Social Networks, the Pandemic, and Higher Education in Visual Arts: Student Perception

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Social Networks Visual arts Education University Ecuador	To determine the most frequently used social networks among university students studying visual arts during the Covid-19 pandemic, a case study was conducted in the Visual Arts Degree Programme at the University of Cuenca, Ecuador. The methodology involved structured interviews with students who experienced the most critical periods: confinement and the transition to the new normality. These interviews were carried out between December 2022 and February 2023. The findings aid in assessing characteristics that are advantageous for formulating new educational strategies.

1. Introduction

Young university students engage with digital technologies extensively, autonomously, and continually. Through these technologies, they acquire knowledge, communicate, access audiovisual content, and engage in leisure activities (Fernández Espinosa, 2019). The educational landscape during the global pandemic necessitated the integration of different digital social networks. For various reasons, teachers and students utilised these platforms for conducting classes and obtaining information (Intriago Cedeño et al., 2021; Pillacela, 2023).

This study aims to determine the primary social or socio-digital networks utilised by university students studying visual arts during the Covid-19 pandemic and the rationale behind their preferences. The case study focuses on the Visual Arts Degree Programme at the University of Cuenca, Ecuador. This degree programme, established in 1999, was the inaugural undergraduate programme within the Faculty of Arts. Its curriculum integrates aesthetic and art history modules with both traditional and contemporary artistic techniques, as outlined in its statutes (Arteaga and Novillo, 2018).

Given the discipline's strong emphasis on visual education, there might have been a preference for platforms that emphasize images and videos, such as Instagram, Flickr, or YouTube. The insights gleaned from the study will enhance our understanding of social learning outcomes and are pertinent for bolstering standards and fostering educational innovation within higher education institutions offering visual arts programmes. Additionally, the data holds potential value for devising robust instructional initiatives to be deployed during periods of unforeseen disruption, such as Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT), prompted by impediments to students' physical attendance at university (Hodges et al., 2020).

Indeed, the post-pandemic landscape underscores an enduring commitment to the advancement of virtual education. The use of digital transformation in pedagogy has notably accelerated (Escaño, 2023), prompting a need to extrapolate and envisage novel pedagogical avenues based on the lessons garnered during this period.

A pertinent precursor to our study is the work of Pillacela (2023), which offers an initial exploratory and descriptive examination centred on the integration of social networks into the teaching practices of faculty members within the Visual Arts Programme at the University of Cuenca in Ecuador. Contrasting with this, the present study delves into the perspectives of students, shedding light on their rationales for engaging with specific social networks within the contextual framework of their artistic education. While educators found these platforms valuable for curating instructional materials and fostering engagement with their students, students themselves utilised them primarily for sourcing visual references and promoting their artistic endeavours, as we shall explore further.

This study aims to gain comprehensive insights into the usage patterns of social networks among visual arts students, assessing both the advantages and drawbacks of their utilisation, and determining whether they serve as more than mere distractions, but instead hold potential for motivational and educational purposes. The examination of such media practices among students is delimited to the period of the pandemic in Ecuador, spanning from March 2020 to May 2023. Following the phases of confinement and the transition to the "new normal", a hybrid teaching approach was introduced in 2021 within the Faculty of Arts at the University of Cuenca, incorporating a blend of in-person and virtual instruction. Subsequently, in May 2022, a gradual transition back to fully in-person education began.

This study is part of the Training in the Knowledge Society in the Doctoral Programme at the University of Salamanca and constitutes a segment of the thesis project titled "Higher Education in Visual Arts. Confronting the Challenge of the Pandemic: A Case Study".

2. Design and Method

This analysis delves into the utilization of social networks by students enrolled in the Visual Arts Programme at the University of Cuenca amidst the pandemic, while also examining the purposes associated with their artistic education.

Social networks, as defined by Cañarte-Rodríguez (2017), constitute a structure comprising individuals or entities interconnected by shared interests and various types of relationships. These networks encompass online services wherein users create personal profiles and access tools for interaction with others. Facilitating collaboration, information exchange, and content creation, social networks operate within the realm of Web 2.0 (Basantes Andrade, 2020).

It is crucial to clarify that, despite sharing certain functionalities, videoconferencing platforms such as Zoom or Google Meet do not fall under the classification of social networks within this study. These platforms served as primary means for video communication between students and educators, integral to the delivery of virtual classes. Therefore, references to them have been omitted.

To establish a robust foundation of knowledge, an initial phase involved conducting an extensive literature review spanning from 2020 to 2023. This review predominantly focused on materials sourced from Scopus, Dialnet, and Google Scholar databases. The objective was to delineate key themes and identify pertinent considerations. Apart from ensuring the currency of information, this literature review enriched our understanding of the subject matter, facilitating insightful interpretations of the findings.

The research methodology adopted for this study is qualitative in nature. Data collection was conducted through structured interviews, a method favoured for its consistent, uniform, and systematic approach, which enhances the analysis and reliability of outcomes (Díaz-Bravo et al., 2013). The interviews were structured around a set of two open-ended and specific questions, centred on the utilisation of social networks within the realm of artistic education among young individuals. These responses provided invaluable insights into the educational perceptions and pre-professional apprehensions of students enrolled in the Visual Arts Degree Programme.

The initial question posed was: "During the pandemic, which social networks did you utilise for your visual arts education? Can you be specific about how useful they were?"

The subsequent question posed was: "In the context of higher education within visual arts, what do you perceive as the negative and positive aspects of social media?"

Interviews were conducted with students in their fifth and ninth semesters of university between December 2022 and February 2023. Both groups experienced emergency remote education and hybrid education modalities during the pandemic.

The study sample comprised 38 students, from whom 33 responses were obtained: 21 from the ninth-semester group and 12 from the fifth-semester group. Within the ninth-semester group, 5 students did not respond, whereas all students in the fifth-semester group responded. The age range of participants spanned from 19 to 23 years, with an average age of 22.12 for the ninth-semester group and 20.6 for the fifth-semester group. Gender distribution was as follows: within the ninth-semester group, females constituted 47.62% and males 52.38%, whereas in the fifth-semester group, females comprised 66.6% and males 33.3%. There were no indications of gender or age bias or disparity among the respondents.

The students belong to Generation Z and are regarded as digital natives. Theoretically, they are distinguished by their proficiency in ICT and adept autonomous learning abilities. However, evaluative research suggests that individuals born into Generation Z possess ICT skills ranging from intermediate to advanced levels (Figueras-Maz et al., 2021). Furthermore, observations indicate that their critical thinking regarding images within the prevailing visual culture is somewhat limited (Agirre-Larizgoitia et al, 2020). Taking this evidence into account from an educational perspective is crucial when devising novel methodologies for engaging with them in the virtual realm.

3. Data Analysis

The responses underwent a process of tabulation and analysis to organise the data. From the wealth of information provided, efforts were made to identify the most pertinent concepts through a system of conceptual labelling. The synthesis of previous literature alongside the interview findings facilitated the identification of recurrent concepts, shedding light on ideas warranting attention. These concepts were quantified by tallying the frequency of mentions, thereby documenting the most commonly used networks and delineating their positive and negative aspects.

There were no notable discrepancies between the responses from both groups. A distinction arose in the courses undertaken by the two groups, and given their unequal sample sizes, an accurate count of course mentions would not be reliable. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify certain courses associated with specific social networks.

4. Results

The survey revealed that the predominant social network among students in the Visual Arts Degree Programme at the University of Cuenca was Google Classroom, accounting for 26%, followed by WhatsApp with 17%, and YouTube with 16% (Figure 1). Throughout the period under consideration, students utilised up to 13 distinct social networks, encompassing platforms such as Instagram, Pinterest, Facebook, eVirtual, TikTok, Academia.edu, Spotify, Discord, Vimeo, and ResearchGate.

Figure 1. Social networks most utilised by Visual Arts students at the University of Cuenca. Numerical data collection and percentage expression.

GOOGLE CLASSROOM	38
WHATSAPP	25
YOUTUBE	23
INSTAGRAM	18
PINTEREST	9
FACEBOOK	8
EVIRTUAL	8
TIKTOK	5
ACADEMIA.EDU	4
SPOTIFY	2
DISCORD	2
VIMEO	1
RESEARCH GATE	1
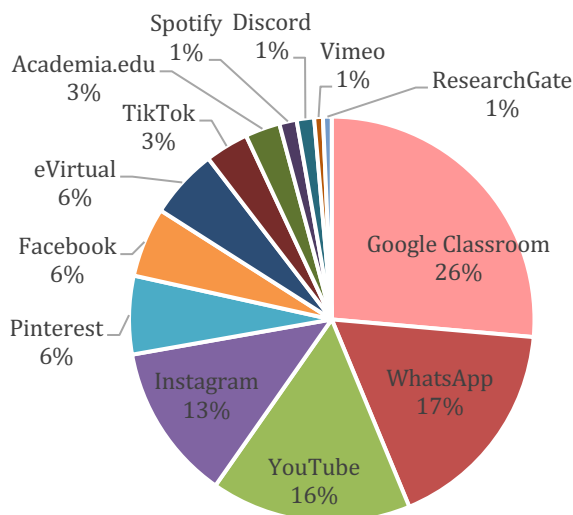
Source: Author's elaboration

In terms of the negative aspects of using social networks within the Visual Arts Degree Programme, students primarily highlighted their distracting nature. Furthermore, they underscored the perception that social networks offer limited utility for artistic instructional purposes, alongside an important observation regarding the diminished reliability of disseminated information. In total, six response categories were documented (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Negative aspects of social network usage perceived by students within the educational context of the Visual Arts Degree at the University of Cuenca.
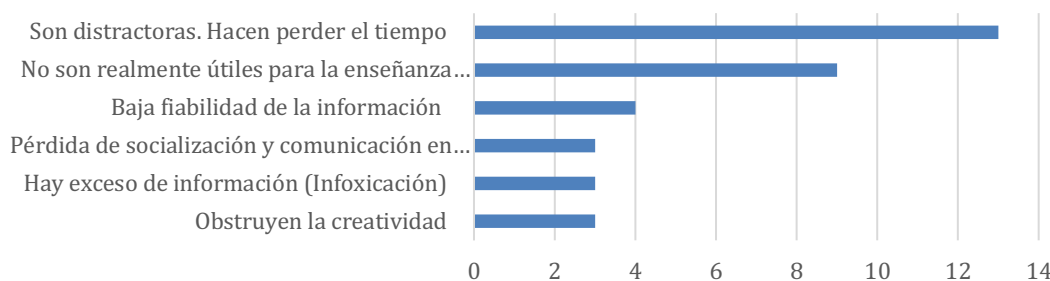
Source: Author's elaboration

The most frequently cited positive aspects included the ability to access diverse, immediate, and valuable information for artists on social networks, the facilitation of effective communication within the academic community (among students and between students and teachers), and their role as an efficient tool for dissemination and artistic promotion. A total of 5 response categories were identified (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Positive aspects of social network usage perceived by students within the educational context of the Visual Arts Degree at the University of Cuenca.

Source: Author's elaboration

5. Discussion

5.1 Social Networks Most Frequently Used

Google Classroom was the primary network mentioned and was predominantly utilised by teachers for assignment notifications and management, encompassing both theoretical and practical tasks. The institutional eVirtual platform, based on Moodle technology, operated as a closed network for material sharing, although it received comparatively fewer mentions. The eVirtual system likely found greater utility in online assessments for theoretical subjects, whereas Classroom served not only as a repository for organised content but also facilitated the viewing of students' creative work and offered feedback during synchronous teleconferencing sessions. The data underscores the significant role of Classroom as a virtual learning environment, with its integration of university email suggesting its status as an institutional platform.

After the pandemic was declared, the imperative to engage with students and foster cohesion prompted most educators to embrace WhatsApp, an instant messaging platform enabling the formation of contact groups. Throughout the lockdown period, this network proved highly effective for academic communication, possibly owing to heightened smartphone usage among young individuals. A dedicated WhatsApp group was established for each subject, facilitating queries, clarification of doubts, dissemination of information, monitoring of progress, and distribution of online class links. Additionally, teachers received updates, as observed in courses like object art or digital drawing. Notably, in the photography course, the teacher conducted preliminary reviews via WhatsApp before students formally submitted their work.

YouTube, the third most mentioned network, was utilised to find reference information, and view tutorials, documentaries, reviews, or lectures on artistic subjects to complete tasks. In essence, its usage was educational and research oriented. Conversely, in certain subjects, students engaged in video creation. For instance, students established a YouTube channel to upload recordings of their work processes in their digital painting courses. Similarly, in the Educational Project for the Arts module, videos were produced for an art project involving children. However, the Vimeo platform was not as significant for the students as it was for the teachers, as emphasized in earlier research (Pillacela, 2023), which emphasized its value for audiovisual resources related to culture, contemporary art, and creative economies. YouTube, akin to Spotify, was identified as an ideal platform for accessing podcasts.

During the Laboratory class, Instagram served as a platform for students to create their artistic portfolios. Additionally, it was utilized for searching graphic references and information. This platform is predominantly visual, featuring a plethora of personal imagery such as selfies and self-videos, reflecting its focus on young users and showcasing emerging artistic trends. Notably, Instagram experienced growth during the pandemic, serving as a promotional tool for artists and facilitating commercial transactions. Gallerists, museums, auction houses, and buyers interact on this platform, leveraging strategic hashtag usage for content dissemination. Some students, while continuing their studies, embarked on entrepreneurial ventures during the pandemic, selling artwork and monetizing through advertising.

Pinterest is acknowledged for its rich iconographic content, attracting visual arts students seeking access to its diverse and high-quality images. It serves as a valuable resource for inspiration, idea

generation, and the exploration of artistic references. Conversely, Facebook emerged prominently in the interviews despite occasional perceptions of its obsolescence and decline. It remains relevant for the dissemination of artistic content and facilitating transactions through Facebook Marketplace. References to the IDEA Congress, an annual event organised by the Faculty of Arts, frequently arose, encouraging student participation. Since 2020, IDEA has been broadcast on the institutional Facebook Live channel.

TikTok witnessed rapid expansion from 2020 to 2021, as noted by Piacenza (2021). This platform consists of short video clips created by both professionals and amateurs, often characterised by their highly creative and emotional content (Rojas Cuevas et al., 2022). Students highlighted its utility for finding visual references and accessing tutorials. In contrast, Academia.edu and ResearchGate are academic platforms recognised for their utility in accessing theoretical information, as they host a wealth of books and research articles.

Discord occupies the lower ranks in the hierarchy of social networks. Primarily associated with instant messaging services, Discord is often linked with communities centred around video games. Interestingly, in the teacher survey conducted by Pillacela (2023), Discord and TikTok failed to garner any mention, possibly reflecting a generational gap. Conversely, Behance was noted for its user-friendly interface for showcasing artistic portfolios, a sentiment not echoed in the current survey where none of the interviewed groups of young individuals cited this network. It appears that teachers exhibit a greater interest in Behance compared to students. Indeed, Behance's focus on graphic design, as highlighted by Terán Pacheco (2020), may account for its appeal among educators.

5.2. Negative Aspects

The main drawback attributed to networks in the field of higher visual arts education is the distraction they create. Students acknowledge their addictive nature, recognising their design to captivate through algorithms adept at triggering a dopamine release in the brain. Short videos emerge as the most compelling format, leading to subsequent time wastage and procrastination, with significant repercussions. What may start as a brief visit to a social network for work-related purposes or a reference search can easily escalate into a two-hour diversion. Furthermore, the allure of certain content fosters scattered thoughts, with students expressing concerns about veering away from the central idea of their assigned tasks.

The subsequent drawback pertains to the perceived limited utility of social networks for arts education. It is underscored that social media platforms lack educational content, and learning through these channels is deemed less substantial compared to in-person instruction, particularly for practical subjects necessitating technical training alongside theoretical knowledge. During Emergency Remote Teaching sessions for practical subjects, emphasis was placed on scrutinising detailed examples, completing and submitting assignments, and receiving final feedback. While Google Classroom facilitated group feedback discussions, there were instances where teachers' comments failed to reach all students. Such individualised attention would undoubtedly have been more feasible in traditional in-person educational settings.

Certain networks may have been utilised for more creative or didactic purposes within the classroom, however, they generally assumed an ancillary role. At most, these networks were perceived as auxiliary tools to facilitate educational processes rather than direct mediums for education. Conversely, prior to the pandemic, social networks were often regarded as essential for fostering innovation, techno-cultural transformation, and educational empowerment. Their adept management was believed to facilitate more meaningful learning (Quiroz Llobet, 2018), even within the realm of visual arts, owing to their relational, interactive, and omnipresent characteristics (Marfil Carmona, 2018). Encouraged by the positive stance of the student body, universities were prompted to incorporate social networks to cultivate open, flexible, and participatory learning environments (Gallardo-Echenique, 2018). Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram held the potential for facilitating communication and information exchange. They could foster the creation of conducive environments, the construction of collective knowledge, peer support, and motivational enhancement (Mercader and Gairín, 2017).

The impetus, or perhaps obligation, of the Knowledge Society was directed towards leveraging the resource of social networks; hence, even today, educators feel compelled to integrate them into the classroom. However, when digital practices are not adeptly mastered and educators are required to

exert substantial effort to catch up, students may perceive this discrepancy (Figueras-Maz et al., 2021). In this regard, it should be acknowledged that the mere use of social networks does not inherently serve as a motivating factor. For instance, a masterclass delivered by a proficient speaker via Zoom may prove more engaging than partaking in a discourse on a YouTube video. What students truly value is the disposition and manner in which the educator delivers the content, irrespective of the pedagogical approach employed (Figueras-Maz et al., 2021; Mercader and Gairín, 2017).

Another negative aspect highlighted is the low reliability of information. Indeed, the data disseminated and viralised in virtual communities are typically unfiltered by any verification system (fact-checking), and the authenticity of shared content may be biased. The issue of misinformation contrasts with the surge in individuals seeking information through social networks during the pandemic (Maroto-González et al., 2021). Nevertheless, post-truth (the trivialisation of data due to emotive messaging) and fake news (sensationalist misinformation) were already prevalent before the onset of Covid-19 (Martínez Gimeno et al., 2018).

The loss of socialisation and the impersonality of relationships through the use of social networks were also highlighted as negative factors. It is acknowledged that the media identity of young university students is sometimes an idealised construction, artificial, and distant from reality. Cooperation within a group becomes challenging when members use fictitious names, and their profile angles are crafted for maximum impact and influence on others (Gutiérrez Miranda, 2023). Self-representation on social networks often diverges from reality, with an aesthetic component that may not align with ethical considerations.

Socialising on digital networks within the learning context poses further challenges. For many students, these platforms belong to their personal lives, and connecting with peers and teachers can lead to tensions. This fear of privacy invasion is deeply ingrained (Figueras-Maz et al., 2021), potentially leading students to hesitate to share personal accounts for academic purposes or to inhibit their participation. Therefore, it would be advisable to encourage the use of profiles specifically created for educational purposes.

Among the negative aspects mentioned is the excess of information or information overload. This issue is intertwined with other aforementioned points, such as the distraction induced by social media and the low reliability of information. In the context of visual arts, furthermore, one could argue for the "infoxication" of multimedia content, stemming from the constant bombardment of various images, static or moving, shared by users seemingly in competition with propagandistic icons. Marfil Carmona (2018) has previously discussed the infoxication of artistic images and the proliferation of remixed and reinterpreted visuals. From these networks, such content constructs our identity and relational imagination, and they serve as reflexive impulses of society. Reproductions and original creations vie for prominence and attention, yet their overwhelming abundance can lead visual arts students to become overwhelmed or resort to trending graphic content as points of reference.

Indeed, another negative aspect highlighted is the hindrance to creativity resulting from solely relying on references found in networks. Students perceive stagnation in their artistic development because, while they encounter numerous innovative expressions, they acknowledge their lack of originality. The fundamental issue lies in the prevalent practice of appropriating and remixing materials to generate new meanings, with memes serving as the primary example. The ease of digitally editing content and replicating it fosters the emergence of these spontaneous visuals: humorous images with diverse hypermedia applications that exert significant influence among young people (Fuentes Mata, 2019). Memes, typically created anonymously, often involve various amateur contributors who recompose and transform their original meaning throughout the process (Abadía, 2020).

At this juncture, it becomes imperative to reassess the concept of the prosumer, positioned at the intersection of content consumption and production (Toffler, 1994; Rodríguez Ríos and Lázaro-Pernias, 2021). As visual arts students witness the widespread reproduction of media content manipulated by individuals lacking artistic training, often infringing upon intellectual property rights, they begin to question their own ethical principles, starting with the notion of originality. Is merely mirroring the consumable data of this hyper-mediated and self-centric society sufficient? (Toribio-Lagarde, 2022; Vaquero-Cañestro, 2022). Alternatively, is it worthwhile to adhere to the conventions of artistic creation, to which they have been apprenticed? The responses of the students reveal a reflective and critical stance towards the implications of artistic evolution on the internet. Currently, as the pandemic wanes, they must

grapple with the progressively subtle creative applications of artificial intelligence as another emerging reality.

5.3. Positive Aspects

The primary positive aspect of social networks mentioned by the students is their accessibility, immediacy, and utility for artists. The aspects particularly valued within the context of their education are updates on cultural activities and event promotions. As budding creators, they recognise the importance of staying informed about developments in their field, including national and international artists, artworks, exhibitions, events, and current affairs. This information may be sourced from established channels or directly from artists' profiles. For drafting projects, submitting assignments, or seeking references, such sources are viewed as invaluable, providing swift access to information. Additionally, social networks serve as fertile ground for the emergence of new talents and avant-garde trends. Despite the lack of verification, such content can be highly educational.

In this regard, it is worth briefly mentioning the significance of social networks in the art world during the health emergency, which may lie at the core of students' motivations to engage with them. Prior to 2020, the influence of the digital culture had already made a considerable impact on art education (Marfil Carmona, 2018). However, during the period of confinement, social technologies emerged as the primary alternative for producing, exhibiting, and distributing art (Rojas Cuevas, 2022). With physical exhibition spaces closed and cultural events cancelled, the art market shifted towards virtual platforms (Gutiérrez Miranda, 2023). Museums, galleries, and cultural institutions experimented with new dissemination strategies using social platforms, benefiting from their accessibility and international reach. Interaction and engagement with audiences on these networks were encouraged (Rojas Cuevas et al., 2022). Museum profiles showcased works from their collections, while videos were edited to provide virtual tours of installations, sometimes in real-time. Live connections, quizzes, and surveys were conducted to engage with followers (Colón Nazario, 2022). Through applications such as Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram, a revised model of participatory aesthetics emerged (Rojas Cuevas et al., 2022). While participatory art had experienced a surge before the pandemic, it was now digital networks that assumed prominence, bridging the gap between art and society. Concurrently, artists themselves sought ways to connect with the public and make an impact. Established artists and emerging talents alike embraced these platforms in a more or less egalitarian manner (Simoneto and Lisboa, 2023). Many documented their experiences of confinement through images and, leveraging the immediacy of social networks invited their followers to actively participate (Rojas Cuevas et al., 2022). Twitter facilitated discussions with professionals from the art world and, on occasion, collaborative curation projects linked to digital heritage materials (Racioppe, 2023). Despite the challenging circumstances, a considerable amount of art was both produced and viewed during this period and economic activity continued unabated in cyberspace (Rojas Cuevas et al., 2022). Marketing efforts became more personalised, and to some extent, the commercial elitism associated with traditional art transactions was mitigated. The online platform provided a dynamic marketplace where transactions could be swiftly conducted without intermediaries (Simoneto and Lisboa, 2023). Offline galleries transitioned to online platforms, ensuring that their collections remained dynamic and frequently refreshed, thereby sustaining the interest of potential buyers. Among all the networks, Instagram stood out for its influence. Through this platform, online auctions were conducted, products and services were exchanged, galleries utilised it as a sales channel, and art fairs were organised where reactions and likes served as indicators of relevance. Instagram emerged as the preferred network for collectors, who used it as a means to discover new talents (Read, 2020).

The students were aware of this socio-economic transition within the art world. In this context, the reported situation aligns with another positive aspect highlighted by the students: the promotional and dissemination capabilities afforded to artists by social networks.

With just one click, the publication of artwork could potentially transcend borders and reach thousands of international views. As the online art market expanded, viral dissemination became a boon for emerging artistic careers (Colón Nazario, 2022). New and aspiring artists leveraged social media platforms to promote themselves. This could translate into gaining recognition, increased traffic to online events in which they participated, and greater sales of their exhibited works virtually. It presented an opportunity for young artists to begin establishing their reputations.

The students were certainly aware that not having a presence on social networks could, in the short or long term, diminish their chances of recognition, potentially impacting their professional prospects. Their portfolios, serving as introductions to their work, could be shared with interested audiences, opening doors to involvement in projects, participation on juries, or teaching opportunities. Whereas previously they sought participation in exhibitions to kickstart their careers and enhance their employability prospects, this role was assumed by social networks. Here, they could monitor responses to their posts, engage with professionals and institutions, sell artwork, and cultivate a clientele (Luzuriaga-Ubilla, 2022). Nonetheless, such endeavours demand a consistent social networking strategy to achieve success. It is also noteworthy to mention the presence of financial support channels for artists on these platforms, as well as micro-patronage options.

During the period of confinement, physical art seemed to take a back seat. While artworks were indeed marketed and sent via post, digital art prominently emerged. Items such as backgrounds for Zoom applications and NFT images gained traction. The interviews conducted revealed a notable inclination among many students towards digital illustration or painting. Recognising emerging trends, they acknowledge the indispensability of mastering graphic design tools in a world where art consumption occurs predominantly through screens. It is worth noting that among the most lucrative avenues for artists are the design industry, advertising, and video games (Fernández Vallbona, 2022).

Subsequently, the positive aspect of effective communication within the academic realm is underscored, encompassing interactions between students and teachers as well as amongst peers. In this regard, social networks are valued for facilitating ongoing studies and sustaining connections during periods of distance learning. They proved instrumental in submitting assignments and engaging in online tasks. While students turned to platforms like WhatsApp to seek clarifications from their peers, it cannot be asserted that virtual environments inherently fostered companionship. It was only with the adoption of hybrid learning modalities that a closer and, to some extent, more congenial rapport was re-established. The research indicates that the fifth-semester group maintained a WhatsApp group, excluding teachers, stating that it was reserved for informal communication amongst themselves.

The absence of camaraderie during the period of confinement likely impacted the teaching-learning process. When feedback was not shared through Google Classroom, students were unable to observe each other's work. Some resorted to requesting their peers to share their work via WhatsApp. Considering Vygotsky's concept of proximal development, which underscores the importance of social interactions for cognitive stimulation and skill development, the lack of knowledge about their peers' progress would likely have had a negative impact on them. Interestingly, upon returning to the classroom, students were surprised to discover the true dimensions, whether large or small of the works they had only seen through Classroom or WhatsApp.

Another significant aspect is the usefulness of social networks for obtaining references and generating new ideas. Art students often explore visually oriented platforms like Pinterest or Instagram, as they are rich sources of images for idea generation and inspiration. However, this "visual research" carries the risk of relying too heavily on trending or viral iconographies, thereby resulting in repetitive and less original works.

Finally, attention is drawn to the importance of social networks as educational aids, a notion that does not necessarily contradict the idea that networks are not highly beneficial for teaching visual arts. Rather, the emphasis lies on their specific role as support mechanisms. For instance, networks may facilitate interactive, dialogical, and participatory tools in certain activities, but they may not be suitable as the central focus for teaching drawing or painting.

6. Conclusions

This case study has uncovered the autonomous preferences of Visual Arts Degree students at the University of Cuenca regarding the utilisation of social networks within their education. Following the exposition of their preferences and a thorough consideration of the pros and cons delineated, an in-depth analysis has been conducted, which could potentially be extrapolated to higher education settings in visual and plastic arts across diverse contexts and countries.

The objective was to conduct a diagnostic assessment of the role of social networks in the academic lives of students and propose strategies to better engage with them. The findings may pave the way for

new avenues of study. Social networks represent a potentially valuable source of virtual resources. Building upon the data, it becomes possible to explore methods for motivating students within the teaching-learning process and enhancing their skills. Understanding student concerns necessitates an examination of how networks can be optimally integrated into various educational scenarios, including Emergency Remote Teaching, more structured Virtual Learning Environments, or even traditional in-person education, within the framework of an expanded curriculum.

Today, professions in the arts demand the cultivation of new proficiencies. While it may be unrealistic to transform visual arts students into social media specialists, it is feasible to enhance their proficiency in utilising Web 2.0 tools. Rather than solely crafting digital marketing personas, the focus should be on fostering competence in social network management, enabling students to propagate their creative outputs online, which is the predominant platform for many.

It is noteworthy how teachers and students often exhibit divergent preferences towards various social media platforms. Throughout the pandemic, these platforms served not only as sources of information but also as educational tools. Students actively engaged with them and comprehended their dynamics, perhaps even more effectively than their teachers. As the world undergoes rapid transformations, it becomes imperative for educators to update their technological acumen. Adaptation involves not only refining their skills in navigating new media but also enhancing their capacity to devise engaging educational methodologies. In essence, it is not merely about ICT proficiency, but primarily about pedagogical proficiency in utilising ICT.

Social networks may not consistently serve an educational purpose, yet innovative strategies based on co-creation or co-creativity can be devised. In higher education, it is imperative to incorporate ethical and deontological considerations, not solely linked to commercial interests. Networks can serve as platforms for proposing activist art projects and initiatives that promote a culture of engagement (Macaya and Cañabate, 2022).

Moreover, it is essential to recognise that students' beliefs are not immutable truths; rather, they reflect their experiences and practices and can be subject to change with shifting circumstances. Therefore, it is crucial to foster in them a critical perspective on visual language stereotypes, the implicit discourse of images, and their influence on our cognition and conduct (Agirre-Larizgoitia et al., 2020). This entails cultivating a reflective yet adaptable outlook on contemporary issues and a motivating and transformative approach to their own artistic endeavours.

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