COMMUNICATION, SOCIAL MEDIA AND ADOLESCENCE
The Use of Social Media in Adolescent Communication in the Basque Country and Navarre

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1. Theoretical Framework and the State of the Art

Digital technology has become an integral component of the lives of adolescents in Spain, with access becoming increasingly early and widespread. According to recent data, virtually all young people between the ages of 12 and 17 own a mobile device and use the Internet on a daily basis (UNICEF, 2021). This constant connectivity facilitates access to educational resources, interaction with peers, and exploration of personal interests. In the contemporary age, social media has become a pivotal aspect of the lives of young people, profoundly altering the manner in which they engage with each other (Burnette et al., 2017). This transformation can be attributed to the diverse demands for social interaction and acknowledgement that these platforms address (Throuvala et al., 2019; Vannucci and McCauley-Ohannessian, 2019).

During adolescence, a pivotal period for identity formation and the development of interpersonal relationships, social media plays a substantial role in enabling experimentation with diverse facets of personality and acquiring feedback from peers (Martínez and Olsson, 2019; Valkenburg and Peter, 2011). In this context, social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and WhatsApp have undergone a fundamental shift in their function, enabling adolescents to sustain connections with their immediate social circles whilst simultaneously accessing more extensive communities and diverse areas of interest.

In quantitative terms, 67% of social media users in Spain use it to interact with other people, a percentage that rises to 83% in the 12-17 age group (IAB, 2024). This figure represents approximately 30 million active users in the country (IAB, 2024). On a global scale, the number of users has grown exponentially, doubling since 2016 and exceeding 5 billion in 2024 (DataReportal, 2024).

Instagram has emerged as a predominant social media platform among Spanish adolescents, with a notable penetration rate of 83% among the 12-17 age group and an even higher prevalence of 95% among 18-24 year olds. This underscores its status as a pivotal space for interaction and self-expression, particularly among younger demographics. Conversely, TikTok has emerged as the second most prevalent platform among this age group, with a usage rate of 73% among 12- to 17-year-olds (IAB, 2024). WhatsApp is distinguished as the social network that receives the highest ratings from its users, with Spotify, YouTube and TikTok following closely behind (IAB, 2024). Conversely, Facebook, although still one of the most prominent and widely utilised social networks, has experienced a decline in popularity among younger demographics, who perceive it as a 'dated' platform (IAB, 2024).

On a global scale, users typically dedicate an average of 2 hours and 23 minutes per day to social media consumption (DataReportal, 2024). However, some young people describe their use of these platforms as 'practically constant' (Anderson et al., 2023), suggesting a pattern of uninterrupted and potentially problematic interaction.

Intensive social media use has given rise to a number of concerns regarding its potential negative impacts on adolescents. For instance, 57% of young people concede that social media distracts them from significant activities such as studying or completing homework assignments (Rideout and Robb, 2018). Moreover, research has indicated a correlation between social media utilisation and mental health issues. A meta-analysis involving 21,473 participants concluded that fear of missing out (FoMO), promoted by social media, is strongly correlated with depression, anxiety and neurotic tendencies (Fioravanti et al., 2021). This state of hyperconnectivity also has practical implications: one in five young people admit to checking their mobile notifications while driving, which poses a risk to road safety (Rideout and Robb, 2018).

Furthermore, 21% of adolescents who utilise social media platforms report a decline in life satisfaction, attributed to the perception of their peers' lives on digital channels (Lenhart, 2015). A 2013 study of Facebook users revealed a negative correlation between the extent of social network usage and subjective well-being. The study's findings indicated that individuals who utilised Facebook to a greater extent reported diminished levels of life satisfaction (Kross et al., 2013). Interacting with other people in person did not predict these negative results. In relation to this phenomenon, numerous studies have underscored the tendency to idealise the lives of users on select social networks, such as Instagram or Facebook. This tendency has been observed to precipitate a decline in self-esteem and self-concept among other members and has even been linked to the promotion of risky eating behaviours (Aucapiña and Campodónico, 2024; Burnette et al., 2017; Schmuck et al., 2019). It has been demonstrated by other studies, for example that conducted by Rubio-Hernández et al. (2024), that the relationship between social media use and self-esteem can demonstrate a combination of positive and negative outcomes.

This suggests that factors such as the nature of the interaction and the perception of online acceptance may act as mediators in this association.

In terms of communication patterns, it has been observed that adolescents have integrated social media into their daily lives, using it not only for entertainment and information, but also as 'relationship technologies' that transform traditional forms of social interaction (Gallego-Pérez, 2009). These platforms have become the most widespread communication system, in which 'social interaction is no longer the exclusive domain of face-to-face contexts' (Sánchez-Vera et al., 2013, p. 351). Recent studies have indicated that the primary motivation for adolescents to utilise social media platforms is to maintain communication with their social circles, namely friends and family (DataReportal, 2024). This phenomenon of pervasive communication is exemplified by the predominance of instant messaging platforms such as WhatsApp, which is utilised by an overwhelming majority of the Spanish population (95.6%) (AIMC, 2024).

Digital platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger facilitate constant, real-time communication, thereby enabling synchronous and asynchronous interaction. However, despite the predominance of social media, young people value and recognise the importance of face-to-face communication for maintaining meaningful relationships. Indeed, in contrast to the initial online applications, which were regarded as sanctuaries from reality (Turkle, 1997), contemporary digital platforms reflect, complement and reinforce offline relationships. Indeed, online communication has been shown to complement face-to-face interactions and facilitate the development of social skills in adolescents (Reich et al., 2012; Rubio-Hernández et al., 2024).

Furthermore, social media facilitates the establishment of communities based on shared interests, irrespective of geographical distance. This phenomenon is further compounded by the predominance of digital interactions in the lives of young people, leading to the proliferation of online friendships. A survey conducted by Lenhart (2015) revealed that 57% of adolescents have encountered a new acquaintance through online means.

A study conducted in the United States has revealed that a significant proportion of adolescents engage in social interactions with their peers in person outside of the academic environment. However, for the majority of individuals, this is not a common occurrence. A mere 25% of the sample reported spending time with friends in person (outside of school) on a daily basis. However, the percentage of adolescents who communicate with friends on social media on a daily basis is 55%, which is more than double the percentage of those who engage in daily face-to-face interaction (Lenhart, 2015). A plethora of studies have indicated that a significant proportion of young people express a predilection for social media due to its convenience and capacity to facilitate multiple concurrent conversations. A survey conducted by Rideout and Robb (2018) revealed that 42% of boys and girls concur that social media has resulted in a reduction of time they could spend with friends in person.

The decline in face-to-face interactions has the potential to engender adverse consequences for the development of adolescents' social skills. These include the ability to interpret and respond to non-verbal cues, manage interpersonal conflicts and form deep relationships. It is evident that the development of these skills requires practice in face-to-face contexts. Turkle (2015) posits that reliance on digital communication can diminish empathy, the capacity for solitude, and introspection. Moreover, research has demonstrated that excessive reliance on virtual interactions can diminish the quality of personal relationships and increase social isolation (Primack et al., 2017). These findings emphasise the significance of balancing digital experiences with face-to-face interactions, a balance that is crucial for social media to complement, rather than supersede, young people's social and emotional development.

Conversely, Moreno and Gannon (2013) and Reid-Chassiakos (2016) have identified positive effects associated with social media use. Digital platforms have been shown to facilitate the establishment and maintenance of a broad and diverse range of social relationships among adolescents (Nesi et al., 2018). This phenomenon has been particularly noted in cases of physical or social isolation, suggesting that digital platforms may serve as a crucial source of social and emotional support for adolescents. Furthermore, moderate use of these platforms has been shown to have significant benefits for the development of communication skills, particularly among adolescents who face difficulties socialising in face-to-face contexts (Uhls et al., 2017). The extant literature suggests that the impact of social media is not inherently negative or positive, but rather that its effect depends on a number of interrelated factors, including frequency of use, the content accessed, and the context in which it is used. These

variables are critical to understanding how digital platforms can influence the well-being and social dynamics of this age group.

1.1. Objectives

The overarching aim of this research endeavour is to undertake a comprehensive analysis of contemporary youth communication patterns, specifically among individuals aged 11 to 23 residing in the Basque Country and Navarre. The primary focus of this analysis is to examine the extent to which these individuals exhibit a preference for digital communication over face-to-face interactions. Regarding the specific objectives, firstly, the study explores the preferences of adolescents when communicating via social networks or face-to-face. Conversely, it examines the impact of digital platforms on their face-to-face interactions.

2. Methodology

The present study was conducted using data from the Ikusiker panel, which was established in 2018 and administers annual surveys of students aged between 11 and 23 years. This panel facilitates the collection of anonymous and voluntary information on various aspects pertaining to the utilisation of social networks by young individuals. The participants were divided into two primary age categories for the purpose of analysis. The survey was conducted on a sample of 3,000 secondary and high school students between the ages of 11 and 17. The surveys in this age group were carried out in collaboration with seven schools involved in the project: two in Bizkaia, two in Gipuzkoa, two in Navarre and one in the province of Alava. In all cases, students completed the questionnaires during school hours using the school's own computers.

Conversely, a survey was conducted among 3,000 students from the University of the Basque Country/Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea (UPV/EHU) and the Public University of Navarre (UPNA). The survey was administered to students aged between 18 and 23 years. The sample comprised young people from diverse geographical locations, genders, academic disciplines and courses.

The initial research survey is conducted in person, with the objective of elucidating the nature of the project and ensuring the continued participation of the panel members throughout the study. Those who elect to participate in the project are subsequently provided with a series of links, which they are required to utilise in order to conduct surveys via the WhatsApp platform on a regular basis.

Following the reception of the results, the statistical information presented by the tool employed in the online questionnaires and the Excel programme is utilised for the analysis and elaboration of the results. The present research examines three sections or blocks of questions asked to students throughout the 2024 academic year. The initial section of the text provides a general overview of the utilisation of social networks. In this section, panellists were invited to discuss the platforms they utilised, as well as the frequency with which they accessed these platforms on a daily basis. The results of the questionnaires indicate a tendency among students to utilise the Instagram platform for communication purposes, as opposed to the more commonly employed WhatsApp. In order to gather more information about this tendency, respondents were asked about the purpose for which they use Instagram.

The second part of the analysis focuses on adolescents' preferences related to face-to-face and digital communication. In this regard, the participants were invited to select their preferred mode of communication (face-to-face or digital) for the discussion of five distinct subjects: 1) illness; 2) positive news; 3) current affairs; 4) sexual-affective relationships; and 5) informal topics (gossip, humour...). As illustrated in Section 3.2, the ensuing data has been collated and is presented in tabular form. Furthermore, in this particular block, respondents were invited to indicate their preferred mode of communication, whether in person or via social networks.

The third part of the study focuses on analysing the influence of digital communication on face-to-face communication. In this section, a series of inquiries were posed, including the following: to what extent do individuals perceive the subjects discussed on social networks to be reflected in their real-life interactions? Ultimately, the participants were invited to express their opinions on the future importance of social media.

3. Results

3.1. General Use of Social Media

As illustrated in Table 1, Instagram has been identified as the most prevalent platform among young individuals in the Basque Country and Navarre, thereby solidifying its status as the predominant social network within this demographic. WhatsApp is the second most popular platform, primarily used for direct communication. It is followed by TikTok, a platform that has gained considerable popularity thanks to its short, dynamic video format. YouTube and X (formerly Twitter) are positioned in third and fourth place, respectively, although the former exhibits a substantial disparity in its level of utilisation. It is noteworthy that X appears to have diminished in relevance among adolescent demographics.

The findings further demonstrate that Facebook, once a prominent platform, exhibits minimal penetration among this demographic, thereby substantiating its gradual transition towards a more mature audience. It is evident that alternative social media platforms such as BeReal and Telegram have also demonstrated a decline in their user base, indicating that despite the provision of specific features, these platforms have not succeeded in garnering a substantial following among adolescents in this particular region.

Table 1. Most used platforms

	Total
	1.0.0,0
Instagram	3.6,3
WhatsApp	2.4,9
TikTok	2.0,7
YouTube	9,5
X (Twitter)	7,4
Twitch	0,5
BeReal	0,3
Telegram	0,1
Facebook	0,1
Other	0,4

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

It is evident that the majority of young people utilise these platforms more than once a day. With the exception of WhatsApp, which is generally used multiple times a day, panellists were asked to indicate which of these networks they used "more than once a day".

Figure 1. Percentage of people using each platform "more than once a day".
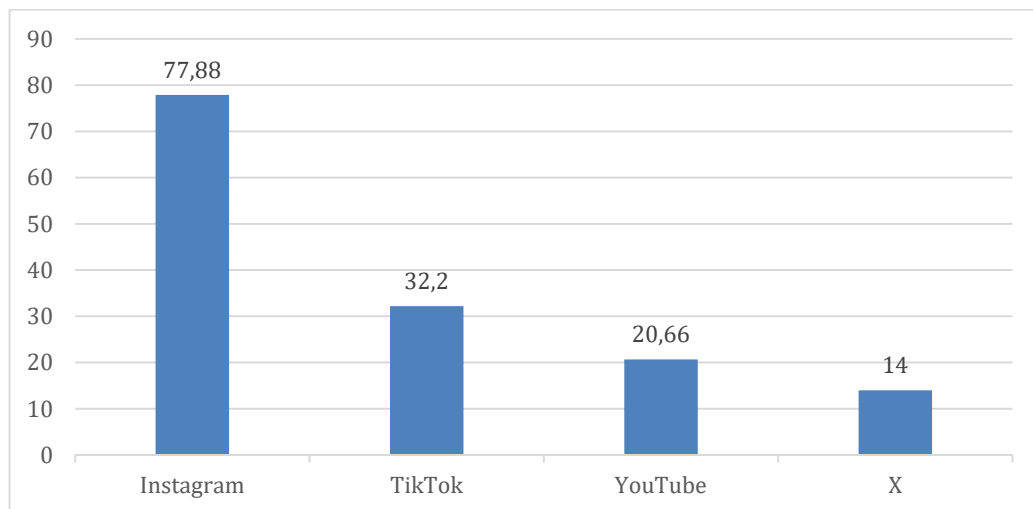
Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

Each social networking platform offers a unique set of functions that adapt to different needs and preferences. In Spain, WhatsApp is the primary means of communication among adolescents. This

platform facilitates not only the transmission of text messages, but also voice and video calls, in addition to the sharing of multimedia content. Consequently, it has become a practical and widely accepted option.

Instagram, although initially conceived as a visual social network focused on the publication of photographs and videos, has been acquiring a growing role as a means of communication among young people. This phenomenon can be attributed, at least in part, to the presence of features such as direct messages and private stories, which have been demonstrated to facilitate more personal and expeditious interactions. The data presented in the following table indicates that 17.1% of respondents utilise this platform "sometimes" or "many times" for the purpose of communicating with friends.

Table 2. What they use Instagram for

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Many times
To keep in touch with my friends	38,44	32,97	1,82	15,3
To entertain me	0,64	6,16	26,54	55,2
To study or work	47,4	31,07	8,01	2,06
To show the photos/videos I take	19,89	37,53	24,52	6,59
To be informed about what's going on in the world	9,76	25,8	36,23	16,75
To buy things	73,29	11,26	3,51	0,48
For flirting	43,9	28,96	13,17	2,51

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

The following evaluation utilises a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 corresponds to "very bad" and 10 to "very good", to rate the most popular social networks as evaluated by the panellists. A more detailed analysis of the results was conducted by segmenting them into two distinct groups: secondary and high school students, on the one hand, and students from the University of the Basque Country/Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea (UPV/EHU) and the Public University of Navarre (UPNA), on the other.

As demonstrated in Table 3, Instagram and TikTok received particularly high ratings from middle and high school students, with an average score of 7.9, reflecting their popularity and the positive regard young people have for these platforms. Conversely, X has a rating of below 5, suggesting significantly lower usage and perception among this group.

A variation in ratings is evident when the results for university students are considered. A decline in ratings for Instagram, YouTube and TikTok is evident when compared to the secondary and high school groups. Conversely, X exhibits a marginal enhancement in its rating among university students, though it persists in being the platform least appreciated.

**Table 3.** Rating of social networks

Social Networking	Secondary and high school students	University students
Instagram	7,9	6,4
YouTube	7,4	7,2
TikTok	7,9	7,5
X	4,5	5,4

Source: Own elaboration, 2025

3.2. Face-to-Face Versus Digital Communication

Despite the increased prevalence of communication via digital platforms, the survey results indicate that young people still place a high value on face-to-face interactions for the development of meaningful relationships. A survey of 83% of panellists revealed that they feel "a little more comfortable" or "much more comfortable" discussing an illness in person than on digital platforms.
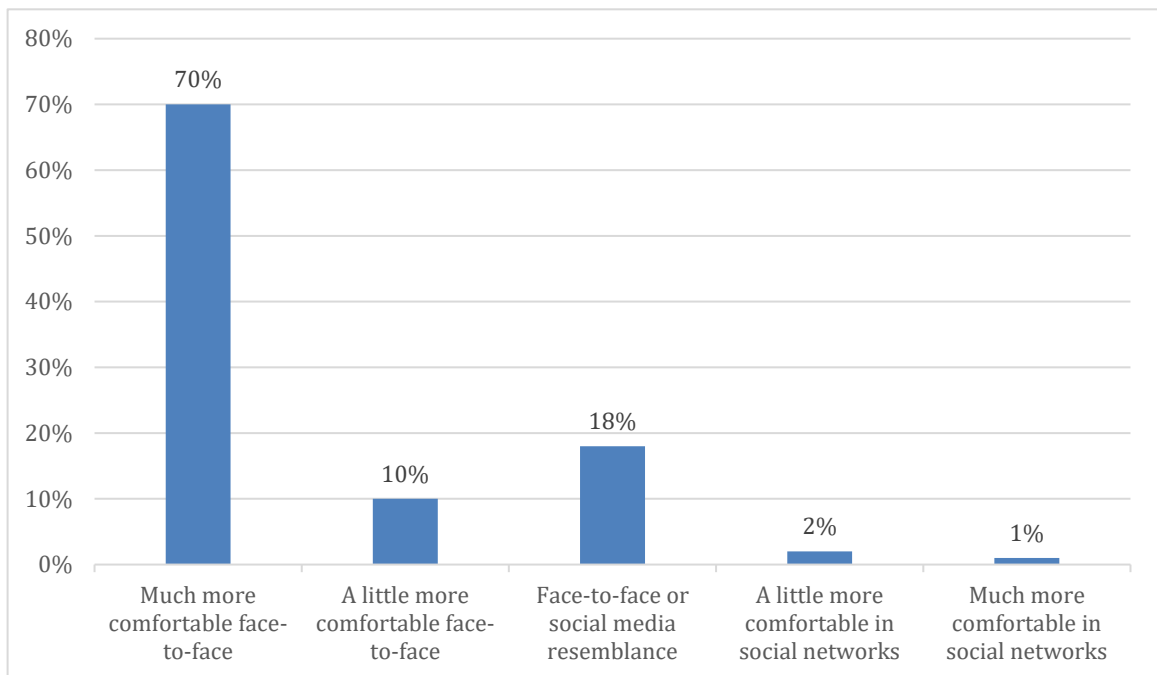
Figure 2. In which space do you feel most comfortable talking about an illness with your friends?
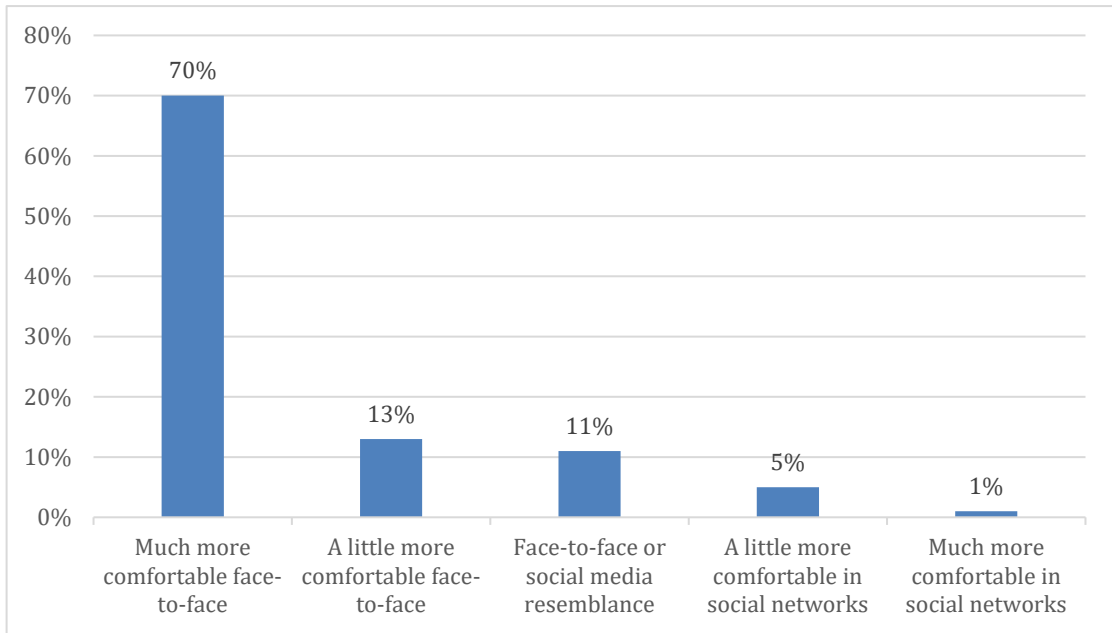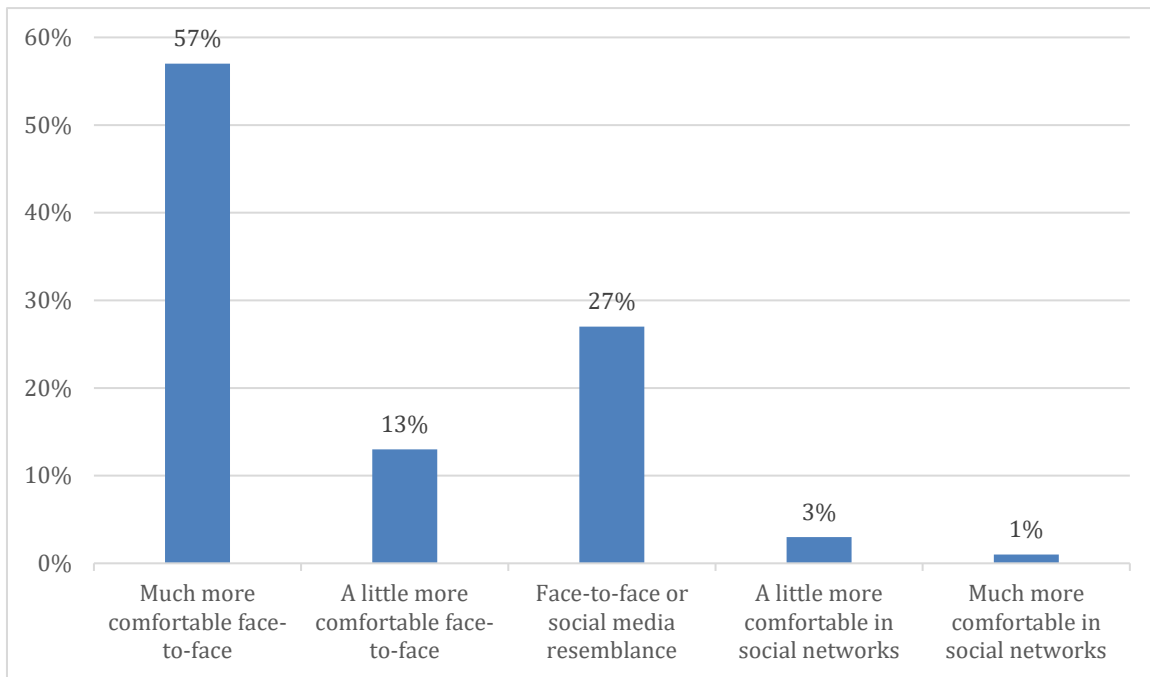

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

In the context of interactions pertaining to positive news or current affairs, the proportion of students who opt for in-person communication remains significant.

Figure 3. In which space do you feel most comfortable talking about good news with your friends?

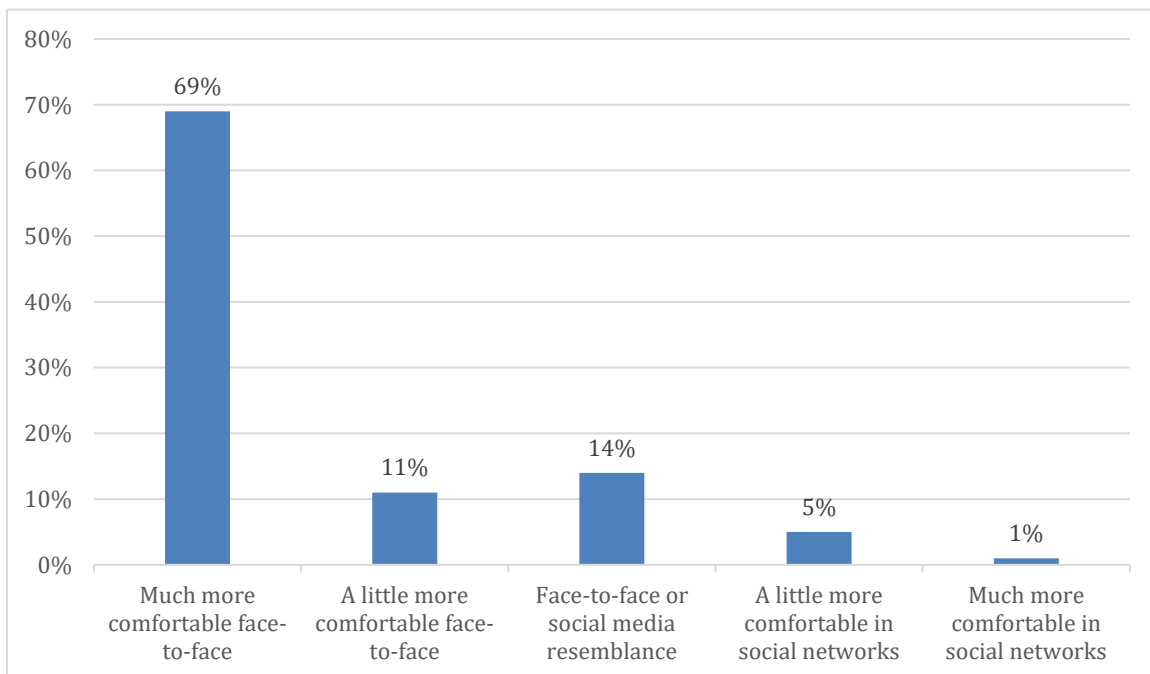Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

Figure 4. In which space do you feel most comfortable talking about a topical issue with your friends?
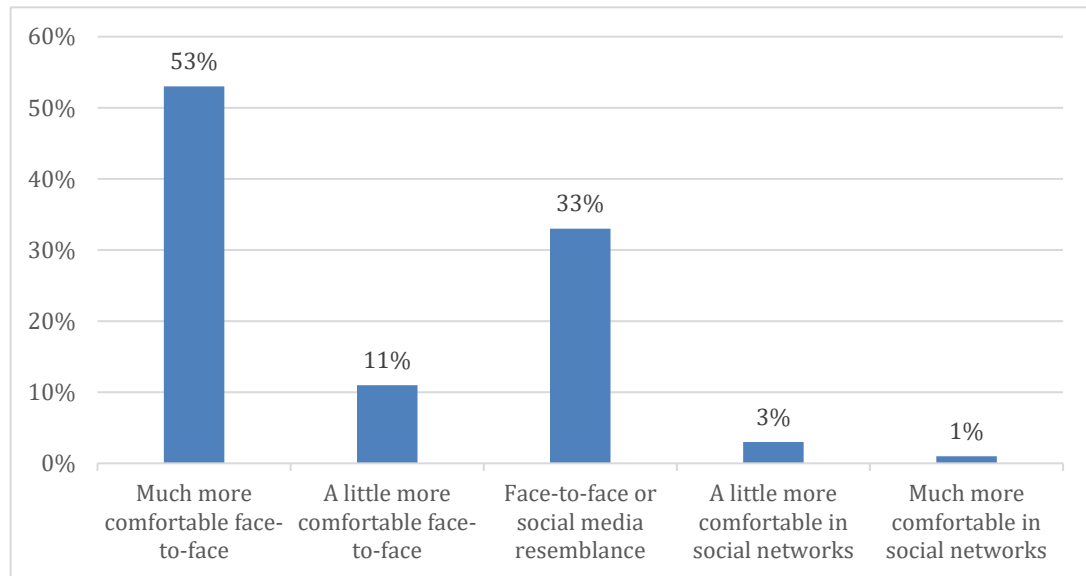

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

With regard to sexual-affective and informal topics, the panellists continue to demonstrate a preference for face-to-face discussions.

Figure 5. In which space do you feel most comfortable talking about sexual-affective relationships with your friends?
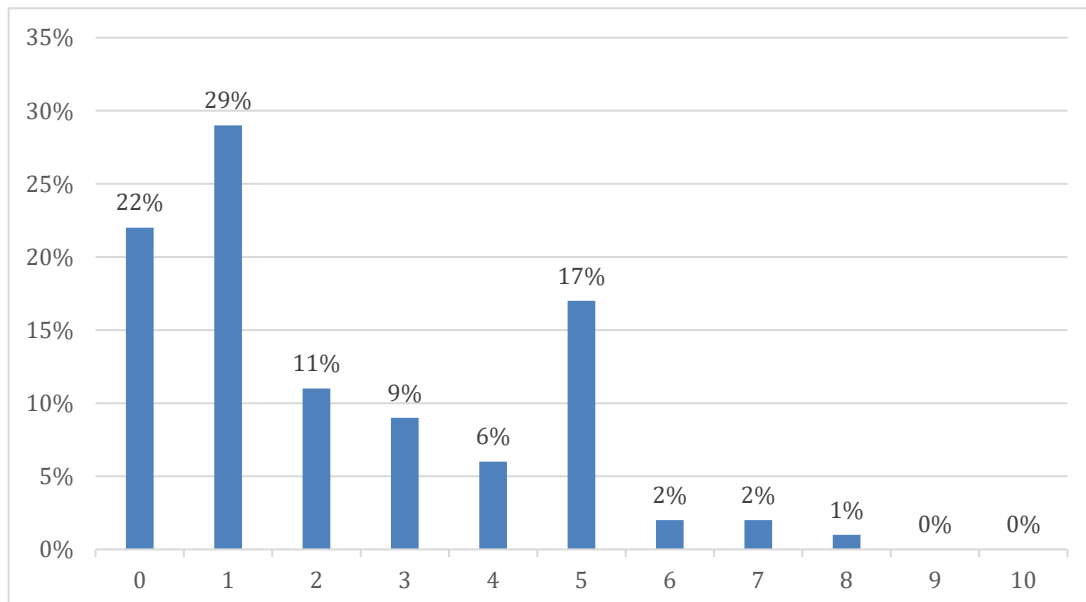

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

Figure 6. In which space do you feel most comfortable talking about informal topics (gossip, humour, etc.) with your friends?

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

In the context of relationships in general (with friends, family, etc.), it is observed that a mere 5% of individuals prefer to engage in such interactions via social networks. The value 0 is indicative of an individual who prefers face-to-face interaction, while the value 10 is indicative of an individual who prefers to use social media.

Figure 7. In general, in which space do you feel more comfortable relating to others (with your classmates, friends, family, sexual-affective relationships...)?

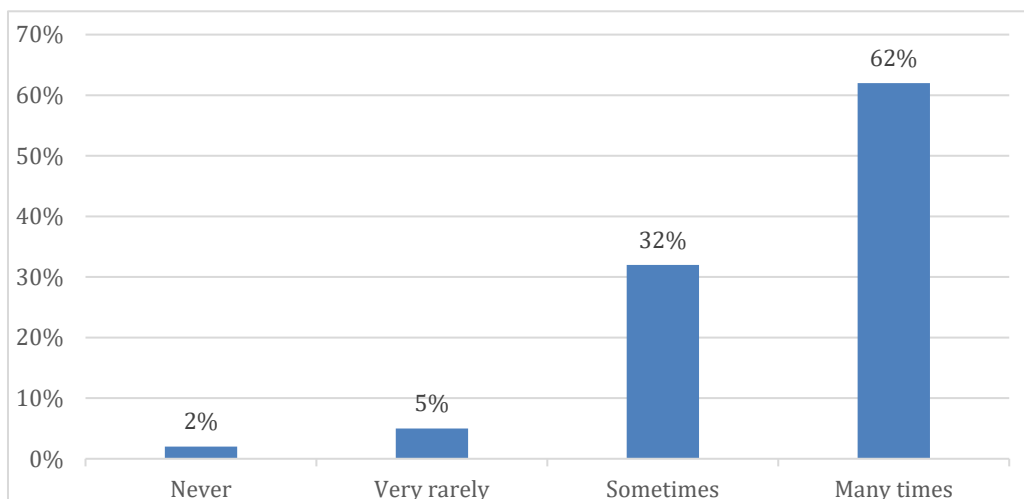Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

3.3. The Influence of Digital Communication on Face-to-Face Communication

The third section of the study explores how digital communication affects face-to-face interactions among young people, examining the impact of digital platforms on their social lives offline. The results obtained in the second section reveal a clear preference for offline communication, which is valued more highly by participants than interactions mediated by digital technologies. Nevertheless, despite this

preference for direct communication, face-to-face interactions are not immune to the influence of content generated on social networks.

The data show that young people's face-to-face conversations are strongly shaped by the topics and trends circulating on digital platforms. Notably, 94% of panellists reported that topics from social media often carry over into their face-to-face conversations, either "many times" or "sometimes". This finding emphasises the significant role social media plays in shaping communication dynamics among young people and highlights how digital content influences social interactions, even in more traditional, physical settings.

Figure 8. Do you think that the topics that appear on social networks then appear in face-to-face conversations?

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

The results also demonstrate that 92% of participants believe that users tend to reiterate the opinions they find on social networks without verifying them against other sources of information. Of the participants in the survey, 53% indicated that this phenomenon occurred "many times," while 39% reported it as occurring "sometimes". This data suggests a strong tendency among adolescents to accept and reproduce the discourse and opinions that circulate in the digital sphere without subjecting them to critical analysis or exhaustive verification.

Figure 9. Do you think that the opinions and points of view that appear on social networks are then repeated in face-to-face conversations without being modified or contrasted?
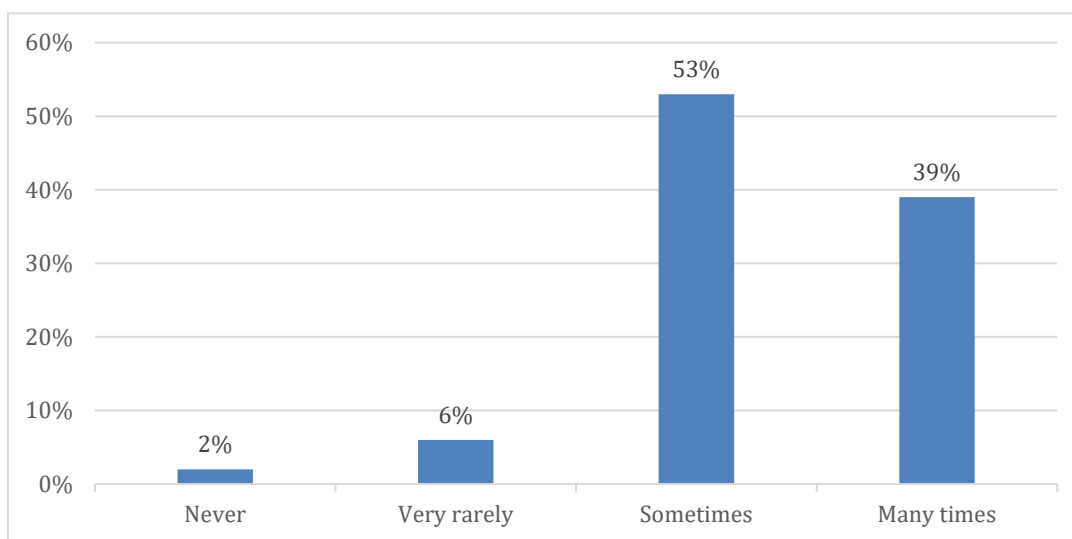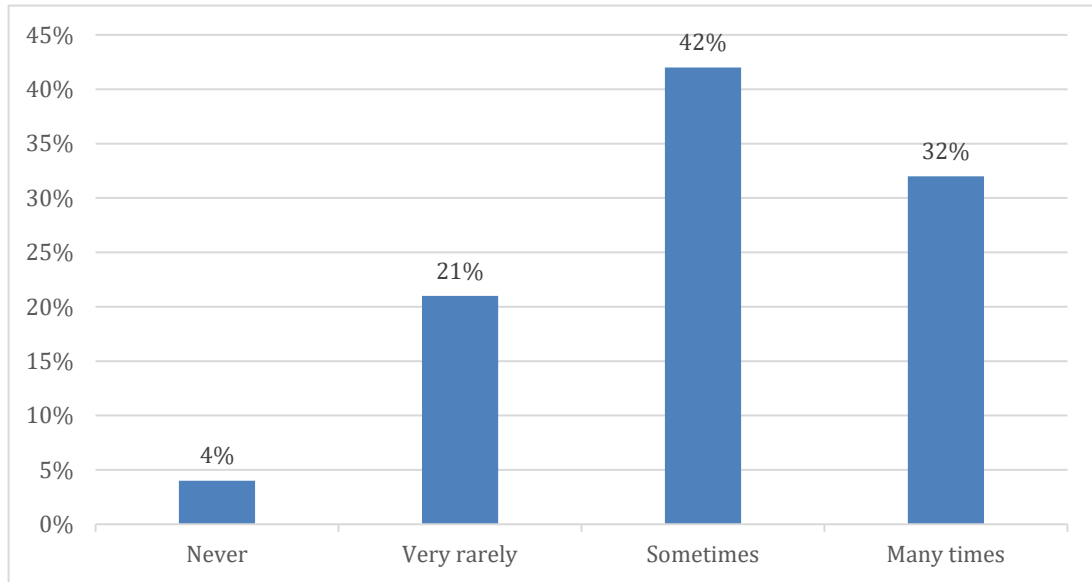

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

In addition to reproducing ideas and opinions, 74% of the panellists acknowledge that they tend to incorporate linguistic styles and expressions they hear or see on social media into their speech, either

"sometimes" or "many times". This phenomenon is indicative of the way digital platforms exert influence not only on the content of conversations, but also on the manner in which young people express themselves verbally. A mere 4% of the panellists affirm that this phenomenon does not apply to them, thereby underscoring the pervasive influence of social media on the linguistic patterns of adolescents. This finding suggests that social networks act as a channel of linguistic socialisation, shaping not only young people's ideas and opinions, but also the way they communicate and interact in their everyday environment.

Figure 10. Have you ever repeated ways of speaking or expressions you have heard or seen on social media?

Source: Own elaboration, 2025

The aforementioned points lead to the conclusion that young people feel a constant pressure to be present on social networks, perceiving them as an essential tool to stay connected to their social environment. This need for digital connection reflects the profound integration of social platforms into the daily lives of adolescents. This perception of 'connectedness' through social networks appears to have become a fundamental component in the formation of their social identity and the integration within peer groups. This phenomenon underscores the growing reliance on these platforms in their social and communicative lives.

Figure 11. On a scale of 1 to 10, to what extent do you think young people are forced to be on social networks to feel connected?
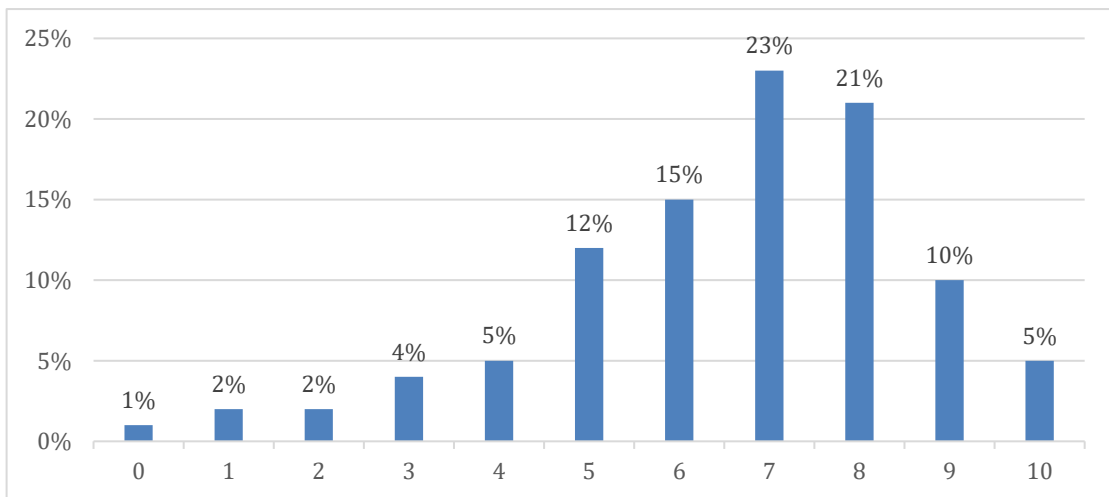
Source: Own elaboration, 2025

Finally, the panellists were asked to share their insights on the future role of social networks, a response that may be influenced by both the prevailing societal opinions (the hegemonic discourse circulating in the media and popular culture) and by young people's personal experiences of using these platforms. As illustrated in Figure 12, it is evident that students anticipate an increase in the relevance of social networks in the domain of social relationships.

Figure 12. In a few years, do you think that social networks will have less or more weight in social relations?
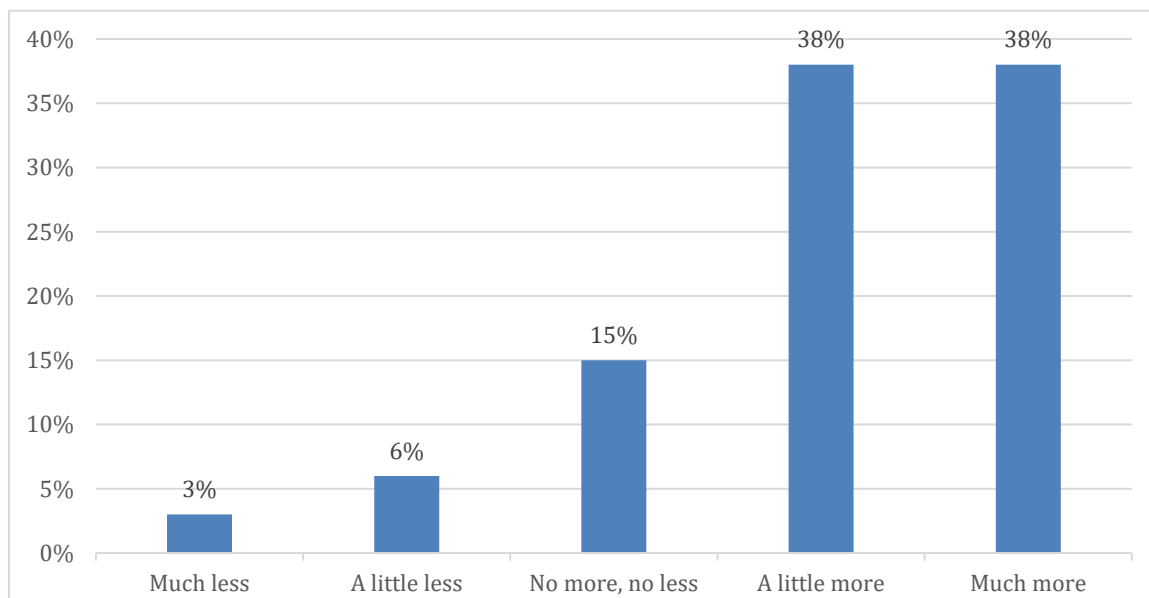
Source: Own elaboration, 2025

4. Discussion

This study serves to reinforce the notion that social networks have become a pivotal aspect of the lives of young individuals aged between 11 and 23 in the Basque Country and Navarre, a phenomenon that has also been documented among young people in other regions of the world. However, the findings of this study demonstrate that digital interactions have not yet fully superseded face-to-face communication. The majority of respondents still value face-to-face interaction for sensitive or important topics, such as illness or sexual relationships, suggesting that, despite the digitalisation of society and the growing use of online platforms, certain aspects of human communication continue to prioritise more direct and personal interaction.

However, while young people recognise the value of offline interactions, there is a clear dependence on digital platforms when it comes to maintaining social relationships. This phenomenon is reflected in the fact that 86% of respondents allocated a score between 5 and 10 to the question of whether they feel they need to be present on social networks to feel "connected". This pressure, as confirmed in this study, is a key factor driving young people to maintain a constant presence in the digital sphere.

In relation to the fear of being left out or not being 'in the loop', several studies have identified that people who experience high levels of FoMO tend to spend more time on social networks. This can lead to problematic behaviours related to overuse of these platforms (Fioravanti et al., 2021). Concomitantly, research undertaken in the UK with 321 users identified a robust correlation between FoMO and social network fatigue, as well as a propensity towards online social comparison. This lends further credence to the notion that this sentiment of apprehension regarding being offline exerts an influence on both the duration spent on platforms and the emotional experience of users (Tandon et al., 2021).

FoMO has been demonstrated to influence not only the amount of time people spend on social networks, but also how they perceive and emotionally process this digital environment, thus affecting their psychological well-being. This phenomenon underscores the necessity to address not only personal factors, such as emotional management and self-regulation of use, but also structural factors, such as the design of the platforms themselves, which are designed to perpetually capture the user's attention. The interplay between these factors necessitates a comprehensive intervention that seeks to mitigate the adverse effects of FoMO and its implications for users' mental health and well-being.

Another crucial aspect to consider is the manner in which social media influences not only communication, but also users' behaviour and perceptions. Research indicates that social media conversations frequently influence face-to-face interactions, with a significant proportion of panellists acknowledging that topics discussed online often extend into real-life interactions. This phenomenon underscores the intricate interconnection between virtual and physical environments in the social dynamics of young people, thereby suggesting that social networks function as a pivotal space for the generation of conversation topics which subsequently permeate into face-to-face interactions.

Furthermore, the utilisation of social media appears to exert a substantial influence on the linguistic expression and opinion formation of users, as they frequently adopt the ideas, idioms and expressions they encounter on these platforms. This behaviour is indicative of the manner in which social networks contribute to the construction and dissemination of specific linguistic and thought patterns, which young people frequently adopt in their everyday communications. This phenomenon has both positive and negative implications. It has been demonstrated that the internet has the capacity to facilitate the rapid dissemination of information and the formation of collective opinions. This process has the potential to engender a sense of belonging and the establishment of virtual communities. However, it is important to note that this phenomenon also carries inherent risks. Specifically, it can result in a dearth of critical reflection, thereby fostering the uncritical adoption of ideas and positions without rigorous examination. This is a matter of concern when viewed from the perspectives of both personal and social development.

The impact of social media on wellbeing and mental health is a multifaceted phenomenon that is contingent on a number of factors. Consequently, as the utilisation of social media is anticipated to rise, a growing number of respondents (76%) in our research concur with this prediction, the necessity to educate adolescents in the judicious and critical use of digital platforms becomes paramount. It is imperative that education not only focuses on the prevention of risks associated with Internet use, but also on the cultivation of competencies for critical reflection on online content and interactions.

The role of families, schools and health professionals is crucial in empowering children in the digital environment. However, the extant data reflect a worrying situation with regard to the preparation and supervision that young people receive. According to a recent survey, 24.5% of parents in Spain have never discussed the dangers and risks of the Internet with their children, and only 36% of children have received cybersecurity training at school (Kaspersky, 2023). This deficit in digital education underscores a lack of awareness regarding the risks inherent in the virtual environment, which is reflected in a paucity of parental supervision. A significant number of parents appear to lack awareness of their role as role models in the presence of screens, as well as the significance of fostering and establishing healthy habits within the domestic environment. A mere 29.1% of families impose rules or limits on the use of the Internet or electronic devices, 23.9% restrict the hours of use, and a negligible 13.2% control the content accessible to their children (UNICEF, 2021).

In this regard, experts emphasise the necessity for families, schools, and health professionals to comprehend the risks associated with excessive technology use and to advocate strategies that empower minors in the digital environment (Hooft Graafland, 2018; Muppalla et al., 2023, Ricci et al., 2022). Research has also underscored the necessity to enhance critical thinking skills in adolescents, empowering them to navigate social networks safely and effectively (Pérez-García et al., 2024). It is recommended that educational programmes be implemented to cultivate digital and analytical competencies, thereby empowering young individuals to navigate social networks while circumventing the perils associated with perilous challenges and misinformation. Social media has the capacity to complement and enhance formal educational settings, fostering collaboration, creativity and critical thinking (Martinez and Olsson, 2019), yet the absence of proper guidance is to be condemned.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that although social media have profoundly transformed the way young people communicate, there remain circumstances in which face-to-face interaction is still considered irreplaceable. The future of communication among adolescents appears to be intrinsically linked to the development of social media; however, further research and reflection on how to balance the use of these platforms with the need to preserve the richness of more direct and personal human interactions is essential.

5. Acknowledgements

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