

Synthetic Verisimilitude and Epistemic Regimes in Algorithmic Culture: Affective and Sociotechnical Reconfigurations of Truth

Regímenes epistémicos de la cultura algorítmica y producción de verosimilitud sintética: aproximación teórico-crítica a la verdad digital

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Citar como: Ramos-Zaga, F. A. and Aguirre-Lanegra, A. J. (2025). Synthetic Verisimilitude and Epistemic Regimes in Algorithmic Culture: Affective and Sociotechnical Reconfigurations of Truth. *Desde el Sur*, 17(4), e0081.

RESUMEN

La proliferación exponencial de contenidos generados por inteligencia artificial ha redefinido la arquitectura epistémica de la cultura digital, al disolver las fronteras tradicionales entre verdad, falsedad y creencia. En ese sentido, el presente artículo tiene por objetivo proponer un marco teórico crítico para comprender los regímenes epistémicos emergentes de la cultura algorítmica, con especial atención a los procesos mediante los cuales la verosimilitud sintética es producida, legitimada y circulada en entornos mediados por inteligencia artificial. A partir de un diseño cualitativo, de carácter exploratorio-analítico, sustentado en un paradigma interpretativo y constructivista, los hallazgos evidencian que la creencia digital no se ancla en la validación empírica, sino en la convergencia entre resonancia emocional, familiaridad cultural y amplificación algorítmica. En conclusión, la restauración de la integridad epistémica en los entornos

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digitales requiere fomentar la alfabetización afectiva, la transparencia infraestructural y la reflexividad colectiva como componentes fundamentales de una gobernanza responsable del conocimiento.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Desinformación, epistemología, inteligencia artificial, medios electrónicos, sociedad de la información

ABSTRACT

The exponential proliferation of AI-generated content has redefined the epistemic architecture of digital culture, eroding traditional boundaries between truth, falsity, and belief. This study aims to construct a critical theoretical framework for understanding the emergent epistemic regimes of algorithmic culture, focusing on how synthetic verisimilitude is produced, validated, and circulated in AI-mediated environments. Employing a qualitative, exploratory-analytical design grounded in an interpretive and constructivist paradigm, the findings reveal that digital belief is not anchored in empirical validation but in the convergence of emotional resonance, cultural familiarity, and algorithmic amplification. The concept of performative real-syntheticism is advanced to capture this condition, arguing that epistemic authority now derives from algorithmic coherence and affective synchronization rather than factual correspondence. Taken together, restoring epistemic integrity in digital environments demands the cultivation of affective literacy, infrastructural transparency, and collective reflexivity as foundational components of responsible knowledge governance.

KEYWORDS

Artificial intelligence, disinformation, electronic media, epistemology, information society

1. Introduction

In a global context defined by the relentless proliferation of AI-generated content, the case of a viral video that appeared to show a woman attempting to board a plane with a baby kangaroo as an emotional support animal, in reality a synthetic creation by the digital artist Infinite Unreality, exposes an epistemic tension that can no longer be disregarded. Far from constituting a trivial anecdote, this episode foregrounds fundamental

questions concerning the nature of truth, the authority of testimony, and the material conditions under which something becomes credible or even real. The incident serves as an entry point into the broader inquiry of how digital technologies not only mediate representations of the world but increasingly fabricate its perceptual and affective parameters.

Within a media ecosystem shaped by algorithmic architectures, the central issue extends beyond the traditional opposition between truth and falsehood, encompassing instead the very processes through which that distinction is produced, negotiated, and disseminated. Such a configuration challenges both sociological and philosophical frameworks by situating algorithmic culture as a privileged site for reexamining the contemporary conditions of knowledge. In this terrain, epistemic authority is no longer grounded in verification but in circulation, while the credibility of a statement or image depends less on factual correspondence than on its algorithmic visibility and affective resonance.

Conceptual efforts to apprehend these transformations have been multiple. The notion of the simulacrum introduced as the replacement of reality by its signs (Baudrillard, 1994), the theorization of ontological agency as the material co-constitution of phenomena (Barad, 2006), and the articulation of distributed cognition as a posthuman condition in which agency extends beyond conscious intentionality (Hayles, 2017), all converge in their recognition of a fundamental epistemic reordering. Each of these frameworks underscores the need to rethink modern epistemology in the light of technical systems that do not merely represent the world but enact it through iterative computation and affective modulation.

The paradigm of algorithmic governmentality further elucidates this shift by displacing disciplinary logics toward forms of pre-reflective modulation that reconfigure the production and validation of knowledge (Rouvroy and Berns, 2013). Parallel analyses emphasize the political economy of such transformations, revealing how the commodification of attention and the quantification of affect reorganize epistemic and emotional life (Cheney-Lippold, 2020; Zuboff, 2019). The digital field thereby emerges as a domain where cognition, affect, and capital become inseparable, producing new conditions for the social construction of reality.

Despite this expanding corpus, a theoretical gap remains in conceptualizing the epistemic regimes specific to algorithmically mediated environments. While the technological, ethical, and sociological dimensions of AI-generated content have been examined, what remains underdeveloped is a systematic account of how these dimensions intersect in the production, validation, and circulation of verisimilitude (Murillo, 2020).

The concept of synthetic verisimilitude, understood not merely as simulation but as an epistemic form that reorganizes the boundaries of the credible and the possible, has yet to receive sustained theoretical articulation. This absence constrains both interpretation and intervention, limiting the ability to diagnose phenomena such as the viral kangaroo case or to devise strategies for navigating the epistemic opacity of automated information cultures.

From a practical standpoint, the insights derived from this analysis can contribute to reframing debates on verification, literacy, and regulation. Beyond the limits of fact-checking and content moderation, the challenge lies in understanding how credibility is assembled through affective, infrastructural, and socio-technical processes. Such comprehension could inform more nuanced strategies of institutional and civic intervention in the governance of the credible, particularly where the indistinction between the real and the synthetic affects democratic deliberation, consensus formation, and testimonial reliability.

At a broader level, the problem of synthetic verisimilitude reflects the ongoing crises surrounding the legitimacy of expertise, the fragmentation of public discourse, and the proliferation of post-veridical communication. The issue resides not only in the spread of falsehoods, but in the dissolution of shared epistemic coordinates that once sustained the very notion of evidence. The viral kangaroo episode thus appears not as an isolated curiosity but as a symptom of a deeper realignment in the epistemological foundations of the digital era. Addressing this transformation requires conceptual tools that can account for the entanglements of affect, technology, and knowledge under the automation of credibility.

Accordingly, this paper seeks to articulate a critical theoretical framework for understanding the emergent epistemic regimes of algorithmic culture, focusing on the mechanisms by which synthetic verisimilitude is produced, legitimized, and propagated in AI-mediated environments. Its contribution lies in reclaiming the interpretive depth of the critical humanities while engaging rigorously with contemporary techno-social analysis, thereby offering both a means to describe and an avenue to critically intervene in the evolving truth-forms that structure digital life.

2. Affective realism and algorithmic credibility in the case of the «baby kangaroo video»

The viral video depicting a baby kangaroo standing upright at an airport boarding gate, holding its boarding pass while two women appeared to argue about its right to fly, offers a paradigmatic case for examining the epistemic and affective dynamics of the contemporary digital ecosystem.

In less than ten seconds, the scene condensed the symbolic, emotional, and technological conditions through which truth and falsehood are negotiated in networked environments. First shared by the Instagram account Infinite Unreality on May 25, the clip was later confirmed as an AI-generated fabrication (Infinite Unreality, 2025). However, before verification mechanisms intervened, the video had already achieved its main objective: to circulate affect, mobilize empathy, and trigger moral commentary. This illustrates how, in digital environments, circulation precedes validation and emotion supplants evidence as the basis of epistemic authority.

From the standpoint of digital ethnography, such phenomena cannot be reduced to simple episodes of misinformation, since they constitute situated events within the affective economy of the network. In these events, algorithms, interfaces, and users co-produce meaning and credibility through continuous feedback loops. The kangaroo video exemplifies what may be described as affective realism, a mode of digital truth that depends less on correspondence with empirical facts than on the intensity of emotional resonance it generates. This notion aligns with the broader transformation of communicative regimes, where the logic of verification has been supplanted by a logic of circulation. As a result, the veracity of a message becomes secondary to its capacity to move, connect, and be felt.

A corpus of eighty-seven comments, drawn from the Infinite Unreality post as of November 3, 2025, was analyzed out of a total of 1.3 million likes and 14,400 comments. The analysis followed the principles of digital ethnography (Han, 2015; Pink et al., 2015), treating the comment thread not as raw data but as a social field in which affect, interpretation, and epistemic negotiation are performed. Each comment was read as a micro-event within a larger assemblage of human and algorithmic interactions. The data were coded through qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2014), combining inductive and abductive logic to identify patterns of sentiment, interpretive stance, and epistemic attribution. The focus lay on the affective and interpretive mechanisms through which users ascribed reality to the video, distinguishing emotional engagement, anthropomorphic projection, moral narration, and reflexive awareness.

Approximately seventy percent of the analyzed comments displayed an affective reading of the scene. Users responded with emojis (😢, 😔, ❤️) and verbal expressions of empathy such as «please let him on the plane,» «poor baby,» and «look at his eyes.» These reactions constructed a shared emotional horizon that privileged tenderness and compassion as dominant interpretive frames. From an ethnographic perspective, this

collective empathy exemplifies what have been described as affective publics, temporary emotional communities emerging from shared responses to mediated stimuli (Papacharissi, 2015). The perceived realness of the video derived not from cognitive verification but from emotional resonance. The anthropomorphic posture of the kangaroo activated cultural codes of innocence, obedience, and vulnerability rooted in a long sentimental tradition of animal imagery (Berger, 1980). Consequently, emotional engagement substituted for epistemic distance, generating a participatory fiction in which compassion became the measure of truth.

Beyond affective resonance, a second interpretive tendency emerged in comments attributing intentionality to the kangaroo. Phrases such as «he wants to go» or «he bought the ticket» indicate the projection of human agency onto a nonhuman subject. This anthropomorphic attribution follows deep cultural schemas in which agency is inferred from perceived effects (Descola, 2022). In the digital context, algorithms and synthetic images operate analogously to these animistic forces, since their capacity to produce emotionally charged effects prompts users to ascribe them intentional behavior. The kangaroo thus becomes a «sensitive actor» whose imagined emotional state legitimizes moral engagement (Bucher, 2018). The illusion of intentionality emerges performatively from the interaction between image, algorithmic visibility, and user imagination, illustrating how technological mediation animates affective perception.

Approximately twenty percent of the comments constructed moral micro-narratives, portraying an innocent victim (the kangaroo) facing an unjust authority (the airline employee). Expressions such as «just let him board» and «better behaved than most humans» embedded the scene within familiar narrative templates of victimhood and redemption. Digital ethnography interprets this as participatory storytelling, in which users co-create moral meaning around synthetic content. The brevity of short-form video encourages narrative compression, requiring viewers to reconstruct context through emotional inference. Hence, plausibility depends less on visual realism than on narrative legibility: the scene feels true because it conforms to preexisting cultural scripts. Through repetition and emotional synchronization, such moral storytelling consolidates what has been called performative consensus (Taylor, 2004), where truth arises from rhythmic agreement rather than empirical evidence.

The diffusion pattern of the video further illustrates how algorithmic reinforcement sustains epistemic internalism. High engagement metrics, including thousands of likes and reactions, reflect the internal feedback loops characteristic of algorithmic environments (Goldberg, 2007). Within such loops, users are repeatedly exposed to affectively coherent content,

which strengthens the alignment between emotion and belief. The predominance of empathetic over skeptical comments indicates that platform algorithms privilege emotionally saturated material. Consequently, truth becomes defined internally, through the algorithm's capacity to optimize engagement, rather than externally, through factual correspondence. Users thus inhabit an algorithmic hermeneutic circle in which the content that moves them appears more real precisely because it is algorithmically amplified.

A smaller fraction of comments, around ten percent, displayed meta-reflexivity, explicitly identifying the video as artificial with remarks such as «it's AI, isn't it?» or «AI button.» Interestingly, even these skeptical interventions often retained affective investment, as in the comment «I don't care if it's AI, let him on the plane.» This ambivalence reveals the emergence of post-truth play, where users acknowledge artifice while continuing to engage emotionally. From an ethnographic standpoint, such behavior reflects the normalization of synthetic authenticity, that is, the recognition that digital experiences can be emotionally meaningful even when their artificiality is evident (Boellstorff, 2015).

The multilingual composition of the thread, which included English, Spanish, Arabic, Indonesian, Turkish, and Italian, further demonstrates the transnational nature of affective publics. Despite linguistic diversity, emojis and interjections established a universal semiotic economy of empathy. This pattern corroborates arguments that social media produce translocal publics connected not by discourse but by shared emotion (Miller et al., 2016). The global circulation of the baby kangaroo image reveals a standardized affective grammar in which vulnerability functions as a cross-cultural currency of meaning.

Synthesizing these findings, users interpreted the video as real for three interrelated reasons. First, affective realism made the scene emotionally plausible, outweighing its technical implausibility. Second, cultural narrative templates provided familiar moral structures that lent coherence to the fiction. Third, algorithmic epistemology rewarded emotional engagement, transforming collective sentiment into a criterion of truth. These mechanisms demonstrate that belief in digital contexts arises not from cognitive error but from a situated epistemic practice in which human feeling and machine calculation converge. As a result, the baby kangaroo episode exemplifies how, within the contemporary digital condition, truth is no longer a matter of correspondence but of circulation, affective resonance, and algorithmic amplification.

The ethnographic analysis of affective realism and algorithmic credibility in the case of the baby kangaroo video demonstrates that digital belief arises from the convergence of emotional resonance and computational modulation rather than from evidentiary validation. Building on this insight, the following section turns toward the ontological dimension of this condition, examining how algorithmic processes no longer mediate representation but actively generate it. By addressing the algorithmic ontogenesis of technological simulation, the analysis explores how digital images acquire performative agency, producing reality through operational efficacy and affective plausibility rather than through correspondence with the external world.

3. Algorithmic ontogenesis of technological simulation

In the contemporary configuration of digital image production and circulation, a profound ontological transformation challenges the foundational assumptions of visual thought and its epistemic functions. The digital image no longer merely represents the external world; rather, it operates as a performative¹ device that generates reality through algorithmic processes, rendering the empirical referent unnecessary (Ayala et al., 2023). Consequently, the algorithmic ontogenesis of the simulacrum redefines the image as an active agent in the constitution of the real, within a digital ecology in which efficiency displaces veracity and affect supplants reference (Baudrillard, 1994). This shift inaugurates a new visual regime where representation gives way to operation, and truth is reconfigured as a function of performative efficacy rather than empirical correspondence.

Because the conventional critique of the image as mediation, rooted in representational regimes, proves insufficient for grasping the logic of semiotic production within AI-mediated platforms, the digital image must be approached as a programmatic rather than representational entity. This reconceptualization arises from the recognition that algorithms, instead of describing the world, actively reconfigure the perceptual and cognitive conditions under which reality becomes legible by processing data that shape meaning and value (Harari, 2018). The movement from mimesis to operation entails a decisive semiotic reorientation: the sign ceases to point toward an external referent and begins to intervene directly in the construction of perception and behavior. As a result, the image alters

1 The use of the term *performative* typically presupposes an intentional agent. However, algorithmic and artificial systems lack intentional attitudes, even though their operations can produce performative effects. The notion of performativity in this context is therefore metaphorical or systemic, not intentional.

both its semiotic status and its ontological function, transitioning from mediation to modulation.

The performative turn in the theorization of the image finds a significant antecedent in philosophical discourses that conceive the simulacrum as endowed with autonomous ontological force (Deleuze, 1994). Within this framework, the simulacrum does not imitate but generates, producing difference rather than reproducing sameness. This generative capacity acquires new intensity in AI-generated imagery, whose formal and operational autonomy allows circulation within digital economies without reliance on empirical grounding. The condition was anticipated in the typology of images that situates the simulacrum at the stage where the image «no longer hides anything, but is true insofar as it is a simulacrum» (Baudrillard, 1994). At this juncture, the image asserts its autonomy as an operative force that produces tangible effects upon perception, discourse, and material practices.

Within the emerging semiotic economy of operation, the validity of the image depends less on factual correspondence than on its ability to produce credible and affectively resonant effects. Algorithmic logic, privileging functionality over truth, establishes operative efficiency as the principal criterion of legitimacy (Gunkel, 2020). In this view, generative design is oriented not toward replicating the world but toward predicting the conditions under which something will appear real, desirable, or trustworthy (Meyer, 2025). Consequently, simulation ceases to function as imitation and becomes a mode of ontological production. It fabricates realities capable of eliciting belief and emotional engagement, not through accuracy but through affective plausibility.

As a result, digital media environments instantiate a condition of automated hyperreality. The objective is no longer the reproduction of faithful copies but the generation of effects of reality that circulate within economies structured by attention and affective engagement. Within this regime, empirical fidelity gives way to perceptual intensity, and the decisive factor becomes the ability to attract, sustain, and modulate attention. The ecology of attention, conceptualized as a system in which persistence depends on affective resonance rather than truth value, suggests that visibility is determined by the power to evoke emotion (Citton, 2017). The image thus accrues value through its performative capacity to embed itself within accelerated perceptual circuits, where attention itself operates as a form of currency and visibility as a measure of affective success.

Consequently, the epistemic and political implications of this transformation are considerable. As plausibility becomes equated with statistical

correlation, particularly within probabilistic architectures that underpin AI models (Marcus and Davis, 2019), the intelligibility of the world becomes absorbed into a computational logic that substitutes prediction for comprehension. Algorithmic systems simulate reality with sufficient precision to influence decisions, perceptions, and emotions, producing a condition of referentless performativity in which images act directly upon social and cognitive processes without empirical anchorage. The concept of performativity, originally theorized in relation to language (Butler, 2011), acquires renewed significance when transposed to the visual domain, where digital images constitute acts that shape reality rather than mere representations of it.

Within this configuration, affect replaces the referent as the principal organizing principle of visual semiosis. The digital image appeals not to cognition but to sensation, immediacy, and intensity, privileging affective movement over rational signification (Massumi, 2002). Algorithmic architectures systematically exploit this affective potential by optimizing exposure and emotional salience to sustain engagement. The semiotic regime that emerges from this configuration measures communicative efficacy in terms of affective resonance rather than representational fidelity. From an epistemological standpoint, such dynamics correspond to internalist logics wherein validation derives from the coherence of algorithmic operations rather than correspondence with external facts (Goldberg, 2007). Under these conditions, the truth of the image resides in the consistency of its operative effects and in the intensity of the affect it provokes.

Moreover, the digital attention economy intensifies this dynamic by transforming attention into a scarce and monetizable resource. The commodification of perception, often described as the proletarianization of attention, entails the subordination of cognitive autonomy to semiotic flows that structure experience as a function of algorithmic control (Stiegler, 2018). Within this regime, the algorithmic simulacrum not only captures attention but configures the parameters that define meaning, relevance, and reality itself. The image no longer reflects the world; it encodes, anticipates, and ultimately produces it, translating epistemic processes into economic and affective transactions.

Given this reconfiguration, the traditional notion of representation requires critical reconsideration. The digital image depends less on its correspondence with the visible than on its operational capacity within circuits of algorithmic efficiency and affective modulation. Accordingly, the ontology of the technological simulacrum compels a rethinking of the categories through which the relationship between image, truth, and reality

has historically been understood. Rather than indicating the decline of the sign, this transformation reveals its functional reorganization within a techno-social environment in which reality is defined by its capacity to act, to affect, and to persist across networks of perception and memory.

The conceptualization of algorithmic simulation as an operative regime that fabricates the real through affective and procedural logics necessitates a deeper inquiry into the epistemological consequences of this transformation. The subsequent section therefore examines the epistemologies of plausibility that define algorithmic culture, analyzing how credibility and truth become functions of circulation, recognition, and emotional coherence. Through this lens, attention shifts from the ontological autonomy of images to the cognitive and affective infrastructures that sustain belief in environments where verification yields to resonance and familiarity.

4. Epistemologies of plausibility in algorithmic culture.

The epistemic conditions that historically sustained the production and validation of knowledge have undergone a profound transformation. The rise of generative artificial intelligence, the pervasiveness of recommender systems, and the ubiquity of the digital image do not merely represent a change in format or medium; rather, they signal a structural reconfiguration of the very criteria through which truth, credibility, and rationality are determined (Helanski, 2024). Understanding this transformation requires a critical perspective capable of situating these shifts within their sociohistorical, affective, and political dimensions. In this context, what becomes blurred is not only the empirical referent but also the cognitive and affective infrastructures upon which epistemic judgment has traditionally relied.

From a digitally oriented sociological standpoint, a discernible drift emerges toward an epistemic regime that privileges emotional intensity, familiarity, and circulation over evidence and verifiability. This shift substantially redefines the testimonial status of the image. No longer functioning primarily as visual proof or as an indexical trace of an event, the digital image increasingly operates as an affective occurrence, a performative operator that produces resonance rather than verifies fact (Han, 2024). Belief, under these conditions, emerges less as a product of verification than as an affective response. It is felt before it is reasoned, functioning as a shared adhesion that precedes critical evaluation. The act of believing thus becomes a form of emotional participation rather than a cognitive assertion, intertwining affective engagement with epistemic validation.

The politics of visibility within this new configuration can be elucidated through the conception of the image as a redistributor of the sensible rather than as a revealer of hidden truth (Rancière, 2009). The image no longer serves as an instrument for unveiling reality but as a perceptual event that reconfigures what can be seen, thought, and felt. This modulation functions through a logic of affect in which truth is produced as emotional coherence between sign and interpretive community. Accordingly, the epistemic order that emerges sustains what can be described as an epistemology of the like, where the validity of a statement or image is measured by the intensity of the affective adhesion it generates (Citton, 2017). In this sense, truth becomes a social practice of resonance rather than correspondence, one sustained by the circulation of feeling as much as by the transmission of information.

Within this system, epistemic legitimacy migrates from the intrinsic properties of content to the infrastructures that determine its visibility and reach. The digital image acquires truth-value not through reference to the real but through the efficiency of its dissemination (Steyerl, 2017). Once detached from indexicality, the sign becomes an immanent operator of meaning, producing effects of reality without empirical anchorage. The severance between sign and referent undermines the testimonial function of images, as verification gives way to circulation. Algorithmic mechanisms reinforce this process by presenting themselves as neutral mediators while subtly dictating what counts as credible or relevant. Such an arrangement exemplifies the ideological power of technical neutrality, which masks systems of selection and exclusion under the guise of objectivity (Bucher, 2018).

As a consequence, epistemic judgment itself undergoes radical reconfiguration. Information is no longer evaluated solely for its factual accuracy but also for the degree of familiarity and affective resonance it elicits. The cognitive fluency effect, which links repetition and recognizability with perceived truth, becomes systematically exploited by algorithmic infrastructures that amplify content already encountered (Kahneman, 2011). In this environment, repetition functions as evidence, and recognition substitutes for critique. The attention economy, therefore, extends beyond the competition for perceptual time; it establishes a mode of knowing rooted in immediacy, emotional coherence, and sensory saturation. Knowledge, in this sense, becomes a derivative of circulation rather than reflection.

The cumulative effect of this saturation manifests as psychic entropy, a condition of cognitive exhaustion resulting from incessant exposure to informational flows that exceed the capacity for synthesis and deliberation (Stiegler, 2010). This state, far from constituting an individual pathology,

expresses a collective politics of perception that neutralizes autonomy and replaces deliberative reasoning with reactive behavior. Attention thus becomes an extractable and monetizable resource, transformed into a form of perceptual labor governed by algorithmic regimes of control (Citton, 2017). The consequence is the progressive erosion of the foundational principles of critical epistemology: evidentiary reasoning, structured debate, and the capacity for dissent.

Given this erosion, the reconstruction of epistemic frameworks requires renewed attention to distributed and situated forms of rationality. The opacity of machinic operations and the dissolution of empirical referents call for epistemologies attuned to collective participation and systemic accountability. The notion of epistemic injustice, which reveals how structural mechanisms exclude certain subjects from recognition as credible knowers, provides a critical lens through which to examine the ways algorithmic systems perpetuate social bias while concealing it beneath procedural neutrality (Fricker, 2007). Similarly, the idea of cognitive polyphony foregrounds the dialogical and intersubjective nature of rationality, emphasizing that knowledge is strengthened through heterogeneity, interaction, and lived experience (Medina, 2013). This plural conception of reason converges with an ethics of informational design that grounds epistemic reliability not merely in content but in the integrity of the infrastructures that produce and circulate it (Floridi, 2014).

Furthermore, the conceptualization of AI-generated imagery as the simulation of mental models rather than as representation of external reality reinforces the notion that digital environments materialize possible worlds independent of empirical grounding (Chalmers, 2022). Such perceptual possibilism dissolves the boundaries between the real and the fictional, displacing the subject of knowledge from a position before the world to immersion within an infosphere of self-referential signals and circulating affect². The epistemic consequence of this condition is the destabilization of experience as a criterion of truth, since perception itself becomes indistinguishable from simulation.

Under these conditions, digital sociology acquires renewed significance as a field tasked with tracing how algorithmic infrastructures not only distribute information but also organize perception, construct value, and define the epistemic horizon of possibility. The challenge lies not simply in identifying manipulation or disinformation but in elucidating

2 In *Reality+*, Chalmers (2022) maintains that virtual worlds are real, challenging the opposition between the natural and the virtual by proposing five criteria of reality: existence, mind-independence, authenticity, non-illusion, and causal power.

how plausibility becomes truth, how affect becomes argument, and how functionality becomes legitimacy. Within this terrain, collaborative epistemologies emerge not as ethical ideals but as structural imperatives for reconstructing critical rationality capable of countering algorithmic closure.

The challenge, then, is to imagine forms of knowledge that, while engaging the power of digital technologies, resist the reduction of truth to affective operability or viral reach³. This task demands not only theoretical innovation, but also new social practices of validation, deliberation, and listening. Only through such practices will it be possible to inhabit an epistemic present that, though fragmented, can still strive toward more just, open, and collectively shared forms of truth.

The exploration of plausibility within algorithmic culture reveals that epistemic legitimacy increasingly depends on the architectures of visibility and the emotional economies that govern them. Consequently, it becomes necessary to interrogate the ideological structures underpinning such epistemic regimes. The next section thus investigates the ideological architecture of the performative simulacrum, elucidating how digital platforms function as apparatuses of subjectivation that organize attention, belief, and affect. Through this perspective, the analysis advances from the cognitive mechanisms of plausibility to the political and ideological formations that sustain algorithmic power.

5. Ideological architecture of the performative simulacrum

A new regime of meaning production has consolidated itself, one in which the boundaries separating the real, the credible, and the desirable progressively dissolve. This occurs because digital platforms no longer function as mere spaces of symbolic exchange or communicative expression; instead, they operate as complex apparatuses of subjectivation that organize trajectories of belief, affect, and visibility. Within this structure, the performative simulacrum assumes a dual status as both cultural condition and ideological architecture, shaping perception, agency, and epistemic trust through recursive feedback between technological mediation and social desire.

From the perspective of digital sociology attentive to the entanglement of power and knowledge, platforms can be interpreted as technologies of the self in the Foucauldian sense (Foucault, 1988). They constitute technical-symbolic systems that govern subjectivity by modulating affect, curating exposure, and filtering experience through algorithmic selection.

3 Although affective resonance and viral dissemination function as indicators of truth within digital cultures, they do not constitute epistemologically valid criteria.

As a consequence, credulity ceases to be a symptom of individual naïveté and becomes an engineered disposition structured by computational mechanisms that regulate what is seen, felt, and known. This governed credulity does not operate through overt imposition or doctrinal enforcement; rather, it unfolds through the continuous orchestration of attention and emotion, transforming visibility itself into the principal locus of belief.

As a result, belief and visibility become mutually constitutive. What is affectively intense or widely circulated acquires the status of truth not by validation but by repetition. This recursive dynamic underpins an affective governmentality in which platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube function as more than distributors of content: they shape subjects, orient desires, and stabilize collective imaginaries (Benamo, 2023; Han, 2015). The circulation of emotionally charged material thus operates as a mechanism of social ordering that replaces the logic of representation with one of modulation, redefining power as the capacity to organize attention and affect.

In this sense, algorithmic infrastructures may be understood as contemporary forms of digital panopticism that generate distributed regimes of visibility shaping conduct without overt coercion (Foucault, 1977). Their influence lies not in prohibition but in the iterative reinforcement of what must be seen, expressed, and desired. Through mechanisms of filtering and ranking, algorithms construct perceptual trajectories that normalize specific worlds as self-evident. The phenomenon commonly described as the echo chamber consequently emerges as a structural effect of algorithmic repetition, in which the reiteration of familiar content produces a simulated sense of universality and consensus (Sunstein, 2018).

The psychological infrastructure sustaining this dynamic can be illuminated through the availability heuristic, which explains the human tendency to equate cognitive ease with truth (Tversky and Kahneman, 1973). In digital contexts governed by algorithmic curation, this bias is amplified exponentially, as familiarity and virality become proxies for reliability. Hence, the problem exceeds deliberate manipulation; it involves a deeper reorganization of the very conditions under which judgment operates. What appears self-evident is no longer the product of epistemic evaluation but of algorithmic exposure.

Within this restructured epistemic order, agency cannot be confined to the human subject. Conceptualizations of distributed agency, in which action emerges from assemblages of bodies, signs, affects, and

technologies, demonstrate that meaning is co-produced through heterogeneous relations (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). This relational ontology corresponds to the idea that social and technical elements jointly configure networks of causality, situating algorithms as mediators within the production of the plausible (Latour, 2005). Consequently, digital agency arises as a hybrid formation through which humans and nonhumans co-generate affective coherence and epistemic credibility.

Virality exemplifies this distributed configuration. Far from constituting a mere quantitative metric of diffusion, it manifests as a rhizomatic process of affective contagion, driven by intensity rather than semantic content (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). Desire, conceptualized not as lack but as generative potential, circulates through algorithmic architectures, reorganizing perceptual economies and continuously producing new social realities. The viral thus becomes both the symptom and the mechanism of a culture where affect functions as epistemic currency.

Artificial intelligence occupies a particularly complex position within this assemblage. Its function extends beyond computation, operating as a projection surface for fantasies of order, omniscience, and control, thereby serving as a symbolic locus for the delegation of cognitive and ethical responsibility (Žižek, 1999). This displacement of judgment engenders a fetishistic relation to technology: despite the widespread awareness of algorithmic bias and opacity, AI persists as an object of belief, treated as neutral, objective, and rational (Žižek, 1989). The result is a suspension of critical scrutiny that reinforces what may be described as algorithmic epistemic delegation, whereby cognitive sovereignty is relinquished in exchange for the illusion of technical efficiency (Chun, 2021).

Furthermore, AI embodies a domesticated form of otherness. Its symbolic assimilation reflects the process through which unsettling alterity is rendered familiar, manageable, and productive (Žižek, 2016). This domestication constitutes one of the central ideological operations of digital culture, converting the unknown into the desirable and the opaque into the trustworthy. In this respect, AI functions as a technosemiotic fetish, a construct that simultaneously naturalizes its own authority and conceals the political labor that sustains it.

From a critical digital sociological standpoint, AI must therefore be approached not merely as a technological innovation but as an ideological apparatus that structures the conditions under which reality becomes perceptible. It processes data while also shaping subjectivity, consolidating belief, and regulating affective economies. Its authority rests on the promise of imposing rational order upon informational excess, a promise that masks the social and political operations that make such order

possible. Thus, the critique of AI must address its epistemic performativity, exposing how it produces the very conditions it claims to organize.

For these reasons, rethinking AI and the broader platform ecosystem requires more than procedural regulation or ethical reform. It necessitates a critique of the simulacrum as the operative form of the real, one capable of unveiling the affective, epistemic, and political mechanisms that sustain algorithmic belief. Such critique should not limit itself to demystifying illusion; it must also cultivate the imaginative capacity to conceive alternative digital ontologies grounded in distributed agency, collective reflexivity, and affective accountability.

The examination of the performative simulacrum as an ideological architecture underscores the need for a critical framework capable of rearticulating truth beyond the confines of algorithmic operability and affective modulation. Accordingly, the next section introduces a propositional model of performative real-syntheticism, aimed at theorizing synthetic plausibility as both an epistemic and affective phenomenon. In pursuing this objective, the discussion advances toward the formulation of a critical theory of digital verisimilitude that reconciles technological innovation with the ethical and reflexive imperatives of epistemic responsibility.

6. Propositional model: performative real-syntheticism

6.1. Towards a critical theory of synthetic plausibility

The proliferation of algorithmically generated images, viral narratives, and encoded affects calls for a renewed understanding of epistemic judgment, since the traditional binary of truth and falsehood, based on a logic of correspondence between statements and facts, no longer captures the modalities of truthfulness circulating within contemporary media ecologies. Within a semantic conception of truth, meaning and validity depend on the internal coherence of linguistic or propositional systems rather than on their alignment with external referents (Tarski, 1944). Consequently, the epistemic status of statements arising from algorithmic or virtual domains must be assessed according to the operational rules, data hierarchies, and procedural logics specific to those systems. Under such circumstances, truth emerges as an effect of systemic coherence and computational consistency, not as a product of empirical verification.

What arises from this reconfiguration is not mere deceit or misrecognition, but rather a regime of synthetic verisimilitude defined by efficacy instead of fidelity. In this regime, the criterion of truth moves from factual correspondence to affective resonance, from external reference to experiential credibility. Truth operates as a lived sensation, validated by its capacity to be believed, shared, and emotionally absorbed. The operative

force of verisimilitude, consequently, lies in its performativity, in its ability to enact belief as experience. Analyses of digital culture have demonstrated that the «truth» of synthetic content depends less on evidentiary grounding than on its capacity to be felt as real and to embed itself within affective life (Goriunova, 2019).

This dynamic evokes the condition of hyperreality, where representation ceases to refer to external referents and instead produces the real through simulation (Baudrillard, 1994). Within this configuration, the distinction between image and event collapses, and what becomes decisive is not whether something occurred but whether it feels as though it did. Simulation thus functions less as deception than as an affective institutionalization of reality, a fiction authorized by emotion, sustained through repetition, and legitimated by circulation. The truth-effect of such images resides in their intensity and persistence rather than in their referential precision.

Digital platforms play a central role in maintaining this epistemic regime. Rather than serving as neutral infrastructures for communication, they operate as affective architectures that organize desire, attention, and belief (van Dijck, 2013). Through algorithmic modulation, platforms establish hierarchies of visibility, distribute emotional salience, and institutionalize certain modalities of credibility. As a result, truth acquires a pragmatic dimension: it becomes a byproduct of algorithmic efficiency, engagement metrics, and circulatory momentum. Verisimilitude thereby functions as a cultural technology of governance, shaping what can be experienced as real and redefining the conditions under which meaning gains social legitimacy.

The affective dimension of this process proves decisive. Affect not only accompanies cognition but also structures it, orienting both perception and predisposition. Far from representing an obstacle to critique, affect constitutes its precondition, offering the relational intensity through which critical discernment can take place (Ahern, 2024). The dismantling of synthetic plausibility, therefore, cannot rely exclusively on logical refutation or empirical correction. It requires affective literacy, understood as the ability to read and interpret emotional economies as integral components of epistemic systems. The notion of affect as a form of knowing reinforces this argument by positing emotion as a pre-cognitive modality that organizes attention and belief prior to rational deliberation (Massumi, 2002).

Pragmatic theories of truth intersect with this reorientation because they define truth as that which is «useful to believe» within particular

experiential contexts (James, 2008). Within algorithmic cultures, usefulness is redefined through emotional compatibility, viral potential, and circulatory power. The value of truth thus depends less on practical efficacy than on affective traction, on the extent to which a proposition sustains engagement among networked publics. Under these conditions, the digital economy of verisimilitude becomes fully operational: its purpose lies not in establishing empirical proof but in activating affective response, not in persuasion through reasoning but in resonance through emotional synchronization.

Consequently, critique must evolve beyond the verification of data or the correction of falsehoods. It must interrogate the infrastructural, narrative, and affective mechanisms through which operative truths are produced and stabilized. The analysis of the digital epistemic order therefore entails examining both the content of representations and the architectures that sustain them, including the algorithms that determine visibility, the platforms that orchestrate attention, and the social dynamics that grant emotional legitimacy to particular claims.

The reconceptualization of truth as a performative and affectively mediated process foregrounds the necessity of examining how such epistemic dynamics manifest in everyday digital practices. Building on the theoretical groundwork of synthetic plausibility, the next section turns to the mapping of digital credulity, analyzing how belief emerges from the convergence of technological infrastructures, affective intensities, and discursive formations. By investigating the relational mechanisms through which users attribute authenticity and coherence to algorithmically generated content, the discussion advances from the ontological logic of synthetic verisimilitude to its concrete sociotechnical enactments within networked environments.

6.2. Mapping digital credulity

Explanations that attribute digital credulity to individual deficits in rationality or epistemic naïveté have become increasingly insufficient⁴. This insufficiency stems from the fact that credulity operates not as a cognitive shortcoming but as a structural condition produced by the interplay of

⁴ Although digital credulity emerges within structural and affective conditions shaped by algorithmic systems, it is also possible to acknowledge the agent's capacity for critical and reflexive engagement. Algorithms, while operating through predictive and affective mechanisms, can be strategically used to foster epistemic awareness and resist blind belief. From the standpoint of epistemic internalism, such resistance depends on the subject's ability to evaluate internal criteria of justification and coherence rather than relying solely on external signals of validation.

technological infrastructures, affective intensities, and discursive formations. Together, these dynamics constitute the fabric of digital experience, shaping the modes through which subjects relate to visibility, belief, and knowledge. Accordingly, critical inquiry must seek to delineate the conditions that make this willingness to believe possible, intelligible, and socially functional within digital environments.

Digital credulity can thus be interpreted as a form of sensitive rationality governed by logics distinct from those of empirical verification. It functions not as irrationality, but as a rationality attuned to the operational and affective parameters of digital mediation. Within this configuration, algorithms operate as active semiotic agents that directly participate in the production of subjectivity and epistemic orientation⁵ (Bucher, 2018). Because of this, credulity emerges as an effect of algorithmic governance, that is, as a rationality conditioned by technical and affective infrastructures that modulate what can be perceived and believed.

This structural disposition unfolds on multiple levels. At the technological level, algorithms may be understood as codified forms of thought that select, rank, and amplify content according to parameters of indexability and engagement (Amoore, 2020). In such systems, the value of truth no longer depends on correspondence with empirical reality, but on operational viability, namely the capacity of information to circulate and to be captured by automated logics. Consequently, the epistemic shift from verifiability to indexability signals a reconfiguration of how truth is produced. Platforms thus act as invisible curators of meaning, determining not only access to information but also the interpretive frames through which meaning acquires social significance (Gillespie, 2018). Visibility, therefore, acquires ontological force, since being real becomes equivalent to being seen, and being seen implies having been registered within the algorithmic field. As a result, reality is constituted through circulation, embedded in technocultural processes that privilege connectivity over coherence.

Interwoven with this technological dimension is a discursive layer that articulates symbolic frameworks rendering certain narratives believable. The concept of horizons of meaning, which defines the shared cultural

5 The characterization of algorithms as «sensitive actors» can be examined through the lens of attributed intentionality. In ancient cosmologies, natural forces such as rivers or storms were often endowed with intentional agency because their effects appeared purposeful or responsive to human behavior, prompting ritual acts to appease them. A similar anthropomorphic projection occurs with algorithms: their capacity to affect users' experiences and behaviors leads to the perception that they possess intentional attitudes, even though such intentionality is only ascribed on the basis of their observable effects rather than intrinsic purpose or consciousness.

matrices delimiting what can be recognized as real, provides an interpretive perspective for understanding this dynamic (Taylor, 2004). These frameworks stabilize through media repetition, affective familiarity, and communal validation, producing what can be described as performative consensus. Under such conditions, belief arises less from deliberation than from rhythmic synchronization: coordinated gestures of liking, sharing, and reacting that convert emotional resonance into epistemic legitimacy.

At the core of this assemblage operates the affective register, which functions as a constitutive force rather than a secondary element. Networks do more than disseminate data; they also circulate affects (Parikka, 2010). What digital systems transmit is less information than the capacity to feel collectively. Online environments distribute codified affects in the form of content, generating sensations of knowing rather than knowledge itself (Chun, 2016; Senft, 2013). This distinction is crucial, since it marks a transition from cognitive validation to affective experience: a mode of belief grounded in sensation, repetition, and pre-reflective adherence that circumvents rational scrutiny.

These transformations demonstrate that synthetic content, algorithmically generated, optimized, and circulated, does not conceal reality but inaugurates a new epistemic regime that redefines it. Within this regime, credibility is not derived from reality but is algorithmically produced through amplification and affective contagion. Real-syntheticity thus functions as the dominant mode of truth production. Consequently, the question of truth must be displaced from propositional content to the material, affective, and technical conditions of its emergence. In this regard, critique must redirect its focus from statements to infrastructures, from evidentiary validation to the dispositifs that configure experience, and from epistemic content to the affective logics sustaining its plausibility.

The identification of digital credulity as a situated rationality sustained by algorithmic modulation and affective circulation calls for a critical inquiry into the normative implications of such epistemic configurations. Consequently, the subsequent section introduces the notion of normative policies for epistemic governance, addressing the ethical and regulatory challenges posed by algorithmic systems that organize visibility, shape cognition, and institutionalize credibility. Through this conceptual shift, the analysis moves from the descriptive mapping of belief structures to the prescriptive question of how epistemic responsibility can be redefined within the algorithmic condition.

6.3. Normative policies for epistemic governance

The attribution of digital credulity to individual shortcomings of reason or epistemic naïveté proves analytically insufficient within an environment mediated by algorithms. Credulity, rather than a cognitive failure, must be understood as a structural phenomenon emerging from the entanglement of technological infrastructures, affective economies, and discursive formations that collectively compose the texture of contemporary digital experience. Consequently, the task of critical inquiry consists in constructing a cartography capable of tracing the conditions under which this willingness to believe becomes not only possible but also socially functional and affectively coherent within the rhythms of online life.

Digital credulity can be conceived as a form of sensitive rationality governed by a logic distinct from empirical verification. Far from expressing irrationality, it operates through technical-semiotic dispositifs that delineate the horizon of the credible. Algorithms, beyond mediating content and attention, function as infrastructures of sense-making that organize the conditions under which knowledge and belief emerge. Their operational logics extend into affective and epistemic realms, configuring hierarchies of visibility and legitimacy that determine what becomes perceptible as meaningful or trustworthy. Within this framework, algorithmic processes act as modes of epistemic governance, translating social behavior into quantifiable patterns that orient cognition and shape interpretive frameworks (Bucher, 2018). Therefore, the analysis of digital rationality must attend not only to the information circulated but also to the architectures that regulate the perceptibility and legitimacy of truth itself.

The phenomenon of structural credulity reveals a multilayered composition. On one level, the technological substrate operates as the foundation upon which algorithms function as thought materialized in code, selecting, ranking, and amplifying content according to parameters of indexability and engagement (Amoore, 2020). Within this configuration, truth no longer depends on its correspondence to an external reality, but on its operational viability, that is, its ability to circulate, be detected, and persist within systems privileging connectivity over coherence. As a result, the epistemic transformation from verifiability to indexability redefines the very criteria of truth. Platforms, acting as invisible curators of meaning, determine not only what content appears but also how it is framed and understood, granting visibility an ontological dimension (Gillespie, 2018). To exist, in this context, becomes equivalent to being registered within the algorithmic field, rendering the real contingent upon its capacity for digital circulation.

Intertwined with this technical dimension is a discursive stratum constituted by symbolic frameworks that render particular narratives plausible. The dynamics of credulity in digital cultures depend less on rational coherence than on iterative circulation, emotional resonance, and social reinforcement. Within algorithmic loops, belief emerges as a performative effect of repetition: content amplified through engagement metrics acquires an aura of shared conviction. Horizons of meaning, which delineate the cultural boundaries of what can be recognized as believable, continue to operate, yet they are increasingly mediated by computational repetition and affective synchronization (Taylor, 2004). Consequently, belief consolidates performatively through interaction, as gestures of liking, sharing, and reacting produce rhythmic consensus that substitutes emotional intensity for evidential justification.

At the core of this configuration lies the affective dimension, which functions as a constitutive rather than derivative element. Networks, beyond transmitting data, circulate and habituate affects that structure collective experience (Parikka, 2010). What travels across digital platforms is not truth in a traditional sense but the capacity to feel collectively and to synchronize emotion through mediated participation (Chun, 2016). Within this affective economy, users engage not in the accumulation of knowledge but in the consumption of codified feeling expressed as content (Senft, 2013). This dynamic reveals a shift from cognitive validation to affective adhesion, privileging the sensation of knowing over the process of reasoning, and thereby fostering pre-cognitive, affect-driven, and addictive modes of belief that evade rational scrutiny.

These dynamics indicate a profound epistemic transformation. The synthetic, algorithmically generated, optimized, and circulated, no longer conceals reality but reconstitutes it through mechanisms of amplification and affective contagion. Real-synthetivity thus emerges as the dominant mode of credibility. The question of truth, therefore, must be displaced from the level of propositional content to the infrastructural and affective mechanisms that condition its production. Consequently, critique must evolve from the analysis of statements to the examination of systems, from the evaluation of affirmations to the scrutiny of dispositifs, and from the pursuit of proof to the exploration of affective operations that underpin epistemic plausibility.

In light of these transformations, the formulation of normative policies for epistemic governance demands a reorientation of critique toward the infrastructures and affective economies that organize belief. Such policies must not merely aim to correct misinformation but to cultivate reflexive environments capable of sustaining deliberation, transparency, and

collective epistemic responsibility. By integrating ethical design principles with sociotechnical awareness, epistemic governance can move beyond regulatory formalism to foster conditions in which truth regains its value as a shared, critically negotiated, and affectively accountable practice.

7. Conclusions

This research has facilitated a critical re-reading of traditional frameworks that define the relationship between truth and digitality. The notion of performative real-syntheticity emerges as a central interpretative lens, shifting the analytical focus from the binary of truth and falsehood to configurations of verisimilitude mediated by affect, algorithms, and socio-technical performativity. Rather than diagnosing a crisis of truth, the study identifies a mutation in its operative conditions, where the efficacy of the truth acquires a relational and context-dependent character. The theoretical proposition does not aim to resolve the question of truth, but to re-situate it within a field shaped by multiple and often contested rationalities.

Building on this redefinition, the conceptual framework developed in this study addresses the epistemic transformations of the present through a situated and non-reductionist approach. The notion of algorithmic ontogenesis of the simulacrum highlights the active role of technology in producing reality, while the epistemology of the like reveals a mode of validation centered on affect rather than on empirical evidence. Within this perspective, digital credulity is understood not as an individual deficiency but as a structural effect of techno-social design. In parallel, the concept of affective governmentality elucidates the emotional regulation of visibility and knowledge within platform architectures. This configuration can also be examined through the lens of epistemic internalism, insofar as truth and justification increasingly derive from the internal coherence of algorithmic systems rather than from correspondence with external reality. The proposed categories do not seek conceptual closure, but instead open critical pathways for engaging with an epistemic field in constant transformation.

From this theoretical foundation arises a series of practical implications that extend the argument into the domain of applied knowledge. Digital literacy, for instance, must be reconfigured to include emotional competencies, acknowledging affect as a constitutive dimension of networked knowledge. Such reorientation implies a shift in educational practices toward models that cultivate critical autonomy in relation to platforms designed for attentional capture (Corzo-Zavaleta et al., 2025). It also calls for the development of epistemic co-validation mechanisms that recognize

the plurality of knowledge forms and the uneven conditions under which they are legitimized. Platforms, as infrastructures of subjectivation, should therefore be governed through a politics of epistemic care, ensuring that the circulation of knowledge is not determined exclusively by market logic or viral dynamics.

These practical considerations, in turn, point toward broader research trajectories that consolidate the theoretical architecture outlined here. A central priority is to develop analytical tools capable of mapping the affective performativity of digital verisimilitude, particularly through mixed methodologies that combine digital ethnography, semiotic analysis, and data science. Comparative inquiry into diverse technosocial regimes, including corporate, activist, and decentralized configurations, may reveal alternative models of legitimizing knowledge. Furthermore, the proliferation of generative technologies necessitates renewed examination of authorship, agency, and trust, especially in contexts marked by deepening verification crises. Intergenerational analysis will likewise be essential, given that the grammars of digital culture are distributed unevenly across social and experiential strata.

In light of these transformations, the broader challenge is not to restore a lost notion of truth, but to imagine new ways of engaging with the real. What this research articulates as critical hope is an ethical disposition that recognizes the fragility of knowledge while affirming its capacity for renewal and transformation. The aim is not to oppose the volatility of post-truth with rigid certainties, but to cultivate situated, shared, and ethically sustainable anchors for understanding. Such an orientation demands attentiveness, openness, and a collective willingness to co-create meaning within conditions of uncertainty, thus transforming epistemic vulnerability into a generative resource for more grounded and inclusive ways of knowing.

AI usage statement

For the preparation of this article, a large-scale language model, specifically GPT-5 by OpenAI, was used to detect and correct writing and spelling errors. The command employed was: «detect and correct all writing and spelling errors.» After receiving the system's response, a thorough review of the final text was conducted to ensure that the result preserved the tone and intention of the original draft.

Contribución de autoría

Fernando A. Ramos-Zaga cumplió con las fases de conceptualización, investigación, y redacción, revisión y edición.

Andherson J. Aguirre-Lanegra cumplió con las fases de curación de datos, análisis formal, investigación y redacción del borrador original.

Fuente de financiamiento

Autofinanciado.

Potenciales conflictos de interés

Ninguno.

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Recepción: 27/7/2025
Aceptación: 12/11/2025