

STUDENTS AND THE INTERNET: USES, PROBLEMS AND BENEFITS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN PORTUGAL

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Abstract

The emergence of the Internet and the way it has grown worldwide is considered by many as a revolution, not only because it has changed the way people interact with the world, but also because it has become an essential part of most people's lives [1], becoming an increasingly indispensable tool in our daily lives, whether, for leisure activities, work or study, and its users are constantly increasing. In this context and taking as reference the results of the "Study on the access and consumption of online contents during periods of confinement in Portugal - the case of students from a Higher Education Institution" [2], which involved 94 undergraduate and master students, this article presents the main conclusions regarding the trends of Internet access and use during the two periods of confinement caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in Portugal. In methodological terms, this is an exploratory study, using a questionnaire and conducting four interviews with students from the institution, both instruments having been subjected to a prior validation process. The results obtained regarding the frequency of access to the Internet show that the majority accessed the Internet daily and spent a good part of their days online, with many admitting to spending between 6 and 7 hours on the Internet and revealing that the activities they most developed daily were: using social networks, sending and receiving messages (WhatsApp, Instagram and Messenger) and using platforms such as Zoom or Teams to attend classes. As for the type of online content consumed during their periods of confinement, the students who participated in the study showed a preference for music content (through platforms such as Spotify and Youtube), humorous content (such as watching shows, videos or podcasts), informative content (TV news and online newspapers) and also content related to watching movies (namely through platforms such as NETFLIX, HBO, DISNEY+). About the most positive aspects associated with the use of the Internet during their periods of confinement, the study participants mentioned that it allowed them to keep in touch with their friends and family and also that it was a very important tool to keep themselves informed. However, the students also pointed out fewer positive aspects, stressing that they felt several setbacks when using Internet services, namely problems related to Internet speed, the emergence of headaches caused by excessive use, and the feeling of extreme tiredness. When asked if they had difficulties adapting to platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet and Microsoft Teams, most of the study participants disagreed, revealing that they found it easy to use media of this nature. In addition to this, the students also pointed out that they encountered technical problems several times, and in some of these cases, they could not get around the situation, in this regard, it should be noted that an identical conclusion was also obtained in the research of [3].

Keywords: Students, Internet, Higher Education, Problems, Benefits, Portugal.

1 INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the Internet and the way it has grown worldwide is considered by many as a revolution, not only because it has changed the way people interact with the world, but also because it has become an essential part of most people's lives [1], becoming an increasingly indispensable tool in our daily lives, whether, for leisure activities, work or study, and its users are constantly increasing. The most recent data provided by [4] show that the number of Internet users is around 5 billion, which corresponds to 63% of the world population, an increase of 28 million users (60.1% of the world population) compared to last year. In the case of Portugal, according to data made available by [5], the percentage of households with an Internet connection at home was 87.3 in 2021, a tremendous evolution if we go back to the year 2002, where the percentage was only 15.1%. Within the Portuguese population, most Internet users are teenagers and young adults [6], and according to [5] in 2021 the percentage of 16 to 24-year-olds using the Internet was 99.7%, which shows the virtually widespread access and use of this network by young people in Portugal. However, the data from this report also show that the older population, namely the age group between 65 and 74, is still far from having a