The Correlation Between Media Consumption and Loneliness: The Case of Young People in Portugal

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Abstract: Currently, digital media allows individuals to be constantly connected, however, physical interpersonal relationships and interactions that are not mediated by digital platforms are increasingly rare. This generates worrisome levels of loneliness and social alienation, especially in young people who have grown up in a digital world. To understand whether there is a relationship between media consumption and loneliness amongst young people in Portugal, this study statistically relates these two variables. The investigation used a sample of 337 participants and the data was collected through a survey built in two parts, one with the UCLA Loneliness Scale and another with media consumption habits.
The investigation outcomes show that young people mostly carry out their media consumption in the new media and that it is on social media that they spend more time daily. It also allows us to conclude that young people who spend more time daily streaming and gaming online have a higher rate of loneliness. Positive and negative relationships are also identified between the rate of loneliness of young people and the habits they tend to practice when they feel lonely or bored.

1 INTRODUCTION

Media consumption and access to social networks are recurrently present in the routine of individuals. The reception of information can happen on any platform: television, radio, on the Internet, on social networks. Nowadays it is increasingly difficult to be disconnected, turning to media consumption to keep up with the news, for leisure time watching series, movies or through games, as well as to stay connected with each other. However, this constant connection does not mean that we are closer to our peers, on the contrary, constant connection can lead to social alienation and worrisome levels of loneliness. This problem is even more relevant amongst the young population, which grew up in the digital world.

Loneliness has been a growing problem and isolation, a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic, has been an accelerator of the effects that have been felt. As Hertz (2021) explains in her book "The Lonely Century", before the Covid-19 confinement there were already alternatives to human interaction (such as food delivery services, online exercise classes, recommendations generated by algorithms) and the pandemic has significantly accelerated this trend.

This study is part of a larger investigation that addresses the issues of media consumption, loneliness, and political participation. This article will focus on the relation between media consumption and loneliness, in the case of young people living in Portugal.

Youth is considered the formative years of the individual (Aroldi, 2011), the phase between childhood and adulthood. This construction of the individual is influenced not only by the family, but also by teachers, society and by the Internet which is an important foundation in the construction of young people since the beginning of the 21st century (Helve & Bynner, 2007). And as young people are less frequent users of traditional media and turn to new media to carry out their media consumption, it is

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important to understand how the Internet and social media are present in the lives and construction of the youth (Melro, 2018).

New media is more attractive to young people as it allows, on one hand, greater flexibility on the part of the consumer to select and choose the content they consume, when they consume it and where they consume it (as for example in the case of streaming platforms) (Rajendran & Thesinghraja, 2014), as it also allows the consumer to be a producer and to be closer to their peers (as in the case of social media). Thus, social media satisfies the individual's needs for self-connection and social connection (Kim et al., 2022). And social media has a central role as a way of socializing with friends and family, in romantic relationships, in job hunting and networking, as well as in the way businesses are managed, the interaction with companies and brands (Aichner et al., 2021).

However, if the Internet and social media have advantages for their users, they also have disadvantages, and it is necessary to highlight the disadvantages for the young population. Constant access to the Internet on various devices used for working and studying, increases problems of concentration and focus, especially for the youngest, since the constant ease of access, notifications and all the mechanisms of social media and various applications aimed at capturing the attention of individuals with a sense of novelty and urgency, makes it difficult to be present and complete a task without interruptions (Baumgartner & Sumter, 2017). It is also noteworthy that studies indicate that there is a relationship between the duration of Internet use and other addictive behaviours such as alcoholism, tobacco, and drug use, which may manifest in adolescence. That is why it is so important to apply measures and dialogue to prevent these consequences (Secades-Villa et al., 2015). Covid-19, and its repercussions, was a cause of increased compulsive internet use, especially among young people. Psychological stress, Fear of missing out (FoMO) and propensity to boredom are phenomena related to internet addiction (Liang et al., 2022).

Regarding the consumption of information, young people do not use traditional media for their news consumption. While adults and the elderly have stable habits of information consumption, young people, in addition to resorting to new media with great adherence, are also more willing to make cross-media consumption (Torres et al., 2017). Although social networks are the main means of consuming information by young people, they also consider it less reliable, especially compared to traditional media such as newspapers and radio. Consequently, it is

possible to verify a paradox in the consumption of information by young people, because, although they consider social media an unreliable source for the consumption of information, it is on these platforms that they do so and do not resort to strategies to verify the veracity of the content (Pérez-Escoda et al., 2021), which leaves young people more vulnerable to the consumption of disinformation and fake news.

Having this in consideration, the correlation between media consumption and loneliness is a topic that has been studied in sociology and psychology. The perspective of youth in this correlation of themes has been the subject of investigation since media consumption, in particular that excessive use of the Internet can lead to dependence. Young people and adolescents are more susceptible to use the Internet (social media, online games, etc.) and to acquire compulsive behaviours, and this age group is more exposed to the negative effects of this consumption (Savolainen et al., 2020). Some negative effects of constant connection and social media are that they open the door to new forms of social exclusion, intimidation, and harassment (Hertz, 2021).

It is worth mentioning that the young people's experience with social media affects their well-being positively or negatively, thus concluding that there is a link between well-being and the use of social media (Seabrook et al., 2016), and, since the beginning of adolescence, the use of social networks is related to the satisfaction of life of young people (Iacus & Porro, 2022). A positive relationship between young people and social media can benefit their social capital, self-esteem, social support, and psychological well-being, while a bad relationship with social media has negative implications on the psychological well-being of individuals (Erfani & Abedin, 2018). Bad social experiences online result in young people feeling lonelier, alienated from their peers, and these factors contribute to a deterioration of both the mental and physical health of the young population, consequently making them more vulnerable to compulsive behaviours (such as compulsive Internet use) and self-destructive behaviours (Savolainen et al., 2020). In addition, young people who are in a growing up and developing phase, are exposed to selected and edited images of influencers and their peers who appear to have a perfect and successful life. This type of pressure and the need to demonstrate only the positive aspect of their lives, at a time of such transformation and transitions, is a negative contribution to the well-being of young people, especially considering the constant comparison with their peers about the transition to new phases of adult

life, also contributing to them feeling like they are falling behind (Brunborg & Andreas, 2019).

However, other studies also point out that the relationship between media consumption (online) and loneliness can be perceived from both perspectives. Either excessive media consumption can result in an increase in the level of loneliness, leading to the individual feeling anxious, depressed and alienated from personal and family contexts, or, from another perspective, the increase in media consumption can be a consequence of the feeling of solitude of the individual who seeks close relationships with others in this environment (Mozafar Saadati et al., 2021).

As it is possible that this relationship between media consumption and loneliness can become something cyclical, the lonelier the young person feels, the more they consume, the less they seek to connect with their peers outside the online sphere, the less face-to-face communication skills they explore, the lonelier they feel.

This article is structured as follows: after the theoretical framework presented in this introduction the methodology chapter that follows, which explains the methodological approach, the research question, the objectives and the population and sample of this study. This is followed by the Results and Discussion, which begins with an overview of the relationship between the various media consumption mediums related to each other and the UCLA loneliness scale, and continues with the analysis of the consumption of social media, streaming and online games and the analysis of the habits that young people have when they feel lonely or bored and the loneliness scale.

2 METHODOLOGY

This research applies a quantitative approach that seeks to validate the hypotheses using statistics and concrete data (Mattar, 2015), through the relationship between variables, to understand the interdependence of the phenomena under study. So that it can constitute an original contribution to the problem. The quantitative approach resorted to the use of a survey answered by a sample of the youth population living in Portugal (N=337), with the objective of acquiring the necessary data to carry out the statistical relationships between the variables under study.

It is emphasized that this study is part of a broader investigation that addresses the issues of media consumption, loneliness, and political participation. This article focuses on the relationship between media consumption and loneliness, in the case of young people living in Portugal.

2.1 Question and Research Objectives

This investigation has the following research question: Is there a relationship between media consumption and levels of loneliness in young people in Portugal?

Research objectives:

- Understand whether there is a relationship between young people's media consumption habits and their loneliness scale;
- Assess whether the time spent daily on social media is related to the loneliness scale among young people;
- Analyse whether the time devoted to media consumption on entertainment content platforms is related to the loneliness scale of young people;
- Analyse whether the habits and activities that young people use most often when they feel lonely and bored are related to their loneliness scale.

2.2 Data Collection Instrument (Survey)

The study uses a survey as a data collection instrument utilized for the statistical analysis of this investigation. This questionnaire survey involved a first phase of creating an Analysis Model in which the variables and indicators of the concepts media consumption and loneliness are identified. Therefore, the Analysis Model was the primary element that served as the basis for the structuring of this investigation, both for the theoretical framework chapter and for the data collection element, with the analysis performed in the Analysis Model being the conceptual basis that supports the development of the data collection instrument.

The process of elaborating the survey was carried out in various stages: initially, the questionnaire objectives were specified, which intended to collect sociodemographic data and data relating to media consumption and loneliness scale of respondents.

Data collection and questions related to media consumption aim to understand the type of media consumption that respondents carry out as well as the time allocated to this consumption on an ordinal scale, emphasizing the need to understand the habits related to the consumption of information, the quest for being up to date with the news and the degree of trust in the different media platforms.

Regarding the theme of loneliness, during the first phase of this research it was established that an existing loneliness scale indicator would be used,

choosing for this purpose the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Pontinen & Swails, 2017) which, through twenty questions, assigns a rating to the respondent's degree of loneliness. The scale was translated from English to Portuguese, as a reference for translation, the article: "Psychometric Validation of the UCLA-Loneliness Scale for Portuguese Elderly People" (Pocinho et al., 2010) was adapted to the population of this study.

After building the data collection element, it was implemented in an online platform for this purpose. Before the questionnaire became available, a usability test was carried out with three participants who answered the questionnaire and were later interviewed to make known errors and doubts that occurred during the response to the survey. The appropriate corrections were made considering these interviews. The questionnaire was available for responses between the 6th and 29th of April 2022 and was disseminated through an online campaign.

2.3 Population and Sample

For this research, the population is made up of young people living in Portugal aged between 18 and 30, that is, it focuses on emerging young people as they are the generation with the greatest impact on social dynamics, in terms of social decision-making and policy, with future implications. This population is characterized by having approximately one million three hundred thousand individuals (according to Portada - PORDATA, (last access on 20.06.2022), "Resident population, annual average: total and by age group").

For this study, a non-probabilistic sample was used, using a snowball sampling strategy. This sampling technique was selected since this is the most viable technique, given that it is not possible to have equal access to all young people living in Portugal to obtain a simple probabilistic sample. Snowball sampling uses reference chains, so, through a specific selection of individuals who match the criterion, it is possible to continue to disseminate the survey by individuals who correspond to the same requirements (Vinuto, 2014). The sample was built through the dissemination of the data collection element among young people who corresponded to the defined criteria and who consequently shared the survey with their circle of relationships that also corresponded to the criteria of this investigation.

The sample of this investigation has the answers of 337 young people living in Portugal aged between 18 and 30.

2.4 Treatment of Data

The data was analysed using SPSS - Statistical Analysis Software 27. The data obtained through the online questionnaire was exported to Excel, here the data was processed and then they were transferred to SPSS 27 for statistical analysis.

The statistical tests used to carry out the analysis that aims to determine whether there is a relationship between the concepts were: linear regression tests, ANOVA means comparison tests, Mann-Whitney, Kruskal-Wallis tests and Spearman Correlations and Principal Components Analysis.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Media Consumption and Loneliness

We first conduct a non-parametric correlation test to examine whether there were significant relationships between the individuals' loneliness scale and their daily media consumption habits (the variables analysed were: daily time watching television, daily time streaming, daily time gaming, daily time listening to the radio, daily time reading newspapers and magazines and daily time on social media), and also among the different types of media consumption.

In a first analysis of how young people's media consumption habits relate to each other it is possible to find that there are positive relationships between the time spent consuming traditional media. We found that there is a significant positive relationship between the daily time spent watching television and listening to the radio $r(335) = .281$, $p = <.001$, between the daily time spent watching television and reading newspapers and magazines $r(335) = .171$, $p = .002$, and between the daily time spent reading newspapers and magazines and listening to the radio $r(335) = .170$, $p = .002$.

A significant positive relationship is also found between media consumption habits in new media. We found a significant positive relationship between the time spent daily streaming and gaming $r(335) = .153$, $p = .005$, and between the time spent daily streaming and on social media $r(335) = .127$, $p = .020$.

This means that young people who tend to spend time in one of the traditional media platforms tend to also consume other traditional media channels more frequently. The same happens in media consumption in new media, young people who spend more time

daily on social media also tend to spend more time daily streaming and playing online and vice versa.

There is a multifaceted pattern of media consumption that converges on itself, meaning more hours on social media, more hours on online gaming, and more hours streaming, and these consumptions correlate with higher loneliness levels. Loneliness goes hand in hand with psychological disorders and (lack of) mental health. These results highlight that there is a tsunami quietly brewing. The respondents in this study are young people who are in the developmental stage called emerging adulthood (18-30) (Arnett, 2004), which is characterized by opening horizons, experimentation, and freedom. If these young people are trapped in the labyrinth of social media, streaming, and online gaming wrapped in a sense of loneliness that is attempted to be minimized by online media consumption, then their development as emerging adults is in jeopardy, as is their subjective well-being and psychological well-being.

A negative significant relationship between the daily time spent on social networks and reading magazines and newspapers is also noteworthy $r(335) = -.123$, $p = .024$. This data highlights that young people who spend more time daily on social media tend to spend less time of their day reading newspapers and magazines. This is a relevant result, since young people who limit their consumption of current affairs on social media are more susceptible to receiving propaganda and political extremist content (Castelli Gattinara & Pirro, 2018). As it was possible to verify in the elections of 2016 in the United States and 2018 in Brazil, social media were a vehicle for the transmission of misinformation and fake news (Ituassu & Lifschitz, 2019). With the shift in consumption from traditional channels of information consumption to new media and social media, researchers and society in general should ask themselves what tools we need to equip young people to safely navigate social media and search for and consume reliable information and news.

Regarding the relationship between media consumption habits and the loneliness scale of young people it is possible to highlight two significant positive relationships. There is a significant positive relationship between the time spent daily streaming and the loneliness scale $r(335) = .137$, $p = .012$, as well as between the time spent daily gaming online and the loneliness scale $r(335) = .178$, $p = <.001$.

3.2 Relationship Between Loneliness and Time Spent on Social Media

Media consumption on social media is part of the daily routine for 99.4% of the survey respondents, this being the most recurrent daily consumption in the sample of this study. Considering this it is necessary to study this type of consumption and the levels of loneliness of the respondents further statistically. Since social networks not only take time away from face-to-face interpersonal interactions but are also a fertile environment for hostilities and comparisons (Hertz, 2021).

"It is this state of permanent connectedness that makes our use of the telephone and social media like nothing else in the history of human beings and that is contributing in ways that are quite profound to the very unique nature of the loneliness crisis of the century we live in." (Hertz, 2021, p. 117)

Through the non-parametric correlations teste it was not possible to detect a significant relationship between the loneliness scale and the time spent daily on social media $r(335) = .053$, $p = .336$. However, considering that most of the sample devotes two or less hours daily on social media (*N=241*) it was decided to statistically analyse whether there is a relationship between young people who have a compulsive consumption of social media daily, i.e. consume three or more hours of social media per day (*N=96*), and young people who consume two or less hours of social media daily in relation to their loneliness scale.

Using a t test it is possible to highlight a significant relationship $t(335) =2,15$, $p = .032$ between daily compulsive or non-compulsive consumption of social media and the loneliness scale of young people. This test indicates that young people who spend two hours or less daily on social media have on average a lower rate of loneliness compared to young people who spend three or more hours a day on social media.

3.3 Relationship Between Loneliness and Online Gaming

After establishing that there is a significant difference between the time spent gaming daily and the loneliness rate of the young respondents $r(335) = .178$, $p = <.001$ it was analysed whether there is also a relationship between young people who do not usually game (*N=221*) and those who play daily (*N=116*) in relation to their loneliness scales.

Thus, through a t-test it is possible to conclude that young people who do not play online daily have lower mean scores of the loneliness scale compared to young people who game, even if it is for a short period of time, since the results show a significant relationship between the variables $t(335) = -3,36$, $p = <.001$.

As we can see through the Simple Boxplot we can identify that there is a difference in the median of the loneliness rate, that is, the young people who do not play daily show a lower median and a shorter percentile compared to the young people who play online daily. These illustrative results are in line with those of the t-test.
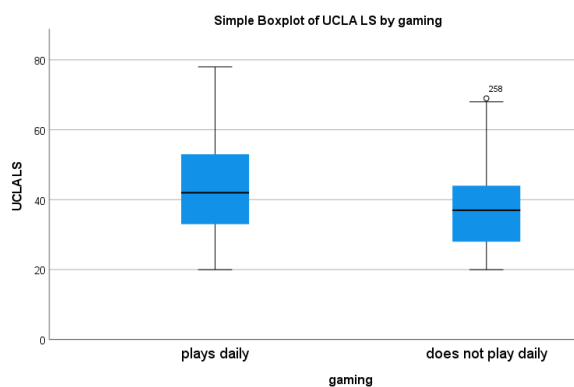

Figure 1: Simple Boxplot of ULCA Loneliness Scale and youth that play and does not play daily.

3.4 Relationship Between Loneliness and Streaming

The time spent streaming daily displays a significant positive correlation with the level of loneliness $r(335)$ = .137, p = .012. To visualize the differences in the loneliness rate of the different times dedicated daily to streaming, the following Simple Boxplot was used. As can be seen, the median loneliness rate with a lower value belongs to the young people who do not have the habit of streaming daily and, in contrast, the clearly higher median loneliness rate is that of young people who stream three or more hours a day, this habit can be considered binge-watching.

Considering binge-watching as a compulsive behavior it was analyzed whether there is a relationship between compulsive and non-compulsive streaming consumption in relation to the loneliness rate of young people. Non-compulsive consumption was considered as two or less hours of streaming per day and compulsive consumption as three or more hours of streaming daily. The results of the t-test illustrate that there is a significant relationship between youths' loneliness rate and compulsive binge-watching behavior $t(335) = 4,14$, p = <.001, with youths who stream more than three hours daily (M = 49,95) having an average loneliness rate 11 points higher compared to respondents who do not engage in compulsive behavior (M = 38,88).
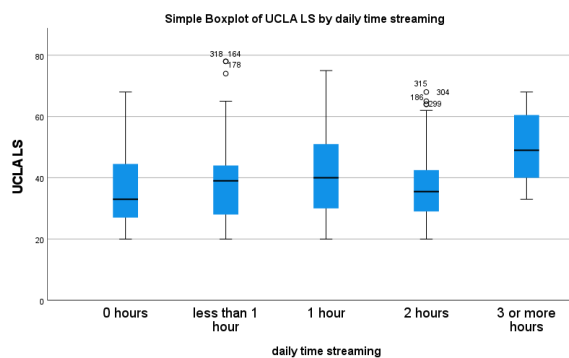

Figure 2: Simple Boxplot of ULCA Loneliness Scale and time spend streaming daily.

Therefore, we conclude that it is recreational media consumption, in this case consumption in new media, that is related to the loneliness level of young people. As explored earlier, compulsive consumption of streaming, called binge-watching is associated with personality disorders, sleep pattern disturbances, and antisocial behavior. Since we have constant access to our mobile devices, this practice becomes very accessible and can become an addiction equal to alcoholism, tobacco, or other forms of addiction (Dhanuka & Bohra, 2019).

3.5 Relationship Between the Loneliness Level and the Habits and Activities that Young People Engage in when They Feel Lonely

Taking into consideration the existing data, it is also possible to understand if there is a relationship between the loneliness level of the respondents and the habits and activities they practice when they feel lonely.

Among all the response options presented, a correlation test showed a significant positive relationship between the loneliness level and young people who tend to play online games when they feel lonely $r(335)$ = .164, p = .003, and a significant negative relationship between the loneliness level and young people who tend to spend time with friends and family when they feel lonely $r(335)$ = -.222, p = <.001.

That is, young people who, when they feel lonely or bored, tend to play online have, on average, a higher level of loneliness. On the contrary, young people who, in the same situation, turn to their friends and family have, on average, a lower level of loneliness. Family and friends, which are strong and meaningful social ties, are shown to be good antidotes to solitude, thus combating, as discussed earlier,

social loneliness (Hofman et al., 2022) as can be clearly seen in the following Simple Bloxplot, it is evident that the more time respondents spend with their family and friends when they feel lonely or bored, the lower the median loneliness rate.
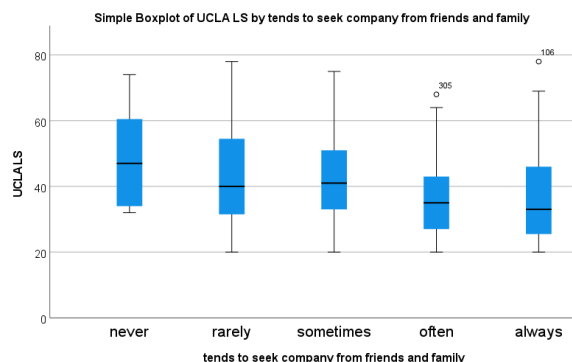

Figure 3: Simple Boxplot of ULCA Loneliness Scale and time spend with family and friends when feeling lonely or bored.

4 CONCLUSIONS

This study analysed the relationship between media consumption and loneliness in the case of young people in Portugal, with a sample of 337 respondents aged between 18 and 30 and living in Portugal.

Regarding the media consumption habits of young people in Portugal, the research allows us to highlight that social media is the main means of media consumption of young people in Portugal. It is possible to ascertain that young people who tend to do their media consumption on traditional media tend to use more platforms of this type while young people who use new media tend to consume several digital platforms. It should also be noted that there is a significant negative relationship between the time spent daily on social media and the time spent daily reading newspapers and magazines, that is, young people who spend more time of their day on social media have a lower habit of reading newspapers or magazines.

Considering the relationship between media consumption and loneliness, the study found that young people who spend 2 hours or less a day on social media have on average a lower loneliness rate compared to those who spend 3 or more hours on social media daily, that is, consumption of 3 or more hours becomes critical, with a significant impact on the loneliness of individuals.

It is also possible to highlight that the media consumption means that show a significant correlation with the respondents' loneliness level are online gaming and streaming. Young people who habitually play online tend to have higher loneliness levels compared to young people who do not play online. In the case of streaming, young people who spend more than 3 hours a day streaming also show higher averages of loneliness compared to young people who do not stream or who spend less time daily with this type of consumption. It should be noted that excessive consumption of streaming can be considered binge-watching (watching a lot of audiovisual content such as series and movies, in a short period of time), which is considered a compulsive behaviour (Dhanuka & Bohra, 2019).

By studying the habits of young people when they feel lonely and bored it was possible to determine that the more frequent the habit of seeking the company of friends and family in this circumstance, the lower the levels of loneliness of the respondents. On the contrary, young people who more frequently tend to do online gaming at these times have, on average, a higher level of loneliness.

This study is an exploratory study and is considered a starting point for future research that takes into consideration this issue in view of young people in Portugal. It is believed that the continuation of the study of this matter is of great relevance due to all the conclusions that have been listed. It is emphasized that the results presented in the study are correlations and do not present causality, that is, cause-effect. As possible topics for future research we highlight the study of the phenomenon of fake news consumption and the consequences of sharing this content on young people's personal social media, the spiral of loneliness and social media consumption and the impact of binge-watching on young people in Portugal.

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