of Social Work. While previous research has pointed to the potential of platforms such as X to favor communication among professionals, knowledge exchange, or mobilization around social causes (Forenza & Eckert, 2018; Ornellas et al., 2018; Suk et al., 2021), the results obtained show that these spaces fulfill an additional function: they act as arenas where the profession negotiates, redefines, and publicly projects its identity.

In this sense, the findings make it possible to qualify the idea that digital campaigns constitute merely tools of institutional dissemination. The joint analysis of the network structure and the narratives developed during World Social Work Day shows that the digital conversation functions as a collective process of meaning production, in which professional organizations, universities, professionals, students, and citizens simultaneously participate in the definition of what Social Work represents.

This interpretation is consistent with Dubar's (2002) approach to the dynamic and relational character of professional identity, as well as with the contributions of Payne (2006), who understands the profession as a social construction permanently negotiated among the different actors that make it up. From this perspective, social networks do not constitute merely a communication channel, but a space where these negotiation processes acquire public visibility and develop openly.

Furthermore, the results extend previous research on the digital presence of Social Work (Gibelman, 1999; Forenza & Eckert, 2018; Maylea, 2021), by showing that the construction of professional identity depends not only on the messages disseminated, but also on the relational architecture through which they circulate. The high modularity observed indicates that different communities develop their own interpretations of the profession, while the existence of bridging actors and shared hashtags allows these visions to be integrated within a common international narrative.

Therefore, the main contribution of this study consists of showing that professional identity is not limited to being communicated through social networks, but is actively constructed through processes of interaction distributed among multiple actors.

4.2. From internal recognition to public legitimation: a dual function of digital campaigns

One of the main findings of this research is that the professional identity of Social Work is not constructed through a single, homogeneous discourse, but through the interaction between two complementary communicative orientations: the

strengthening of the internal identity of the collective and the pursuit of legitimacy before society.

The predominance of recognition messages confirms that World Social Work Day constitutes a privileged space for reinforcing the sense of professional belonging. Expressions of pride, gratitude, and mutual support show that digital campaigns fulfill a function of symbolic cohesion, favoring the consolidation of shared values and reinforcing the collective identity of those who practice the profession. This result coincides with the approaches of Hare (2004) and Gitterman (2014), who point out that professional identity is strengthened through continuous processes of recognition among peers and reaffirmation of the ethical principles that underpin Social Work.

However, limiting the interpretation of the results to this dimension would imply an incomplete view of the phenomenon observed. The significant weight of advocacy narratives reveals that the digital conversation transcends the internal sphere of the profession and is also oriented toward the construction of social legitimacy. The posts that assert the function of Social Work, denounce stereotypes, or demand greater institutional recognition show that social networks are used as spaces for advocacy, aimed at both policymakers and citizens.

This result extends the contributions of Castillo de Mesa et al. (2021a, 2021b, 2022), who had highlighted the potential of social networks to facilitate professional communication and digital activism. The results obtained suggest that these platforms fulfill an additional function: they allow the profession to strategically manage its public image and actively participate in the construction of its social legitimacy.

From this perspective, digital campaigns can be understood as mechanisms of symbolic governance of the profession. Through them, the different actors not only disseminate information about Social Work, but also intervene in the public definition of its competencies, values, and social contributions. Professional identity thus ceases to be a reality constructed exclusively in universities, professional associations, or workplaces, becoming also a product of digital interaction.

The coexistence of both orientations (internal cohesion and external legitimation) makes it possible to understand why the different communities identified in the network develop differentiated communicative strategies without losing overall coherence. The results show that professional identity is not constructed through a homogeneous communicative strategy, but through multiple, partially fragmented and complementary strategies developed by different digital communities. While some communities prioritize the strengthening of the sense of professional belonging, others orient their efforts toward dissemination, social awareness-raising, or the defense of the strategic role of Social Work in guaranteeing rights. Far from representing incompatible discourses, these strategies are complementary and jointly contribute to consolidating professional identity in the digital environment.

Consequently, this research proposes interpreting international Social Work campaigns as simultaneous processes of internal community construction and external projection of legitimacy. This dual function constitutes, in our view, one of

the study's main conceptual contributions and offers an interpretive framework that can be applied to the analysis of other professions that use social networks to strengthen their public recognition.

4.3. Digital campaigns as a strategy for visibility and professional development

The results obtained have important implications for understanding the role that digital campaigns can play in strengthening Social Work as a profession. Traditionally, the construction of professional identity has been associated with processes of university education, professional socialization, membership in professional associations, and experience in daily practice (Payne, 2006; Healy, 2017). However, the findings of this study show that social networks have also become a strategic space where this identity is communicated, negotiated, and publicly projected.

In this context, international campaigns such as World Social Work Day acquire a relevance that transcends their commemorative dimension. The results reveal that these initiatives favor the creation of spaces of interaction among actors who, under ordinary circumstances, would hardly participate in the same conversation. This diversity of participants broadens the possibilities for exchange and favors the circulation of discourses that contribute to reinforcing the visibility of the profession on an international scale.

One of the most relevant aspects identified in this research is the capacity of digital campaigns to integrate initiatives arising from different organizational levels. Although international professional organizations play a central role in articulating the conversation, the results show that universities, local professional associations, and student-driven projects can also acquire highly visible positions when they develop communication strategies aligned with the campaign's general objectives. This finding suggests that the construction of professional identity in the digital environment responds to a more participatory and distributed logic than that observed in traditional models of institutional communication, as pointed out by Castillo de Mesa et al. (2021b).

From a professional perspective, these results invite a reconsideration of the role of digital competencies within Social Work. If social networks constitute spaces where part of the public image of the profession is configured, the ability to design rigorous, ethically responsible, and evidence-based communication strategies becomes part of the competencies necessary to strengthen the social recognition of Social Work. Consequently, and as stated by Castillo de Mesa et al. (2021a) and Méndez-Domínguez et al. (2023), digital literacy should not be understood solely as a technical skill, but also as a competency linked to the exercise of professional leadership, public advocacy, and the defense of social rights.

Furthermore, the results suggest that digital campaigns can help reduce one of the historical difficulties pointed out by the literature: the limited social understanding of the scope and functions of Social Work (Gibelman, 1999; Hyslop, 2018). The high presence of content oriented toward explaining professional competencies, making specific interventions visible, and highlighting the contribution of Social Work to

collective well-being indicates that these initiatives constitute an opportunity to combat persistent stereotypes and favor a more accurate public representation of the profession.

Finally, the study reveals that the effectiveness of these campaigns does not depend exclusively on the intensity of participation, but also on the diversity of actors involved and the complementarity of the narratives developed. The coexistence of discourses of recognition, advocacy, and dissemination makes it possible to simultaneously achieve different communicative objectives: strengthening the internal cohesion of the collective, increasing the social legitimacy of the profession, and broadening citizen knowledge about Social Work. In this sense, the combination of diverse communicative strategies appears to constitute one of the main factors that explain the capacity of international campaigns to project a complex, plural, and socially relevant professional identity.

Despite these contributions, the study presents certain limitations that should be noted. First, the sample was delimited to posts incorporating the campaign's official hashtags, meaning that other conversations about Social Work developed outside these tags were not captured, leaving out other discourses circulating on the platform. Second, the data correspond to a single edition of the campaign (World Social Work Day, 2021), which offers a cross-sectional rather than a longitudinal view of the phenomenon; consequently, the findings cannot be generalized to other editions. Finally, the content analysis was based on a coding procedure developed deductively from the literature and subsequently refined inductively during the exploratory review of the messages; this procedure was applied systematically across the entire corpus. Future research could address these limitations and compare multiple editions of the campaign over time.

5. Conclusions

This research has analyzed how the professional identity of Social Work is constructed in the context of World Social Work Day 2021, combining social network analysis, netnography, and content analysis to examine an international conversation developed on the X platform. The integration of these methodological approaches has made it possible to understand not only the structure of digital interaction, but also the narratives through which different actors contribute to publicly defining the meaning of the profession.

The results show that the professional identity of Social Work does not emerge as a uniform discourse driven by a single institutional actor. On the contrary, it is configured as a collective and distributed process in which professional organizations, universities, professionals, students, and citizens jointly participate in the production and dissemination of different representations of the profession. The high modularity of the network reveals that this construction develops within communities with their own dynamics, while the shared use of official hashtags makes it possible to integrate these conversations into a common international space.

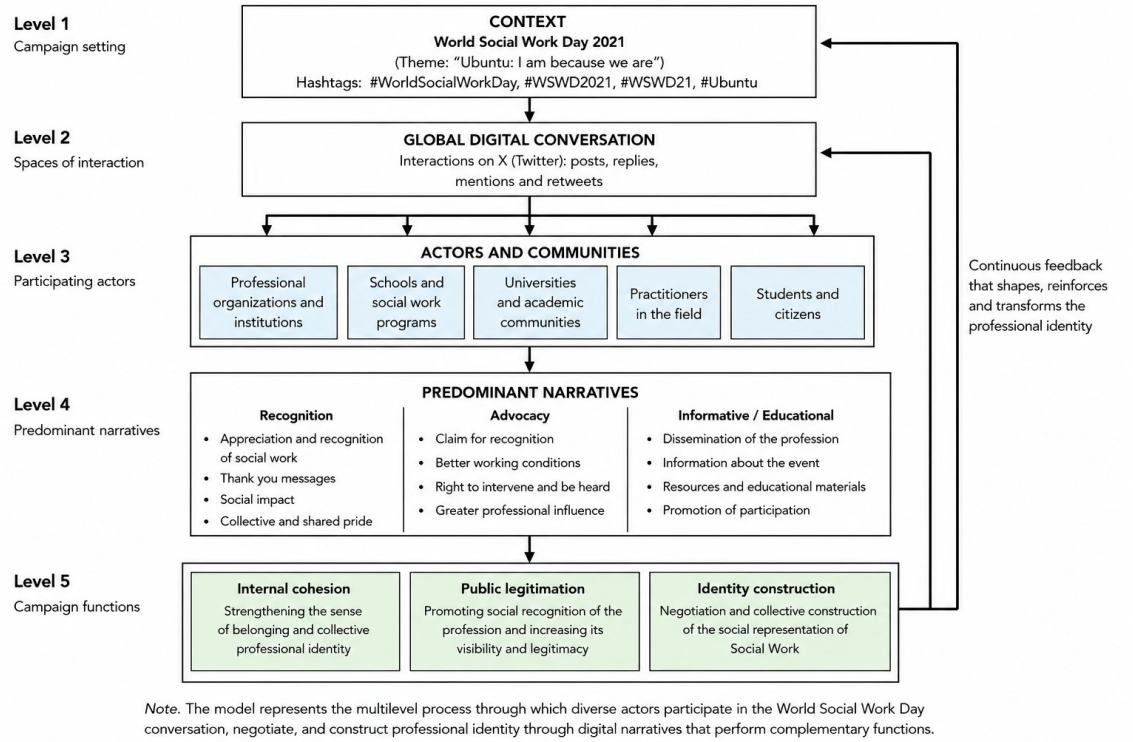
From a discursive perspective, the study reveals that the digital construction of professional identity is articulated around two major complementary functions. On

the one hand, digital campaigns strengthen the internal cohesion of the collective through narratives of recognition, celebration, and professional belonging. On the other, they favor the public legitimation of Social Work through discourses oriented toward explaining its competencies, asserting its role in guaranteeing rights, and increasing its social visibility. The coexistence of both dimensions evidences that social networks do not constitute merely channels of institutional communication, but spaces where the profession continuously negotiates and redefines its identity in interaction with multiple audiences.

The main contribution of this research consists of proposing an interpretive model (Figure 3) that integrates the structural dimension of networks with the discursive dimension of digital communication. In contrast to approaches focused exclusively on analyzing message dissemination or describing virtual communities, this study shows that the relational architecture of the conversation conditions the circulation of certain narratives and favors the participation of actors with diverse organizational profiles in the construction of professional identity. This perspective makes it possible to understand digital campaigns as processes of collective meaning production, broadening the theoretical framework from which the professional identity of Social Work has traditionally been studied.

Figure 3

Conceptual model of the digital construction of the professional identity of Social Work based on World Social Work Day (WSWD)



Note. The model represents the multilevel process through which diverse actors participate in the World Social Work Day conversation, negotiate, and construct professional identity through digital narratives that perform complementary functions.

Note: Own elaboration

The implications of the study transcend the specific case analyzed. In a context characterized by the growing digitalization of professional communication, campaigns developed on social networks can constitute strategic instruments for strengthening the cohesion of the collective, improving institutional recognition, and promoting a more accurate social understanding of Social Work. Consequently, the design of digital communication strategies should occupy a more relevant place both in the planning of professional organizations and in the university education of future social workers.

Finally, this research opens new lines of study for the analysis of professional identity in digital environments. Comparatively analyzing campaigns developed in different countries, platforms, or professions will make it possible to determine to what extent the proposed model is transferable to other contexts and will contribute to a better understanding of how professions construct their legitimacy in an increasingly decentralized, participatory, and global communicative ecosystem.

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