

# DIGITAL CONSUMPTION: AN ANALYSIS OF THE EVERYDAY PRACTICES OF BRAZILIAN INSTAGRAM USERS

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## ABSTRACT

Within just a few decades, the Internet has become the catalyst for a revolution in the way people connect and disseminate content, offering numerous benefits to society. However, the human mind has been increasingly exposed to an overwhelming volume of information that exceeds cognitive limits, as websites, digital social networks (DSNs), messaging services, and other apps are readily available at users' fingertips via smartphones. At the same time, reality itself strives to conform to the judgment of the audience within the feed, with places and objects designed to be recorded by smartphones and individuals eager to meet aesthetic and behavioural standards. These are the central themes of the research discussed in this article, with a particular focus on Instagram due to its current relevance and significance. Through semi-structured interviews, the study gathered the experiences of 25 Brazilian users who frequently engage with the platform, born between 1981 and 1996, corresponding to the so-called Generation Y. Also known as millennials, this generation witnessed the transformations from an analogue to a digital world. The methodological procedure used to process the interview data was thematic analysis. In this process, the research sought to answer the following question: what is the impact of the amount of information available and the stimulation generated by interactions with DSNs on users' routines? Based on nine thematic categories, the main findings indicate that the use of the Internet and DSNs may harm social well-being and become addictive, with users influenced by boredom, escapism, and the "fear of missing out" (FOMO).

## KEYWORDS

Instagram, digital social networks, attention economy, digital consumption

# CONSUMOS DIGITAIS: UMA ANÁLISE DE ROTINAS DE BRASILEIROS UTILIZADORES DE INSTAGRAM

## RESUMO

Em um espaço de poucas décadas, a internet se tornou cenário de uma revolução no que diz respeito à conexão de pessoas e disseminação de conteúdo, proporcionando diversos benefícios para a sociedade. No entanto, a mente humana passou a ser exposta a uma quantidade gigantesca de informação que ultrapassa os limites da cognição, uma vez que websites, redes sociais digitais (RSD), mensageiros e outros aplicativos estão "à mão" em *smartphones*. Em paralelo, a própria realidade se esforça para se adequar ao julgamento da audiência do *feed*, com a existência de lugares e objetos prontos para serem registrados por *smartphones* e pessoas ávidas por atender um padrão estético e de comportamento. São estes os temas da pesquisa de que este artigo dá conta, especialmente focando no Instagram em razão de sua

grande relevância na atualidade. Por meio de entrevistas semiestruturadas, a pesquisa coletou as experiências de 25 pessoas brasileiras que utilizam a plataforma frequentemente, nascidas entre 1981 e 1996, correspondendo à chamada geração Y. Também conhecida como *millennials*, esta geração presenciou as transformações do mundo analógico para o digital. O procedimento metodológico de tratamento dos dados recolhidos em entrevista desenvolveu-se por meio da análise temática. Neste processo, procurou-se responder à questão: qual o impacto da quantidade de informações disponíveis e estímulo de interações nas RSD na rotina do usuário? Com nove eixos temáticos, as principais conclusões mostram como a utilização de internet e RSD pode prejudicar o bem-estar social e se tornar viciosa, sendo os seus utilizadores influenciados por tédio, escapismo e “fear of missing out” (FOMO).

#### PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Instagram, redes sociais digitais, economia da atenção, consumos digitais

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Digital social networks (DSNs; Recuero, 2009) have become an integral part of the lives of billions of people. Beyond their presence across multiple professional sectors, their capacity to connect people, provide information, entertain, and generate employment, they have also influenced both their users and reality itself — eager to fit within the feeds. These networks have increasingly been explored in a seductive and intuitive manner (Wu & Holsapple, 2013) and reshaped by algorithms operating within the strategic frameworks of the attention economy (Bucci, 2021; Newport, 2019). As volatile as an Internet connection, DSNs have evolved to such an extent that they bear little resemblance to their early forms, when their primary purpose was to connect people — the very feature that initially made them so popular (Frier, 2020/2021). Nonetheless, a line of researchers advocates for a critical perspective on the use of the Internet, DSNs, and mobile phones, observing how these technologies influence memory, cognition, and contribute to the development of addictive behaviours (Lozano-Blasco et al., 2022). The hedonic consumption of content from these platforms — produced in cognitively unmanageable quantities — has been reinforced by professional demands, social norms (Turkle, 2011), and the manipulation of desires (Bucci, 2021). Such dynamics foster divided attention in place of sustained concentration (Firth et al., 2019), reduced sociability, increased anxiety (Lozano-Blasco et al., 2022), nomophobia (King et al., 2014), and the “fear of missing out” (FOMO; Przybylski et al., 2013), all of which are subjectively correlated behaviours. This scenario has taken shape through significant historical processes that have culminated in the digital era.

Instagram, in particular — the third most popular DSN in the world (Statista, 2025b) — has attracted scholarly attention for its influence on social well-being, its role in establishing beauty and behavioural standards (Frier, 2020/2021), and its contribution to reshaping reality itself, which appears increasingly determined to conform to the “instagrammable” lens of mobile devices (Molica, 2022). Brazil is of special interest,

as it ranks third globally in Instagram consumption (Statista, 2024a) and contributes to Portuguese being the seventh most widely used language on the Internet (Statista, 2025a). Against the backdrop of profound transformations over recent decades and the gradual shift from analogue to digital routines, this exploratory study collected the experiences of Brazilians born between 1981 and 1996 through semi-structured interviews, which were analysed via thematic analysis. The aim was to understand how the constant production and availability of online content — particularly on Instagram — influence users' everyday practices.

## 2. THE DIGITAL ERA, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND INSTAGRAM CONSUMPTION

### 2.1. POSTMODERNITY AND THE CONTEXTS OF THE DIGITAL ERA AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The rise of DSNs takes place within what several authors describe as postmodernity (Baudrillard, 1981/1991; Lipovetsky & Serroy, 2015), a period characterised by specific contexts and elements. While the Internet provided the technological foundation, these products found fertile ground in a fragmented society (Hall, 1992/2006) immersed in an era of hyperreality, simulations, and simulacra (Baudrillard, 1981/1991).

This corresponds to Bauman's (2000/2001) notion of "liquid modernity", marked by instability and disposability. Such volatility in content consumption extends from the act of changing television channels to the effortless dismissal of a post with a simple swipe of the thumb, driven by the relentless pursuit of new stimuli (Martins, 2011).

Technological advancement — from lithography to the printing press — enabled the mass production of content, surpassing the manual characteristics of artworks (Benjamin, 1935/2012) and facilitating a more efficient dissemination of information. The evolution of machines (Lemos, 2002) brought movement to images, revealing the desires and excitations of cinema (Martins, 2011; Morin, 1980). Screen dimensions gradually decreased, entering households through television and ultimately arriving in users' hands via mobile phones, offering content at unprecedented speed and accessibility — particularly through DSNs.

These technical apparatuses, integral to the cultural industry, encourage consumption as a form of domination (Horkheimer, 1947/2007) and infiltrate leisure time (Adorno, 1947/2002). Today, society coexists with a "global cultural industry that is much more powerful and independent" (Goulart, 2014, p. 119). With the ubiquity of the Internet, this model coexists with the multidirectional, entropic, collective, and personalised communication of cyberspace (Lemos, 2002) — a phenomenon with profound social and cultural implications (Lévy, 1999). Thus, "it may be argued that the society of the spectacle paved the way for the society of simulation, namely cyberspace" (Lemos, 2002, p. 280), where new forces are governed by capitalism and market freedom (Santaella, 2003).

DSN platforms can be critically examined within the context of the digital revolution through the lens of Bucci's (2021) attention economy. Whereas the industrial revolution

was marked by long working hours and child labour in factories, the digital revolution turns the user into a dual commodity: both producer and consumer of content. DSNs are diverse and may be understood within the broader concept of digital social media (Recuero, 2009, 2019). While a social network refers to the structural connections among individuals and groups, social media represent the communicational phenomenon and the dynamic processes of creation, dissemination, and conversation that occur within this digital framework.

The manner in which human relationships operate in cyberspace — collective yet fragmented — may also be interpreted through Cavanagh's (2007) concept of hyper-identity, wherein the self manifests as a digital avatar. As content providers, individuals strive to establish their identities while preserving their reputation, trust, and social connections.

## 2.2. INSTAGRAM AND THE “INSTAGRAMMABLE” LIFE

The habit of using websites to publish photographs dates back to the 2000s, with platforms such as Fotolog, which gathered at least 22 million Brazilian users in 2008 (Coelho, 2018). In 1995, the first DSN, Classmates, was launched by Randal Conrads. Although not the first of its kind, Instagram — created by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger in 2010 — stands out for its longevity and relevance, likely due to its focus on communication through images and videos. This approach connects it to the “realism heuristic”, according to which the image is sensory-specific, tangible, and distinct from the abstract nature of text (Pittman & Reich, 2016). With its simplified layout, Instagram's business model gathered followers based on shared interests rather than friendship alone, incorporated popular features such as likes and comments, and engaged influencers to captivate users (Frier, 2020/2021).

Over time, developers have monitored user behaviour and added new features accordingly — even those resembling competitors' offerings, such as Stories (comparable to Snapchat) and Reels (to compete with TikTok) — a strategy intensified following Instagram's acquisition and subsequent complete control by Mark Zuckerberg (Frier, 2020/2021). Despite these changes and additions, the platform has maintained its relevance.

The algorithmic feed, introduced in 2016, aimed to encourage users to post more frequently (Frier, 2020/2021). Although initially criticised for disrupting the chronological order of posts, the algorithm was refined to deliver content that users find most relevant or desirable (Bucci, 2021). While effective for platform engagement, this mechanism can have a negative impact on social well-being, rendering Instagram potentially harmful and addictive (Idoeta, 2021; McElroy et al., 2019).

Although Instagram initially invited users to adopt an artistic and authorial gaze, content production gradually became ironically repetitive<sup>1</sup> — a simulation of reality shaped to meet consumption standards. The expression of individuality is often replaced by an idealised narrative suited for the feed, filled with artifice (McGinnis, 2020).

<sup>1</sup> Filmmaker Emma Agnes Sheffer created the Instagram profile Insta Repeat ([https://www.instagram.com/insta\\_repeat/](https://www.instagram.com/insta_repeat/)), which is specifically dedicated to exposing the recurrent patterns of imagery across the platform.

Reality itself has adapted to this aesthetic. Hairstyles, clothing, dishes, restaurants, interiors, buildings, and exhibitions are designed to stimulate desire for consumption and display across profiles. In Japan, this design is defined as “Instagrammable”: “insta-bae” (インスタ映え). The more “insta-bae” something is, the greater its potential for social and commercial success (Frier, 2020/2021), fostering a visual culture inspired by a lifestyle (Alves, 2021; Salazar, 2017). Instagram is the primary beneficiary of this network of interests, where companies seek exposure and consumers maintain their profiles in search of instant solutions and gratification (Servidio, 2023).

Whereas filters were once used merely to enhance photographs, such editing is now employed to modify reality and even the human body itself to make them “worthy of acceptance and gratification”. Beyond “Instagrammable” places and objects, the emergence of the “Instagram face” — a term examined by Jia Tolentino (2019) — illustrates the growing number of women investing in cosmetic procedures to achieve a facial appearance aligned with Instagram’s aesthetic standards. This “cyborgian face” appears to extend across DSNs (Cintra, 2020). The platform has thus become a stage for the symbiosis between the photographic and the social (Lipovetsky & Serroy, 2015). “It no longer refers to the other, nor to the world. On the contrary, it is things — and ourselves — that have begun to imitate the image” (Martins, 2011, p. 74).

### 2.3. THE INTERNET, DSNs, CONSUMPTION, AND PROBLEMATIc USE

The omnipresent Internet has shaped society (Turkle, 2011), introducing new habits and social norms that demand time and energy for visibility and validation (Cavanagh, 2007), as well as the need to remain constantly connected and up to date (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017), producing an overwhelming sense of exhaustion (Newport, 2019). The mobile phone has become an extension of the body, resulting in dependency and nomophobia (King et al., 2014). It functions as a data library, placing vast amounts of content at the user’s fingertips and fostering a false sense of memory (Sparrow et al., 2011) — what Firth et al. (2019, p. 120) term “transactive memory”: knowing where to find content, but not retaining the information itself.

Meanwhile, products within the virtual ecosystem operate according to a highly engaging and addictive logic, often at the expense of well-being (McElroy et al., 2019). Apps should ideally prioritise users’ benefit, which would require reversing the attention economy model by encouraging deep information processing and sustained attention rather than addictive usage patterns (Firth et al., 2019). Gratification functions as the driving force behind problematic use, a mechanism that compels users to revisit apps in search of immediate rewards or positive reinforcement, whether for entertainment or information, thereby fostering dependency and diminished inhibitory control (Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Brand et al., 2016). The hedonistic nature of DSNs can intensify their problematic character (Wu & Holsapple, 2013), associating usage with pleasure, excitement, and escapism — each of which may promote more addictive behaviour (Gao et al.,

2017). Boredom can act as a mediator (Przybylski et al., 2013) and a trigger for continuous consumption (Newport, 2019).

The relevance of DSNs has attracted researchers seeking to understand their consumption and behavioural influence. Although initially designed to connect people, studies suggest that DSNs may increase feelings of loneliness, particularly image-based platforms such as Instagram (Pittman & Reich, 2016). While influencers and companies pursue follower counts as a metric of success, this logic does not apply to personal relationships. Dunbar (2018) explains that human social relations are limited to between 100 and 250 connections, which are processed in slightly different ways online and offline (Firth et al., 2019).

Acceptance and rejection are, in reality, self-interpreted, since the judgment of others' actions and communication is inherently subjective and part of social cognition. In the virtual context, such responses can be quantified and qualified through real-time metrics such as follower counts and likes (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). McElroy et al. (2019) note that success and failure responses are similar at the neurocognitive level. According to these authors, some profiles present curated or manipulated records that differ from everyday reality. This virtual environment encourages social comparison, generating unrealistic expectations and a negative self-concept that may foster envy. Striving for the "perfect" narrative, McCinnis (2020) argues, is a lost battle and a superficial victory. Strategies that promote asymmetric information produce an ephemeral boost in self-esteem, inducing further validation-seeking in a potentially addictive cycle.

Interaction with Instagram has evolved as the app itself has adapted. Sheldon and Bryant (2016) identified four motivations for using this DSN: surveillance and knowledge (viewing and engaging with friends' posts); documentation (recording reality and daily life); "coolness" (self-promotion through being trendy or fashionable); and creativity (exercising artistic expression). The latter was an original underlying intention behind Instagram's creation (Frier, 2020/2021). Usage can also take three forms: active (content production), passive (browsing the feed), and interactive (direct socialising). The latter has been negatively correlated with loneliness, as higher-quality bidirectional communication strengthens social bonds and mitigates feelings of isolation (Fumagalli et al., 2021; Yang, 2016).

In its pursuit of attention capitalisation, TikTok has become a compelling competitor in terms of consumption and engagement, particularly among young people. Whereas early DSNs focused on social engagement, TikTok defines itself as an entertainment platform. The app does not privilege follower counts or a history of successful posts. Instead, it promotes content more intensely according to algorithmic data processing. In this way, TikTok prioritises distributions that generate immediate profit, within an immersive interface that also facilitates data filtering (Liang, 2022).

Constant use of the Internet and DSNs releases dopamine, rendering them addictive (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). The sense of productivity associated with each screen transition also provides informational rewards within a multitasking routine, yet may compromise sustained concentration and the retention of relevant facts (Firth et al.,

2019; Korte, 2020; McElroy et al., 2019). There is evidence of mutations in attention span, memory, and social cognition (Hoehe & Thibaut, 2020). Frequent thumb movements on touchscreen devices can even alter neural plasticity within days (Gindrat et al., 2015; McElroy et al., 2019).

FOMO — a sentiment that predates the mobile phone era and is identified in traditions such as Buddhism (McGinnis, 2020) — mediates the relationship between DSNs, users, and the satisfaction of psychological needs that drive usage. The perceived urgency and need for constant connection intensify alongside the expansion of digital options and resources, physical constraints, and the sense of limited time (Przybylski et al., 2013). FOMO is described as “the desire to stay continually connected with what others are doing” (p. 1841), a concept examined in several studies (Devin & Daniela, 2021; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017; Milyavskaya et al., 2018; Sun, 2023). It can act as a mediator in the temporary relief of anxiety associated with checking others’ activities (Franchina et al., 2018), thereby reinforcing loneliness and social comparison (Gupta & Sharma, 2021). FOMO is notably linked to Instagram, particularly when use is motivated by surveillance and the desire for knowledge (Sun, 2023), and becomes harder to regulate when the platform is used for self-promotion or professional exposure (Devin & Daniela, 2021).

Passive Instagram consumption may also be associated with escapism (Müller et al., 2020), a recognised motivation (Frier, 2020/2021; Lee et al., 2015). This practice, which frequently utilises platform features to create a sense of spatial presence, may also lead to problematic use (Kircaburun & Griffiths, 2019).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Adopting a qualitative approach, this study sought to identify possible answers to the question: what is the impact of the amount of information available and the stimulation generated by interactions with DSNs on users’ routines?

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Participants were individuals belonging to Generation Y, also known as millennials, born between 1981 and 1996, as defined by the Pew Research Center (Dimock, 2019). However, the range may vary slightly in other sources. This generation experienced the transition from an analogue to a digital world and is thus capable of providing comparative insights. Brazil, the selected Lusophone country, has more than 141 million Instagram users (Kemp, 2025). It was chosen for its large number of Internet consumers and its population of “sophisticated network users” (Kozinets, 2009/2014, p. 23), who influence Instagram developers’ strategic decisions (Frier, 2020/2021). The DSN is the second most popular in the country in terms of reach (Statista, 2024b). This research does not, of course, seek to generalise its findings to all Brazilian Instagram users.

The sample consisted of 25 Brazilians residing in Brazil, with an average age of 33 years (ranging from 27 to 41), comprising 12 men and 13 women, as listed in Table 1. Participants were selected based on their frequent use of Instagram for diverse purposes, including professional promotion, leisure, interaction, or information seeking. The

aim was to include users with varied forms of engagement to gather a broad spectrum of experiences with the platform.

| INTERVIEWEE  | AGE | OCCUPATION                             |
|--------------|-----|--|
| Pedro        | 39  | Journalist                             |
| Clarice      | 33  | Public servant in education            |
| Paula        | 28  | Content strategist                     |
| Joaquim      | 30  | Marketing analyst                      |
| Teodoro      | 37  | Business consultant                    |
| Cinthia      | 34  | Journalist                             |
| Tarsila      | 32  | Actress, singer, and cultural producer |
| Gustavo      | 32  | Lawyer                                 |
| Teresa       | 37  | Accounting analyst                     |
| Jorge        | 32  | Physiotherapist                        |
| Ana Carolina | 37  | Paediatrician                          |
| Mariana      | 28  | Social media professional              |
| Francisco    | 30  | Dentist                                |
| Maria        | 32  | Event management entrepreneur          |
| Rosângela    | 34  | Video producer                         |
| Alessandra   | 37  | Conference organisation entrepreneur   |
| Erasmo       | 27  | Product designer                       |
| Patricia     | 34  | Teacher                                |
| Fernanda     | 32  | Administrative assistant               |
| Camila       | 36  | Physical education teacher             |
| Ricardo      | 27  | Civil engineer                         |
| Lázaro       | 35  | Civil engineer                         |
| Leonardo     | 33  | Advertising professional               |
| Bernardo     | 41  | Social security officer                |
| Marcelo      | 28  | Electronics technician                 |

**Table 1.** Research participants' profiles

*Note.* Fictitious names are used to preserve interviewees' anonymity.

The interview script was designed to invite participants on a reflective journey through their own memories: from “analogue life” to the online platforms they use most frequently, with particular attention to their Instagram habits, while also addressing the key themes identified in the academic literature.

The interviews were recorded in audio and video using the Zoom videoconferencing software and lasted an average of 90 minutes. Although all participants were willing to collaborate, many spontaneously provided a substantial amount of data, prompting follow-up questions regarding their life experiences, which generated relevant insights.

The large amount of data was transcribed and initially familiarised. Subsequently, the material was subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), following the six proposed phases of study. This allowed the researcher to interpret and manually group the data into codes and thematic axes, guided by the theoretical framework. The main challenge at this stage was to accurately code information, as some questions concerned general internet use while others referred specifically to Instagram,

with responses varying among participants. This methodological approach enabled a detailed analysis of the collected data, providing theoretical flexibility that allowed for a nuanced observation of the themes emerging from this study.

#### 4. DISCUSSION: THEMATIC AXIS

Following data analysis, nine thematic axes were identified: (1) new habits with the Internet — the consequences of the ubiquitous presence of the tool in daily life and how digital platforms compete for users' attention; (2) multitasking and multifunctionality — the frequent performance of tasks on mobile devices, often blending personal and professional life, alongside compromised sustained concentration; (3) the advent of Instagram in users' lives — how and why people use this DSN, even with changes to the application; (4) access routine — constant Instagram usage, with boredom, escapism, and addiction acting as mediators or triggers; (5) Internet, Instagram, and memory — the increasing usage of virtual spaces as memory support; (6) narratives on Instagram — content displayed on the DSN encourages specific consumption and behaviour and promotes comparison, which may lead to negative self-concept; (7) information overload — the infinite feed generates fatigue, boredom, and anxiety, with FOMO acting as a mediator; (8) strategies for healthy connection — using DSNs in ways that respect well-being; and (9) emerging topics — participants contributed information they deemed relevant to the discussed subjects, strengthening knowledge exchange between researcher and interviewees.

##### 4.1. MULTITASKING AND MULTIFUNCTIONALITY

The attention economy has created a scenario in which multiple platforms compete for users, and it has seemingly become a social norm to become entangled in their networks, both for work and leisure. Participants reported that they constantly use at least five platforms, including DSNs and streaming services. Search engines and messaging apps were also mentioned at other points in the interviews, suggesting an even higher number.

Just as the Internet has facilitated new habits, it has also brought challenges, as highlighted by participants. Multitasking routines are intensified by the use of multiple functions within the same application or across platforms. Although such behaviour is often regarded positively (Turkle, 2011), attending to multiple demands simultaneously can impair cognitive capacity, compromise sustained concentration (McElroy et al., 2019), and hinder the memorisation of important information (Korte, 2020).

It has significantly changed the quality of my reading and the quality of my study today with the Internet. It is much easier for me to get distracted. ( ... ) Before, I could read long texts without pausing. Today, I read, but after half an hour, I find myself wanting to check WhatsApp or social media; then, when

I try to read something, a certain anxiety seems to overwhelm me. (Patricia, personal interview, July 06, 2022)

Having both personal and professional circles on the same platform exemplifies how routines have become challenging. These spheres often merge, and free time (Adorno, 1947/2002) is frequently filled with work-related activity.

#### 4.2. THE ADVENT OF INSTAGRAM IN USERS' LIVES

Habituated to successful photo-sharing sites in the 2000s, which operated like online diaries, a portion of this generation of Internet users absorbed the logic of Instagram as a DSN, then a novelty, with relative ease. Beyond being an image-based platform, and thus cognitively appealing (Frier, 2020/2021; Pittman & Reich, 2016), it was the “trendy” application, strategically promoted as such by its founders.

I have been using Instagram since 2013 or 2014, I think, so for about eight years now. ( ...) I used to have a Fotolog account, and I enjoy photography, you know. It was a time when I was constantly carrying a camera around, taking pictures of everything. So, I think I opened it more with the intention of posting photographs, rather than as a social network. (Rosângela, personal interview. June 22, 2022)

“Because everyone started joining, and then I went with the flow, the herd, I went along with the herd [laughs]” (Bernardo, personal interview. July 09, 2022). Instagram has evolved over the years in tandem with shifts in user engagement on the platform. In 2010, for example, features such as Stories and Reels did not exist. In addition to adapting to these changes, most participants reported that they currently use Instagram more passively (Fumagalli et al., 2021; Yang, 2016).

Upon closer examination of the motivations that drive users to remain on the app, the four motivations identified by Sheldon and Bryant (2016) — surveillance/knowledge, documentation, coolness, and creativity — were all mentioned by participants.

#### 4.3. ACCESS ROUTINE

Instagram has introduced new habits for users, whether due to its convenience at hand or the fast Internet connection. The platform's content offerings fill idle moments throughout the day. The application is also used before sleep and immediately upon waking, which explains reports of interrupted and poor-quality sleep (Akbari et al., 2021).

Some participants admitted that the platform fosters a constant, addictive routine of use and checking (McElroy et al., 2019). Particularly among those who have used the platform for several years, there is discomfort with what appears in their feeds: an increase in advertisements, algorithmically curated content, and posts from accounts they do not follow.

The feeling of boredom was acknowledged by 20 participants in their usage of Instagram. The negative perception of boredom (Przybylski et al., 2013) fuels the demand for gratification, which may or may not be satisfied through various functionalities and consumption modes — active, passive, or interactive. This mechanism can become automatic and difficult to disengage from (Newport, 2019). Boredom often arose from the immediate need to fill idle time, such as when waiting in line or before going to sleep. A minority reported turning to other activities, such as a hobby.

Sometimes, you're kind of [laughs] bored. I'm on a shift and it's calm. This shift is quiet, with no incidents occurring. Or I'm at home having dinner alone, my son is asleep, and my husband is on shift. So, I go there, open it, and just scroll through it a bit. (Ana Carolina, personal interview, June 23, 2022)

Studies suggest that escapism functions as a mediator for Internet use and problematic use related to online gaming (Wu & Holsapple, 2013) and DSNs (Gao et al., 2017, Lee et al., 2015), such as Instagram (Kircaburun & Griffiths, 2019). Among the participants, 12 indicated that it occasionally motivates them. "I would say, occasionally, yes. Sometimes it can be understood as a form of escapism, but I would not say it is always. I think this applies to other apps as well." (Lázaro, personal interview, July 07, 2022).

When you're fed up with work... Oh, I don't know, everything is awful, and then you see that blogger travelling. It's Monday, and she's in New York shopping. You think, like: "Wow! What if it were me? What if I had that life?" I think so, I guess I use Instagram like that... Even if I'm upset and frustrated. I left a very boring meeting, full of arguments. I open Instagram to relieve some stress. (Mariana, personal interview, June 23, 2022)

The term "addiction" was spontaneously used by participants as a motivator to check Instagram. The digital era has consequently fostered DSN addiction (Gao et al., 2017; Lozano-Blasco et al., 2022; Montag et al., 2020), encouraged, for instance, by "information rewards" (Firth et al., 2019, p. 120).

Participants described how they cope when deprived of Instagram and mobile phone use (King et al., 2014). They reported feelings of discomfort, distress, and anxiety when unable to alleviate boredom or occupy their time. Some participants expressed indifference towards Instagram itself, but were concerned about not being able to communicate via messaging apps, as they needed to feel accessible. Finally, participants described a sense of relief from the experience of disconnection, although they also reported using the platform during travel, rest, or relaxation without any obligation to remain available.

#### 4.4. INTERNET, INSTAGRAM, AND MEMORY

Although computers have increased in storage capacity over the years and search engines and social media collect an immense amount of content, the human brain

has inherent neural limitations. It cannot assimilate such a volume (Assmann, 2008). Within the digital media environment, the disparity between the breadth of externalised information and the limits of assimilable knowledge is increasingly evident. Assmann (2008) notes that forgetting is the norm, while remembering is the exception in cultural relations. Accordingly, tools integrated into the digital environment serve as support and contribute to the concept of transactive memory (Firth et al., 2019). A modern consequence of this structure is the development of pseudo-memory, also known as the “Google effect” (Sparrow et al., 2011), in which the individual becomes symbiotic with technology, and the brain prioritises remembering where information can be found rather than retaining it internally. This scenario also reflects a reality where the real and the virtual are increasingly blurred (Henriques, 2014). “For any comma I need on a computer, or any other topic, I search on YouTube—software, making pão de queijo (Brazilian cheese bread), anything else. I always find what I need on YouTube” (Joaquim, personal interview, June 15, 2022).

I have a lot of content saved on Instagram. If I’m in a conversation and remember seeing something, I just grab my phone and Instagram to show it or send it to the person. (Mariana, personal interview, June 23, 2022)

I also use my social media as a kind of diary to generate memories for myself, and consequently for others, of a phase in my life, a time, a thought, a place, an occasion. (Leonardo, personal interview, July 15, 2022)

In another aspect of memory, some participants reported revisiting their own profiles to compare past and present behaviours and enjoy observing these changes. Noting the evolution of social connections and links with former partners, however, can evoke feelings of nostalgia or negative recollections.

#### 4.5. NARRATIVES ON INSTAGRAM

At Instagram’s inception, filters were developed to enhance photos taken with the smartphones of the time (Frier, 2020/2021). Today, however, they are used to shape reality itself to match a supposed standard of beauty and status, forming part of the collective memory narratives of cyberspace (Lemos, 2002; Santaella, 2003). Objects and environments are made “Instagrammable” in the hope of being shared, inducing both material and experiential consumption.

These are records of hypermedia in the era of hyperreality (Baudrillard, 1991), where the compulsion to communicate prevails (Lipovetsky & Serroy, 2015). Amid this whirlwind of self-exposure and consumption of others’ narratives, mechanisms of approval via likes and comments emerge, as does comparison, which may contribute to “poor body image and negative self-concept” (Firth et al., 2019, p. 125).

Even aware that digital platform feeds convey narratives rather than factual truth, users remain susceptible to popularity indicators, as noted by Sheldon and Bryant

(2016). The brain processes these indices in a manner analogous to observing interactions in the physical world. Consequently, the virtual environment fosters self-evaluation, susceptibility to illusions, and envy (McElroy et al., 2019). Developing digital narratives with a performance focus, though potentially satisfying, tends to be fleeting (McGinnis, 2020).

I think Instagram's very functionality is a problem for me. It's a social network with a strong appeal to compulsive happiness. Everyone's there posting that they're happy, that they're "slaying". And another crazy thing: people don't post photos as they are anymore. Everything has filters. You can't really know how someone is. (Patricia, personal interview, July 06, 2022)

There's already social pressure... Life has changed a lot since we were children. Today, there's a demand to accumulate, to have things, and to be extremely successful, which can make you feel a bit bad. Instagram complicates this, for example, when you start comparing your life with others'. But you don't see the whole story behind it. You think, "blimey, mate. How come that person has a house rented at 20, has a beach house?" You catch yourself thinking, not out of envy, but "how come...? Am I the one failing here?". It's kind of tricky in general because everyone says, "look! I can do it here. If you try and work hard, you'll make it". But life isn't like that, you know? It messes with your head. I'm not sure if it was the same in the past, but I think our generation struggles more psychologically due to the social pressure created by this perfect life, this perfect lifestyle, promoted through social media. (Francisco, personal interview, August 04, 2022)

I think it's the social status aspect of Instagram. That whole thing about having lots of followers, loads of likes, having tons of... It provides a stage for a lot of idiots. And, honestly, that's kind of true. It gives a stage to a bunch of people there who, man... they shouldn't be getting all that attention in this way. So, there's this issue of status, there's this issue of: "wow, I'm really here working like crazy, absolutely mad. Someone else is doing a bunch of ad[vertising] and getting insanely rich". And that's it. It's a bit of envy. You could call it a bit of envy. (Erasmo, personal interview, July 08, 2022)

Immersed in hyper-reality and social comparison, participants demonstrated how popularity indicators and performance-focused narratives translate into social pressure and negative self-evaluation in the physical world. This distortion may lead to questioning one's own success and frustration with the apparent achievements of others.

#### 4.6. INFORMATION OVERLOAD

The research revealed differing perceptions among participants regarding the vast dissemination of information on DSNs. Some participants (Firth et al., 2019) viewed the large amount of informational stimuli positively, indicating they were accustomed to it.

There's a lot of information [on Instagram], but I don't find it tiring. I filter it, you know? What doesn't interest me, I just skip. So, for me, it's indifferent. But yes, there's a lot of information, yet I don't find it exhausting. You just have to keep filtering. (Ana Carolina, personal interview, June 23, 2022)

Using the idea of content, I think it's an absurd bombardment that I have — using myself as a reference — that we as human beings aren't equipped to process. I think it's at a level that generates anxiety. I notice that when I'm on social media — the only ones I have are Instagram and Facebook — I feel anxious. So, that thing you mentioned about boredom quickly passes because in just a few minutes it starts giving me distress, as it's too much information. I think it's too much information and the excess of visual stimuli, which I find somewhat tiring. (Patricia, personal interview, July 06, 2022)

In contrast, the majority of participants expressed feeling excessively exposed, which leads to fatigue and a negative perception of boredom (Przybylski et al., 2013). This exposure also generates anxiety, manifested by the constant need to check the platform (Franchina et al., 2018) and the sense of an infinite feed. FOMO was also identified as a relevant factor, acting as a mediator in Instagram use and inducing feelings of inertia and doubt regarding decisions (Milyavskaya et al., 2018). These concerns support criticisms directed at technology companies, which are often accused of developing products with addictive and anxiety-inducing potential, frequently at the expense of users' well-being (McElroy et al., 2019).

### 5. CONCLUSION

Situated in the era of hyperconsumption and hypermedia, of simulacra and simulations, contemporary society operates immersed in the excessive production that fuels DSNs. Driven by the attention economy, these platforms compete for users' time, commercialise desires, and shape standards and realities — those considered "Instagrammable". Within this context, Brazilian interviewees, embedded in the peculiarities of this culture, particularly in the interplay between the real and the vibrant cyberspace, shared their experiences, with particular emphasis on Instagram. However, it was also essential to understand their broader relationship with the Internet.

Due to the generational focus, representatives of Generation Y drew relevant comparisons between different periods of Internet and DSN consumption. They experienced a childhood and adolescence closer to material reality and with far less constant

Internet access, and they advocate for responsible and conscious use of the network, as well as periods of “disconnection”, to promote well-being and mental health.

The data revealed that boredom, escapism, and FOMO are influential, mediating, and triggering factors in Instagram use, confirming findings from previous academic literature. Participants perceive the application, in particular, as offering elements that encourage compulsive use, whether through content presentation or the convenience and enhanced experience provided by mobile devices.

Participants reported experiencing anxiety, feelings of fatigue and inertia, and self-criticism stemming from social pressure amplified online. They also indicated that sustained attention has been negatively affected in an increasingly multitasking routine, as supported in the literature (Firth et al., 2019). Instagram contributes to the formation of collective memory, alongside other platforms such as messaging apps and search engines, functioning as both a memory aid and an almost infinite database.

Future research could, for instance, compare Lusophone countries with one another or neighbouring Latin American countries, considering cultural characteristics and Internet consumption patterns. Other studies may explore these themes in different age groups, such as Generation Z, Generation X, and Baby Boomers.

This research was conducted during a period close to an electoral process in Brazil, which spontaneously prompted politically oriented statements. Therefore, longitudinal studies tracking a group of participants and their interactions with DSNs, consumption patterns and information flow before, during, and after major political or social events could provide a better understanding of content circulation and political polarisation over time. With the increasing sophistication of artificial intelligence and the arrival of 5G connectivity, this real/virtual scenario is likely to persist in its rapid processes of change and reconfiguration.

### **Machine Translation Post-Editing: Anabela Delgado**

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**Submitted: 22/03/2025 | Accepted: 10/07/2025**



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