



# Activities, Media and Technologies in the Informational Consumption Habits of Young People: An Investigation at a Polytechnic University in Portugal

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**Abstract.** This article focuses on media literacy in higher education, specifically regarding the activities, media usage, and technologies among students in a media studies course in Portugal. Through research conducted as part of an exploratory project, the aim was to understand the literacy level among these students. This article presents the results obtained at two distinct moments of the study from a comparative perspective. Data were collected through a questionnaire survey in the academic years 2020/2021 and 2022/2023, which were quantitatively analysed using statistical analysis. The findings highlight the use of social media for information consumption, the prevalence of screen usage over print media, and a trend towards replacing traditional television entertainment with streaming platforms. The response trends are consistent across both survey periods, with no significant differences observed. The conclusions reveal that the use of technology by communication students is reinforced by their current habit of reading online newspapers and their use of computers and smartphones, even for entertainment purposes.

**Keywords:** Students · Higher Education · Media Consumption · Media Literacy

## 1 Introduction

The relationship between young people and the media has changed over the years, with the most significant alterations, particularly during the last decade, revolving around the use of technology by this age group. [1] even suggests that this generational gap is widening, although younger individuals have always shown less interest in the news than older generations.

It is well-known that the informational diet of young people today primarily revolves around social media, with lesser consumption of traditional media outlets [2]. Indeed,

“the digital sphere offers an on-demand information menu” [3] and can expand the possibilities for young people’s informational consumption. It does not necessarily imply a complete abandonment of traditional media but rather different perspectives on their usage. Drawing on the Uses and Gratifications hypothesis, which argues that the effect of mass media is a result of satisfying the needs of its audience [4], young people also make different uses of the various media available to them to access the world, aiming to satisfy multiple needs. Taking social media as an example, some users may utilise this platform to expand their social circle, while others primarily aim to play games or share media content [5].

Considering that the lives of young people are increasingly mediated by information and communication technologies [6], when discussing university students, particularly those enrolled in a Communication Studies course, questions regarding media consumption become more relevant as we deal with future professionals in the field.

## 2 Technologies and Information Diet of Young People

Concerns regarding the digital habits of young people have prompted various investigations [6]. The notion that newer generations have been distancing themselves from traditional media, with their information consumption being incidental rather than resulting from direct search or interest in these subjects, is not new ([7–9]). The consumption of information via social media has led some academics to argue that these platforms have altered how people consume media, partly because journalistic information appears to users inadvertently or casually, in stark contrast to intentional or selective exposure to traditional media. Essentially, we’re discussing a specific digital consumption pattern: the likelihood of a user encountering news on the internet or social media without it being intentional [10]. [7] even argue that this accidental news consumption is more significant among young people with little interest in information, suggesting that, as a group consuming less news, they may gain more from accidental exposure than those who consume information from various sources. Another explanation may be that young people are more active and enthusiastic social media users, increasing the likelihood of exposure to more content, including news.

It has been studied how little interest young people show in news content, especially in comparison with older age groups. On the contrary, the number of people who use social networks to access news is proportionally higher among younger people and progressively lower as age progresses [11]. Indeed, the consumption of journalistic information by young people is one of the challenges for the 2025–2030 quinquennium identified by the trend and innovation analysis report of the media ecosystem carried out by the Iberifier project [12]. According to the document, creating strategies to connect journalism and young people is a challenge, given the loss of young audiences, but also an opportunity to build new communities and, we add, to enhance the value of journalistic information among young people. A study by [13] evaluating news consumption among adolescents showed that respondents recognise the value of news in their lives but struggle to verbalise what to do with that value.

In the Portuguese context, the latest Digital News Report [14] shows that Portugal is the 3rd country with the highest trust in news, and over 50% of Portuguese internet users

express interest in news. However, the numbers change regarding younger generations, as only 34.4% of respondents between 18 and 24 years old express interest in journalistic information. The same report demonstrates that “television continues to play a prominent role in the information diets of the Portuguese population” [14]. Still, when we talk about the preferences of younger people, although television is also significant as a news source, there is a tendency towards using various social media platforms more regularly. Regarding social media, the Digital News Report highlights TikTok as one of the most successful platforms, alongside YouTube, in capturing younger audiences. Specifically, regarding news consumption on social media, Facebook was the leader until 2022 but was surpassed by Instagram, which in 2023 was used “for news consumption by 43.0% of Portuguese aged 18 to 24” [14], followed by Twitter (23.7%), TikTok (19.9%), and Facebook (19.4%).

### 3 The Project “Media Literacy in Higher Education”

The project “Media Literacy in Higher Education: A Study with Social Communication Students,” exploratory and descriptive in nature, aimed to assess the level of literacy among students over the three years of their academic journey in the Social Communication course taught at the School of Education of the Polytechnic Institute of Viseu.

The assessment of literacy levels was carried out using two data collection instruments: a questionnaire and a focus group. The questionnaire was first administered during the second semester of the 2020/2021 academic year and subsequently administered again in 2021/2022 and 2022/2023, as illustrated in Fig. 1. The focus groups took place during the second semester of the academic year 2021/2022, with three meetings held, one for each year of the course. In total, 239 students participated in the study over the three academic years.

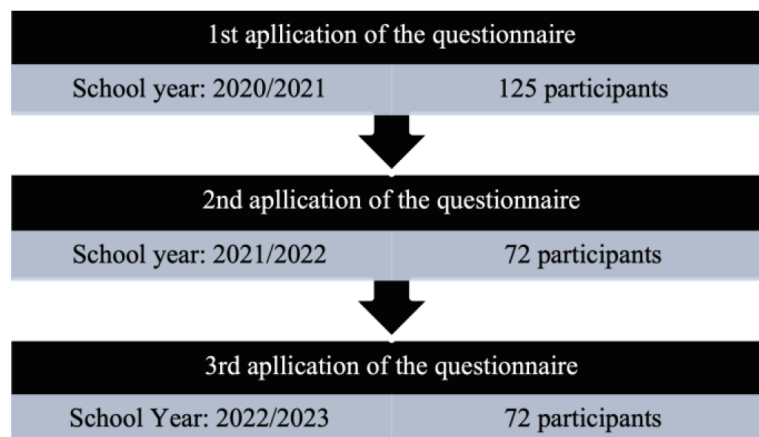


Fig. 1. Phases of the study.

For this article, the selected results concern the first and third administrations of the questionnaire. This choice is deliberate, as it aims to compare the results obtained at

these two points to identify trends in information consumption throughout these students' academic journeys.

As shown in Table 1, in the 1st and 3rd administrations of the questionnaire, female students have higher participation, accounting for 73.1%. The vast majority of students were aged between 18 and 21 years old (82.6%) and were in their 1st and 2nd year of the course (80.2%), with a noticeably higher participation of 1st-year students and a lower representation of 3rd-year students in both questionnaire administrations.

**Table 1.** Sociodemographic characterisation.

	1st application		3 <sup>rd</sup> application		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Gender</b>						
Female	91	72.8	53	73.6	144	73.1
Male	34	27.2	19	26.4	53	26.9
<b>Age</b>						
18 and 19 years old	42	33.6	31	43.1	73	37.2
20 and 21 years old	61	48.8	28	38.9	89	45.4
22 and 23 years old	16	12.8	8	11.1	24	12.2
24 and 25 years old	5	4.0	1	1.4	6	3.1
>25 years old	1	0.8	3	4.2	4	2.0
<b>Year</b>						
Year 1	55	44.0	34	47.2	89	45.2
Year 2	50	40.0	19	26.4	69	35.0
Year 3	20	16.0	19	26.4	39	19.8

## 4 Results

Taking into account the objectives, the results are presented regarding (1) Use of means in access to information; (2) Functions associated with technology and devices; (3) Functions associated with traditional media; (4) Activities carried out with the media. The results presented are the result of a statistical analysis, which involved measures of descriptive statistics (absolute and relative frequencies, means and respective standard deviations) and inferential statistics. This study used the chi-square test for independence, the Fisher test, the Student t-test for independent samples, and the Mann-Whitney test. The Chi-square assumption that there should be no more than 20% of cells with expected frequencies lower than 5 was analysed. The significance level for rejecting the null hypothesis was set at  $(\alpha) \leq .05$ . Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) version 28 for Windows.

Regarding the use of means of communication (Table 2), there were no statistically significant differences between the 1st and 3rd applications of the questionnaire. In both moments, the tendency is for frequent use of social networks to stay informed, followed

by television as the second most frequently used medium. On the other hand, it can be seen that the printed newspaper is the least used medium by the students, and it is possible to observe a slightly lower average in the 3rd application of the questionnaire, which indicates a decrease in the use of this medium over the years by this generation.

**Table 2.** Use of media to access information.

	1st application	3rd application	Sig.
	Average	Average	
Newspapers/magazines (printed)	1.56	1.44	.754
Newspapers/magazines (online)	2.99	2.74	.142
Television	3.47	3.39	.706
Radio	2.67	2.61	.318
Websites and blogues	2.63	2.78	.517
Social Media	3.86	3.82	.682

Considering the different means and devices (Table 3), the results suggest that the Internet is the medium that most (91.3%) of the students prefer to stay informed. In this case, the relationship is significant,  $\chi^2(4) = 9.937, p = .041$ , with a higher proportion of students choosing to inform in the 3rd application and students in the 1st application choosing Educate/General Culture.

For the participants, the computer is closely associated with entertainment, followed by its use in education and general culture, as evidenced by the results. These results are consistent in the two moments when the questionnaire was applied, and no statistically significant differences were found.

Both social media and smartphones excel in entertainment activities, and when students want to establish and maintain contacts. This trend can be seen in both the first and third applications of the questionnaire, and as the statistical tests reveal, no significant differences are observed between these two moments, which indicates a decrease in the use of this medium over the years by this generation.

**Table 3.** Functions associated with technology and devices.

	1st application		3 <sup>rd</sup> application		.Sig
	N	%	N	%	
<b>Internet</b>					
Inform	46	37.1	39	54.2	.041*
Entertain	37	29.8	18	25.0	
Broadcast advertising	4	3.2	5	6.9	
Educate/General Culture	19	15.3	4	5.6	
Establish and maintain contacts	18	14.5	6	8.3	

(continued)

**Table 3.** (continued)

	1st application		3 <sup>rd</sup> application		.Sig
	N	%	N	%	
<b>Computer</b>					
Inform	19	15.4	12	17.1	.919
Entertain	57	46.3	30	42.9	
Broadcast advertising	1	0.8	0	0.0	
Educate/General Culture	28	22.8	18	25.7	
Establish and maintain contacts	18	14.6	10	14.3	
<b>Social Media</b>					
Inform	2	1.6	1	1.4	.974
Entertain	63	50.4	37	51.4	
Broadcast advertising	7	5.6	3	4.2	
Educate/General Culture	0	0.0	0	0.0	
Establish and maintain contacts	53	42.4	31	43.1	
<b>Smartphone</b>					
Inform	2	1.6	1	1.4	.984
Entertain	55	44.7	31	43.7	
Broadcast advertising	1	0.8	0	0.0	
Educate/General Culture	2	1.6	1	1.4	
Establish and maintain contacts	63	51.2	38	53.5	

Table 4 presents the results related to the functions that students associate with traditional media, and it is possible to highlight the printed newspaper as the medium that students most associate with the function of informing (both in the 1st and 3rd applications). For most students, television and radio serve to inform and entertain, a similar tendency when the question is posed concerning printed magazines for answers.

These trends were consistent when the questionnaire was applied, and no statistically significant differences were observed.

**Table 4.** Functions associated with traditional media.

	1st application		3 <sup>rd</sup> application		.Sig
	N	%	N	%	
<b>Television</b>					
Inform	46	36.8	31	43.1	.576
Entertain	48	38.4	20	27.8	
Broadcast advertising	11	8.8	7	9.7	

(continued)

**Table 4.** (continued)

	1st application		3 <sup>rd</sup> application		.Sig
	N	%	N	%	
Educate/General Culture	19	15.2	14	19.4	
Establish and maintain contacts	1	0.8	0	0.0	
<b>Radio</b>					
Inform	50	40.3	25	35.2	.548
Entertain	56	45.2	37	52.1	
Broadcast advertising	3	2.4	3	4.2	
Educate/General Culture	15	12.1	6	8.5	
Establish and maintain contacts	0	0.0	0	0.0	
<b>Printed Newspaper</b>					
Inform	108	86.4	65	90.3	.423
Entertain	0	0.0	0	0.0	
Broadcast advertising	0	0.0	0	0.0	
Educate/General Culture	17	13.6	7	9.7	
Establish and maintain contacts	0	0.0	0	0.0	
<b>Printed Magazine</b>					
Inform	51	40.8	28	38.9	.423
Entertain	49	39.2	26	36.1	
Broadcast advertising	10	8.0	13	18.1	
Educate/General Culture	15	12.0	5	6.9	
Establish and maintain contacts	0	0.0	0	0.0	

The students’ answers allow them to identify trends in the activities they carry out with the media (Table 5). They stand out in both questionnaire applications: the habit of watching news on television, consuming content on platforms such as Netflix or HBO, and consulting social media pages on social networks. In students’ daily lives, the radio is often used to listen to music and entertainment programs, but not to listen to the news through social media. Very few students report buying printed newspapers and magazines, but they reveal frequent habits of reading newspapers online. Few participants admit to watching reality shows on Portuguese TV, although many watch day and night programs on television, and they report listening to podcasts with some frequency.

**Table 5.** Media Activities.

	1st application	3rd application	Sig.
	Average	Average	
I watch the news on television	3.42	3.26	.130
I watch daytime entertainment programs on Portuguese generalist channels	2.28	2.27	.601
I watch nightly entertainment programs on Portuguese generalist channels	2.43	2.39	.424
I watch content on platforms like Netflix, HBO, etc	3.03	3.06	.910
I watch reality shows on Portuguese TV	1.79	1.74	.265
I'm in the habit of buying the newspaper	1.23	1.28	.885
I'm in the habit of buying magazines	1.24	1.18	.720
I read newspapers online	2.80	2.53	.115
I hear the news on the radio	2.18	2.21	.954
I hear podcasts	2.35	2.38	.326
I listen to music/entertainment programs on the radio	2.83	2.80	.946
I check social media pages on social media	2.98	3.21	.382

Finally, it should be noted that the activities described above and summarised in Table 5 remain the same between the two moments in which the questionnaire was applied.

## 5 Conclusions

The change in the relationship between young people and the media is indisputable, and their use of technology is at the root of this change. If, on the one hand, the consumption of traditional media is decreasing, the use of information through social networks is increasing.

In addition, it is notorious that young people show little interest in journalistic information. When these young people are students in communication and journalism, contrary to what would be expected, the trend is similar. The connection is established similarly, with no greater interest in traditional media and privileging the internet and technologies as a source and means to obtain information.

Although they associate printed newspapers with informing, they admit they make little or no use of this resource, privileging social networks and digital technologies. This answer about using social networks to stay informed aligns with data from the 2023 Digital News Report, according to which “69.0% of the Portuguese say they use Facebook in general and 40.0% declare that they use this network for news consumption” [14].

The use of technologies by communication students is further reinforced by the current habit of reading online newspapers and using computers and smartphones, even

for entertainment. From this point of view, we should stress that “individuals’ purposes of social media usage play a role in how they perceive information” [15]. If students consider technology a means of entertainment, the information consumed through these technological means may not be taken seriously enough. In a world where disinformation is a daily challenge, this is another argument in favour of mandatory media literacy programs in schools’ curricula.

In fact, the results of this investigation are not new or surprising, but they reinforce the importance of thinking about media literacy programs directed at young people. [16] considers that media studies offer citizens a critical perspective towards mainstream media and social media, and these competencies are better acquired from critical media literacy than from simply offering verification tools. Considering the close relationship between young people and technology, on the one hand, and the problems created by disinformation, on the other hand, it would be helpful to include in these media literacy programs “the critical exploration of social media, algorithms and big data” [16].

In conclusion, young people’s close relationship with technology should be addressed from the digital and media literacy point of view, essentially in the scope of critical thinking.

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