

Uses, Perceptions and Impacts of Instagram: A Study with Young Higher Education Students

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Abstract: Given the evidence that young people have a very active presence on social networks, especially Instagram (Kemp, 2022), it is important to study this phenomenon and understand what drives young people to use this social network to share content, especially photos and audiovisual content. The study presented was guided by the following research questions: What is Instagram used for by university students? How does Instagram impact and influence youth perceptions regarding everyday life? From a methodological perspective, the case study resorted to a mixed methodology. Data was collected through a questionnaire and a focus group from undergraduate students from a public higher education institution in Portugal. The study collected data from 89 respondents, mostly female and aged between 19 and 22. The results revealed that Instagram is one of their favourite social networks and is where they spend the most time daily, mainly to keep in touch with friends and family and find new content. Participants affirmed that they don't use social media to feel accepted, validated or integrated. This shows that they use social media to reinforce what they already know and feel through the feedback they receive from shared content. Even though most state that they don't engage in getting likes, comments or reactions on their shared content, the participants in the study admit that this is a consequence and are happy with the feedback they receive. The study, although limited to a sample of students from a single higher education institution, enabled the researchers to understand better some engagement habits that currently take up little under one-fourth of the users' daily time while awake. The sheer fact that users spend so much time on this social media platform daily, sometimes with little or no positive impact on other activities, has already been outlined as an issue worth tackling in future studies.

Keywords: Instagram, Uses, Impacts, Youth, Higher education

1. Introduction

According to the 2022 Digital Global Overview Report, it is young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who spend the most time on social networks, with females spending an average of 3 hours and 13 minutes a day and males 2 hours and 43 minutes (We are social, 2022). The report also shows that Instagram is the fourth most used social network globally and is a favourite among young people. Instagram allows users to share different types of content, especially photographic content, which leads users to focus mainly on sharing photos. This social network achieved great success after its launch in October 2010, partly due to the possibility of creating and editing content directly on the application.

The aforementioned data points to a specific age group and shows that young people have the most active presence on social networks, especially Instagram, a social network that is increasingly present in the day-to-day life of this younger generation. Moreover, it is outlined that younger users are excessively concerned with posting photos and the feedback they receive for those same photos. In this context, it is important to study this phenomenon further and understand what drives young people to use Instagram to share content, especially photographs. It is also important to understand how they behave on Instagram and the impacts associated with its use, especially regarding approval and validation by other users.

Given the evidence mentioned above, this project was guided by the following research questions: "What is Instagram used for by young higher education students? How does Instagram impact and influence their perceptions regarding everyday life?". This article summarises the work conducted and some of the results obtained.

2. Theoretical Framework

Nowadays, young people have behaviours that distinguish them from other generations regarding digital practices. They use digital media in a multitasking way since technologies are at the epicentre of their lives (Amaral et al., 2017). In a research carried out by the same authors that aimed to understand the practices and consumption of Portuguese people, it was possible to conclude that, of the 1,814 young people surveyed, almost

90 per cent used the internet daily, which shows a strong presence of online activities in their everyday lives. Social networks are also heavily used by young people who spend a large part of their time in these spaces (Portugal & Souza, 2020), mainly due to the ease with which they can access them on their mobile phones (Ferreira, 2018). According to Vilela (2019), the internet and social media have countless advantages and are a new world full of possibilities and opportunities. Social networks play an important role in the lives of young people since, by creating private or public accounts, they can interact with each other (Cardoso, 2022) in an open or more dissimulated manner. Many interaction processes that young people have, from a social, cultural, or educational nature, are derived from activities linked to social networks such as Instagram (Amaral et al., 2017).

Instagram, in a nutshell, is a social network that promotes user interaction mainly through relatively simple tasks through content such as photos and videos (Silva, 2018) and that enables its users to communicate by resorting to actions such as liking and sharing content, comment and post copyrighting, and intricate editing. Simply uploading or taking a photo and publishing it is considered the ground zero competency for a newbie on Instagram. It quickly gives way to trimmed-to-detail publications with effects, trendy soundtracks, and deep and eye-catching quotes or life lessons to be shared with the world. On social networks like Instagram, young people can express themselves and share their interests, opinions and needs with others (Portugal & Souza, 2020), developing and consuming content from other users and sharing ideas and information (Cardoso, 2022). Worldwide, the app is the second favourite social network for users aged between 16 and 64 and is the favourite of both female and male users (We are Social, 2022). In Portugal, according to 'The Portuguese and Social Networks 2022' study, Instagram is one of the digital spaces most used by young people aged between 15 and 24, who use the application daily for several hours (Marketeer, 2022).

It can be said that globally and in Portugal, Instagram is the most successful social media among the younger generations and has even been voted a favourite. According to Alegria (2019), this phenomenon is due to the already-mentioned functionalities combined into the app and leaves no need to use any other application. A study by Huang and Su in 2018 among 307 university students revealed that the respondents used Instagram mainly to see posts by other users, especially entertainment posts and the possibility of socially interacting. It was also possible to conclude that gender and professional background influenced their reasons for using it. For example, in terms of professional background, design students use social networks to be inspired and see other work, while engineering students use them mostly to follow their friends' updates. According to the same authors, Instagram users post various photos to get comments and likes, as it triggers their need to seek social validation.

Vilela (2019) believes that the use of Instagram directly influences young people's lifestyles, learning, thinking, and interacting with other people. Its misuse and excessive use can have negative impacts and consequences on their lives, especially if there is a related dependency, i.e. a constant need to be connected to Instagram. According to Köse and Doğan (2019), Instagram dependency is characterised by behavioural addiction, and, according to their research with 325 students from three universities in Istanbul, they found that young women spent the most time on the social network using it for entertainment and leisure purposes.

By using Instagram daily, young people can trigger insecurities about their perception of their bodies. According to Vieira (2019), there are currently standards that categorise people, so it is crucial and almost mandatory that they look good and have a good body image. A study carried out in Brazil involving 212 female adolescents concluded that the use of social networks, especially Instagram, is associated with dissatisfaction with the body image of adolescents (Lira et al., 2017), which indicates the negative impact that this application has on the lives of young people, especially female adolescents.

The use of social media also leads young people to compare themselves with other users through the information they see in photographs, videos posted, descriptions, likes and comments, and these comparisons can affect their well-being. Hwang (2019) also mentions that social networks generally make it possible to obtain information about other people, especially friends and acquaintances, making them platforms for social comparison. According to the same author, young people compare themselves to others negatively and positively. When they compare themselves negatively with other users, it's in the sense that they want to become more like them. In other words, they consider themselves inferior to them because they're not like them, which can lead to feelings of envy. By positively comparing themselves, they feel that the people they are comparing themselves to are inferior and, therefore, have a feeling of superiority. They tend to feel good in these situations, and their self-esteem improves. According to Jan et al. (2017), these comparisons can be called downward and upward, respectively. A study carried out by the authors among 245 university students who use

Instagram concluded that there is an association between the use of the social network and social comparison, i.e. as soon as they enter the app, younger users automatically start comparing themselves with other users, showing a particular negative impact associated with their use. It also showed that the amount of time per day they spend on Instagram and the frequency with which they open the app influence all types of social comparison.

As to comparisons made on social networks, it's important to mention that, as well as being made with friends and acquaintances, they can often be made with so-called digital influencers or celebrities. Nowadays, we can see digital influencers' existence and strong presence on various social networks. These users have made the platform their primary form of work and share their daily lives, from the clothes they wear to where they go. Digital influencers usually have a high profile and exert a great deal of influence over their followers, so they always try to highlight the most positive side of their personality and their lives in their posts, ending up showing a life and a way of behaving that is not entirely real and true, making young people unable to realise what is real and what is not (Vieira, 2019).

By using the app every day and several times throughout the day and by comparing their lives with what they see shared in their feeds, young people can start to experience symptoms linked to low self-esteem, depression and dissatisfaction with life since social comparison has an impact on their self-perception and the way they evaluate themselves. A positive self-image can be linked to high self-esteem, while if a young person has a negative self-image, they can develop low self-esteem, so the act of comparison triggers a set of reactions that need to be considered.

Research has shown that social networks are often places where young people try to boost their self-esteem, and many of them use them and spend part of their time in these spaces precisely because they have low self-esteem. Hawi and Samaha (2016) and Köse and Doğan (2019) observed in their research that there is a negative correlation between levels of self-esteem and addiction to social networks, i.e. users with low self-esteem use social networks more than users with high self-esteem. In this sense, a study carried out in Indonesia with 259 participants showed that individuals who find it difficult to build social relationships in the "real world" due to low self-esteem try to connect with people on other social networks, especially Instagram (Rahardjo & Mulyaani, 2020). Based on the results of these studies, it is possible to identify that in many cases, it is low self-esteem and other external factors, such as inhibition and social anxiety, that often lead people to use these media. Andreassen et al. (2016) shared the same opinion as they stated, based on the results of their 2016 study, that people use social media to gain more self-esteem by posting photos and consequently trying to get likes and comments or to escape from low self-esteem, as on social media they can communicate online through a screen rather than face-to-face.

3. Methodology

In methodological terms, we chose to carry out a case study, which, as the name suggests, describes a particular reality. The case study provides an in-depth approach to the subject under study since specific and detailed information is collected. This type of study, therefore, made it possible to apply data collection techniques such as questionnaires and focus groups.

Using a mixed approach in this project, quantitative data was collected through a questionnaire survey, while qualitative data was collected through a focus group. Both approaches were best suited for gathering data and information associated with our study's objectives.

As Santos and Henriques (2021) point out, using a questionnaire makes it easy to reach students quickly. It is, however, more impersonal, according to Coutinho (2014), and, therefore, it must be prepared with care regarding its questions, size, layout and overall appearance.

A focus group was also held to complement and clarify the data obtained through the questionnaire. According to Sá et al. (2021), a focus group is a data collection technique consisting of a group discussion on a particular topic chosen by the researcher. This technique aims to obtain information that could not be gathered, for example, by interviewing just one person, and it allows results to be achieved more easily than individual interviews. However, all the techniques can complement each other (Sá et al., 2021).

4. The Study

The sample of participants in the study included undergraduates from the ESEV School of Education (Portugal), from different degrees. The sample for this investigation is considered a convenience sample since the

individuals were selected conveniently, i.e. it would be easier to reach the youth as they attended the same school as the researcher. In addition, the individuals were also selected intentionally, since in this type of sampling, individuals are chosen because they represent the population to which the study is directed, allowing the researcher to select who will be included in the sample.

The questionnaire was available online for one month (April 2023) and shared with 1st, 2nd and 3rd-year students from ESEV's undergraduate programmes. During this period, 89 completed questionnaires were collected, with 80.9% (71) female and 16.9% (15) male participants, as seen in Table 1. The questionnaire was answered by students aged between 18 and 25 or over. Of the 89 participants, students aged 19 and 20 were the most represented, making up 23.6% of the total sample. These were followed by students who were 21 (19.1%) and those who were 25 or over (12.4%) (Table 1). As for the focus group, 6 students were selected to participate. Once the availability of the participants and the researcher was agreed on, the place, time and day were selected, and the focus group took place on the 11th of May, 2023.

Table 1: Participant's age and gender

Gender	f	%
Female	72	80.9
Male	15	16.8
I'd rather not say	2	2.2
Age	f	%
18	5	5.6
19	21	23.6
20	21	23.6
21	17	19.1
22	10	11.2
23	3	3.4
24	1	1.1
25	11	12.4

Regarding the distributions of participants according to the degree attended, Table 2 shows that students from the Basic Education and Social Education degrees were the most participative, with a total of 34 students (38.2%) from the Basic Education course and 21 students (23.6%) from the Social Education course. This was followed by 14 students from Advertising and Public Relations (15.7%), 12 from Sports and Physical Activity students (13.5%) and 6 from Social Communication (6.7%).

Table 2: Participants by course and year

Course	f	%
Cultural Performance Arts	1	1.1
Plastic Arts and Multimedia	1	1.1
Social Communication	6	6.7
Sport and Physical Activity	12	13.5
Basic Education	34	38.2
Social Education	21	23.6
Advertising and Public Relations	14	15.7

Since the questionnaire was aimed at students in the 1st, 2nd and 3rd years of the degrees taught at the ESEV, it was possible to get responses from all years, with 39.3% (35) of the students attending the 2nd year, 31.5% (28) saying they were enrolled in the 3rd year, and the remaining 29.2% attending the 1st year (Table 3).

Table 3: Participants by course and year

Year	f	%
1st	26	29.2
2nd	35	39.3
3rd	28	31.4

5. Results

Concerning the students' use of social networks, the questionnaire data showed that the social networks where students spend the most hours (between 3 and 4 hours or more a day) are Instagram (34), WhatsApp (32) and TikTok (22). The social networks where students spend the fewest hours (less than 1 hour a day) are Messenger (67), Facebook (64), Pinterest (58), Snapchat (56) and BeReal (51). The social networks where most students say they don't have an account are Telegram (48), as seen in Figure 1.

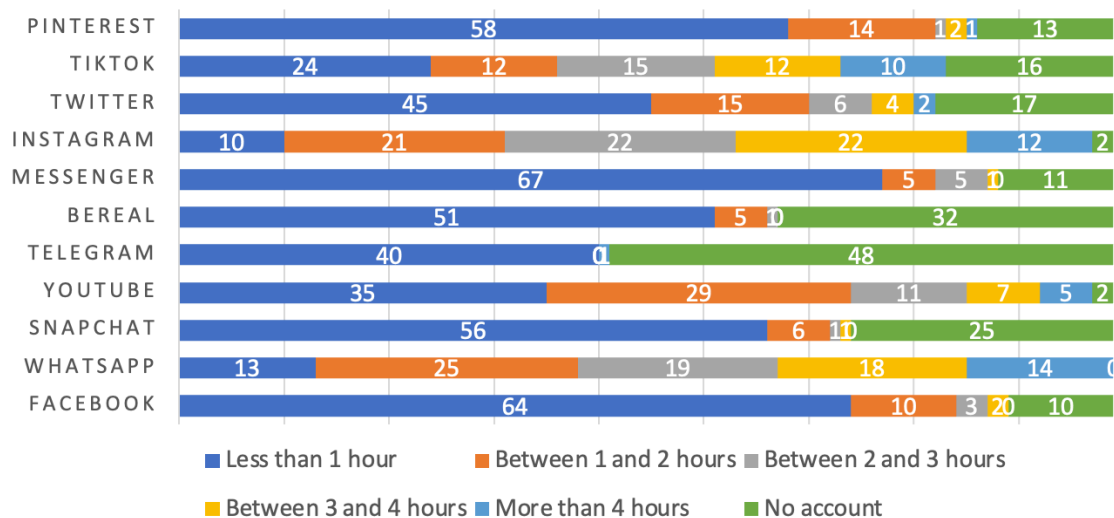


Figure 1: Time spent by students per day on different social networks

Through the same question asked in the focus group, which was intended to find out which social network was most used by the students, the data obtained corroborates what was obtained through the questionnaire. Instagram once again stands out in the participants' responses:

Student 1- "Instagram. I spent 5 minutes on it today, but my daily average is 1.5 hours."

Student 2- "Instagram. I spent 1 hour but only on Instagram because I don't use any other social networks."

Student 3- "Instagram. I was on TikTok for 1.5 hours and 9 minutes."

Student 4- "Instagram. I was on for 12 minutes."

Student 5- "Instagram."

Student 6- "Instagram. I was on for 17 minutes."

Regarding the frequency with which students use social media, based on the objectives and reasons for using it, Figure 2 shows that many students 'always' and 'often' use social media to occupy their time (47) because it's fun (45), it helps them relax (45) and are used when they feel happy (41). Of the participants, 40 said they sometimes use social media when frustrated, 39 students when happy, and 36 students sometimes to escape boredom and loneliness.

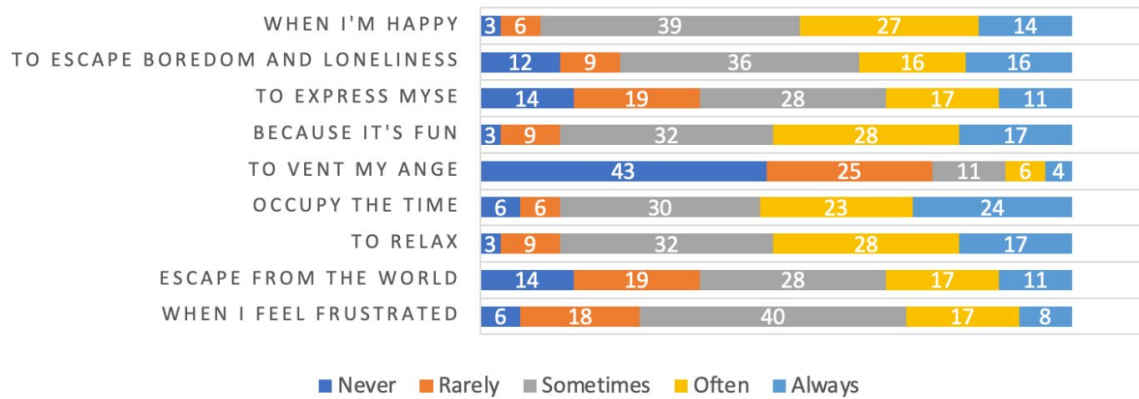


Figure 2: Frequency and reasons to use social networks

Figure 3, referring to the purposes for which students use Instagram, shows that the possibility of keeping in touch with friends and family stands out, followed by the fact that Instagram allows them to find new content, with most students also agreeing. The other reasons mentioned by more than half of the students were that Instagram allows them to occupy their free time and to follow public figures and influencers.

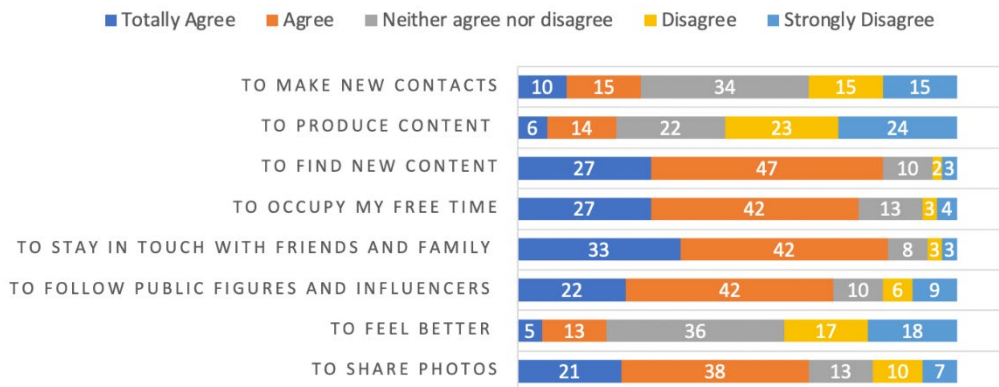


Figure 3: Purposes for which students use Instagram

We also tried to understand what emotions students felt after using Instagram. Figure 4 shows that the student's perceptions about their positive emotions after using this social network are joy (39), satisfaction (34) and excitement (30) since the students classified these as positive emotions that they felt "always" and "often" after using Instagram.

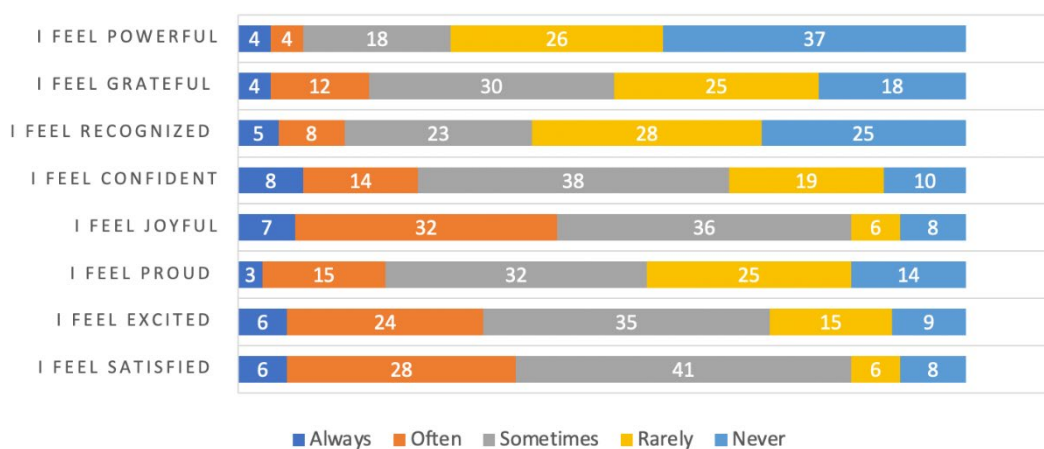


Figure 4: Student's perceptions about their positive emotions

By analysing the results shown in Figure 5, it can be seen that 46 participants do not think that Instagram has a negative impact on their self-esteem (20 disagree, and 26 totally disagree with the statement). Regarding the

statement "Instagram has a positive impact on my self-esteem", no student totally agreed with it, and only 20 students agreed. It's important to mention that the majority neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. Concerning the statement "Instagram has no impact on my self-esteem", 32 students answered affirmatively using the "agree" and "totally agree" options, while 35 "disagree" and "totally disagree".

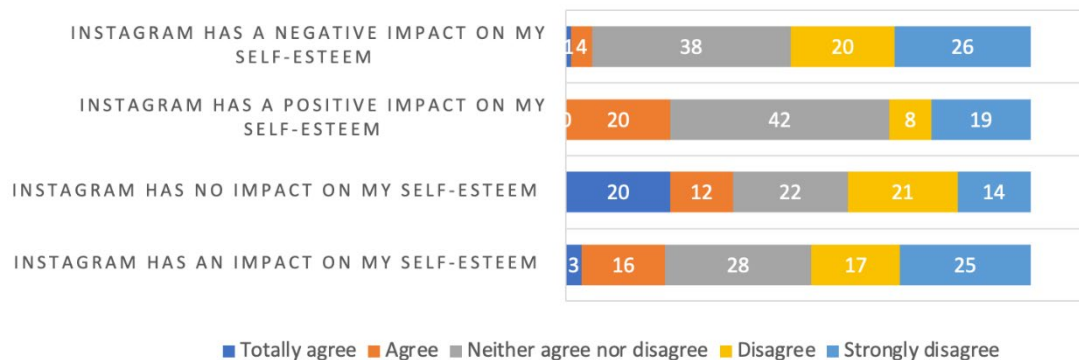


Figure 5: Impacts associated with the use of Instagram

During the focus group, we tried to understand what drives students to share photos on Instagram. The questions asked were: "What makes you publish photographs? Under what circumstances and why do you do it? Both in stories and in the feed," to which the students responded:

Student 2- "To congratulate someone on their birthday. In memory of someone who is no longer here."

Student 5- "When I'm travelling."

Student 1- "I do a lot of dance work, and I can publicise my work and reach more people. To make contacts (...) So that people in the industry can also share and exchange ideas, contacts and information about castings. It's not working, but I'm sharing what I do through Instagram."

Student 5- "I don't think it's a social network just for entertainment, but for people who use it professionally."

Student 3- "It's not a question of validation, but for example, I post a photo because I feel good, but I prefer to post make-up videos, so I end up sharing the photos to diversify the feed and reach more people so that they can go to the page and watch the videos. Even though the accounts have much more reach, the photos get more attention in the feed."

During the focus group, the content shared made it clear that students post photos in their feeds and stories in different circumstances, namely when they want to congratulate friends on their birthdays while travelling. They also do so when they want to share their passions, both for entertainment and professionally. However, when they share photos, they do so because they feel good about themselves.

The questionnaire also sought how students feel after posting a photo on Instagram (Figure 6).

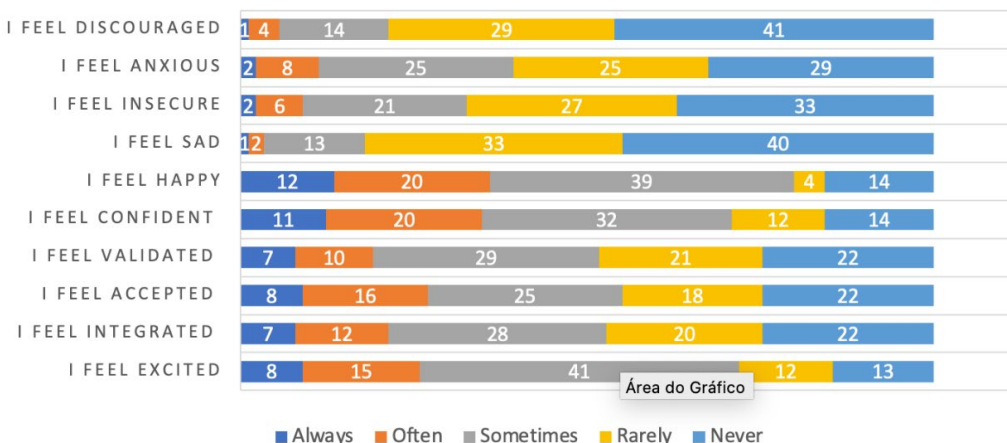


Figure 6: Student's perceptions about how they feel after posting a photo on Instagram

Figure 6 shows that considering a set of emotions, the students' positive emotions were happiness, confidence and acceptance. As can be seen above, after posting a photo, students feel "always" or "often" happy (32), confident (31) and accepted (24). In addition, 39 participants also said they felt pleased "sometimes". As to the more negative emotions, the ones least mentioned by the participants by choosing "never" and "rarely" options were sadness (73) and discouragement (70).

The focus group also endeavoured to obtain answers regarding how students feel after posting photos by asking the question, "If you could describe in one word how you feel after posting a photo, both in stories and in the feed, what would it be? And why?" the following answers were obtained:

Student 6- "Anxiety."

Student 5- "Anxiety."

Student 3- "Nervousness."

Student 1- "Not anxiety. I feel enthusiasm."

Student 4- "Joy. I shared it because I feel beautiful."

Through the answers given by the students during the focus group, emotions such as "anxiety", "nervousness", "enthusiasm" and "joy" emerged. The students who said they felt "enthusiasm" and "joy" justified their choices because they like what they usually publish and don't feel insecure about their shared content. On the other hand, the students who said they felt anxious and nervous specified that they felt this way when thinking about the feedback they would receive on their shares.

6. Conclusions

The research presented in this paper aimed to identify the uses, perceptions, and impacts of Instagram use by a sample of young university students from Portugal. The developed case study, conducted with a literature review and the application of two data collection instruments, a questionnaire survey and a focus group, allowed us to collect quantitative and qualitative data that shed some light on the matter. The questionnaire results show that Instagram is one of the students' favourite social networks and the one they spend the most time on daily. The time spent on Instagram is 3 to 4 hours or more, according to most of our respondents. Results are concurrent with those obtained by recent research (Marketeer, 2022; We are Social, 2022; Obercom, 2023) that point to frequent use of this social network by young people of similar ages to the participants in the research presented. The growth of users in the 18 to 24 age group was highly pronounced in Instagram's remarkable growth. The reports reveal that in 2023, Instagram was used by 72.0% of these young people, making it the most popular social network in this age group, surpassing YouTube in 2022 (Obercom, 2023). The Digital 2023 Global Overview Report also confirms the popularity of this social network among young people of these ages by showing that a total of 517.7 million users aged 18 to 24 (32.0% of Instagram's total ad audience) use Instagram and "the "typical" internet user spends almost 2½ hours each day using social media platforms, comparing to more than one-third of our total online time" (Kemp, 2023, s.p.). Another research also pointed out that young people between the ages of 16 and 24 spend the most time on social networks, with females spending an average of 3 hours and 13 minutes a day and males 2 hours and 43 minutes (We are Social, 2022).

Given that users are both content consumers and producers in the context of social media, the study also identified that the social network where students post most often is Instagram, while Facebook is falling behind and is less used by students and more frequently used by older people. Despite recent data indicating that Facebook remains the most significant active social media platform in many countries around the world (Kemp, 2024), it seems that younger people are less likely to be using Facebook and Twitter (renamed X) than they were a decade ago (Anderson, Faverio & Gottfried, 2023).

A closer look into what students use Instagram for shows that it is mainly used to keep in touch with friends and family and to find new content. The conclusions obtained in our study are in line with those reported by the Digital 2023 Global Overview Report, which suggests that among the top seven reasons for using social media, the first is to keep in touch with friends and family, followed by spending free time, reading new stories and looking for content (kemp, 2023).

The data also shows that students don't use social networks to feel accepted, validated or integrated. They don't use Instagram, for instance, in search of any social approval or validation. However, although students say they are not looking for likes, comments or reactions to their shares, the participants in the study admit that this is a consequence. Although they don't share for this purpose, they are happy with the feedback they receive, which

acts as a "confirmation" of what they already know and feel about what they post, especially regarding the photos they share. From an emotional point of view on how they think and view social networks, it was possible to conclude that students feel positive emotions more readily than negative emotions after using Instagram. The most selected were joy, satisfaction, and enthusiasm. They also associated Instagram with sharing, leisure, fun, inconstancy, validation and sharing. Based on these results, there is strong evidence that, in general, Instagram can positively impact the well-being of the students who took part in the study. The study concluded that much of what was answered regarding emotions and the use of social networks mostly gravitated around Instagram, probably because it was the most used network by our sample of students. Although these conclusions seem encouraging, suggesting that Instagram can provide a sense of connection and support, it is essential, as Beyari (2023, p. 8) says, "to be aware of its potential negative impacts on mental health. In light of these findings, it may be beneficial for individuals to set limits on their social media use and prioritise activities that promote mental well-being, such as physical exercise and social interaction with friends and family."

Lastly, the information collected through the questionnaire and the focus group also allows us to conclude that students post photos above all when they feel good about what they share. They do so mainly on Instagram because it is their friends' social network. After sharing photos, students tend to feel positive emotions such as happiness, confidence and acceptance. However, some who mentioned feeling anxious and nervous attributed it to the pressure felt regarding the feedback they may receive. These results corroborate those obtained by Beyari (2023) in the sense that "(...) social media can have both positive and negative effects on mental health, depending on how it is used and the specific features that are engaged with. It is therefore important for young people to be aware of the potential risks and to use social media in a balanced and responsible manner" (p. 9).

In general, the contributions of this research are mainly to have allowed the identification of trends in the use of Instagram by young university students, as well as to understand the impacts of the use of this social network on the emotional level, communication and sharing of content. Since its conclusion, the study presented has provided additional research questions and challenges that, in collaboration with young higher education students, are already contributing to a better understanding of the phenomenon easily recognised as an intrinsic part of the higher education landscape. Current and future research is looking at these issues, and our future work will undoubtedly follow along these lines and be developed within this context.

The study, although limited to a sample of students from a single higher education institution, enabled the researchers to understand better some engagement habits that currently take up little under one-fourth of the users' daily time while awake. The sheer fact that users spend so much time on this social media platform daily, sometimes with little or no positive impact on other activities, has already been outlined as an issue worth tackling in future studies.

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