



## SOCIAL MEDIA AND SELF-HARM: Perceptions Among University Students in Spain

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### KEYWORDS

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### ABSTRACT

*The rise of non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) among young people has intensified debate on the role of social media as spaces for information, socialization, and mental health risks. This study examines the perceptions of university students in Spain regarding NSSI and the need for digital content regulation. A survey of 1,011 participants revealed that 31% identified social media as their main source of information on self-harm, 11% had searched for content on Twitter (30%) and TikTok (30%), and 95% supported stronger regulation to prevent its dissemination, highlighting the ambivalent role of platforms between support and risk.*

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## 1. Introduction

Non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) is not a recent phenomenon and has been conceptualised in various ways over time. In previous decades, it was associated with mental health disorders, sexual abuse and domestic violence (Faura-García et al., 2021). In 2014, self-injurious behaviour (SIB) was incorporated into the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) (American Psychiatric Association, 2014) as a distinct clinical entity, highlighting the need for further research and monitoring by health professionals. However, self-harm is not currently considered a mental disorder in itself nor necessarily a precursor to suicide. Nevertheless, the DSM-5 emphasises that this behaviour ‘should be a focus of clinical attention’ (DSM-5, 2022) (American Psychiatric Association, 2022).

Recent years have seen a worldwide increase in this behaviour, with at least 14 million episodes of self-harm reported annually, equivalent to a rate of approximately 60 cases per 100,000 inhabitants (Moran et al., 2024). International research estimates that the lifetime prevalence of self-harm reaches 14% in children and adolescents, while in the adult population it declines to 3% (Moran et al., 2024). This behaviour typically begins between the ages of 11 and 15 (Ariza, 2022; Jans et al., 2017; Nock, 2010; Vega et al., 2017). However, these figures may underestimate the true prevalence, as many individuals who self-harm do not seek professional help, meaning that reliable data based solely on hospital admissions or consultations are limited. Moreover, these data are fragmented, and there is currently no national or regional database in our country that centralises such information.

Self-harm is a manifestation of profound emotional distress, through which individuals seek to alleviate their suffering by inflicting physical harm on themselves, such as cuts, blows or burns to the body surface. Its primary function is to provide relief from pain and serve as a means of emotional regulation (Nock, 2014). This behaviour has increased alarmingly among young people over the past decade. In Spain, the Anar Foundation, through its *Annual Report. Teléfono/Chat Anar* (2023), has highlighted a concerning rise in calls from minors seeking help for self-harming behaviour. According to the report, requests for support in such situations have increased nearly sevenfold over the last five years, representing a 592% rise compared with previous years. The number of reported cases grew from 484 in 2019 to 3,348 in 2023, reflecting a 3.2% increase compared with the previous year. These figures illustrate a troubling trend and underscore the growing incidence of self-harm among minors in the country.

In addition, the Generalitat de Catalunya, in collaboration with the Departments of Health and Education, conducted an Emotional Well-being Survey in 2022, in which 1,900 educational centres participated. The results indicate that 26.8% of young people aged 11 to 18 have engaged in self-harming behaviour at some point. These findings, published in *El Periódico* (Pérez, 2023) and in the official report of the Generalitat de Catalunya (2023), underscore the seriousness of the situation and highlight the urgent need to address this issue through a comprehensive approach involving both the educational community and mental health services.

In December 2023, the Manantial Foundation published a report entitled *#Rayadas. La salud mental de la población joven en España* (*The Mental Health of Young People in Spain*), which presents a concerning picture of the prevalence of self-harm among young people. According to the report, 11.7 per cent of individuals aged 16 to 24 report engaging in self-harm repeatedly, while 10 per cent acknowledge having done so occasionally. These figures underscore the scale of a phenomenon that affects a substantial proportion of the country’s youth population.

The scale of this phenomenon is not limited to Spain. In the United Kingdom, one in 15 adolescents engaged in self-harm during the first COVID-19 lockdown, with self-harm being twice as common among those who reported experiencing intense loneliness, which was identified as a risk factor during this period (Geulayov et al., 2024). Similarly, the Spanish Paediatrics Association and collaborating organisations published a guide in 2022 entitled *Assessment and Clinical Management of Self-Harm in Adolescence: An Evidence-Based Protocol*. This document estimates that the prevalence of self-harm among adolescents reaches 27.6%. The guide classifies self-harm as a ‘major public health problem’ and emphasises adolescence as a stage of ‘particular vulnerability’ to the onset of such behaviour. This perspective underscores the urgent need to address self-harm in this age group through preventive measures and early intervention in order to mitigate its negative impact on young people’s mental health.

Various factors can contribute to the onset of self-harming behaviour, including interpersonal difficulties, depression, anxiety, trauma, victimisation, substance abuse and personality disorders (Valencia-Agudo et al., 2018). In many cases, self-harm functions as a coping mechanism, providing temporary relief and a sense of control over emotional distress (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). However, this strategy is maladaptive and avoidance-based, as it compromises physical integrity without addressing the underlying causes. Rather than promoting long-term psychological well-being, the individual resorts to an immediate means of escaping suffering (Angelakis and Gooding, 2021).

Although repetition of this behaviour may offer momentary relief and a transient sense of well-being, it often generates feelings of guilt and can evolve into a cyclical pattern, potentially developing into behavioural addiction (Fonseca-Pedrero and Al-Halabí, 2024). This phenomenon underscores the importance of early intervention and a comprehensive therapeutic approach that addresses not only the self-harming behaviour itself, but also the underlying factors that sustain it.

Accordingly, this study seeks to understand young people's perceptions in order to gain first-hand knowledge of their awareness of self-harming behaviour, its representation on social media, and their opinions regarding the control of content that may encourage such behaviour.

## 2. Review of the Literature

Over the past decade, there has been growing interest within the scientific community in understanding young people's interactions on social media, leading to studies examining how these spaces may influence engagement in self-harming behaviour and how digital platforms manage related content (Alhassan et al., 2021; Khasawneh et al., 2020). This interest is prompted by the marked increase in self-harm and suicidal behaviours among adolescents on social media. Abi-Jaoude et al. (2020) reported a 15 per cent increase in posts relating to stressful situations on social media between 2013 and 2017. Furthermore, approximately 70% of adolescents aged 13 to 17 own a smartphone and are active on at least one social media platform, spending an average of more than five hours per day online. Social media use has been associated with increased body image concerns and the development of eating disorders (Holland and Tiggemann, 2017). Some studies have also explored the potential harmful effects of both exposure to and posting of self-harming acts on these platforms, approaching the issue from various perspectives (Atauri-Mezquida et al. 2025).

Jhaver et al. (2021) adopt a positive perspective on social media, focusing their study on hate speech. Their examination of platforms' responses to toxic messages is noteworthy, as it could be applied to issues relating to health and self-harming behaviour. They analysed the accounts of three influential extremist figures on Twitter, Alex Jones, Milo Yiannopoulos and Owen Benjamin, who collectively generated over 49 million tweets, in order to assess whether the platform is capable of removing toxic content, both from followers and from the influencers themselves, and whether moderation constitutes an effective means of detoxifying major social networks. The study found that Twitter removed a substantial number of conversations, thereby significantly reducing levels of toxicity among followers. Platforms employ a combination of human moderators, who work to detect inappropriate behaviour (Seering, 2020), and automated tools that remove unsuitable messages. Although platforms are often criticised for their perceived ineffectiveness due to the volume of inappropriate content, deplatforming represents another important moderation strategy, allowing for the permanent exclusion of certain groups (Ali et al., 2021). The study demonstrated that when individuals are banned for spreading toxic content, both their influence and the activity and toxicity levels of their followers decrease. The researchers therefore conclude that banning could serve as an effective strategy for reducing social media toxicity.

Similarly, Naslund et al. (2020) investigated whether it is possible to detect and predict users' moods and affective states based on the content and images they post or follow. This could be achieved through a combination of manual content moderation on social media and monitoring via apps. The authors suggest that social media may be beneficial for sharing experiences with illness, seeking support from others, and obtaining information on treatment recommendations and access to support services, provided such engagement occurs under professional guidance.

A more pessimistic perspective is presented by Lerman et al. (2023), who adopts a highly critical stance on Twitter's policies (now X). She argues that, although the platform explicitly prohibits content related to self-harm, the hashtag 'shtwt', which refers to the self-harm subculture on Twitter, increased

by 500% between October 2021 and August 2022, averaging 20,000 tweets per month (Goldenberg et al., 2022). This suggests that content moderation is largely ineffective in regulating self-harm-related material. The researchers analysed how social media can provide group identity and emotional support while simultaneously normalising extreme eating disorders and other forms of self-harm. Although their study primarily addresses anorexia and bulimia, these findings can be applied analogously to self-harming behaviour. Their work indicates that negative effects arise not only from harmful body image content, but also from recommendation algorithms that promote unhealthy diets and self-loathing (Harriger et al., 2023). In addition, users may inadvertently encounter communities that encourage these behaviours.

The authors draw parallels with extremist content, which fosters radicalisation through echo chambers and algorithmic amplification, suggesting similar dynamics may occur in the dissemination of self-harm content. Lerman et al. (2023) applies the 3N model, originally developed to explain the formation of violent extremists and terrorists (Kruglanski et al., 2022), to health-related contexts. She analysed 612 of the most popular hashtags, appearing over 230 times, and collected tweets related to mental health and self-harm, allowing her to identify recurring themes and map an information ecosystem on X. Users frequently select hashtags or employ euphemisms to circumvent detection by the platform's moderation protocols, facilitating navigation between harmful content without being flagged. Consequently, the authors advocate for stricter moderation of online material that poses risks to mental health.

In contrast, Khasawneh et al. (2021) examines social media challenges on YouTube and Twitter and their association with self-harm and other behaviours that pose risks to participants' physical and psychological well-being. His study aims to analyse the motivations that drive users to post content related to three of the most viral challenges on social media: 'Blue Whale', 'Tide' and the 'Ice Bucket Challenge'. To this end, he sampled 180 YouTube videos, 3,607 comments on these videos, and 450 messages on Twitter. One criticism highlighted by the author is the limited effectiveness of platforms in identifying and moderating content related to self-harm or risky challenges. He proposes the use of automated video and content analysis algorithms, based on machine learning, to detect such material before it is made publicly accessible, and to notify users to remove or modify harmful content in order to prevent engagement in risky behaviours. Additionally, the author recommends that platforms implement scales indicating the level of harmfulness of a post, thereby enabling content creators to recognise the potential danger of their material prior to publication.

Similarly, Atauri-Mezquida et al. (2025) highlight the lack of control on social media, noting that explicit content related to self-harm is rarely accompanied by prior warnings. In this regard, it has been suggested that certain content moderation mechanisms could influence the exposure and dissemination of such behaviours, potentially increasing the likelihood of user participation (Baer et al., 2020).

Current platform guidelines, such as those of the Suicide Prevention Research Centre Safe and Effective Messaging Guidelines, appear to be largely ineffective, as users frequently disregard these recommendations. Lookingbill (2022) offers a measured critique of Twitter's policies on self-harm content, focusing on a qualitative analysis of self-harm-related material identified through specific hashtags across 30 videos. The study aimed to examine how hashtags circumvent exclusion and algorithmic detection on the emerging platform TikTok, highlighting the limitations of the platform's Community Guidelines, which explicitly prohibit content promoting self-harm. Despite these rules, algorithms often fail to identify certain hashtags related to self-harming behaviour.

Similarly, Hilton (2017) analysed 362 messages and found that self-harming behaviour is frequently misunderstood and ridiculed, which may delay individuals' access to treatment. In the context of X, the platform can serve as a valuable support network for individuals who self-harm, offering a sense of community, understanding and emotional support. At the same time, however, it can contribute to the normalisation of self-harm and the perpetuation of these behaviours. Hilton suggests that X may facilitate the healing process through the sharing of personal stories that convey hope and recovery, but notes that unsupportive messages may hinder this process. The author emphasises the critical need for qualitative research to improve understanding of self-harm, and to utilise this internationally relevant data to inform the development of effective public education campaigns and personalised treatment interventions.

### 3. Methodology

The aim of this research is to ascertain the level of knowledge among the university population regarding non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI), particularly in the context of social media, and to explore whether students consider greater control of such content to be necessary.

The hypothesis is that, despite content control mechanisms implemented by social media platforms, material related to NSSI remains accessible. It is further suggested that the majority of the university population is aware of what self-harm entails and has encountered information about NSSI through social media.

The objectives of the study are as follows:

01. To determine the level of knowledge of young university students about self-harm and to analyse the sources through which they have acquired this information, whether from family, friends or strangers.
02. To examine whether students are aware of the textual and visual codes used to refer to self-harming behaviour on social media and whether they believe that some of these codes romanticise the seriousness of the behaviour.
03. To explore whether young university students consider greater regulation of self-harm-related content on social media to be necessary.

#### 3.1. Research Instrument and Sampling Procedure

A structured questionnaire was designed using the Microsoft Forms platform to collect data. The questionnaire addressed four main areas: (1) participants' knowledge of self-harm, (2) their personal experience with such behaviours, (3) their exposure to content related to self-harm in the media, with particular emphasis on social media, and (4) perceptions regarding the need for regulation of social media content linked to self-harm.

Sampling was conducted using a combination of cluster and snowball techniques. At least one university per autonomous community was contacted, and collaboration was established with teachers from various disciplines. Once access to classrooms was secured, several classes were randomly selected, and the questionnaire was distributed. A QR code was provided to enable students to complete the questionnaire on their own devices. The survey was administered in the classroom, with participants responding individually and anonymously to preserve confidentiality. Data collection took place between May 2024 and January 2025.

Prior to finalisation, the questionnaire was pre-tested with health and communication professionals, as well as with students, to ensure clarity and comprehensibility. Any items that caused confusion were revised before the questionnaire was finalised.

The survey results are stored on the URJC Drive and securely maintained on institutional servers, with encryption ensuring that only the research team has access. This approach complies with ethical guidelines for research involving publicly accessible online content and protects participant privacy (British Psychological Society, 2021). The study was approved by the University Ethics Committee [approval 0802202307023].

#### 3.2. Sample Description

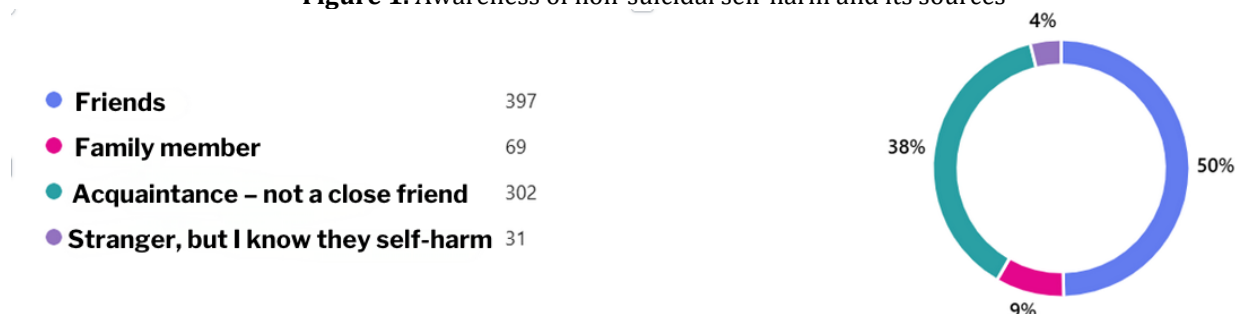
The sample comprised 1011 participants, of whom 85% identified as female, 11% as male, and 1% as non-binary or transgender. The mean age of the sample was 20 years. 85% of participants reported no history of self-harm, while 12% acknowledged having engaged in such behaviour and 3% chose not to respond to this question.

### 4. Results

Non-suicidal self-harm among young people and adolescents is a social phenomenon that directly impacts mental health and is prevalent within this population. This is reflected by the finding that 99% of respondents reported being aware of self-harm. The main source of knowledge comes, in 46% of the cases, from someone in the closest environment, with 50% being a friend and 38% an acquaintance.

Only in 9% of the cases was it a family member, and 4% referred to a stranger, but with the knowledge that the person was self-harming (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Awareness of non-suicidal self-harm and its sources



Source: Authors elaboration, 2025

To assess and characterise the profile of individuals who engage in self-harm, this study considered two main variables: age range and gender. To this end, cases reported by respondents were classified according to the age at which the individual first engaged in self-harming behaviour, as recalled by the respondent. Consistent with previous research (Muehlenkamp et al., 2018), adolescence was identified as a key period for the onset of self-harm. Among the cases reported, 71% involved individuals aged 14 to 17, making this the most representative age group. Notably, almost 19% of respondents reported knowing someone under the age of 14 who had self-harmed, whereas only 10% reported cases involving adults.

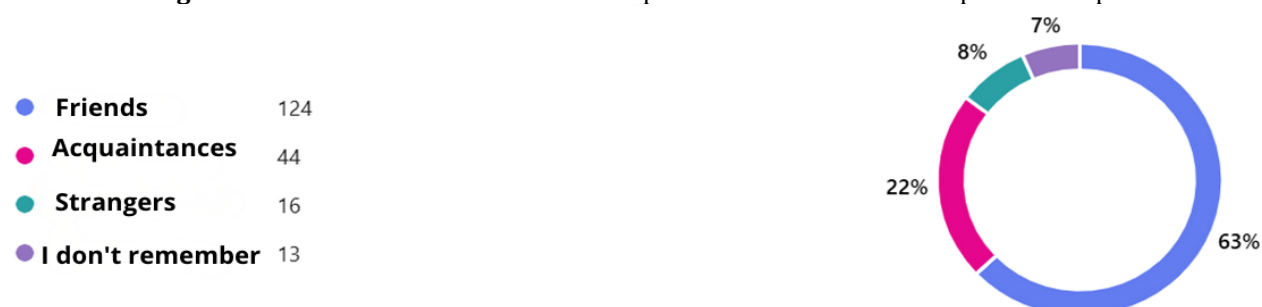
Regarding gender, self-harm exhibited a clear gender bias. In 86% of cases, respondents indicated knowing a female who had self-harmed, compared to 11% who reported a male, 2% a transgender individual, and 1% a non-binary individual.

#### 4.1. Social Media as a Platform for the Expression of Non-Suicidal Self-Injury

A key objective of the research project underpinning this study is to examine the role of social media both as a channel for disseminating information and as a space where individuals interested in non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) can interact. When respondents were asked about the primary sources through which they have learned about this phenomenon, 31% indicated that social media was their main source of information. These findings underscore the need for a deeper understanding of how social media influences mental health and the propagation of self-harming behaviours, which in turn can shape both the individual and collective identities of people who struggle to manage their emotions.

It is important to recognise that social media is not solely digital a space for entertainment, interaction, or self-representation, but also functions as a platform for instant messaging. This aspect is particularly relevant to non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI), as 17% of respondents reported having received a photo related to NSSI on their mobile device. Interestingly, in these cases, respondents indicated that they had not learned about NSSI through social media per se, but rather through a friend or acquaintance. This is supported by the finding that, in most cases (63%), such photos were sent by friends (see Figure 2). These results suggest that, although social media plays a significant role in how young people initially encounter information about NSSI, the sharing of NSSI-related images via mobile messaging appears to be strongly influenced by the friendship ties between sender and recipient.

**Figure 2.** Sender of non-suicidal self-harm photos and their relationship to the recipient



Source: Authors elaboration. Year: 2025



Adolescents and young people frequently share aspects of their lives with peers through social media and instant messaging, which can result in non-suicidal self-injury being used as a form of expression. However, this method of emotional regulation is not always understood by recipients, who may experience negative emotions such as sadness, anger, fear, or helplessness upon receiving such messages. These responses are also reflected in media portrayals, including television series and films, which frequently depict this phenomenon. Popular media, such as the series *13 Reasons Why* and various films, were among the most commonly cited sources of information by respondents. Indeed, 45% of participants reported that social media romanticises NSSI as a form of emotional self-regulation, presenting it as attractive or desirable (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3.** Perceived romanticisation of non-suicidal self-harm on social media



Source: Authors elaboration. Year: 2025

#### 4.2. Coded Language of Non-Suicidal Self-Harm on Social Media

Sharing a common language is a key characteristic that helps to identify the existence of digital communities on social media centred around non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI). Previous studies (Martínez-Pastor et al., 2023) have emphasised the importance of recognising the coded language, expressed through hashtags and metaphorical images, that has developed as a specific mode of expression for this phenomenon, thereby giving rise to online communities focused on NSSI. Understanding the diversity, meaning, and prevalence of these codes not only allows researchers to gauge the extent of the phenomenon, but also provides insight into the variety of expressions that users employ to convey their feelings, knowledge, and experiences related to self-harm.

In this context, the study examined respondents' awareness of the previously identified coded language used in online communities focused on non-suicidal self-injury (Martínez-Pastor et al., 2024). The results indicate that, although the majority of respondents are aware of NSSI, only two out of ten young university students surveyed understood the meaning of the codes most commonly employed by members of these digital communities. Of these, 24% reported familiarity with the meanings associated with images of self-harm represented through the use of barcodes. In the participants' own words, this coded language was described as: 'It symbolises the act of cutting and refers to scars' (A03) and 'They are the marks left on the arms or legs, which resemble this code in shape, as the cuts are made following the same pattern' (A57).

A similar pattern emerged when respondents were asked about the meaning of the butterfly in relation to self-harm, with 18% reporting familiarity and providing descriptions such as: 'People who self-harm draw butterflies on their arms, usually over the cuts to cover them up, and it is assumed that as long as they have butterflies drawn on them, they cannot self-harm because it would be "killing" the butterfly' (A32); 'From what I've seen on social media, it symbolises that the person has gone through or is going through periods of self-harm and is a way of representing their progress' (A43); and 'Instead of self-harming, they draw butterflies and think of their loved ones' (A153).

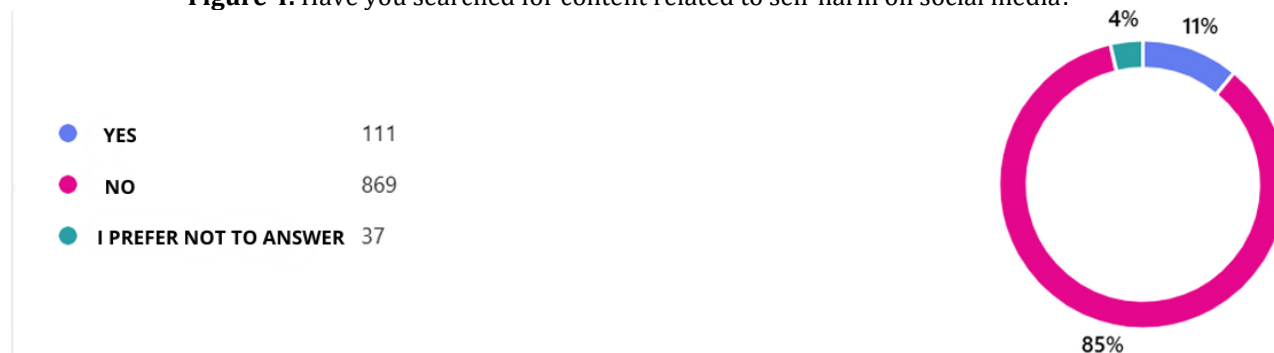
However, when examining more specific terms used within Spanish-speaking digital communities that share self-harm content, such as 'trasto' or 'moots', only 1% of respondents recognised them. For example, one participant explained: 'Moots are those people on social media with whom you have a connection (on the subject of self-harm) and whom you rely on for support in trying to heal' (A06).

Respondents also identified other types of codes, including colours that signify different experiences they have undergone, as well as the semicolon symbol (;) often tattooed by individuals who have attempted suicide and survived.

### 4.3. Debate on Access, Control and Regulation of Content

11% of respondents reported having searched for content related to self-harm on social media (see Figure 4). The platforms most commonly used for this purpose were Twitter (30%), TikTok (30%), Instagram (25%) and, in 15% of cases, other platforms such as Tumblr, YouTube, or Pinterest.

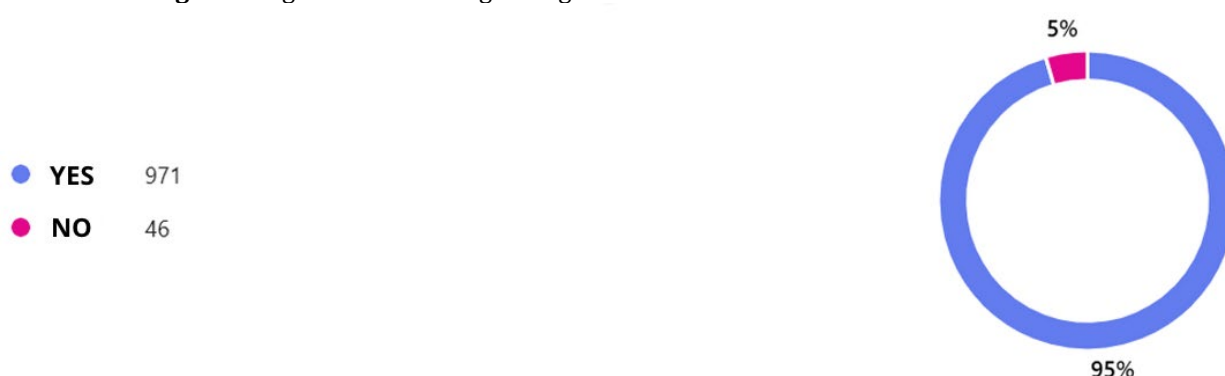
**Figure 4.** Have you searched for content related to self-harm on social media?



Source: Authors elaboration, 2025

The accessibility of this type of content, combined with respondents' personal experiences, means that the vast majority of the university population surveyed (95%) agree that content related to self-harm posted on social media should be regulated (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5.** Agreement with regulating self-harm content on social media



Source: Authors elaboration, 2025

## 5. Discussion

Non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) is a widespread social phenomenon among adolescents and young people, with both cultural and digital dimensions. The fact that 99% of respondents reported knowing of cases of self-harm reflects its high prevalence within this population, particularly among peers. Adolescence is confirmed as a critical period for the emergence of these behaviours, with 71% of the cases reported by respondents occurring between the ages of 14 and 17. This pattern of onset was also noted by Swannell et al. (2014), who found that self-harming behaviour typically begins between the ages of 10 and 17 (17.2%), followed by young adults up to the age of 24 (13.4%). Similarly, Muehlenkamp et al. (2018) identified the age of onset as primarily between 13 and 16 years.

From a gender perspective, the data indicate that 86% of known cases involve women, consistent with recent studies reporting a higher prevalence of self-harm among adolescent females. For instance, Diggins et al. (2024) found that, at age 14, the prevalence of self-harm was 15.4%, with a ratio of 2.6 females for every male. The survey also highlights that, to a lesser extent, individuals known to respondents who self-harmed were transgender (2%) or non-binary (1%). Although the number of cases in this survey does not allow conclusions about statistical significance, previous research indicates that LGBTQI individuals report a higher risk of suicide and associated behaviours, including self-harm, compared to their cisgender and heterosexual peers (Marchi et al., 2022). The phenomenon of self-harm should not be analysed in isolation, but rather in relation to the social and cultural structures that differentially affect specific groups (Hartas, 2023).



The role of social media in disseminating these practices is particularly significant, with 31% of university students surveyed identifying these platforms as their primary source of information about self-harm. The circulation of images and messages related to these behaviours is illustrated by the finding that 18% of respondents had received a photo of self-harm, most often sent by friends, highlighting the interplay between digital dynamics and the expression of emotional distress. This supportive role presents a complex situation for friends who are exposed to such content. Indeed, Bilello et al. (2024) found that, although friends are often willing to provide support, they frequently experience a range of difficult emotions and unmet needs when assisting young people who self-harm.

Social media has also been identified as a potential risk factor for mental health problems among young people, primarily due to the excessive time spent online and exposure to certain types of content (Dooley et al., 2019; Huang, 2017). Intensive social media use, combined with other factors such as lack of trust in family members or experiences of bullying, constitutes a psychosocial risk factor that increases the likelihood of self-harm, particularly among girls (Diggins et al., 2024). Despite potential negative consequences, most adolescents believe that social media helps them form friendships and maintain positive expectations regarding its use (Feijóo, 2022).

The existence of shared codes within these digital communities, such as the 'barcode', the 'butterfly' or specific terms like 'moots', demonstrates that self-harm is not merely an individual act, but part of a digital culture with shared meanings. The use of a metalanguage specific to social media (Martínez-Pastor y Gaete-Selgado, 2023) allows users to share content without directly referencing it and without detection by platform moderation mechanisms (Brown et al., 2018; Moreno et al., 2016). However, knowledge of these codes among the university population surveyed varies, suggesting differing levels of involvement in these communities.

The accessibility of self-harm content on social media also raises questions about regulation. While 11% of university students reported having searched for this type of content on platforms such as Twitter (30%) or TikTok (30%), 96% supported the implementation of control mechanisms to prevent its dissemination. The need to regulate self-harm content on social media is further emphasised by Atauri-Mezquida et al. (2025) and reinforced by widespread social concern regarding participation in viral challenges that pose risks to mental health (Ortega-Barón et al., 2023).

This consensus on regulation among the university population surveyed underscores the need for a balanced approach that permits the expression of emotional distress while preventing the romanticisation of self-harm, an issue reported by 45% of respondents. Such romanticisation is closely linked to coded communication, which reinforces a sense of belonging to a community and can normalise self-harming behaviour, minimising its perceived severity (Dam et al., 2023; Logrieco et al., 2021; Tørmoen et al., 2023). Moreover, previous studies indicate that rates of help-seeking among young people who self-harm remain low (Cox et al., 2024), further emphasising the influence of social media on mental health outcomes (Milton et al., 2023).

## 6. Conclusions

Self-harm in digital environments must be understood not only from a mental health perspective, but also from cultural and social perspectives, in which social media plays a central role. The performativity of suffering, the aestheticisation of pain, and the construction of digital communities are key to understanding how social media shapes youth subjectivity and the formation of narratives of distress, which are expressed and circulated online.

The data indicate that 99% of the university population is aware of self-harm, with adolescence representing a critical stage for the emergence of these behaviours, as 71% of known cases occur between the ages of 14 and 17. Furthermore, the marked gender bias, with 86% of cases involving women, underscores the importance of considering the socio-cultural factors that differentially affect various gender identities in relation to self-harm. It should be noted, however, that the study has a limitation in this regard, as the sample includes a higher proportion of women, which may introduce bias.

The role of social media has proven crucial in the dissemination of these behaviours. This study contributes to the academic discussion recognising social media as one of the primary sources of information on self-harm, positioning it as a clear risk factor. The use of social media for both peer support and the circulation of distressing images reflects an emotional complexity that affects not only

those who self-harm, but also those who, while willing to provide support, experience emotional difficulties when confronted with such situations.

The university population surveyed advocates for the regulation of self-harm-related content on social media, signalling concern over the potential negative impact of this material on mental health. This consensus underscores the urgent need for policies that balance freedom of expression with the protection of young people from content that may perpetuate the romanticisation of self-harm.

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