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FOREVER EPHEMERAL?

AN EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS OF YOUTH SELF-PRESENTATION WITH
INSTAGRAM STORIES IN THE CONTEXT OF VISUAL MOBILE COMMUNICATION

Corvinus University of Budapest
Doctoral School of Sociology and Communication Science
Communication Science Doctoral Programme
Stipendium Hungaricum Scholarship Programme

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Doctoral dissertation

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Budapest
2024

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Acknowledgment

I am deeply grateful to my supervisor, Dr. Ágnes Veszelszki, for her invaluable assistance, guidance, and advice throughout the research. Without her support, I would not have been able to complete this dissertation.

I am indebted to my professors, particularly Prof. Dr. Petra Aczél, Prof. Dr. Benczes Réka, Dr. Judit Sass, and Prof. Dr. Andrea Kárpáti, for providing me with valuable knowledge and guidance. Their instruction, teaching styles, and feedback have significantly contributed to my development throughout this journey.

I would like to extend my heartfelt appreciation to the organizers of the emma Doctoral Summer School 2023 at LUT Business School, in Lappeenranta, Finland, mainly Dr. Päivi Maijanen-Kyläheiko and Dr. Kaisa Pekkala, for providing an excellent platform for academic growth and networking.

Additionally, I am thankful to the reviewers of the first version of this thesis, Prof. Dr. Andrea Kárpáti and Dr. Wolfgang Stock, for their constructive feedback and comments that have greatly contributed to the quality of my work.

I am beholden to my peers in the Ph.D. program, mainly Alexandra Béni, Ádám Kuttner, Judit Sebestény, Utku Bozdog, and Aizhamal Muratalieva, for their remarks and support along the way. Their friendship has made this process a lot easier.

I greatly value the students I have taught and supervised over the years at the Corvinus. Their enthusiasm and curiosity have been a great source of motivation for me.

I am appreciative of my friends who have been a ground of strength and comfort throughout this process. Their encouragement and understanding have been priceless.

I am indebted to my colleagues at Nokia, the International Student Recruitment and Admissions Office, and the Institute of Finance at Corvinus, mainly Duong, Leo, Matt, Viki, Miki, Klaudia, and Dr. Kata Váradi for their continuous encouragement.

I am especially thankful to my family for their unconditional love and their comfort during the painful loss of my two siblings while I was abroad. Without their emotional assistance, I would not have been able to keep my focus and complete this milestone.

Finally, I recognize my own dedication, endurance, and hard work amidst mental and emotional stress. This dissertation is a result of my commitment, self-development, and determination. Note to self: Keep it up! 😊

1. Introduction

Picture this: The first thing that most of us do after waking up is to grab our smartphones. Besides turning off an alarm, it almost feels like opening curtains to the world. App notifications summarize what happened overnight. With a quick swipe, while preparing to eat breakfast or on the way to school/work, some may share visual pieces of our days online, painting a routinary image of our lives, one brushstroke at a time. Throughout the day, selfies, food, architecture, quotes, landscapes, songs, and other elements depict the latest experiences on Instagram Stories to those who follow us – or to anyone on Instagram, in the case of open accounts. The ephemeral content feature reached one billion users in 2023 (Kemp, 2023) and includes a set of creative tools to design visual content (Veloso da Silva, 2021). However, the shared moments are visible for only 24 hours, unless saved as a “Highlight”. After this specific duration, the stories¹ automatically expire to give way to new everyday scenes – in a cycle of seeing, registering, sharing, and disappearing.

From “mundane” moments like a cup of coffee to more “significant” events like a birthday celebration, everything is worthy of being registered and shared on ephemeral content platforms. Taking into consideration Instagram’s popularity on a general level, as it registers more than 2 billion monthly active users (Kemp, 2023), and the ubiquity of mobile phone photography in our daily lives (Villi & Stocchetti, 2011; Villi, 2015; Turkle, 2017; Peraica, 2017; Miller, 2020), it is not with surprise that this social media has become a common topic in contemporary communication science research. Leaver et al. (2020) explain that the platform has altered the understanding of visual social media cultures; Manovich (2016) points out that Instagram is fomenting changes in photography, not only regarding styles but its aesthetics as well; Serafinelli and Villi (2017) indicate that smartphones mediation for images production/sharing online can affect how individuals think visually of events, people and their surroundings.

The integration of smartphones connected with the internet, camera phones, and Instagram Stories has become an almost unnoticeable part of many young people’s lives, allowing them to document and share their experiences with the world, one snapshot at a time.

¹ For clarity, throughout the dissertation I use capital S in Stories when referring to the feature (Instagram Stories) and lower s in stories for the product/images shared on the platform.

Adopted by the youth, Stories is part of the tools people use for self-presentation, a practice that has been studied for many decades in the intersection of social psychology and communication (Goffman, 1959; Baumeister & Jones, 1978; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Baumeister & Hutton, 1987). More recent work has focused on understanding the ways social media and the Internet favor visibility and impression management (Schau & Gilly, 2003; Litt & Hargittai, 2016; Rettberg, 2017; Schlosser, 2020; Hollenbaugh, 2021).

Moreover, Instagram has turned into the favorite platform of those aged 16-24 years old globally as of 2023 (Kemp, 2023). However, the specific academic study of Instagram Stories is still an area in development, as the feature was launched only in 2016, with very few authors analyzing youth practices with the feature from a qualitative and multidisciplinary perspective. Although not a thoroughly novel practice, as Stories itself copied other similar platforms' functionalities, such as Snapchat (Verstraete, 2016; Leaver et al., 2020), the intersection of mobile images, ephemerality on social media, and self-presentation remains a rich solid for scientific exploration.

The pervasiveness of this topic is evident in the fact that transient content is nowadays spread across many mobile applications, including Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, Telegram, TikTok, and BeReal, to name a few. This online communication genre is characterized by features that allow users to produce, share, and consume visuals with several layers of information (i.e., images, text, geolocation, hashtag, texts, songs, etc.) that are automatically programmed to disappear from the public eye after a set period. Thus, ephemeral content encourages spontaneity, real-time sharing, and a sense of immediacy, distinguishing it from permanent posts by fomenting more authentic and temporary interactions, as further described in the literature review and discussed in the results chapter of this dissertation.

Instagram Stories, specifically, is now a prime example of how ephemeral communication takes form on social media, despite not being the only example of it. Barnea et al. (2023) identified, based on an empirical study, that ephemeral images can affect information processing and content-consuming behavior, with users of these features (e.g., Instagram Stories) spending more time and attention viewing the ephemeral images in comparison to perpetual content users (p. 448). We don't want to take a technologically deterministic perspective on this dissertation work but rather indicate how Instagram usage for self-presentation is interconnected to social cultural practices that seem common in an era of visual mobile communication.

Beyond the particular Instagram feature, image-centered social media practices and affordances have also been the subject of research in other scientific fields, such as

neurosciences (Crone & Konijn, 2018; Sherman et al., 2018; Barnea et al., 2023), psychology (Desjarlais, 2020; Jan et al., 2017; Calancie et al., 2017; Sherlock & Wagstaff, 2018), philosophy (Saarinen & Taylor, 1994; Fuchs, 2014; Nyíri, 2019b; van Dijck, 2008; Benedek & Nyíri, 2014; Turkle, 2017) and linguistics (Jones & Hafner, 2012; Seargeant & Tagg, 2014; Veszelszki, 2017). One key point in many of these studies is how social media affects users' lives, even interfering with their psychological well-being. While communication science has traditionally adopted theories from other fields, the intersection of visual communication, self-presentation, and ephemeral visual social media is still underdeveloped.

The tendency of growth in visual social media usage, such as Instagram and TikTok, is likely to continue since the number of Internet users is still on the rise and nearly doubled in the past ten years, from 2.53 billion to 5.16 billion, now representing 60% of the world population (Kemp, 2023). Considering the uses and appropriations of smartphones in the contemporary world and their functionalities for self-presentation on the Internet, this research explores and analyzes, within visual mobile communication, the influence of ephemeral images from Instagram Stories in the youth self-presentation, thus providing evidences on contemporary visibility practices and impression management strategies.

In times of Stories, self-presentation gets help from images that continuously expose the lived, the observed, and the imagined. With additions of features propitiated by digital technologies, such as filters, figures, GIFs, emojis, and Augmented Reality functions, other virtual universes can be built on the photographed world. However, now all of this is programmed by the computers to be provisional – 24 hours are enough unless the user decides to manually highlight it in a digital album.

1.1. Outline of the dissertation

Differently from most traditional communication theories perspectives (Pierce, 2019), which look at the communication process usually focusing on only one of the sides (sender, transmission, message, channel, receiver, destination, noise, feedback), based on a single model (linear, interactional or transactional), or strictly delimiting the research tradition and denying other claims (Craig, 1999; 2001), the present study is based on three main components: the sender (Instagram Stories users); content (Instagram Stories images); and their effects (appropriation and interpretation of the images by the viewer). Additionally, the third component doesn't focus on the audience as in reception studies (other users), but instead on the sender themselves as being a receiver of their content (through the constant review of

reactions and visibility reach). To connect the three components, I revisit and discuss theories related to visual mobile communication, self-presentation on social media, and Instagram studies, thus providing a multidisciplinary perspective for interpretation.

The dissertation is designed following the IMRaD scheme (Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion): first, it presents the three objectives and research questions that guide the entire dissertation (Chapter 1); then it provides the theoretical framework and the object (Stories) description, contextualizing its use as part of a broader contemporary visual mobile communication practice centered on ephemeral content (Chapter 2); followed by a presentation of the main methodologies, the procedure for data collection and analysis, in addition to the limitations, ethical considerations, and transparency in the process (Chapter 3); the next part presents the results structured by each stage of the empirical work (Chapter 4); and a discussion on the findings in relation to the research questions (Chapter 5); finally, after the references, a series of appendices support the methodological decisions and enhance the transparency of the study. In the following paragraphs, I explain further each of these sections.

The literature review (Chapter 2) covers a theoretical discussion of visual mobile communication to explain how visibility has become intertwined with mobile device usage in contemporaneity; that is, the central role that visuals produced with/in smartphones play in our daily communication (Moriarty, 1994, Griffin, 2002; Villi, 2015; Serafinelli & Villi, 2017). Furthermore, I discuss the ways ephemeral content, especially within Instagram, represents a new way in which we appropriate visibility to present ourselves, reflecting an era of ephemerality (Lipovetsky, 1990, 2005; Turkle, 2017) when even images are not necessarily produced to last, but can vanish after fulfilling their role of depicting certain experiences (Verstraete, 2016; Manovich, 2016; Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Leaver et al., 2020). Finally, I explain how the process of self-presentation (Goffman, 1959, Baumeister & Jones, 1978; Baumeister & Hutton, 1987) develops in the context of social media, a digital space that affects our connection with each other and the ways we can curate our image online (Litt & Hargittai, 2016; Schlosser, 2020, Hollenbaugh, 2021). This theoretical discussion seeks to provide a multidisciplinary scope for the research, centered on the communication tradition (Craig, 1999) of social psychology in dialogue with social cultural studies, as proposed by Griffin (2002), which contributes to understanding self-presentation with transient images in times of hyperconnectivity and the contextual environment that enables these practices.

Elaborated on the previous concepts, the methodology (Chapter 3) presents the multimodal qualitative approach (Morse, 2003; Flick, 2014) from an interpretive paradigm in communication (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015), more specifically with the phenomenological

approach. The research design includes: 1) six focus groups (Stewart et al., 1990; Morgan, 1996; Vicsek, 2010) with youth 18-22 years old living in Hungary; 2) a netnography (Langer & Beckman, 2005; Kozinets, 2014, 2020) of their Instagram Stories activities, focusing on their shared ephemeral content on the platform; and 3) 20 semi-structured interviews (Smith, 1995; Adams, 2015) with the same participants from the previous phases to further assess their self-presentation strategies on the platform. The study started with a pilot research (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002; Ismail et al., 2018) in the second semester of 2021 to test the methods and design further empirical research, followed by the application of the main procedure between January and October 2022.

The final sample consisted of 43 participants divided into six face-to-face focus groups that were organized in 2021 and 2022 at the Corvinus University of Budapest; complemented with 782 images collected from their Instagram accounts over five weeks in the second semester of 2022 during the netnography stage; in addition to 20 semi-structured interviews conducted online via Microsoft Teams. The material is explored with a hybrid inductive-deductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) developed with the assistance of a qualitative data analysis software (MAXQDA) in an iterative and reflexive coding process following the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019).

Furthermore, a codebook (*Appendix 1*) was elaborated during the pilot study for the initial coding of the images based on previous literature about self-presentation and Instagram studies, which served as the first step in the deductive-inductive thematic coding process. Complementary to the methodology, and as a good practice in qualitative research, some illustrative samples of the focus group transcripts, of the images collected from Instagram Stories, and of the interviews are provided in the appendices (*Appendix 6, Appendix 7, Appendix 8*), alongside other relevant material to guarantee transparency and to allow the replicability of this research design (*Appendix 2, Appendix 5*).

The results (Chapter 4) present the empirical qualitative interpretative analysis of the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and provides evidence on how the youth present themselves via ephemeral content from a self-presentation theory perspective. The results are organized in three parts: Initially, I describe the context of partakers visual mobile communication experience, providing relevant demographics about their image production and consumption on Instagram and Instagram Stories. After that, I present the themes² with a thematic map, and

² Based on Braun & Clarke (2019, p. 593), I divide the thematic analysis in "themes" as the main shared meaning across a set of "topics". The latter represents an early stage of the data classification and interpretation process. In

the topics under each theme, that were developed from the discussions — or published, in the case of images — with information provided by the participants in each stage of this research, offering examples from the data. Lastly, I discuss how those results reflect on changes in self-presentation taking the specific context of visual mobile communication, evaluating and answering each of the research questions.

1.2. Relevance of the research

From the exposed information in this introduction, it is possible to notice that the use of visual social media with ephemeral content, especially Instagram, has gained prominence and relevance both in contemporary communication practices — such as the high number of users on the platforms, with Instagram alone accounting for more than two billion users (Kemp, 2023) — and academic studies about the area. However, there's still a lack of qualitative research about self-presentation with ephemeral content from a visual mobile communication perspective.

Therefore, exploring and understanding how youth self-presentation is influenced by visibility practices through the mediation of transient images produced with smartphones will provide a deeper comprehension of contemporary youth online communication behavior. Furthermore, it can contribute to and reinforce the empirical and theoretical basis of visual mobile communication, Instagram studies, and self-presentation studies on social media. Hence, this study is justified in at least three points, demonstrating its theoretical and empirical relevance:

(1) The research provides an updated discussion about visual mobile communication, connecting the topic with social media and Instagram studies, and contributing to the theoretical development in communication science in the digital age. Additionally, by examining the uses of Instagram Stories among the youth from a visual mobile communication perspective, the research provides empirical evidences of contemporary communication practices by dialoguing with and bridging three interconnected theoretical areas: visual mobile communication, social media studies, and online self-presentation.

(2) The investigation applies a three mixed method approach to studying self-presentation from a qualitative perspective, enabling an in-depth understanding of how the youth adopt ephemeral content for self-presentation — with the users' information as

this sense, there is an hierarchy where each theme contains a series of topics, and each topic has under it the coded segments from the data.

participants. Furthermore, this mixed research design combining focus groups, netnography, and interviews provides a comprehensive view of the user experience, and motivations behind self-presentation using ephemeral content. Likewise, by engaging with the users as participants in the research process, it becomes possible to gain a comprehensive understanding of the social, cultural, and technological factors which influence how they present themselves online. This approach provides a much more in depth analysis of self-presentation than a single-method strategy, as it considers the broader context of user behavior and motivations.

(3) The research focuses on a novel type of mobile communication, ephemeral digital images on visual social media — with the example of Instagram Stories — which usage by the youth has not been qualitatively scrutinized, despite its popularity and ubiquity nowadays. Although the focus throughout the study is on Stories, this communicative practice characterized by ephemerality can also be perceived in other mobile applications, such as Snapchat, TikTok, and BeReal, but each platform offers different affordances and functionalities. Hence, the research covers a novel area within visual mobile communication and fills this gap in knowledge by exploring how young people use transient images on social media for self-presentation. Findings from the research will provide an understanding of the roles these images play in youth communication nowadays and how this type of mobile communication affects a specific component of social relationships, namely self-presentation.

In connection to the theoretical and methodological relevance, academic research on Instagram Stories and fleeting content can further the knowledge of its user behavior and the impact of these visuals on user engagement. Young people adopt Instagram Stories to share their experiences, build relationships, and express their creativity, and they are also the main consumers of social media nowadays. Therefore, this study's findings can be applied as initial pathways for platforms willing to qualitatively explore young people's usage of their features as well as by companies that aim to improve their social media communication with this new generation.

Finally, there's a personal motivation for the development of this work that comes from my long journey in studying the Internet and social media, with previous projects on topics that dialogue with the current one (Veloso da Silva, 2018, 2021). Hence, this investigative project enables the continuation of an analysis initiated in the bachelor's degree about self-presentation on the Internet, then developed on the master's degree about adolescents on Instagram, and further investigated throughout the doctoral studies — now presented in this dissertation.

The next subsection of this dissertation draft presents the three research questions along with the research objectives, which are all aligned between themselves and with the proposed

theoretical framework, referring respectively to theory (visual mobile communication), images (Instagram Stories), and experiences (self-presentation on social media).

1.3. Research questions and objectives

The research puzzle of this investigation centers on the in-depth exploration of how ephemeral visual content, particularly Instagram Stories, influences the self-presentation and visibility practices of youth in the context of visual mobile communication. Despite Instagram's widespread popularity and the pervasive role of smartphone cameras in documenting and sharing everyday experiences, the academic examination of Instagram Stories remains underdeveloped.

Therefore, through a qualitative, multidisciplinary, and mixed-method approach, this dissertation explores the implications of online ephemeral content in visual mobile communication, and more specifically, how it transforms visibility practices and self-presentation strategies among the youth. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and BeReal have greatly impacted the way users depict their lives online and how they present themselves to their followers. Moreover, by adopting ephemeral visual content on Instagram Stories, users share their private lives and construct complex visual self-presentation strategies, playing with the platform's affordances. Hence, this research qualitatively (Jaeger & Halliday, 1998) analyzes and answers three questions:

1. **RQ1:** *How does online ephemeral content influence visibility practices among the youth in the context of visual mobile communication?*
2. **RQ2:** *What specific strategies are used for visual self-presentation mediated by ephemeral images on Instagram Stories?*
3. **RQ3:** *What characteristics distinguish the use of ephemeral images as a communication practice on visual social media?*

In alignment with these questions, the general objective of this dissertation can be summarized as follows: To analyze, within visual mobile communication, the influence of ephemeral images from Instagram Stories in the self-presentation of the youth born in the 21st century (aged 18-22 years old). A more focused set of specific objectives, also directly connected to the previous RQs, reflects on the contribution to theory, analyzes the ephemeral images, and describes the characteristics of those studied online experiences:

- **Theory:** *To provide a theoretical basis on how social media applications with ephemeral content intersect with visual mobile communication.*
- **Images:** *To typify the visual self-presentation strategies mediated by ephemeral content of Instagram Stories among the youth.*
- **Experiences:** *To investigate the characteristics that distinguish the use of ephemeral images as a communication practice among the youth on visual social media.*

2. Theoretical background

2.1. *Situating communication theory*

How our societies produce, share, interact with and consume images has changed consistently for centuries (Griffin, 1991, 2002). The development and popularization of mass communication, and later on with new technologies, especially mobile devices coupled with a camera and Internet connection (Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Serafinelli & Villi, 2017; Peraica, 2017), parallelly with socio-cultural and economic changes (Castells, 2007, 2010) has been in the center of academic discussions. In this chapter, I develop a theoretical framework by exploring the *field* of communication, providing a conceptual discussion about the main terms related to the dissertation topic — including visual mobile communication, self-presentation on social media, and Instagram — and situate our object of study, Instagram Stories. The three main theoretical axes progress from traditional literature into a more contemporary reading, enabling the contextualization of the analyzed phenomenon.

Within communication science, the study of social media platforms (Russmann & Svensson, 2017; Meier & Schäfer, 2018; Leaver et al., 2020; Hollenbaugh, 2021), for instance, has even impacted the creation of specific specialized university programs³ and scientific journals⁴ dedicated to the study and diffusion of knowledge about the area. Additionally, a more funneled perspective can be found in the research on visual social media (Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Serafinelli & Villi, 2017), as for the case of Flickr (Murray, 2008, van Dijck, 2011), Snapchat (Verstraete, 2016), Instagram (Veszelszki, 2019; Leaver et al., 2020, Veloso, 2021), TikTok (Medina Serrano, 2020; Cervi et al., 2021); and BeReal (Reig, 2022; Highfield, 2023; Reddy and Kumar, 2023).

In the past decade, a new characteristic of these visual platforms became broadly adopted on smartphone applications: features that allow the users to produce, share, and consume information automatically programmed to disappear after a given time, the ephemeral

³ To name a few programs in 2022/2023: Master of Science in Digital Social Media from the University of Southern California (Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism), in the United States; Master of Digital and Social Media (member of the Internet Industry Association) from the Curtin University, in Australia; and the Master in Social Media Communications, from Dublin City University (School of Communications), in Ireland; the Master in Social Media and Digital Communication, from the University of Westminster (Communication and Media Research Institute), in the United Kingdom.

⁴ As for the journals, *Social Media and Society* (ISSN: 20563051); *Online Social Networks and Media* (ISSN: 24686964); *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* (ISSN: 2152-2723); and *Social Network Analysis and Mining* (ISSN: 1869-5469).

content. This topic has also become the scope of academic and media scrutiny, including Shein (2013), Verstraete (2016), and Bayer et al. (2016). However, not much research has been conducted on the multimodal qualitative approach from the users' perspective — especially the youth who were born and grew up in the 21st century, thus immersed in the mobile communication society — about the experiences that are presented via ephemeral content on visual social media, taking a multidisciplinary perspective on self-presentation.

Understanding the thematic diversity and academic relevance of visual social media in contemporaneity is one step in the process of analyzing new technologies' affordances and usages. Furthermore, it is equally important to inspect it considering the different segments of societies and, whenever possible, to incorporate their perspective into the research. Hence, this dissertation takes a multidisciplinary theoretical framework and a multimodal methodological approach to investigate youth self-presentation via ephemeral content on Instagram Stories. Additionally, it is based on their self-perception, thus offering an immersion into *how* it happens, but also on social and cultural aspects that relate to this phenomenon (*why*).

Hence, as previously noted, there's an attempt to build an intersection between three main areas in communication science: 1) visual mobile communication; 2) self-presentation on social media, and 3) Instagram studies, focusing on the recent research about Instagram Stories. Thus, I seek contributions from other authors that have been scrutinizing our contemporary society to further explain ephemerality, such as Gilles Lipovetsky (1990, 2005), and youth practices in the digital culture, such as David Le Breton (2017).

2.2. Visual communication in the digital age

2.2.1. Visual communication: a long-term evolving discussion

Visual communication theory can be approached from several perspectives, as described by previous authors (Moriarty, 1997; Griffin, 1991, 2002; Russmann & Svensson, 2017), with many possibilities to analyze empirical objects, their use of color, composition, and typography, among other features. The diversity of visual communication studies reflects the multidisciplinary present in communication science (Craig, 1999, 2015), creating constant dialogues with art, linguistics, psychology, graphic design, computer science, and philosophy, to name a few, when it comes to research topics related to visibility (Griffin, 2002; Nyíri, 2003; Benedek & Nyíri, 2014; Andrews, 2014; Veszelszki, 2017; Nyíri, 2019b). In this section, I first briefly introduce visual communication studies to then focus on visual mobile communication.

The history of visual communication goes back thousands of years to ancient cave paintings, its usage in botanics to represent natural elements as plants across many centuries (Nyíri, 2003, p. 174), but is also a contemporary characteristic in digital and social media, as I will discuss in the following sections. Moreover, visual communication is usually associated with the use of visual aids (e.g., diagrams, photographs, emojis, body language, facial expressions, etc.) to convey a message and generate meaning in the audience. The diversity of interpretations is necessary considering the relevance and plurality of the matter (Moriarty, 1997) but it is also essential to situate the viewpoint taken in this research and the dialogues that I will encourage with other areas (e.g., social media and self-presentation).

According to Lester (1995/2020), throughout history, images of diverse forms have been adopted to express ideas, tell stories, and transmit information, with the proliferation of visual media in the recent centuries (e.g., television and film) denoting its increasing relevance in how our societies communicate. Thus, the author argues that visual communication plays a relevant role in the ways we perceive information, process and understand it, and more broadly in how we interact with the world around us.

Lester (1995/2020) explains that there are four main visual theories connected to communications, but they can be divided into two groups based on their research focus and interpretation of phenomena: sensory (gestalt and constructivism) and perceptual (semiotics and cognitive). The first group is more concerned with technical and sensorial elements of how we see images: visual cues of color, form, depth, and movement; how the brain notices these cues, and how data is transmitted via our nerves. The second group is dedicated to exploring the perceptual processes, how we interpret signs and their meanings (semiotics), and how mental activities (e.g., memory) relate to visual perception (cognitive theory).

Accordingly, Lester (1995/2020) claims that the best messages are those that combine words and pictures/images, going beyond a dichotomy of solely textual or visual, which increases the chances of viewers retaining information in their memory and acquiring knowledge: “(...) visual messages can become long-time mental memories through direct, cognitive processing. Your mind’s eye – not an actual sensual image – has created the picture inside your head” (p. 6). This line of thought has become relevant in communication, sociology, philosophy, and linguistics, among other fields, to study visual learning⁵ – debates about how

⁵ A series of publications addressing topics of visual learning from a diverse range of perspectives has been organized since 2012 by the Hungarian researchers András Benedek, Kristof Nyíri, Petra Aczél, and Ágnes Veszelszki. Some of the titles can be consulted on this page <https://www.peterlang.com/series/vl> and on the Visual Learning Lab <http://vll.mpt.bme.hu/> maintained by the authors in cooperation with other researchers.

people acquire and relate to varied forms of knowledge through visuals (Dondis, 1973; Nyíri, 2019b).

A dichotomy between images and words, or more specifically whether images would represent a language on their own, is discussed in another work by Lester (2006) – and also by Mitchell (1986, 2002, 2005), as I will present further in this section. Lester (2006) refers to Sol Worth (1981) for clarification: “Pictures are not a language in the verbal sense. Pictures have neither lexicon nor syntax in a formal grammarian’s sense. But they do have form, structure, convention, and rules” (Worth, 1981, *apud* Lester, 2006, para. 22). However, visual messages, as a collection of signs, become a language in the mind while supporting the comprehension of the world around us – they are linked to a context that helps us remember events through images.

Symbolic imagery can take the form of both words and pictures, argues Lester (2006). Letters and words are composed of line drawings with curves and shapes that can be displayed in a varied set of colors, depths, movements, etc. In fact, words originate as visual images and are still seen as a form of art by typographers and calligraphers (Lester, 2006). However, in the era of digital manipulation of content with computers (and smartphones), there is an overlay of medium (color, form, depth, and movement) and messages, with the medium influencing and facilitating our interpretations of the messages.

Lester (2006) explains that we live in a time when images mediate many activities, a phenomenon never seen in mass communications that he refers to as a “visual culture”, be it via billboards, books, clothing, television, or computer, to name a few. “We are becoming a visually mediated society. For many, understanding of the world is being accomplished, not through reading words, but by reading images” (Lester, 2006, para. 7). The explosion in visuality, though, may result in a more balanced status of the relationship between words and pictures, which combined have a stronger capacity of being retained by our minds.

More recently, philosopher Nyíri (2019a) has argued that visual mental images are moving images because the world is presented in front of our eyes equally moving, contrasting this idea with man-made still images (static). “Moving images are not in need of interpretation, or captions, or verbal context, as opposed to the way still images are. The notorious problem of the ambiguity of the static image herewith disappears” (p. 9). Nyíri (2019a) then adds that visual language (gestures and facial expressions) pre-dates verbal/spoken languages in humankind’s history, thus reinforcing the primacy of both visual language and visual thinking (p. 10).

The development of alphabetic writing around the 8th century B.C. represented a blow to visual thinking and the beginning of a tension between visuality and textuality (Nyíri, 2019a, p. 11), with a prevalence of texts in prints until the past centuries. The change began with the invention of photography, the cinema, and the television. However, the radical transformation in this tension, and a new turn to visuality, came with computers, which enable authors to edit and distribute still and moving images.

This idea was also indicated by Lester (1995/2020) when claiming that the status of images is “improving” (p. 417) – citing the example of graffiti on walls that combine text and images to convey a vast number of meanings, from anger to humor. Despite my research not focusing on the cognitive side of Instagram Stories usage, this is relevant to our study as we can notice that ephemeral images are highly complex, adopting visual, textual, and audio elements in several layers of information, as discussed in the following chapters. Moreover, the feature works in a way that gives the notion of movement (time duration of a few seconds) to both still and moving images.

Reviewing Aldous Huxley’s (1942) work “The art of seeing”, which defended that “the more you know, the more you see”, Lester (1995/2020, p. 6) proposes the “visual communication’s circle dance” to complement Huxley’s theory of sensing (physiological process), selecting (isolate scene or object), and perceiving (make sense or the selected message). Thus, Lester adds to these new instances, creating a new cycle of sensing, selecting, perceiving, remembering, learning, and knowing:

- The more you know, the more you sense.
- The more you sense, the more you select.
- The more you select, the more you perceive.
- The more you perceive, the more you remember.
- The more you remember, the more you learn.
- The more you learn, the more you know (Lester, 1995/2020, p. 6).

Despite Lester’s contribution to visual communication, we don’t take for granted the “visual communication’s circle dance” to the extent of contemporary visual messages and practices. Hence, mediated ephemeral images on Instagram Stories, for instance, do not necessarily contribute to this full cycle individually (e.g., a single post), since they are produced to disappear and be replaced. However, the continuous practice of sensing, selecting, perceiving, and sharing could contribute to remembering or even to the acquisition of knowledge about oneself (self-perception). This could be a topic for further exploration in

psychology and cognitive sciences, as my focus relies on self-presentation, despite also offering cues to the understanding of how it may contribute to Instagram users' self-perception.

As can be noticed from Lester's (1995/2020, 2006) contributions, the notion of a *process* has also become an important definition for visual communication. Worth and Gross (1974), from whom I borrowed some definitions of communication in the previous section, have highly influenced the development of the research about visibility, addressing communication as part of acquired human knowledge. "In the process of becoming human, we learn to recognize the existence of the objects, persons, and events that we encounter, and to determine the strategies by which we may interpret and assign meaning to them" (Worth & Gross, 1974, p. 27).

The authors make a distinction between events we encounter as 1) natural or 2) symbolic, according to the conditions in which they are presented and the strategies we use to assign meaning to them. A natural event interpretation is embodied in its existence (with *attribution*), while the meaning of a symbolic event depends on our recognition of its structure (*communicational inference*). Thus, this second event is also defined as a communication event, requiring the interpreter to recognize that it's made, performed, or produced for a specific purpose: symbolizing or communicating.

Taking Worth and Gross's (1974) concepts, we can thus infer that the phenomena analyzed in this project, the ephemeral content shared on social media, are understood here as a symbolic/communication event, which is produced in a context, adopting a technology for the production/transmission, to convey meanings that the creators strategically aim for. They require the researcher to look for the context and structure surrounding them, both as a social-cultural visibility practice from the youth and the technical technological dimension that allow them to happen.

In addition to Lester (1995/2020, 2006) and Worth and Gross (1994), many other researchers have contributed to expanding the research on visual communication and visual studies, even when not associating themselves directly with one of these areas. Chmielecki (2015) explains that visual communication has linguistic origins, for which it has been criticized, but it also has developed along the lines of visual studies. Griffin (1991) argues that although we have been using several forms of visual communication for centuries, as for paintings, it was with the rise of mass communication that a debate on the specific notion of visual communication began. "As it is now understood, to speak of visual communication is to speak of the visual emphasis of today's mass media" (p. 10). William Ivins' work, titled *Prints and Visual Communication* (1953), is indicated by Griffin (1991) as one of the precursors of

contemporary visual communication studies, shifting the research from a concern about art and art history towards the relevance of images, including photography, on the way we communicate and learn.

Within communication studies, journalism has traditionally adopted visual communication from a technical perspective and focused mostly on the acquisition of certain applied skills (e.g., newspapers design, photography), which Griffin (1991) says could lead to a “technicist bias”, a technological determinism view on how to produce the “right” communication content. “In photography, this has often been associated with a naive view of the capacity of photographic media to mechanically reproduce reality, the idea that the camera does the work, and one simply needs to know how to run the camera” (p. 13).

One decade later, Griffin (2002) defended that any subject, including visuals, can only be fully grasped if its interpretation considers an intersection of any other adopted traditions with the sociocultural perspective. This approach enables researchers to comprehend and explain historical and social aspects of the phenomenon, thus evaluating how it’s constituted about cultural conventions, its communication patterns, the shared meanings within/across groups, the contemporaneous context and social structure in which it occurs, among other characteristics (p. 30).

A rise in visual studies furthered the development of visual communication as a research area in the late 20th century, mainly with the contributions of W.J.T. Mitchell (1986, 1994, 2002, 2005). As I have discussed in another work (Veloso da Silva, 2021), Mitchell’s Picture Theory applied to the analysis of visual elements represents a legacy with three main characteristics: 1) the definition of critical iconology, as a science of images and their discourses; 2) the proposal of a post-disciplinary context that combines visual, image, and media studies; and 3) his foment to a theoretical discussion about visual topics (Purgar, 2017, p. 15).

An important discussion from the author refers to a pictorial or visual turn, usually wrongly labeled as a phenomenon of our times (Mitchell, 2002). However, Mitchell has explained it is a wrong interpretation of his thought since there were other pictorial turns throughout history. He states that there should not be a division, a dichotomy, between the age of literacy (for instance) and the age of visibility. Therefore, this visual turn “is a repeated narrative figure that takes on a very specific form in our time, but which seems to be available in its schematic form in an innumerable variety of circumstances” (Mitchell, 2002, p. 173).

Despite not making an isolated connection between visual studies and visual communication, Moriarty (1997) defends that visual communication encompasses a variety of

disciplines, dialoguing with areas such as visual literacy, visual thinking, visual perception, imagery, and representation (see *Figure 1*). Moriarty and Kenney (1995) cite Mitchell's works among the relevant studies for understanding visual communication. While developing a conceptual map of visual communication and revising research in the field, Moriarty concludes that in many studies those areas can present intersections among themselves.

It is important to note that these areas are not independent but intersecting (...). For example, there are several points of intersection between production and reception. Visual thinking - the ability to visualize - is important in both creating (encoding) and interpreting (decoding) a visual. Likewise meaning construction is paralleled by meaning interpretation. And the social uses analyzed by anthropology are similar to the concept of audience uses which are the focus of communication studies (Moriarty, 1997, p. 21).

The map not only shows the complexities of visual communication but also brings up the vast possibilities of research within the field. In the case of this project specifically, it is positioned in the intersection of message production and message perception, considering the cultural context in which it develops. This dimension can be perceived in Research Question 01, pointing to a sender/receptor as the same subject to an extent in the case of Instagram Stories.

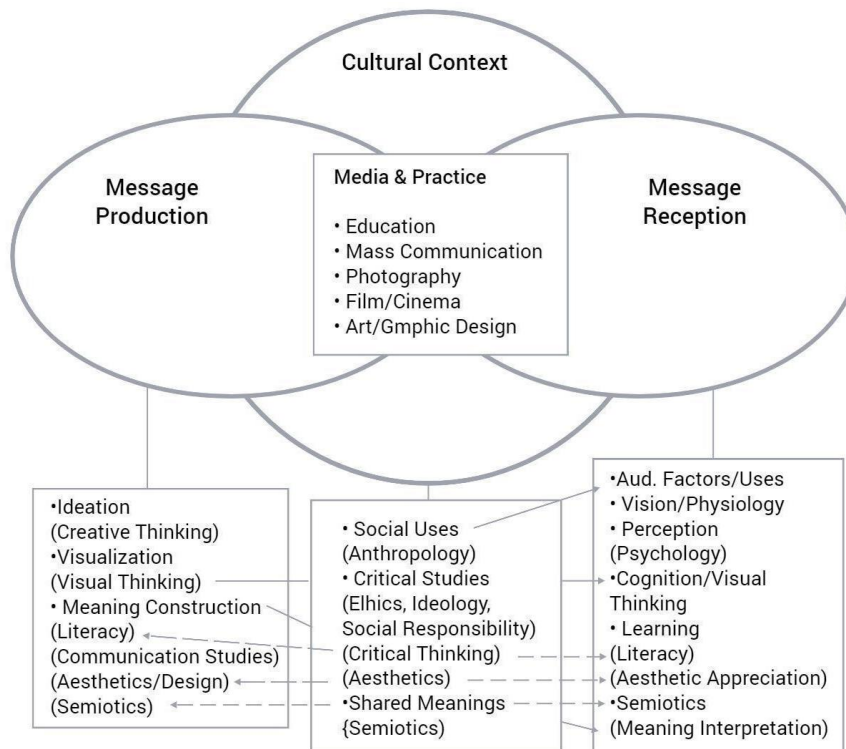


Figure 1. A Conceptual Map of Visual Communication.

(Source: Moriarty, 1997, p. 22)

Still taking the contribution of Moriarty (1997), it is noticeable that their conceptual map proposes a multidisciplinary approach to the study of communication phenomena, which connects with Griffin's (2002) proposal. Accepting this understanding and funneling towards a contemporary perspective, with the affordances and practices in mobile visualities, we move on to a discussion on visual mobile communication. The next section doesn't seek to bring up concepts, but to contextualize the subject and provide further dialogue for our intersection between visual communication and digital media.

2.2.2. Visual mobile communication: immediacy and connection

Contemporary smartphones enable a multitude of communication practices (Nyíri, 2003; Ling, 2004; Villi, 2007, 2010, 2013) and work as a mobile multi-function device to produce, share, and consume information on the Internet (Ling & Horst, 2011, Hand, 2020). Visual mobile communication is a phenomenon that has been studied for more than 20 years, but at the same time, it is a still developing subject, as the technologies keep evolving and our societies adopt and/or give new uses to them. Equally, visual mobile communication has grown in popularity and effectiveness over the past decade as a means of connecting with others, exchanging ideas, and conveying messages. This subsection aims at situating the research on the topic and further providing a theoretical ground for the empirical analysis in this dissertation.

Mobile communication started to become popular around the 1990s, after more than one hundred years since the first line telephone was invented (Ling, 2004), but access to smartphones only increased around the turn of the 21st century. In fact, a market report has shown that by early 2023, around 5.44 billion people owned a phone, representing 68% of the world population with access to a mobile device (Kemp, 2023). This happened due to several reasons, including the cost of devices that decreased over time, the further development of technologies such as the Global System for Mobile Communication (GSM) and the Wireless Application Protocol (WAP), in addition to the expansion of infrastructure for broadband mobile Internet coverage (Ling, 2004, p. 15; Ling & Horst, 2011, p. 365; Nyíri, 2003).

Almost 20 years ago, Ling (2004) already indicated that mobile communication has evolved from being a cumbersome and difficult system to a portable and indispensable component of how we organize our contemporary life, with its capabilities expanded to include connection to the Internet, the ability to produce and share images, and the possibility to distribute location-sensitive information (p. 11), to mention a few. Additionally, this

contemporary mode of communication facilitates the real-time sharing of opinions, perspectives, and experiences, adding a notion of immediacy and authenticity to the process.

Despite differences in its usage across countries and urban/rural regions, since the early 2000s, smartphones equipped with cameras have contributed to a phenomenon called visual mobile communication (Villi, 2007). This phenomenon enabled people to communicate complex ideas and concepts through the use of images and videos, besides text or audio, as well as to portray feelings and moods visually on the Internet – for instance, with the use of emojis and emoticons (Bódi & Veszelszki, 2006; Veszelszki, 2015).

The Hungarian philosopher of technology Kristóf Nyíri (2003) analyzes the pictorial meaning and mobile communication, emphasizing how changes in the way we communicate nowadays have indicated a shift towards visual communication, especially with the advent of mobile phones and computers that potentially enable anyone equipped with the devices to produce and share a vast profusion of visuals. The author argues, for instance, that animated images on mobile communication are equivalent to iconic languages⁶, which “are rich and dense carriers of meaning, especially well-suited to convey large amounts of information on a small display” (p. 179). However, Nyíri (2003) avoids advocating for a strictly and isolated “visual language”, defending that verbal communication (voiced or written) can be complemented with a pictorial dimension to improve its effectivity (p. 181), which connects to what I previously discussed about visual communication with Lester’s (1995/2020) contributions.

Many of the early studies about visual mobile communication dealt with Multimedia Messaging Services (MMS) and photo messaging in the early 2000s. For Nyíri (2003), one of the most relevant characteristics of MMS was its capacity to integrate graphics with spoken and written words in synchronous-complementary communication. Likewise, this combination of visual and verbal formats via mobile devices “has the potential to create and maintain a higher level of human cohesion than could be achieved by any of these dimensions by themselves” (p. 184), representing not only a social activity but being part of a community creation process.

⁶ Kristóf Nyíri (2003) builds his argument about iconic languages after a historical discussion regarding visibility, including a semiotic discussion, and refers to Yazdani and Barker’s publication *Iconic Communication* (2000) as an indicative of how visual languages can extend and, in certain cases, even replace verbal language. From the volume, the author mentions Colin Beardon (2000) to demonstrate that the “ambiguity in pictures can be removed via felicitous animation; that where the still image stands in need of interpretation, the moving image is self-interpreting” (p. 178). This thought is later complemented by the justification that “while still images correspond to the *words* of verbal languages, animations correspond to *sentences*” (p. 179).

In connection with these understandings about the importance of visuals in mobile communication, Mikko Villi (2007, 2015) analyzes photo messaging from a communication science perspective, exploring the practice concerning photography theories and as a form of visual interpersonal communication. Two key factors brought by the camera phones are that, on the one hand, they include visuals in phone communication, which was primarily verbal until then (voice calls, SMS); on the other hand, it also changes photography itself, which became more ubiquitous, transient, mundane, and interpersonal (2007, p. 51) with the possibility to take a picture and immediately share it online.

The escalation of photo production and sharing with the advent of mobile cameras on smartphones adds more complexity to the visuality in contemporary times (Villi, 2007, 2010, 2013, 2015). This increase in photo sharing online has impacted mobile communication and the visual relationship people maintain with daily events and their surroundings (Serafinelli and Villi, 2017). The development of smart mobile technology highly contributed to the circulation of photography, explain Serafinelli and Villi (2017), henceforth allowing the interconnection of two areas: digital technology and the new mediated practices. “With smart mobile devices, photography has become so ubiquitous that the existence of events, people, and objects seems to be directly connected with being photographed” (p. 3).

Villi (2010) lists some of the characteristics of visual mobile communication: it mediates presence (communication over space); enables visuals to be exchanged immediately (synchronous or instantaneous), offers ubiquitous visual connection (via images on the Internet), is done via a personal device (individual phones/cameras), and makes unexpected experiences photo-worthy (unique daily events).

When referring to smartphone photos, the researcher explains that they differ from traditional photography in the sense that the latter communicates events located in a distant past (there-then to here-now), while phone images refer to both a spatial and a temporal immediacy, connecting two presents (there-now and here-now). Thus, the phone camera promotes disposable images: “The general anticipation towards mobile images seems to be that they are best when fresh, they can live vigorously for a while, be shared with friends and then be soon forgotten.” (Villi, 2010, p. 92).

This mediated presence via visual mobile communication is enabled in two ways: by a communicative presence, that gives the feeling of being in the photographed event or place while it develops (experiencing it through an image); and by enabling the “presence of the absent”, when an image brings visually to the place a photographed object or person that is

distant now. The novelty here is that presence is visually communicated primarily over distance, not over time, in a quasi-simultaneous way (Villi, 2010, p. 151).

Oksman and Turtiainen (2004) studied youth mobile communication culture in Finland and indicate that young people adopted these devices faster in comparison to older generations, and in a short period, the mobile phones became a “natural, almost organic” (p. 332) part of their lives. The authors point out that using mobile phones relates to the youth’s everyday life since they embrace this type of technology for many activities, such as talking with friends daily or beginning romantic relationships via messages (p. 326). Also, mobile communication and new media have reduced, and sometimes overlapped, the traditional opposition between content producers and content consumers (p. 328).

A central component of mobile communication among the youth is the integration of this new type of communication to support building their social identity and the definition of personal space, as explained by Oksman and Turtiainen (2004). Hence, mobile devices become tools to connect users with social communities and influence how self-presentation is constructed, enabling them to participate in synchronous online interactions with an audience without being corporally present. “Communication of this kind always involves the possibility of withdrawing from the stage. It also provides the communicator with a facade enabling communication and presentation of self that are considerably different from what is possible in face-to-face situations” (p. 336).

Bayer et al. (2016) argue that visual mobile communication meets many needs and motivations, “including recording memories and supporting relationships, self-presentation, and self-expression” (p. 4). Kindberg et al. (2005) indicated that pictures produced and shared from phones would establish a new genre in mobile communication (p. 42), implicating a much more complex and rich use than traditional cameras: “The combination of camera and direct sending capabilities lets us use images to bring remote people into an experience or to accomplish tasks with them” (p. 48). They interviewed 34 camera phone users in the United Kingdom and the United States to analyze their device usage and found that participants mainly capture images for four main purposes: affective versus functional intentions, and social versus individual reasons (p. 44).

Affective relates to the sentimental connection with someone in the image or when a photo is captured for fun (e.g., joking with friends); while functional relates to the use of cameras to support a practical task, such as registering visually an object they want to buy later on. Social reason refers to snapping an image and then sharing it with those present at that moment to enrich the experience (e.g., a photo with friends at an event) or with absent others

as visual evidence of the activity and to share its meaning. Finally, individual intentions are connected to personal reflections, when someone keeps a photo because it has value to themselves (e.g., keeping a photo of a loved one with you) or it represents a moment they want to remember, although sometimes the visuals can also be shared with others.

Ling and Horst (2011) analyzed mobile communication in the global South and inferred that mobile phones can impact life at the macro and micro levels, reshaping our everyday routines in many ways. However, the transformation is not seen as a revolutionary step, but rather as an adaptation of previous activities to the new technologies (p. 370). For instance, we used landline phones for calls with friends, now we use smartphones to send voice, text, and visual messages; we used an analog camera for photography and a printed album to keep them, now it can all be done with mobile phones.

Beyond the specific usage of smartphones, Bódi and Veszelszki (2006) and Veszelszki (2015) have also noted an increase in the relevance of visuality in information-communication technology, such as social media platforms, when compared to its antecedent techniques of textual transmission. This importance is evidenced by the increasing use of static and animated visuals for online communication, for instance, emoticons and GIFs (graphics interchange format), especially to convey the meanings of emotions.

Hand (2020) demonstrates that smartphones have impacted the relationship people maintain with image production, especially among younger users, for whom the device has always been their default camera (p. 312). Moreover, the equipment is seen as an intimate device present in most moments of daily life, even working as a mirror. “Smartphones have become particularly significant in shaping the contours, content, and conduct of photography because they are single devices allowing for control of the ‘whole process of photography’” (Hand, 2020, p. 312).

One example of smartphone photography is the contemporary selfie, which Hand (2020) elucidates that it’s not merely a self-portrait, but a new genre in how it’s composed and designed, reorganizing the connection of body, space, and image. Similarly, a selfie brings together the producer and the referent as the same agent, which usually can be visualized in the picture by the arm that extends to hold the phone camera. In this sense, Hand (2020) notes that the selfie becomes a trace of the performance (photographing) instead of an object (self), thus distinguishing it from other forms of self-portraiture (p. 321).

While conducting a qualitative study of photo-sharing practices among young adults, Lobinger et al. (2022) found that media repertoires represented a meaningfully structured composition of practices based mainly on two elements: “the imagined affordances of

platforms and their expected audiences” and “interpersonal coordination and matching practices” (p. 73). Participants associated social relevance with taking and sharing images (p. 80), and smartphones were their primary way to execute it. Still, the choice of platform and type of photo depends on situational communicative needs and purposes (p. 84). Overall, the youth shared images for many purposes, such as “building, maintaining or strengthening social relationships, functional purposes, and self-expression” (p. 81).

Notwithstanding that Lev Manovich (2016) addressed this subject from a slightly distinct angle, his perspective regarding social media is relevant to understanding visual mobile practices. In his book *Instagram and Contemporary Image* (2017), Manovich discusses the way Instagram has been fomenting changes in photography, not only regarding styles but its aesthetics as well. This plurality of dimensions meets our proposal for exploring contemporary images, as he states:

Image cultures that develop around technological media are defined not only by raw technologies, the ways they are packaged and promoted by companies, or how people use these technologies, but also by cultural “languages” – systems of conventions and techniques that define the subjects, narratives, editing, compositions, lighting, sequencing, and other image characteristics (Manovich, 2016, p. 18).

I cover visual social media and more specifically Instagram in the following section of this chapter. The vast number of contemporary images produced and shared online daily, among other technological economic implications, give space to the saturation of images, to ephemerality – they are no longer made to last and endure, instead, to be consumed and discarded or thrown into a digital forgotten archive. This can be seen from a practical perspective by looking at different platforms, such as Flickr, Snapchat, Instagram, BeReal, and TikTok, all primarily focused on visual content.

2.3. Social media visualities: overflow of images

2.3.1. Discussing social media characteristics

Before focusing on the main topic of Instagram as a visual social media and of Instagram Stories, I briefly cover another relevant concept for this discussion: social media, positioning the theoretical perspective taken for this research. Firstly, social media has a broad range of definitions (Wolf et al., 2018; Lipschultz, 2020) and they usually change/adapt as the

technology itself evolves. Social media platforms have significantly changed how we engage and communicate with one another in the twenty-first century, impacting informal interactions as well as institutional and professional communication (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 3), and by early 2023 a market report indicated that almost 60% of the world population was social media users (Kemp, 2023), but their history goes back a couple of decades and can be connected with the first Internet forums and blogs, such as the Planet-Forum system (the 1970s) and LiveJournal (the 1990s). These initial platforms already enabled people to share content online with others and engage in debates about those topics.

As I have discussed in another study (Velooso da Silva, 2018), the Internet as known nowadays had a great development in the 1980s. That happened when the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) in the United States split the existing military network ARPANET⁷ into two different systems: one for scientific purposes (ARPANET) and another for military use (MILNET), which could be interconnected. In the following years, other networks were created to serve the academic community and civil society, expanding access and connection possibilities (Velooso da Silva, 2018, p. 66).

The global network connection was enabled in 1983 after an adaptation in the UNIX operating system to include the TCP/IP protocol (Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol), thus offering an official protocol and language for communication between machines. Later on, in 1989 the World Wide Web (WWW) was developed by the British scientist Tim Berners-Lee, from the CERN (Conseil Européen pour la Recherche Nucléaire - the European Organization for Nuclear Research), becoming public in 1993 (Velooso da Silva, 2018, p. 67). The rise of social media platforms is associated by van Dijck and Poell (2013) with a “general networked culture” that had web technologies (browsers and search engines) directly influencing how our societies access information and communicate (p. 5).

In 1997, one of the first social networking websites (SixDegrees.com) was launched, allowing its users to create a profile and connect with other people via the Internet. This was then expanded in the early 2000s with MySpace dedicated to bands and music fans (Manago et al., 2008), and LinkedIn for professional connections, both launched in 2003. Obar and Wildman (2015) explain that, currently, social media services are Internet-based applications that enable user-generated content to be produced/shared and where individuals/groups create

⁷ The ARPANET network was created by the department of defense of the United States in 1969, during the Cold War, for the transmission of data and the sharing of information with military purposes (Velooso da Silva, 2018, p. 66).

user-specific profiles designed/maintained by the service provider (business) to facilitate the development of online social networks of users/groups.

In the historical chronology, the launch of the Facebook website in 2004 was another relevant point for social media. Initially intended for college students to connect with one another, it expanded to anyone with an email and in the two first years reached over six million users. By 2006, the microblogging website Twitter went online, allowing users to share short messages (tweets) with their followers. Associated with the rise of these websites, the widespread popularization of smartphones in the late 2000s brought the possibility to access the Internet from almost anywhere and provided the scope for mobile applications dedicated to online communication, without the need to use browsers. I will further explore this topic in the following section when presenting the specific case of Instagram.

For van Dijck and Poell (2013), the convergence of technological and cultural trends is connected to the rise of social media platforms, which then resulted in changes in the media landscape and also other social domains (p. 5). About previous mass media logic, the authors identify four characteristics that ground social media logic: programmability, popularity, connectivity, and datafication. Programmability refers to how these platforms and their algorithms automatically influence the users' creative/communicative processes, while also enabling users to affect the information/communication flow with their content (e.g., hashtags). Popularity denotes the mechanisms and strategies for boosting the visibility of people, things, or ideas on each platform, which have both algorithmic and socioeconomic components (e.g., Trending Topics on Twitter).

Connectivity is at the root of social media, as most of them were created with the primary purpose to generate connectedness, but now it expands to the "socio-technical affordance of networked platforms to connect content to user activities and advertisers", mixing users' actions to create their customized social networks with an automated algorithmic logic (van Dijck and Poell, 2013, p. 8). Datafication refers to how social media transforms facets of the world (e.g., images, GPS location, relationships, and likes) into real-time data, which is then processed for automatic predictions that will feed the platform's cyclic logic - and that can influence and/or be influenced by certain public discourses (e.g., Tweets shared during a broadcasted political debate).

The logic of social media, as was previously the case with mass media logic, is gradually dissipating into all areas of public life; the cultural and commercial dynamics determining social media blend with existing commercial and advertising practices, while also changing them. Far from being neutral platforms, social media are affecting

the conditions and rules of social interaction (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 3).

When it comes to the definition of the term, it also interconnects with other denominations. boyd and Ellison (2008) refer to the term social network sites⁸ but present a definition that is vastly cited in reference to social media platforms⁹ as well, counting in December 2022 with more than 25.420 citations. The authors defined it as “web-based services” and listed three characteristics connected to what a user can do within it:

1. Construct a public or semi-public profile,
2. Articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection,
3. View and traverse the list of connections and those made by others (boyd and Ellison, 2008, p. 211).

Wolf et al. (2018) reviewed some of the most cited definitions already published about social media and some challenges they face, such as the limitation to specific technological developments located in time (e.g., referring only to websites, but not including smartphone applications as they appeared later). Wolf et al. (2018) then summarize that social media is built around connections and relationships (p. 16).

The variety of concepts can be perceived even in dictionaries. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary describes social media as “forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos)” (para. 1). The Cambridge Dictionary refers to them as “websites and computer programs that allow people to communicate and share information on the internet using a computer or mobile phone” (para. 1). The concept of social media itself has been scrutinized in other literature reviews and books (boyd & Ellison, 2008; Ngai et al., 2015; Obar & Wildman, 2015; Wolf et al., 2018; Lipschultz, 2020) that can be referred to for more clarifications, thus removing the need for a long debate here.

⁸ One of the first references to the term social networks sites was made by boyd (2004) when studying the online dating site Friendster to exemplify websites that enabled people to create a profile for self-presentation and to connect with each other in networks that mixed private and public life: “it is the public exhibition of private relationships in order to allow for new private interactions” (p. 4). The term was developed from a previous notion of social networks associated with the study of offline social groups (Recuero, 2005).

⁹ As presented in this section, a characteristic of social media platforms is that they go beyond the notion of websites and mix characteristics of broadcasting with those of social network sites. In this sense, adopting the words of Recuero (2019) the concept of social media “doesn’t focus on the structure of the websites that enable communication, not in their affordances, not in the network that emerges from their structure, but rather in the combination of these elements” (para. 1, authors own translation). Original in Portuguese: “O conceito de mídia social é um pouco diferente dos anteriores. Ele não foca na estrutura que permite a comunicação (sites de rede social), nem nas affordances em si, nem na rede que emerge dessa estrutura em si, mas na emergência da combinação desses elementos” (Recuero, 2019, para. 1).

In this dissertation, I adopt a broader understanding that encompasses previous formats, defining social media as an online platform where people and organizations can present themselves, and exchange information via direct multimedia messages in multiple ways (one-to-one, one-to-many), interact and engage with other users publicly or privately (persons and companies), broadcast content with synchronous feedback from the audience (e.g., live streaming on YouTube and Instagram), and participate in online social groups.

Each social media offers different levels of interaction and possibilities for communication, while some have a stronger visual focus (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, BeReal) others were built primarily on text-based formats (e.g., first versions of Twitter). These platforms can be based on the Internet as a website, accessed via a browser, or be provided via mobile communication, as for smartphone applications connected to the Internet. I will provide further characteristics of the specific social media platform analyzed in this research, Instagram, in the following section.

2.3.2. Instagram as a visual social media platform

Instagram is a social media platform that counted over two billion monthly users in 2023, being used daily by almost 1.4 billion people, and being the favorite social media platform among youth aged 16 to 24 years old (Kemp, 2023). According to market statistics, more than 50 billion images have been shared on Instagram up to 2020, with an average of 995 photos uploaded every second into it. Another survey, from the Pew Research Center, also indicated the platform is the most used by young people, between 18 and 29 years (Auxier & Anderson, 2021), and is the third most used by 14-17 years old American teenagers, only behind YouTube and TikTok (Vogels et al., 2022).

Originally launched by software developers Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger on October 6th, 2010, with its name combining “instant camera” and “telegram”, over more than one decade Instagram has been subject to several studies (Hu et al., 2014; Lup et al., 2015; Manovich, 2016; Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Serafinelli & Villi, 2017; Veloso, 2020; Leaver et al., 2020; Béni & Veloso, 2022). This section will draw a perspective on the platform showing both empirical and theoretical discussions of some characteristics that makes it a prominent ephemeral content platform. Following this purpose, the section covers Instagram and later on more specifically the Instagram Stories feature.

The company was bought in April 2012 by the Facebook Group (from 2021 named Meta Platforms) for \$1 billion. The acquisition helped Instagram to boost its growth under the

resources, support, and integration offered by Facebook, expanding its user base and features. In 2013, the platform started allowing users to share content in video formats, in addition to photos, and in 2016 Instagram Stories was introduced for ephemeral content that lasted 24 hours. On the company's website, there is a section that further describes what Instagram is from its corporate perspective:

Instagram is a free photo and video-sharing app available on iPhone and Android. People can upload photos or videos to our service and share them with their followers or with a select group of friends. They can also view, comment, and like posts shared by their friends on Instagram. Anyone 13 and older can create an account by registering an email address and selecting a username. (Instagram, 2022, para. 1)

As stated in their description, the app focuses on sharing visuals (photos and videos) via mobile communication, in addition to creating a space for “friends” to interact with the content. Leaver et al. (2020) inferred that Instagram can act as a basis for establishing links, connecting users for interactions and group formation, and building networks based on similar interests. The application goes beyond a content-sharing platform and enables the formation of social networks (Haythornthwaite, 2005; Meier & Schäfer, 2018). This is accomplished by “following” another profile, exchanging comments or messages, reactions with “I loved” in publications, tagging with tags #, tagging other profiles in images, and referencing spaces with geolocation, among other possibilities of connection.

The app stands out among other social networking or content sharing on the Internet because it was created primarily for mobile experiences, with 53% usage on tablets and 47% on smartphones. However, it was adapted, and, by 2017, it was already possible for users to access their publications from computers, and there are many official and “unofficial” software that allow posting on the desktop. The increase in Instagram usage and its integration into daily life has impacted not only how we share contemporary images but also inserted new possibilities into visual mobile communication practices (Leaver et al., 2020, Veloso, 2020).

For some authors (Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Serafinelli & Villi, 2017; Russmann & Svensson, 2017; Hand, 2017; 2020) there has been more recently a shift towards visual images in social media, especially after the rise of Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat in the second decade of the century, with image-sharing becoming an integral part of the online experiences. Thus, taking the popularity of social media around the world, this shift in visual practices transforms not only how we communicate with each other, but also the way we perceive and construct our sense of self (Russmann & Svensson, 2017).

Highfield and Leaver (2016) discuss the importance of visual elements in our daily lives, defending that sociocultural research should focus more on visual social media, not only text-based content. They point out that Instagram is an example of a platform that is “replete with GIFs, selfies, emoji, and more, is the latest iteration of networked communication with a long-running theme: we have always found ways to be visual online” (p. 48).

Such an argument can be associated with Serafinelli and Villi (2017), for whom being online has become an interactive and creative practice. They exemplify this by showing that the social media platform usage has been connected to a specific verb (to *Instagram*) and that photo-sharing has turned into a way to connect people with their experiences (p. 9). This is even more evident when we look at an Instagram official statement back from 2013: “photos are memories of the people, places, and moments that mean the most to us. We have always sought to give you simple and expressive ways to bring the stories behind your photos to life” (Instagram, 2013, para. 1).

Russmann and Svensson (2017) add that the phenomenon of visual social media goes beyond a mere return of visual communication, as the contemporary practices are more multimodal – the simultaneous use of videos, hashtags, emoticons, text, etc. – and the platforms allow images to be framed, filtered and edited before being shared. Consequently, visual social media not only enable additional information to go along with images, but they also afford the sender to elaborate on their visual presentation strategically and reflexively.

Hand (2020) explains that since the beginning of the 21st century, there have been many changes in photographic practices, in the technologies available for registering/sharing photos, and in the images themselves, which are also aligned with a transformation in the widespread presence, interpretations, and cultural significance of visuals (p. 310). Further developments occurred in the connection of images and social media: “photography has become embedded in a greater variety of social practices, and social media is now primarily visual in its infrastructure, aesthetics, and uses” (p. 310), thus establishing a direct relationship between the platforms and visual communication (Hand, 2020, p. 311).

The high volume of visual content shared online has promoted what Hand (2020) says is a shift in social media practices, moving from repositories of images to infrastructures of circulation. This can be perceived in the examples of Flickr, where users primarily store their photos, to smartphone applications such as Twitter or Instagram, in which the speed and reach of the image are more relevant than the platform repository functions. Additionally, these new media venues impact how visuals are organized, kept over time, circulated, and looked at by users.

To speak of “social media photography,” then, involves thinking about how making, distributing, and viewing images has become an almost unavoidable part of everyday life, and how social media companies have recently transformed themselves into primarily image-based media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram). (...) The acquisition of Instagram by Facebook in 2012, for example, further reoriented personal photography away from “photo sharing” repositories like Flickr and toward a different form of everydayness — that of communicating *with* images as almost a default, and the increased significance of “comments” and “likes” in the maintenance of social relationships, especially in Instagram. (Hand, 2020, pp. 310, 312, original emphasis).

Contemporary photography practices on social media, according to the author, point out cultural conventions of immediate communication, with images being used to communicate the presence (p. 317) and, in some cases, to share with others ordinary events of daily life (everydayness). Some examples of these operations are the applications Snapchat and BeReal, which distinguish and favor the representation of what is happening at the moment.

Social media platforms are considered part of a broader transformation in most of our contemporary societies, which is referred to as a digital culture (Miller, 2020), impacting how we produce/share/consume information. Computation is at the center of this change, going from a calculator to “a filter for all culture” (p. 18), altering the ways we consume movies and television or read books electronically. (Miller, 2020, p. 18). Miller (2020) lists the technological dimensions of production, distribution, and consumption which contribute to the shape, character, and potential of these new digital media products. They are:

- Digital (numerical representation 0-1 code, from Alan Turing in the 1930s);
- Networked (use of two-way networked infrastructures);
- Interactive (responsiveness, user preferences, user actions);
- Hypertextual/hypermediated (large databases, algorithms, personalization);
- Database (container of information; store, organize, present content).

As I have explained in a review of Miller’s work (Veloso da Silva, 2022), digital culture understands technology as a result of scientific and technical research, without suggesting a technological determinism or a social and economic determinism of technology, but rather discussing the technological enablement (purposes and practices afforded by new technologies). Miller compares the Internet with television to show how both have become media that helped our societies access information and entertainment, while also altering our basic perceptions of reality and how we form social relationships (p. 3846).

In this sense, Instagram is part of a bigger cultural process across our societies that enables us, among other things, to create digital identities (based on factual or false information), to express ourselves, connect virtually and engage with communities, and extend our lives to an online environment. Leaver et al. (2020) state that it has not only changed the ways we communicate visually with each other, but also provides new approaches for marketing and advertising activities centered on visuals that connect companies and/or digital influencers with their audiences. Furthermore, Leaver et al. (2020) enumerate four characteristics that are stimulated in the application:

1. [It] positions itself as cultivating a ‘networked intimacy’ (users = ‘friends’);
2. Intends for navigation via mobile phones with inbuilt cameras on the move;
3. Views users’ collection of ‘moments’ as keep-sakes (archive of memories);
4. Incites spontaneous snap of events ‘as they happen’ (Leaver et al., 2020, p. 103).

However, users have adapted and changed the initial purposes of the platform. This can be noticed in the case of influencers’ and companies’ pages on Instagram, users usually with a high number of followers (not only friends) who use professional equipment to plan, produce, and share designed content (thus, not necessarily on the moment or spontaneously). Instagram itself has evolved and become a multifunctional platform, where commercial use has been fomented by the company by enabling people to sell/buy products (Instagram Shop) and create/promote advertisements.

A 2014 study by Hu et al. evaluated the most common types of images shared on Instagram and found that users usually post about eight main categories: friends, food, gadget, captioned photo, pet, activities, selfies, and fashion. The authors analyzed a sample of 1000 images and suggested that five groups are representative of the users in general, according to their posting behavior: the “selfie-lovers” who share mostly images of themselves; the users who post images depicting quotes and textual references; those who actively publish their daily ventures (e.g., indoor/outdoor activities, events, sports, etc.); the ones who share culinary content, as dishes (and they generally also post other varied topics); and finally people who like to depict themselves with their friends (Hu et al., 2014, p. 597). This categorization provided by Hu et al. (2014) is adapted for the codebook (Appendix 1) that I created to analyze Instagram Stories from the participants in this research.

Another study, from Caldeira (2016), looked at the reasons Instagram users post and engage with others on the platform, developing a content analysis of approximately 12,000 images. Their findings indicate that people (individuals, not companies) tend to have similar motivations when posting on Instagram as the reasons previously identified in traditional

photography, namely: protection against time; communication with others and the expression of feelings; the capacity for self-realization; the demonstration of social prestige; and photography as a hobby (Caldeira, 2016, p. 142).

When it comes to the users' experience, previous studies (Lup et al., 2015; Meier & Schäfer, 2018; Stapleton et al., 2017) have shown that Instagram usage can be associated with good and bad outcomes, depending on factors such as frequency of use, content exposed to and even type of peers. Lup et al. (2015) evaluated social comparison on the platform and found that the number of strangers followed by a user could be associated with depressive symptoms – which had also been found in a previous study about Facebook (Steers et al., 2014). Thus, findings suggest that “the amount of strangers followed significantly moderated the association of Instagram uses with social comparison and the indirect association of Instagram use with depressive symptoms through social comparison” (Lup et al., 2015, p. 250).

In alignment with these findings, Stapleton et al. (2017) have found that although the platform couldn't be directly held accountable for self-esteem changes, its intense use could indeed affect the youth's self-worth perception when it depends on others' approval. This may indicate that social comparison on Instagram provides young people whose self-worth is contingent on approval from others an opportunity to exercise their self-validation goals, and subsequently authenticate their self-worth. In the process of self-validating, young people are more likely to fall into the trap of correspondence bias, which, in turn, adversely affects their self-esteem (Stapleton et al. 2017, p. 147). This is exemplified by when a user consumes content that depicts another person as happy, without showing the overall context and facts that lead to that happiness.

Another research conducted by Añez et al (2018) with 1.501 adolescents in secondary schools in Barcelona showed that high level of screen-time exposure for leisure, especially the use of social media, was associated with body dissatisfaction among girls, while it didn't result in the same effect for boys. Focusing on Instagram's frequency of use and psychological well-being, Sherlock and Wagstaff (2019) found that social media can affect one's self-esteem, contributing to negative psychological outcomes and self-perception.

In contrast with these negative perspectives, Meier and Schäfer (2018) take a more optimistic point of view, suggesting that the platform can provide the scope for new ideas and impulses to its users. Conducting a structural equation modeling mediation analysis of Instagram users' data (N = 385) the researchers concluded that the intensity of social comparisons was positively related to inspiration mediated by “benign envy”. Hence, they suggest that comparison processes could result in beneficial emotional outcomes to peers' self-

presentations, which in consequence may inspire them to “transcend their current selves and strive for self-improvement” (p. 416).

In addition to users’ self-presentation, other studies (Veloso da Silva, 2020; Rosa & Soto-Vásquez, 2022, Béni & Veloso, 2022) have proposed that Instagram could have a broader impact on society. I conducted a qualitative content analysis of 108 images shared on the platform under the #Favela to assess how Brazilian slums were visually represented (Veloso da Silva, 2020). The results indicated that the representation of these geographical locations usually depicted as violent by traditional media outlets was disputed by locals both textually and visually: Other hashtags with positive terms related to feelings (#love) and pride (#FavelaVenceu, which means “Favela Won”) were associated with the main term; while the images depicted human agents, mostly locals, posing to the camera to highlight fashion/clothes, beauty/body attributes and their faces (e.g., via selfies with smiles), thus distancing “favelas” from its negative connotation commonly in the media.

A qualitative content analysis of two hashtags adopted for the representation of migrants (#caravanamigrante and #migrantcaravan) was conducted by Rosa & Soto-Vásquez (2022). The study indicated that migrants were primarily represented by non-migrants, usually professionals and organizations that sympathize with the cause, a practice named “aesthetics of otherness”. Migrants who dispute the narratives tend to associate the hashtags with their motivations for migration, most commonly via the Spanish hashtag (#caravanamigrante).

Béni and Veloso (2022) evaluated qualitatively how images classified as Top Posts on the explore page of Instagram under the #Africa represented the continent. Our findings demonstrated that the visual representation of #Africa in the platform reinforces existing frames (e.g., a place of exotic wonders and wilderness) but also offers the scope for more positive representational imagery (diverse continent), which is constantly disputed by local and external agents. However, it seems like Instagram reinforces via its algorithm visual and thematic information about Africa that is already popular on the platform, such as images related to fashion and traveling.

After this route exploring the literature about Instagram, I proceed to the evaluation of other theoretical contributions regarding its specific analyzed feature in this dissertation: Instagram Stories. The text is developed in three main levels simultaneously: 1) I explain some characteristics of the feature and how it has evolved based on information from the company itself and market data; 2) I connect one of its most evident attributes, ephemerality, with previous studies that show how this is a symptom of our times; 3) I review recent studies that have already analyzed the feature in communication science and related fields.

2.3.3. Instagram Stories and disappearing images: An evolving feature

The feature analyzed in this study, Instagram Stories, was officially released by Instagram in August 2016, when the platform also opened the possibility of publishing longer videos and reached over one billion users by 2023 (Kemp, 2023). The feature was a market response from the Facebook Group (from 2021 named Meta Platforms) after the failure of acquiring its direct competitor, the app Snapchat, which had made it popular among youth to share “ephemeral” visual messages that disappeared after a short period. Stories enabled users to post images in a style similar to a slideshow format, of which content vanishes after 24 hours, and have become topics of research in many areas, such as health and behavioral sciences (Fondevila-Gascón et al., 2020; Hufad et al., 2020; Lu & Lin, 2022), education and learning (Tsai et al., 2020; Almeida & Rosa, 2022), linguistics and literature (Shakargy, 2021; Henig & Ebbrecht-Hartmann, 2022), and communication and marketing (Bainotti et al., 2020; Georgakopoulou, 2021; Sánchez-Cobarro et al., 2021; Yoo, 2022).

Since there isn’t still a clear concept of what a story is, it is defined here as ephemeral content automatically programmed to disappear from a social media platform after a specific time. The duration, technical characteristics, design, and format of the content may vary from platform to platform. In its official disclosure about the new social media application feature, Instagram highlights the ephemerality characteristics and encourages its users to post more, with no worries about the amount of published material.

With Instagram Stories, you do not have to worry about over-posting. Instead, you can share as much as you want throughout the day — as creatively as you want. You can bring your story to life in new ways with text and drawing tools. Photos and videos will disappear after 24 hours and will not appear in your profile grid or post line. [...] Instagram has always been a place to share the moments you want to remember. Now you can share your highlight moments and everything else between them, too. (Instagram, 2016, para. 2-6).

Although Instagram, and specifically Instagram Stories, has become by 2024 the most used platform with ephemerality built-in, it’s possible to notice that ephemeral content has spread across other social media (see Section 2.3.4 below). However, the popularization of this type of communication on social media can be granted to Snapchat, which was the first platform to gain attention and attract a large base of users focusing on transient visuals. Therefore, to comprehend Stories and ephemerality nowadays, it is necessary to assess its predecessor.

Conceived by Stanford University's students Evan Spiegel, Bobby Murphy, and Reggie Brown, the app was launched in July 2011 as "Picaboo", being later rebranded as Snapchat in September 2011.

The platform's main characteristic was exactly the temporality of its visual messages (photos and videos), which disappeared automatically after being viewed by the recipient. In this sense, the "Snaps" promoted spontaneous content sharing, as it reduced the digital footprint left by other social media posts and messages, attracting younger audiences that wanted more control over what they shared online (Vaterlaus et al., 2016). Snapchat defines itself as a technology company and states the relevance of smartphone cameras for contemporary communication: "We believe the camera presents the greatest opportunity to improve the way people live and communicate" (Snapchat, 2024, n.d.).

Over the years, Snapchat adapted its functionalities to allow other forms of communication, including in 2013 the possibility to compile "Snaps" in a sequence, shared for 24 hours; the application of filters and lenses to generate images with augmented reality (AR); and chat and video calls, thus offering functions that were present in other messaging/call apps, such as Skype. Nowadays, users can also browse publicly available Snaps and the app is used by more than 800 million people every month (Snapchat, 2024).

The success and innovativeness of Snapchat lead Meta Platforms and other companies, such as TikTok and Telegram, to incorporate ephemeral communication features in their applications, further contributing to its dissemination. Among the characteristics that facilitated the popularization of Stories is its practical design, with structured visual icons that make the features clear and easy to open/use. Thus, it facilitates the actions of snapping and sharing moments from the users' daily lives in an "authentic" way, and as the images will disappear after a while for the audience, the pressure of producing polished or curated posts is removed. As I will examine in the results section, these qualities of easiness and spontaneity are indicated by the participants of this research as reasons for the app and feature popularity.

Based on Instagram's official description (2023) stories are shown in four different places for private accounts: on the user's profile as a colorful ring around their profile picture; at the top of the followers feed along with other user's stories in a row; in the feed via their profile picture, when the person makes a "permanent" post; and in the direct inbox (messages), also accessible via the profile picture. If the account is public, the content may appear in Explore page, connected to geolocations tags (e.g., when tagging a restaurant), and in shared stories via collective stickers (e.g., for events such as elections). People can also set their content to be automatically shared on Facebook Stories when posting it to Instagram, as the

two platforms are integrated. Finally, it is possible to limit the audience of a Story by posting it to Close Friends, a customizable list to which the user can determine who has access to it.

Additionally, Instagram Stories is equipped with a wide range of creative tools for a quick edition of photos, videos, and text, stimulating the users' creativity (see *Figure 2*). Among the functionalities, there are several filters (13 were available in Hungary in 2023), visual and textual stickers, text overlays, geolocation tags, and hashtags, the possibility to draw on the content and to add songs to it (not available globally due to copyrights legislations), among others. These tools allow users to add their personal touch and creativity to their stories, making them more engaging and interactive.

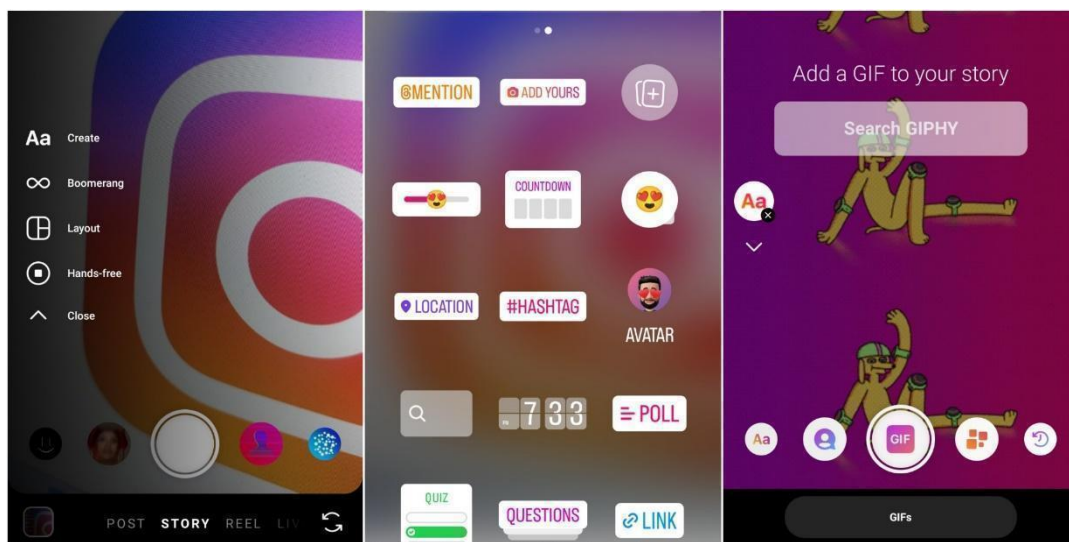


Figure 2. Screenshots demonstrating some of Instagram Stories' functions.

(Source: Own elaboration - January 17, 2022)

The stimulus to a playful but also commercial and replicable creativity is a point raised by Lipovetsky (1990) to explain a society crossed by ephemerality on a general level, not only in a social media context – and this includes the arts and communications. Despite the focus on fashion, Lipovetsky expands his understanding of how products are not made to last in the current capitalist societies (e.g., pieces of clothes that are replaced each season) and says that the relationships we maintain with objects are no longer utilitarian, but playful, with the continuous search for images and a cult to the body (p. 201). To an extent, this reflects in the content shared via Instagram Stories, in which durability is limited to 24 hours, before being replaced.

Stories' "older brother", Snapchat, was the subject of a study conducted by Verstraete (2016), in which they explain that ephemeral content is about time, place-based sharing, and creativity. First, the configuration forces a specific duration to the media, its lifetime, and how

it should be consumed. Second, there is a continuous stimulus to share, both because it will disappear after being broadcasted and because something is happening now. Third, adding to the “aesthetics of fluidity and impermanence”, the imperative of sharing also means it is necessary to produce, to frequently create something new (p. 108).

Although this study focuses on Instagram Stories, the discussion about ephemerality and the changes in how humans experience time comes from a long way in academic history, beyond social media studies. Ferreira et al. (2018) mention that Gumbrecht (1998) already reminded us of how postmodernity brought around a process of timelessness, impacting the idea of temporality. Hand (2020) suggests that social media images on a general level are immediate and ephemeral, based on the constant amount of content shared on these platforms in real-time, the ways the images circulate, and the pace they are consumed and discarded. Contrastingly, they are also enduring, to an extent: “An image might be viewed and discarded immediately on a smartphone but will be simultaneously archived across social media by default” (p. 317).

This notion of ephemerality is debated by Lipovetsky (2005) when defending that we live in hypermodern times, in which tradition has become “a nostalgic product to be consumed” (p. 60) and not to structure our societies, as now a global capitalist market favors constant changes. “There may be a frenzied vogue for the past, but it no longer has the power to organize collectively the way people behave. The past seduces us, while the present and its changing norms govern us” (Lipovetsky, 2005, p. 61).

Susan Murray (2008), when studying the photography website Flickr, noted this ephemerality as a practice for photo-sharing back in 2008. She explained how everyday life representations in images were becoming the norm for that website, in contrast to the precious (and expensive) photo experience of previous decades. “Some have claimed that it is indeed a new category of photography, called ‘ephemera’”, points out, adding that “it is, perhaps, the confluence of digital image technology along with social network software that has brought about this new aesthetic” (Murray, 2008, p. 155-156).

Media and Culture scholar José van Dijck (2008) follows a similar line of thought to Murray’s, showing how photography’s role and function have changed in the past decades. For van Dijck, photography moved from being a memory tool related to family representation towards becoming a communication device with the individual in its nucleus (p. 6). As we will indicate in our results, images in the context of visual mobile communication are still memory tools, although they now include other functionalities.

The relations of time, image, and ephemerality can be extended to different segments across societies. In his analysis of fashion over the centuries, Gilles Lipovetsky (1990) provides an interpretation of the changes that led society to consumption based on the ephemeral. With the triple operation a) ephemeral, b) seduction and c) marginal differentiation, the author presents the logic of fashion that can be associated with the ephemeral logic of digital images, especially in Instagram Stories.

Lipovetsky (1990) defends that there is a cult to fantasy and incessant metamorphoses in contemporary societies, in which the renewal of forms becomes a “worldly value”. Thus, fashion is simultaneously connected with the pleasure of seeing and the pleasure of being seen, of showing off to others (1990, p. 41-42). Following Lipovetsky’s perception, in a society traversed by ephemerality, the lifetime of products is based on a culture of easy consumption, a brief pleasure, for a quick replacement by another sample that carries similarities to the last, which is exemplified by video clips. The author argues that the ephemeral and aesthetic signs of fashion are now a mass demand, as contemporary societies sanctify constant change and novelty (1990, p. 182).

The concept of ephemerality, in this way, is directly connected to the reproductivity and accessibility capacities of capitalist societies, not only to an aesthetic that insists on capturing a viewer’s attention. Hence, attributes of gadget-centered consumption (e.g., videogames, phones, etc.) bring those characteristics perceived in fashion to a broader material environment. Thus, not only the duration of a product is relevant, but also the language needs to be understood quickly, characters should not be too complex, and speed is sovereign. “Especially nothing slow, no dead time: something must always be happening on the electronic screen, maximum of visual effects, insistent attack on the eye and the ear, many events, little interiority” (Lipovetsky, 1990, p. 240, author’s own translation).¹⁰

Taking this understanding, the study divides the concept of ephemeral content into two classifications, based on their production and distribution and previous literature: 1) built-in ephemeral content, which stands for content that is primarily produced/shared on features and platforms that automatically program it to disappear after a specific time or after consumed (e.g., Instagram Stories, expired or deleted messages, etc.); and ephemeral media (Grainge, 2011), which relates to other forms of ephemeral content that may even be kept in storage, but due to its characteristics are also very transient, such as TikTok videos or a timeline post on

¹⁰ Original citation in the Spanish version of the book: “Ante todo, nada de lentitud ni tiempo muerto; en la pantalla electrónica siempre debe estar ocurriendo algo, efectos visuales al máximo, hostigamiento de la vista y el oído, multitud de sucesos y escasa interioridad” (Lipovetsky, 1990, p. 240).

Facebook. In the next section, I intend to demonstrate the diversity of research encompassing Instagram Stories, from discussions on its usage to communicative practices within the feature.

2.3.4. Ephemeral social media: a spreading practice in communication

In recent years, besides Snapchat and Instagram, other platforms used for visual mobile communication have incorporated features of ephemerality, with images programmed to disappear automatically, such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Skype, YouTube, TikTok, BeReal, and Telegram (see Table 1). WhatsApp and Facebook, which both belong to the same group as Instagram Stories (Meta Platforms), have adopted similar functionalities in 2017 and are still available in 2024. WhatsApp introduced “Status” in February 2017 as part of its eighth anniversary, looking for ways to innovate and to offer more functionalities. The changes gave WhatsApp users, nearly two billion people (Hirose, 2024), the possibility to communicate with their contacts using “stories” that disappear after 24 hours, without sending a direct message, which brought to the messaging app a social media-like appearance.

Nearly at the same time, Facebook Stories, launched in March 2017, introduced similar functions as those available on Instagram and WhatsApp, enabling transient posts with pictures, videos, or text that self-delete after 24 hours, and counting on reactions and comments. Later, Meta allowed integration for crosspost on Stories between Facebook and Instagram, expanding the visibility of content, with around 500 million people using Facebook Stories every day (West, 2024). The main differences between the features across Meta’s apps are the privacy settings (i.e., WhatsApp Status is restricted to the list of contacts), content visibility (i.e., on Facebook, a reply is visible to other users and posts can be open to anyone), and the audience demographics in each platform (see *Table 1* for details).

An ephemeral content initiative that had a short lifespan was Skype Highlights. Launched in June 2017 as an intent to revitalize the call app with the addition of social media functionalities, the feature allowed users to post photos and videos edited with other visual elements (i.e., emojis), which disappeared after seven days. However, a bit more than one year later, in September 2018, the company took a step back after assessing the feedback from users and noticing a lack of adoption, as reported in the media at that time (Warren, 2018). As a justification, Skype informed that the previous updates had made it harder to perform calls and that Highlights didn’t resonate with the majority of their users.

Platform	Feature	Creation Date	Discontinuation Date	Main Functionalities	Target Audience	Privacy Controls	Interaction Mechanisms	Unique Aspects
Snapchat	Stories	Jul-11	Ongoing	Ephemeral photos/videos, filters, lenses, chat, Discover	Generation Z, Millennials	Custom audience selection	Reactions, comments, direct messaging	Advanced AR lenses, Discover section
Instagram	Stories	Aug-16	Ongoing	Ephemeral photos/videos, filters, interactive stickers, direct messaging	General social media users, Generation Z, Influencers	Custom audience selection	Reactions, comments, direct messaging	Wide variety of interactive stickers and polls
WhatsApp	Status	Feb-17	Ongoing	Ephemeral text/photos/videos, status updates, viewership tracking	General users, adults	Viewership tracking, custom audience	Replies via direct messaging	End-to-end encryption, 24-hour visibility
Facebook	Stories	Mar-17	Ongoing	Ephemeral photos/videos, filters, interactive features	General social media users, adults	Custom audience selection	Reactions, comments	Integration with Facebook's broader social features

Skype	Highlights	Jun-17	Sep-18	Ephemeral photos/videos, creative tools, interactive features	General users, adults	Custom audience selection	Reactions, comments	Integration with Skype profiles, seven-day visibility
YouTube	Stories	Nov-17	Jun-23	Ephemeral videos, creative tools, comments, interaction	Content creators, Influencers	Creator-defined visibility	Comments, emoji reactions	Seven-day lifespan, cross-promotion of channel content
BeReal	Real Moments	Jan-20	Ongoing	Ephemeral photos, dual-camera, no filters/editing, daily notifications	Generation Z, Millennials	Custom audience selection	Comments, RealMoji reactions	Daily notification system, dual-camera feature, no filters or editing tools
LinkedIn	Stories	Sep-20	Sep-21	Ephemeral professional updates, photos/videos, text overlays	Professionals, Businesses	Custom audience selection	Reactions, comments	Professional networking focus, business-oriented content
Twitter	Fleets	Nov-20	Aug-21	Ephemeral text/photos/videos, reactions, mentions	General users, influencers	Custom audience selection	Reactions, mentions	Ephemeral tweets, integrates with Twitter's main features

Table 1. Ephemeral content platforms and features created in the past 13 years
(Source: Own elaboration)

A more niche enterprise, YouTube stories-like feature, introduced in November 2017 and rebranded as "Reels," was designed to enhance user engagement through ephemeral content for creators with over 10,000 subscribers. "We want to do even more to give you easy ways to express yourself and engage with fans (...). Reels are YouTube's spin on the popular 'stories' format, but designed specifically for YouTube creators" (YouTube, 2017, para. 7). Aiming to capitalize on the popularity of ephemerality by allowing creators to share videos and photos that disappeared after seven days, the feature offered creative tools and interactive engagement functions. Although YouTube Reels gained attention at its early-stage, it wasn't broadly adopted by creators due to internal competition with YouTube Shorts and, similarly to Skype's initiative, was ultimately discontinued in June 2023.

Two other initiatives to embed ephemeral content on social media that were discontinued include LinkedIn, a professional networking platform, and Twitter (currently named X), a microblogging site. LinkedIn discontinued its ephemeral Stories feature by the end of September 2021, as announced by Liz Li, then senior director of product (Li, 2021). Introduced in 2020, it allowed users to share short-lived, informal videos, similar to Snapchat's and Instagram's formats. However, LinkedIn found that users preferred creating lasting videos that could be attached to their profiles, showcasing their professional expertise. This move followed Twitter's shutdown of its feature, Fleets, which was justified due to a lack of user engagement (Peters, 2021).

Although these companies' decisions suggested a declining trend in the popularity of transient visual products, at least to specialized platforms where users are accustomed to other forms of communication, Snapchat and Instagram remained committed to their Stories. Likewise, ephemeral content has continued to spread to other platforms over the past years. BeReal, developed in 2019 and released in 2020 by the French entrepreneur Alexis Barreyat and popular among the youth. Reig (2022) suggests that this mobile application appeals to authenticity and simplicity, but it's contradictory for constraining the exact instant a photo has to be taken (Reig, 2022, p. 135). The users receive daily notifications after which they have two minutes to show what they are doing at that moment with photos from the back and front cameras in the smartphone.

The app does not allow uploading content from the phone memory/gallery, but a BeReal may be published after the notification expires and it will be tagged as "late", thus forcing users to share the "now" without filters. Accordingly, there are no likes, but public comments and RealMoji reactions; it is only possible to post once daily; and watching friends' visuals is limited to those who post something, although public content can be seen freely (see

Figure 3). Similarly to Instagram Stories, the material is ephemeral and not visible after 24 hours.

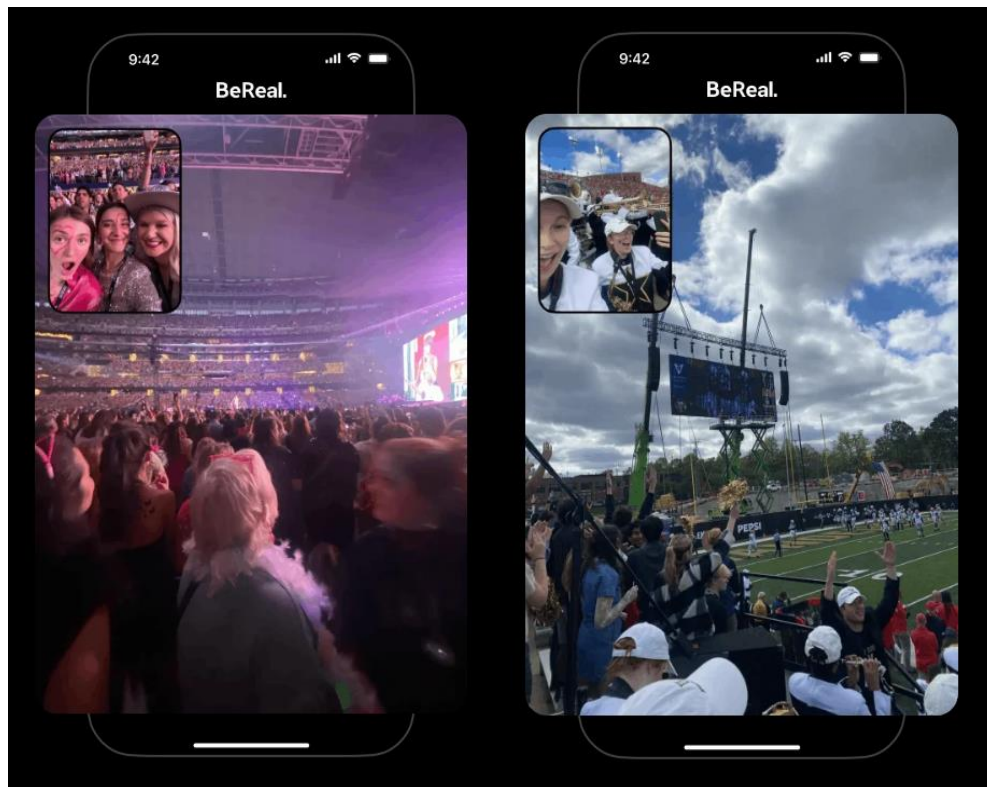


Figure 3. Screenshot with images shared by BeReal to advertise their app

(Source: bereal.com - July 11, 2024)

These functionalities and limitations of the app are described on their website as “a new and unique way to discover who your friends really are in their daily life” (BeReal, 2023, para. 3). However, in a special issue of the *Flow Journal* dedicated to studying the application, Highfield (2023) demonstrates that its claim for authenticity is a common goal from many other social media platforms, thus “BeReal is just the latest in a long line of online spaces aimed at presenting a real and authentic self” (n.d). The uniqueness of BeReal, according to Highfield (2023), is its particular random temporal constraint that determines when users can post.

As demonstrated in *Table 1*, ephemeral content features, developed by Snapchat and popularized by Instagram, have been widely adopted by other platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Skype, YouTube, BeReal, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Telegram. Despite the success on Meta’s platforms, other initiatives like Skype Highlights, YouTube Reels, LinkedIn Stories, and Twitter Fleets were discontinued due to low user engagement, which shows that although ephemerality may be widely spread, it is not easily embedded into the social media logics of every platform, as users are already accustomed to communication patterns in those spaces and may not adopt these features. However, the long-lasting success of Instagram Stories and, more

recently, the specific case of BeReal, show that transient visuals are still a trend, mainly among younger audiences. In the next section, I cover what the academic literature about Instagram Stories have found about this practice in different areas of studies, with a focus in communication science.

2.3.5. Reviewing contemporary literature about Instagram Stories

I conducted a systematic literature review (SLR) of 70 peer-reviewed articles published from 2016 to 2022 about Instagram Stories and available on two academic platforms (Scopus and Web of Science). The search strategy aimed to identify publications related to the ephemeral feature using relevant keywords (Instagram, Instagram Stories) in titles, abstracts, and keywords. The data retrieved consisted of 344 entries from both Scopus (n=171 entries) and WoS (n=173 entries), which were evaluated to exclude duplicates, identify unique entries across the data sets, filter for peer-reviewed papers (excluding books, book chapters, and conference proceedings), and select papers that directly referenced Instagram Stories (N=70) rather than general mentions of Instagram. The main goal was to further address the topics and areas of contemporary research regarding the feature, which was classified based on their field of research.

It was possible to notice that ephemeral content has been studied in many fields and disciplines, such as health and behavioral sciences (Fondevila-Gascón et al., 2020; Hufad et al., 2020; Lu & Lin, 2022), education and learning (Tsai et al., 2020; Almeida and Rosa, 2022), linguistics and literature (Shakargy, 2021; Henig & Ebbrecht-Hartmann, 2022), and communication and marketing (Bainotti et al., 2020; Georgakopoulou, 2021; Sánchez-Cobarro et al., 2021; Yoo, 2022).

Not surprisingly, communication and marketing was one of the prevalent areas, with 43 papers (*Table 2*) discussing theoretical issues of ephemerality, methodological challenges of collecting disappearing content, and empirical applications of Stories for personal branding, advertising, and marketing. In a separate paper (Veloso da Silva, *in press*), I address more in-depth other characteristics of this SLR, including the methodologies adopted to research visual ephemeral content. However, in the following paragraphs, I present 11 papers selected from each of these four major disciplines to demonstrate the diversity of approaches to analyzing stories.

Distribution of papers based on field of research and approach to methodology			
Field of Research	Count	Approach to Methodology	Count

Behavioral and Health	11	Mixed Quali-Quanti	7
Education and Learning	5	Primarily Qualitative	43
Linguistics and Literature	6	Primarily Quantitative	20
Communication and Marketing	43	Total	70
Others	5		
Total	70		

Table 2. Distribution of papers in the SLR by field of research and methods.
(Source: Own elaboration)

The selection of the articles from the original sample of 70 publications was based on their relationship to the dissertation topics (e.g., visual communication, youth, ephemerality, self-presentation) or, when not possible to establish a direct connection in specific disciplines, such as literature, I opted for papers that demonstrated the sociocultural relevance or methodological challenges brought by stories. Likewise, the structure of this section also follows the four disciplines identified in the SLR:

- Behavioral and Health Sciences - three papers
- Education and Learning - two papers
- Linguistics and Literature - two papers
- Communication and Marketing - four papers

In a quantitative research about the influence of Instagram Stories on attention and emotion, which in the SLR was classified under Behavioral and Health Sciences, Fondevila-Gascón et al. (2020) indicated that a greater number of followers on influencers' accounts implies greater emotional activation in other users, but usually negative emotions. Likewise, there was greater emotional activation in men than in women. The study measured psychophysiological signals when participants visualized the stories of influencers and measured the electrodermal activity (EDA) of 37 young participants aged 18 to 24 years old.

Hufad et al. (2020) analyzed qualitatively the influence of stories on the self-existence of university students in Indonesia from the theory of uses and gratification perspective. The research pointed out a slight correlation between the feature and self-existence, with 18.2% of participants indicating that they improved their confidence when uploading content to the platform feature, and almost 16% adopted strategies to get popular on Instagram.

Another study conducted by Lu and Lin (2022) investigated the engagement of Generation Z and Millennials with Instagram Stories and its association with emotions and psychological dependency. They numbered eight motivations for the feature usage among participants: exploration, self-enhancement, perceived functionality of the app, entertainment and fun, social sharing, relationship building, novelty, and surveillance (p. 7-8). Also, their

findings demonstrate that users experience more positive than negative emotions when engaging with stories. However, although contributions to others and content creation tend to result in positive emotions, creation alone predicts negative emotions when failing to get attention from peers or with the concern of being judged and not accepted. Finally, user engagement with stories is connected to psychological dependency, which could lead to compulsive or excessive use and, ultimately, to addiction.

Beyond the behavioral studies, other researchers have analyzed the adoption of Instagram Stories for educational purposes. Tsai et al. (2020) studied the use of mobile multimedia platforms (MMPs), more specifically Stories, in the process of teaching dental diagnosis among 89 senior dental students in Vietnam. In an experiment, they produced and uploaded educational images of five modules (dental anatomy, caries diagnosis, periodontics, endodontics, and oral radiology) to the platform. Their results point out that students increased their diagnostic test scores (from 49% to 73%) after the use of Stories for training purposes. Thus, after the evaluation of the scores and feedback from students, the study concludes that the platform can be used as an adjunct teaching tool and may enrich professional education.

Another research by Almeida and Rosa (2022) explored the transferring and sharing of knowledge in integrative and complementary health practices (PICs in Portuguese) on Instagram in Brazil. The researchers describe the experience related to an account named “@conhecendoaspics” (“Getting to know the PICs”) on the platform, which was used to share information about 29 health practices. Their reflection indicates that Instagram and its stories can increase awareness and the reach of knowledge about the topic among students and the general public. Additionally, the multiple types of content enabled by social media aligned with strategies to make the information more comprehensible via multimedia material can improve the teaching-learning process.

In the domain of linguistics and literature, the studies focused mainly on the adaptation of books to social media storytelling. For instance, the Insta Novels Project developed in 2018 by the New York Public Library Instagram page in association with the creative agency Mother—New York City transformed five literary works into Instagram Stories. Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll; The Yellow Wallpaper, a short story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman; the poem The Raven by Edgar Allan Poe, A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens, and The Metamorphosis by Franz Kafka became digital books shared to Stories. The project was an object of study by Shakargy (2021), who conducted a grounded analysis to evaluate the contradictions within this intersection of literature, social media, and advertising agencies. The author indicates that “Insta Novels” provides the scope to “maintain the cultural

relevance of, and even renew, traditional and central institutions” (p. 9). However, the library used Instagram merely as a platform to disseminate the content, without taking advantage of its affordances to adapt the cultural objects. Hence, four embedded tensions are identified in the process revealing a misunderstanding of media values and culture: between literature and technology; eternity and temporality; personal and public; and readers and users.

The usage of Instagram Stories for literature adaptation was also studied by Henig and Ebbrecht-Hartmann (2022), who investigated the publication of a Holocaust diary titled “My daughter Éva”, originally published in Hungarian (*Éva Lányom*) in 1947. The author discusses the relationship between memory, social media experience, and testimony in the 2019 visual adaptation of the book into Stories. The findings indicate that the project enables users to experience a mediated memory of the Holocaust and become media witnesses while engaging with social media content. “The followers are turned into witnesses of Eva’s story by utilizing selfie aesthetics, subjective point-of-view shots, and the Instagram stories’ resemblance to a diary” (p. 219), combining self-witnessing with media witnessing, which indicates a new kind of agency.

When it comes to the specific research about Instagram Stories from a communication and marketing perspective, the studies are equally diverse. Bainotti et al. (2020) discuss the methodological issues and challenges for the study of ephemeral digital content. The authors take inspiration from what users do to archive their images as a resource for researchers to retrieve and store the material. One example is using other external platforms to scrape data (such as StorySaver.net) and bypass Instagram API limitations. However, they point out that this approach to using digital methods of scraping and archiving primarily ephemeral information raises epistemological and ethical concerns.

Another approach to analyze the communicative practices in the feature is taken by Yoo (2022), who conducted a netnography to investigate how ten South Korean sports stars use social media for self-management. Through in-depth interviews and analysis of Instagram content, the author identified that the athletes shared daily snaps of their lives to build relationships with the public via voluntary self-exposure, an intent to reduce the distance with their audience and to depict their life outside of sports events. At the same time, the participants also worked on publicizing and commercializing their image via sponsored content. Thus, sports stars used digital strategies on Instagram, such as the curation of content, to self-manage their careers simultaneously as athletes and as a self-living commercial. Despite its contribution to understanding self-presentation with ephemeral content, the article focuses specifically on

famous athletes on the platform, which does not allow for a generalization of these strategies to other Instagram users, for instance.

Still from a communication perspective, but analyzing ephemerality from a broader perspective than that conducted by Yoo (2022), Georgakopoulou (2021) evaluates the intersection of affordances, values, and practices in the design of stories across several platforms, including Snapchat and Instagram. The researcher argues that it is necessary to interpret this type of content as curated, socio-technical formats. Moreover, Georgakopoulou points out that directives shape the types of stories that are told (e.g., sharing life-in-the-moment), the mode of engagement (e.g., quantified viewing), and the tellers' self-presentation (e.g., authenticity). Hence, stories have become a specific format of communicative practice and social action that can be recognized as typical by its design values, tools/functionality, and directives to users about what to share (p. 7). Thus:

The immediacy and mining the mundane are key to this type of telling and to creating authenticity for the teller. Authenticity in this case is closely linked with presenting 'real' (non-polished, non-filtered) everyday lives. (...) Studies of stories as curated features on social media require combined attention to the communicative how, what and who, as well as the socio-technicity of stories (Georgakopoulou, 2021, p. 7).

Differently from Georgakopoulou (2021), who highlights the relevance of contextual information to interpret stories, the fourth paper representing the discussions in communication and marketing (Sánchez-Cobarro et al., 2021) focuses on content reach and impression to estimate interactivity on the feature. Sánchez-Cobarro et al. (2021) compared retailers' and manufacturers' brand-generated content interaction based on 800 stories and publications gathered via a digital marketing and communication agency in Spain. They pointed out that the reach of stories (number of unique users who see a post) is essential to explain interaction, whether impressions (number of times a post is displayed to users) determine publication interaction (p. 520). In this sense, Sánchez-Cobarro et al. (2021) defend that companies need to rethink their online strategies and communication techniques to maintain the effectiveness of their brand content and improve their relationship with Instagram users.

As demonstrated above, Instagram allows the user to choose from a variety of features that can be added to the content. These include textual information, such as hashtags or written texts, geolocation tag; or visual additions, ranging from emojis, stickers, GIFs, photos over photos/videos, etc. Some options may include both: for instance, it is possible to add a poll in which the user asks a question in textual mode and then offers a maximum of four options of

answers (see *Figure 4*).

This heterogeneous scope of visual and textual components, as also reflected on the multiplicity of research found in the SLR, are here understood as part of what makes contemporary images more complex (Georgakopoulou, 2021). This can be noted in the fact that they add new aesthetics to visual content on social media (e.g., emojis, stickers, GIFs), but are also used to build a certain online community around the topic (e.g., for hashtags such as #NightRunners and #MothersOfInstagram), dispute the visibility or participate in broader discussions in society (#BLM, #Africa) or even to contrast with part of the visual information in the photo/video (as when someone adds polls over the image of food in which both choices are similar, showing that there's no real choice in there).

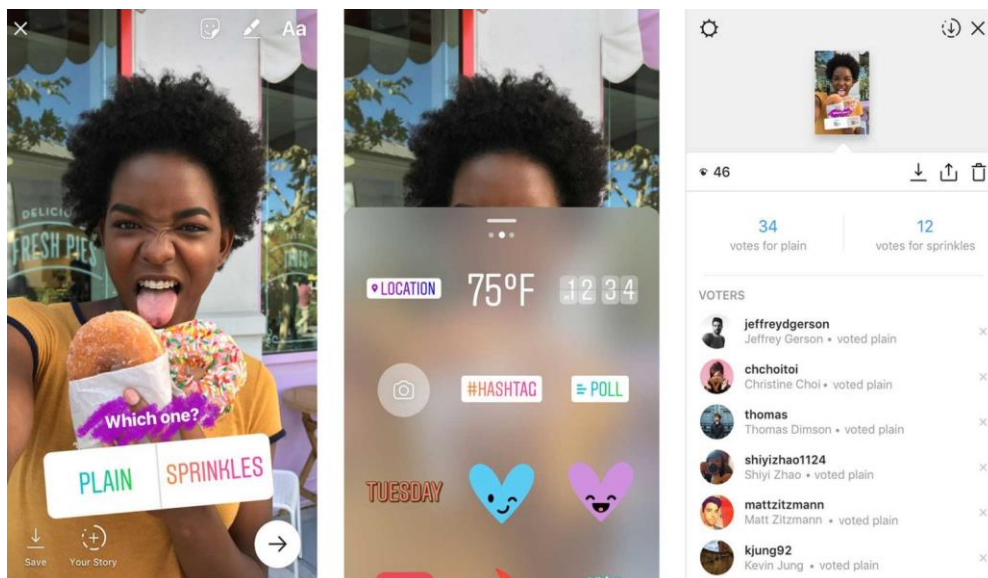


Figure 4. Image depicting the applicability of creativity on Instagram Stories.

(Source: Instagram/Reproduction - October 03, 2017)

The question of ephemerality is allied to such attributes: the images disappear, and they are not permanently within the reach of the other's gaze. However, they leave traces behind – whether it is the most used sticker, the geographic reference of the photographed spaces, the days of the week in which they were posted, user-appropriate textual expressions, or additions made to the photos and videos by the application users. To further sustain the empirical analysis of the youth's usage of Instagram Stories, I present in the next section a discussion about self-presentation, how it is constructed in the context of social media, and their visibility practices online.

2.4. Youth self-presentation and visibility practices

2.4.1. A theoretical tradition about self-presentation

Research about self-presentation has been conducted for many years in social psychology (Goffman, 1959; Baumeister & Jones, 1978; Baumeister, 1982; Baumeister & Hutton, 1987) and more recently in studies from other fields, including communication science, to study contemporary phenomena related to self-presentation, visibility and impression management on the Internet (Schau & Gilly, 2003; Litt & Hargittai, 2016; Rettberg, 2017; Schlosser, 2020; Hollenbaugh, 2021). In this chapter, we describe the main discussions regarding the topic and then, in a subsection, explain how it is applied nowadays in the context of social media.

The study of self-presentation can include verbal and non-verbal information (clothing, voice tone, etc.), as well as the social-cultural context. Jones and Pittman (1982) proposed a framework for research about self-presentation from a social psychology perspective. In this view, socialization in a culture leads to people acting in a certain way, thus following contextual cues that align with their culture without noticing. However, the self¹¹ isn't a solid form, as it may shift depending on the motivational state and situational cues; and can also evolve/change to incorporate a person's actions/outcomes.

Jones and Pittman (1982) explain that self-presentation involves a person acting to share their response to generate the desired impression in others, which they relate to impression management – as proposed by Goffman (1959). Thus, a strategic self-presentation is defined as “those features of behavior affected by power augmentation motives designed to elicit or shape others' attributions of the actor's dispositions” (Jones & Pittman, 1982, p. 233) – while by features, they include verbal and non-verbal elements of communication.

A taxonomy to classify self-presentation strategies is proposed by Jones and Pittman (1982), consisting of ingratiation (presenting oneself as nice and friendly), intimidation (presenting oneself as dangerous or threatening), self-promotion (presenting oneself as competent and qualified), exemplification (presenting oneself as morally exemplary and committed), and supplication (presenting oneself as needed or helpless). At that time, the researchers argued that self-presentation was a ubiquitous phenomenon in social life, but there was a lack of a conceptual framework to interpret it (p. 231). More recently, Lewis and Neighbors (2005) demonstrated that this taxonomy has been expanded over the years to include

¹¹ Jones and Pittman (1982) work on the definition of "phenomenal self", based on a previous study, as "a person's awareness, arising out of interactions with his environment, of his own beliefs, values, attitudes, the links between them, and their implications for his behavior (Jones & Gerard, 1967, p. 716, *apud* Jones & Pittman, 1982, p. 232).

other tactics, but even nowadays there is still no established definition that encompasses self-presentation strategies to their full extent, especially considering the constant transformations brought by new technologies and social media platforms.

Baumeister and Hutton (1987) define self-presentation as “a behavior that attempts to convey some information about oneself or some image of oneself to other people” (p. 71). In this sense, the behavior designates motivations that are, at the same time, stable dispositions from the individuals, but that are also dependent on the situation. These motivations can be “activated by the evaluative presence of other people and by others’ (even potential) knowledge of one’s behavior” (p. 71).

The authors present two types of self-presentational motivations, which were previously coined by Baumeister (1982): pleasing the audience – when the individual aligns their self-presentation with what the audience would expect/prefer; and self-construction – when the self-presentation follows the individual’s ideal self. The first type can vary according to the specific situation in which the person is, as pleasing the audience in a formal work meeting would be different from pleasing colleagues at a birthday party, for instance. Baumeister and Hutton (1987) indicate that the reasons connected to audience-pleasing can even result in contradictory or inconsistent self-presentations. The second type of motive (self-construction) is more stable and, thus, relates to more consistent self-presentations in different situations and audiences.

Baumeister and Hutton (1987) accept further contributions to the understanding of self-presentation developed by Jones and Pittman (1982), who articulated a more refined concept for the audience-pleasing concept to include strategies that are not aiming to generate a positive impression. These are the 1) strategy of intimidation, if the individual wants to be seen as dangerous; 2) strategy of exemplification, willing to be noted as morally virtuous; and 3) strategy of supplication, associating oneself with the sense of helplessness and need (Jones & Pittman, 1982, *apud* Baumeister & Hutton, 1987, p. 72).

The general principle behind all these self-presentations, then, is that people present themselves to create a particular and useful impression on the audience, to influence or manipulate the audience to benefit the self-presenter. Often this is accomplished by impressing the audience as likable and competent, but sometimes it can be most useful to appear dangerous or helpless (Baumeister & Hutton, 1987, p. 72).

A key characteristic of self-presentational motivations across these definitions is the presence

of “others”, enabling mutual interpersonal evaluations and the creation of social reality.¹² And the otherness may represent several audiences simultaneously, as for the example of a classroom environment in which students have to present themselves to their peers, who may have varying levels of interest in the interaction, and to the teacher. Managing behavior¹³ towards a mixed audience with different values, and being impossible to satisfy both groups, is considered a “self-presentational dilemma” (p. 74).

One of the most relevant theorists of self-presentation who has analyzed the ways we present ourselves in everyday life is Erving Goffman (1959). Taking a dramaturgical approach, Goffman associates routine situations with a theatrical version of life. Goffman’s concept of “impression management” argues that individuals are constantly trying to administer the impressions generated on others through various “strategies”. For instance, people might dress a certain way (casually, formally, etc.) or use specific words and tones of voice to present themselves in a particular way (polite, sarcastic, etc.). Furthermore, much information is communicated in an encounter and Goffman (1959) differentiates it as “given” information (intended and managed) and as “given off” (unintentional and involuntary).

The author explains that a person acts in a performance based on abstract claims upon the audience (idealized), incorporating the values of the society in which the *act* happens. “This constitutes one way in which a performance is ‘socialized’, molded and modified to fit into the understanding and expectations of the society in which it is presented” (Goffman, 1959, p. 35). Hence, different social situations or circumstances will demand different ways of self-presentation, and individuals may consciously or unconsciously adjust their strategies accordingly. Whenever the actor fails to present an acceptable and effective self, they are subject to embarrassment.

Whether an honest performer wishes to convey the truth or whether a dishonest performer wishes to convey a falsehood, both must take care to enliven their performances with appropriate expressions, exclude from their performances expressions that might discredit the impression being fostered, and take care lest the audience impute unintended meanings (Goffman, 1959, p. 66).

Despite the actions to conform with the social environment, there can still be discrepancies

¹² Social reality is discussed by Baumeister and Hutton (1987) following Gollwitzer’s contributions (1982): “social reality means that something matters only if other people know about it” (Baumeister & Hutton, 1987, p. 75).

¹³ Behavior is defined by Baumeister and Hutton (1987) as “a compromise between the desire to meet the group’s standards and expectations and the desire to create the desired public image of self” (p. 74).

between appearance and actual activity, as for when the individual performs a certain character in public but must sacrifice some standards in private (Goffman, 1959, p. 44). This can be seen when a professional is providing a service to a client, and it involves quality and speed. In such a case, Goffman affirms that poor quality can be concealed, but not slow service (p. 45). Likewise, Goffman argued that people often present a “front” to others, which is a carefully curated image of themselves. This front can be an accurate or inaccurate representation of the person’s true self and it functions to manage the impressions that others will create of the individual and that, ultimately, will guide their behavior in social interactions.

Leary and Kowalski (1990) reviewed the literature on impression management and uses it interchangeably with the term self-presentation, although acknowledging that the first is a broader and more encompassing term. Thus, dedicating the second term to an individual’s intent to foster their impression in other’s eyes and distinguishing “self-presentation to the self” when the intention also regards their impressions of themselves (p. 34). However, the authors demonstrate that there are points of connection between the private self, the person’s motivations, and impression management.

This is done by dividing impression management into two components: impression motivation and impression construction. Leary and Kowalski (1990) identified that motivation is associated with the intention to generate an impression on others, and it depends on the goal-relevance of the impressions, the value of the desired goals, and on the discrepancy between the desired and the current image (p. 36). Construction refers to how an individual alters their behavior and adopts tactics to create certain impressions. This component is affected by five factors: “the person’s self-concept, his or her desired (and undesired) identities, the constraints of the role in which the individual finds himself or herself, the target’s values, and the person’s perceptions of how he or she is regarded currently” (p. 36).

Furthermore, Baumeister and Hutton, (1987) reinforce that a person will control their self-presentation based on the perception they expect to produce in the given audience, in addition to how private/public the interaction is, thus avoiding embarrassment or unwanted interpretations. Likewise, someone confessing their sins to a priest and looking for redemption (anonymous or private interaction) is expected to share different information than the same person talking with a group of friends in a bar and aiming to look friendly (more public interaction).

A previous study from Baumeister and Jones (1978) pointed out that a relevant feature of a social encounter is the prior knowledge (or limitation of it) and expectations that

participants possess regarding their peers. Following this interpretation of social expectations,¹⁴ in certain situations, a person may act following what the audience knows about them (p. 609) or try to compensate with positive information, enhancing their self-presentational image, when the other already knows something negative about them, while being cautious regarding the known bad impression (p. 614).

However, Baumeister and Hutton (1987) explain that recurring public statements can influence a person's own private beliefs, corroborating with cognitive dissonance¹⁵ theorists who pointed out that expressions of attitudes are modified to conform to behaviors. For example, if an individual doesn't believe in a religious doctrine, but speaks out publicly in a positive way about it, their belief may align with their public speech to reduce the cognitive dissonance state. "That is, people express attitudes consistent with their recent behavior because they want to make a good impression on others, and self-contradiction or inconsistency makes a bad impression" (Baumeister & Hutton, 1987, p. 77). Correspondingly, the public self (presented to others) affects the consistency and stability of the self. If the social environment is changed, as when someone moves to a new country, then the personality can also be adapted to the new situations.

Contrastingly, a deceptive self-presentation may also occur when someone deliberately presents themselves in a contrasting way to their current state for ulterior motives. For instance, lying that one is ill can be a strategy to justify poor performance, so they are perceived as "sick" and not incompetent, or a strategy to get the gratification of attention (Baumeister & Hutton, 1987, p. 79). It is necessary to point out that self-presentation is affected by many other variables, not only the environment or a direct clear intention. Personality traits are one of them, as people with high self-esteem or extroverts use more sophisticated strategies to seek positive impressions from others, while people with low self-esteem or introverts may just want to avoid attention (p. 84).

¹⁴ Expectancy theory has been studied at least since 1964 when Victor H. Vroom defended that an individual goes through certain processes of motivation when choosing how to behave based on expected results. The expectancy theory is constituted of three elements: Expectancy (an effort will contribute to a performance), Instrumentality (a performance will result in an outcome), and Valence (the outcome will generate a reward). (For more details, refer to Vroom, 2005).

¹⁵ Cognitive dissonance (CD) theory was proposed by Leon Festinger in the 1950s and developed within social psychology. According to Vaidis and Bran (2017, para. 1), "inconsistencies among cognitions (i.e., knowledge, opinion, or belief about the environment, oneself, or one's behavior) generate an uncomfortable motivating feeling (i.e., the cognitive dissonance state)." Based on Festinger's studies, the authors explain that a person may adapt, change or add elements involved in the dissonance to deal with it. For example, someone may change their opinion to match their behavior and thus reduce inconsistency (Vaidis and Bran, 2017, para. 1).

2.4.2. Self-presentation in the context of social media

The development of the Internet and social media platforms in the past 30 years has enabled people to adopt these technologies for their self-presentation strategies (Schau & Gilly, 2003; Rettberg, 2017; Schlosser, 2020; Hand, 2017; 2020; Hollenbaugh, 2021). In this section, we discuss the characteristics of self-presentation in the context of social media and the implications it presents for contemporary communication. Since recent publications already dealt with a literature review on the topic (Schlosser, 2020; Hollenbaugh, 2021) our focus is mainly on analyzing and presenting key characteristics of the phenomenon.

Even before the advent of social media, the Internet was already studied on the basis of Goffman's (1959) self-presentation theory. Miller (1995) argues that electronic communication does not enable interaction in the same sense as that face-to-face proposed by Goffman, as it doesn't meet the same requirements (e.g., signals to inform a sender about when the reception happens and then frame the interaction accordingly). However, the author focused mostly on initial and limited forms of communication available at that time, such as emails and websites, which didn't offer synchronous interaction and feedback. One characteristic indicated by Miller (1995) regarding these electronic communication types is the reduced chances of embarrassment. "On the internet, you can't smell my breath, catch the tremor in my voice, or realize that I'm watching the rest of the party over your shoulder." (para. 17).

Berger (2013) argues that online communication presents five essential differences when compared with face-to-face oral interactions: "It is more likely to be (a) written, (b) undirected, and (c) anonymous and involves (d) larger audiences and (e) reduced social presence" (p. 293). However, the arguments regarding written and asynchronous information seem to contrast with the development of visual social media, especially ephemeral content, in which images are usually the primary content and are shared almost instantaneously (Bayer et al., 2015, p. 13). Despite these contrasts, Berger (2013) offers relevant contributions to understanding self-presentation in online communication, with a discussion about undirected interactions or the possibility of posting without pointing towards a specific person; the levels of anonymity enabled by the Internet; the capacity of talking to several audiences simultaneously; and the lack of a present and immediate receiver. For the author, although these factors may reduce the worries for impression management when something is published, the content still leaves traces behind that could come back to "haunt" the Internet users if they're not careful with what is shared online (p. 294-295).

When it comes to social media usage specifically for self-presentation, an extensive

scope of literature has been produced and critically reviewed in the past ten years (Bayer et al., 2015; Vogel & Rose, 2016; Rettberg, 2017; Baker et al., 2019; Schlosser, 2020; Hollenbaugh, 2021). In a qualitative study, Baker et al. (2019) have identified that female young Instagram users adopt the platform for self-promotion, seeking ways to generate engagement with their audiences. Hence, participants reported investing time and effort to select/edit photos to present their best selves and achieve social validation through likes/comments. Moreover, the youth constantly compare themselves with others (e.g., celebrities, fitness models, etc.), prioritizing other users' evaluations when curating their content, thus curating it to induce a positive response from the viewers.

Bayer et al. (2016) evaluated ephemeral social interaction on Snapchat among college students and found that the experiences on the social media were perceived as more enjoyable by users in comparison to other technologies (e.g., Facebook). The quanti-qualitative study focused on social and emotional experiences and indicated on the one hand an association of Snapchat interactions with more positive mood, while being connected with lower social support on the other hand. Ultimately, Snapchat users in the study informed that they pay closer attention to the disappearing content (when compared to archived material) and adopt it to share spontaneous contextual information (here and now) with close ties, which the authors assume would result in increased emotional rewards, especially when receiving enthusiastic feedback from the viewers (p. 5).

The rise of ephemeral media platforms, according to Bayer et al. (2016) is a result of the challenges brought by persistent media for self-presentation, as those previous technologies exposed the experiences for a longer period, thus enabling a message to be scrutinized by the audience. In the case of Snapchat, the platform affordances restrict the duration of the information and how it can be produced/consumed, favoring mundane quotidian content on the go: "thus [a snap] represents a deliberative, shared experience that is temporally bounded. In doing so, Snapchat facilitates a distinctive sharing practice that is both in-the-moment and momentary" (p. 4).

A recent study about impression management among college students on BeReal conducted by Reddy and Kumar (2023) questioned whether a structured user experience, such as the one offered by the application, would reduce the pressures of social media posting. Their initial findings suggest that, although the youth expressed appreciation towards watching their friends' mundane events, there are still issues regarding self-presentation. This can be seen in the fact that participants worry about when they receive the notification to post, indicating that some moments of the day would be more worthy of being shared online.

Additionally, despite BeReal schedule being random, users who constantly received the prompt while doing the same activity perceived the representation as not an honest depiction of their entire routine, since only one single repeated frame was published (e.g., doing homework). The authors also pointed out that, contradictorily to the application founders positioning it as an alternative to other “addictive” apps, BeReal users felt they should be constantly available since the notification comes by surprise and only gives them two minutes to post. “Images will most likely portray mundane activities, yet users still experience pressure to make even the day-to-day seem interesting to friends on the platform” (Reddy & Kumar, 2023, para. 9).

The concerns about social media influence on users’ behavior have been addressed in other previous studies. Vogel and Rose (2016) analyzed self-presentation from a psychological perspective to understand how Facebook may affect users’ well-being. Their findings can be summarized in two points: 1) social media users favor positive self-presentation; 2) when their activity is self-focused (on their own image) it could be beneficial, but if the focus shifts to others’ idealized images it could be harmful to their psychological well-being. Several studies (see Przybylski et al., 2013; Balta et al., 2020; and Rozgonjuk et al., 2020) pointed out that social media usage, including Instagram, can be associated with a trait called fear of missing out (FOMO), which is defined as a “pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent” (Przybylski et al, 2013, p. 1841), thus leading to a constant online connection and anxiety.

Hollenbaugh (2021) reviews contemporary literature produced on self-presentation in social media and connects it to previous theories, including Goffman’s dramaturgical perspective. The researcher points out three main ways in which these platforms have affected self-presentation in comparison with previous forms: “Decreasing anonymity for users, contributions from audiences, and increased context collapse have shaped self-presentation in social media” (p. 81).

The first of these characteristics is evidenced by the decision of companies, such as Facebook/Meta and Twitter, that encourage users to add profile pictures, connect with friends, and register with their own names – or at least confirm their identity to continue using the services. Despite online anonymity decreasing over the past two decades, it is still a relevant feature of the Internet in comparison to face-to-face interactions, being pointed out by Hollenbaugh (2021) as one of the affordances of social media, while the levels of anonymity enabled by a platform could reflect on the self-presentation content that a user feels motivated to share (reducing deceptive information if they can be easily identified).

The second point is related to contributions from audiences that are perceived in several actions of peers online (friends, family, followers, etc.) which can influence how a user's impression is built, such as tagging in images/content, likes, comments, etc. Accordingly, the levels of persistence/durability are pointed out as an affordance from social media that could impact one's self-presentation: people tend to share more of their "true self" on platforms such as Snapchat, where the content is ephemeral and don't last for very long in time (Hollenbaugh, 2021, p. 86), a similar feature offered by Instagram Stories.

The third element of changes in self-presentation is noted by a collapse of the context since many different audiences co-exist on social media, denoting varied levels of intimacy (friends, family, co-workers, strangers, etc.). This audience can be managed via two strategies: audience-reaching, increasing visibility, and personal disclosure; and audience-limiting, excluding people or selecting who can view certain posts (Litt & Hargittai, 2016). However, this is pointed out by Hollenbaugh (2021) as a complex task, considering that social media users need to manage potentially competing self-presentation goals to a heterogeneous audience (p. 88).

A study conducted by Litt and Hargittai (2015) about Facebook and Twitter users demonstrated that although people usually interact with vast audiences online when posting something they imagined specific audiences¹⁶ for their content: either a broad abstract group or a target homogeneous group. Contrastingly, despite imagining different spectators for their content, users often didn't change their settings to match that perspective, thus still sharing with a general audience.

Correspondingly, platforms also offer features that afford different levels of visibility: adding a geolocation tag to an image shared on an open account on Instagram, for instance, can make a user "visible" to those nearby, while also communicating spatially to those away; something similar happens when adding certain hashtags, which can increase the chances of a tagged content being seen by people who search for or who are interested in the same topics. Thus, it is not uncommon for social media users to spend hours curating their profiles by carefully selecting the visual content that they want to share with the aim to present themselves in a certain way.

Accordingly, several factors may affect how users present themselves online, including

¹⁶ In a previous publication, one of the authors has described the imagined audience as a "mental conceptualization of the people with whom we are communicating" (Litt, 2012, p. 331).

personal values, goals, and beliefs. In this sense, a person who wants to be seen as authentic¹⁷ (Davis, 2014) may adopt strategies that will highlight their uniqueness and genuine characteristics, while those who value privacy may prefer not to share details about their routines. Hollenbaugh (2021) indicates that these social media possibilities lead to more options to choose from when curating one's image but also reflect on the need to be more careful not to disclose undesirable information to specific audiences, thus moderating presentation motives and content. "Under conditions of high visibility, social media users may be more selective in their self-presentation to convey an ideal image" (Hollenbaugh, 2021, p. 86).

Therefore, intimacy, privacy control, and different levels of visibility are interconnected parts of these platforms that can be used for self-presentation. However, the social and technological affordances vary among different social media, they may change over time, and even be presented in distinct ways within features in the same social media. For instance, a person can maintain an open account on Instagram and post carefully selected and edited content (persistent) with hashtags and geotags on their feed to a vast audience – in this case, the entirety of Instagram users –, while sharing more casual visual information to their list of Close Friends on Instagram Stories (ephemeral).

Hollenbaugh (2021) explains that the effectiveness of one's self-presentation can be measured by how the audience responds to it, and the feedback received from a performance. "People desire others to see them the way they see themselves, and social media provide countless opportunities to perform and test self-conceptions for varying audiences" (p. 84). Correspondingly, the users must adopt new strategies to control how they present themselves online in comparison to face-to-face interactions, taking advantage of the affordances of each platform.

In a volume dedicated to elaborating on the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological challenges of visual communication in the age of social media, Russmann and Svensson (2017) point out that a shift towards visuals – fomented by platforms such as YouTube and Instagram – results in changes on how we relate to each other, and on the perception and construction of the self. The authors explain that visual social media go beyond a simple return of visual communication, as they enable multimodal content with many layers of information produced

¹⁷ In alignment with Goffman's (1959) thoughts, Davis (2014) explains that authenticity is "an unmediated guide for the actor's inner thoughts and emotions" (p. 505) that can be reflected in outward actions. Likewise, to achieve an "ideal-authentic balance, entails accomplishing a particular version of the self, but doing so in a seemingly natural way; it is to engage in identity work, while hiding the labor of doing so" (p. 505).

and shared strategically. “Hence, not only do online visuals add additional information to a message and elaborate on ‘who we are’, they also afford highly strategic and reflexive communication in order to give a specific impression of the sender, an object or a place among other things.” (p. 2).

Another literature revision on self-presentation in the context of social media is provided by Schlosser (2020), which reflects the disclosure of “true selves” (factual information, regardless of its effects) or the presentation of an idealized version of social media users (designed communication to influence impressions). In comparison to face-to-face interactions, the author points out that people can have more control over what they share online, thus being able to build an ideal self that could include true or false/modified details. One example of this online control is the possibility to maintain strictly textual/visual interactions with other people, without ever speaking verbally - or the other way around, by sending voice messages and not typing texts or sharing images, thus limiting the cues that could disclose information (e.g., tone of voice).

Schlosser (2020) highlights that self-presentation and self-disclosure are not necessarily mutually exclusive, as a person may present true information while still being willing to foster a desirable public self-image. To distinguish between self-disclosure and self-expression, the author refers to Bargh et al. (2002) who offer a comparison between the actual self and the true self. “The actual self are true aspects of the self that are expressed in one’s social life, whereas one’s true self are true aspects of the self that are not expressed to others” (Schlosser, 2020, p. 2). Interestingly, in online environments, people tend to express more of their true selves than they would in face-to-face interactions (Bargh et al., 2002 *apud* Schlosser, 2020) because this can contribute to their self-presentation. This happens when someone intentionally shares their true age and gender in a dating app without including other visual or verbal cues (p. 3).

Two common characteristics of online communication differ from face-to-face: asynchronicity and multiplicity of audience. In the cases that online interactions are asynchronous, they allow individuals to edit/revise what and how they will communicate, while also evaluating it according to their audience’s expectancy (Litt & Hargittai, 2016) – thus supporting self-presentation. Their audience may also be more diverse from a person’s offline communication, being broadcasted (one to many), to people who are usually dispersed geographically, and including groups of acquaintances, friends, family members, and strangers in a single interaction.

Those posting on social media have become performers who present an edited version of themselves that they believe will be best received by others, often managing their

reputations through what they post and managing what others post about them. This managed impression of one's online persona does not preclude disclosing facts about the self. Posters may share facts about themselves if such facts reflect favorably upon them. (Schlosser, 2020, p. 4).

Mentioning previous studies (Verduyn et al., 2015), Schlosser (2020) indicates that social media users tend to share more positive than negative experiences on these platforms. In connection to the studied platform, an example is when someone visits a tourist place and publishes on their Instagram account carefully selected/edited images to create an impression of a traveler and a good photographer, among others. Accordingly, the same images could align with what is already expected from their "followers" about the visited place and with the platform affordances (as discussed in the results chapter; see *Theme 2* and *Theme 6*).

For Hand (2020), social media transforms the relationship between photography and self-presentation, because they bring a sense of "transience", in a reference to what Murray (2013) names the temporariness of the public-presented self. "This does not mean that self-presentation in social media has no coherent narrative form, but rather that such narratives embrace the speed and immediacy of social media" (Hand, 2020, p. 314). Additionally, images shared on these platforms carry several layers of data (e.g., locational data, hashtags) and are mixed with other media forms (e.g., text, audio, etc.).

Moreover, as discussed in the previous sections, Hand (2020) indicates that these platforms favor the public sharing and discussion of images depicting routinary events, such as eating or even more intimate areas of life (e.g., illness, sex, etc.). "This ordinariness is an outcome of the materiality of smartphones, the new conventions of friendship maintenance and mediated sociality, as well as changing photographic conventions that appear radically open." (p. 319). In the following section, I present and discuss characteristics of youth's visibility practices on social media, which supports the contextual understanding of the investigated audience, before moving to the methodological procedure adopted in this research.

2.4.3. Youth's visibility practices on social media

This section contributes to providing a context about the public participating in the research, youth born in the 21st century, aged 18-22 years old at the time of the study, and further enriching the multidisciplinary nature of the work. The aim of dedicating a section to the youth is to bring it to the center of the discussion, giving it due empirical and theoretical relevance, and thinking about how it relates to the communicational object addressed in the study.

Furthermore, it summarizes and updates a previous discussion I conducted regarding adolescents' usage of Instagram Stories in Brazil (Veloso da Silva, 2018). The text will discuss characteristics that mark this period of life and certain implications of visual mobile communication and visibility practices among the youth.

There are theoretical considerations that point to a digital nativity of the public born in the era of new technologies, as Palfrey and Gasser (2008), separating the generation of the previous ones, but also those that analyze the perceived risks and possibilities of this time for the adolescent, as Livingstone (2008). For the French anthropologist David Le Breton (2017), digital social networks gain space in the universe of the studied audience by acquiring the characteristic of a mirror that assists in the narrative construction of oneself, of their identities.

Social networks promote multiple identities. They become the main tools of socialization and experimentation for young generations, a place of confronting intimate experiences with the experience of others. The recognition coming from this transmission is undeniable, they are increasingly absorbed by the reality that they help build. (Le Breton, 2017, p. 20, author's translation).¹⁸

To structure the understanding of visibility in visual mobile communication, I review the contributions of Sabilia (2016) and Mallan (2009). Along with that, it is necessary to consider some sociocultural and economic transformations found in society over the centuries that give evidence of the prevalence of ephemerality in the shared contents in the Stories and other similar tools, which Lipovetsky (1990) has previously examined. Specific characteristics of self-presentation will be discussed in the following sections, with Goffman's (1959) impression management theory as a base.

In a 2009 study, before the rise of Instagram, Mallan argued that new technologies enable a creative process in identity construction taking a similar process as the "bricolage", as it results from a wide scope of materials and tools. Based on boyd's (2007) understanding of how social networking sites have become part of contemporary youth culture, Mallan (2009) explains that these platforms "provide new spaces and ways for virtual identities to be constructed, visually presented, and narrated" (p. 52).

Tapscott (2009) has a deterministic and optimistic perspective on the effects of technology in the life of youth, to the point of suggesting that "growing up digital has had a

¹⁸ Original text in Portuguese: "As redes sociais promovem uma exposição de múltiplas identidades. Elas tornam-se as principais ferramentas de socialização e de experimentação as jovens gerações, um lugar de confrontação da experiência íntima com a experiência dos outros. O reconhecimento vindo dessa transmissão é inegável, eles são cada vez mais absorvidos pelo real que eles mesmos ajudam a construir" (Le Breton, 2017, p. 20).

profound impact on the way this generation thinks, even changing the way their brains are wired” (p. 10). Even though I agree that contemporary young generations are immensely impacted by technologies such as the Internet and smartphones, I avoid making claims on biological determinism and prefer to analyze the broader context of the experiences enabled by technology and appropriated/transformed by the youth. For Tapscott (2009), the exposure and immersion to the digital world have been positive, with the new generations being more open-minded towards diversity, smarter, and quicker than previous generations (p. 10).

Beyond the youth visibility practices online, it seems like the specific concept of youth is still a disputed area. In this sense, delimiting a generation is complex, as it involves several elements, not only age but social behavior and cultural practices. When reviewing the literature on adolescence and contemporary youth, we observe many terminologies such as Generation Z - born between 1993 and 2005 (Turner, 2013) or born from 1997 onward (Dimock, 2019), Net Generation - born in the internet age (Tapscott, 1998; 2009), Digital Generation (used by Livingstone, 2011, without a specific age limit), among others. In 2019, the Pew Research Center in the USA tried to set a clear distinction between generations, including previous ones, but that definition is not yet widely adopted across different academic fields.

For John Palfrey and Urs Gasser (2008), a common culture connects this audience, with fundamental parts of their lives being mediated by digital technologies. These adolescents and nowadays young people who were born in the digital age cannot relate, for example, to a world in which other forms of communication were prevalent, and many of them haven't used more analogical tools to communicate or present themselves. “Those who were born digital don't remember a world in which letters were printed and sent, much less hand-written, or where people met up at formal dances rather than on Facebook” (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008, p. 4). This young generation, Tapscott (1998; 2009) argues, was the first to grow up in a digital world, surrounded by and using digital media in their daily lives (e.g., video games, computers, etc.).

Sonia Livingstone (2008) addresses a common question among researchers who dedicate to exploring characteristics of the youth in the digital age: what, then, is distinctive about the construction of personal and peer relationships among young people, now that this is increasingly mediated by social networking sites? For the author, factors such as risks and opportunities brought by online connections need to be discussed academically. Livingstone (2008) points out that even the language of contemporary social relationships is being reframed in this context, with its vocabulary adapting words such as ‘profile’, ‘private’, ‘top friends’, ‘block’, etc. (p. 4).

It's possible to notice that the advent of new technologies is constantly transforming and intensifying social practices among the youth, including how they present themselves online. Fietkiewicz et al. (2016) investigate the differences in social media usage across Generations X, Y, and Z. They explain that Generation X tends to use social media less frequently and is more inclined toward platforms like Twitter for sharing news and professional information, while Generation Y is more active on platforms like Facebook, motivated by social interaction and networking, especially in a professional context. Finally, Generation Z, in contrast, is moving away from Facebook in favor of more visually-oriented, mobile-native platforms like Instagram.

A characteristic across the literature is a diversity in the terminologies applied to classify distinct generations, sometimes with the boundaries being fuzzy. Thus, when addressing the group, I won't call for a specific nomenclature for the youth, such as digital generation or Generation Z, but rather focus on an age time frame that encompasses people born in the 21st century, who grew up in a hyperconnected world and who are users of visual mobile communication (this later being a criterion for the sampling). This decision aims to prevent the conflicts and misalignment that are perceived in the literature when naming an entire generation, thus I intend to study the behavior of this group based not only on their birth date but also considering the social and cultural context of the analyzed communicative practices.

Likewise, the Argentinian researcher Paula Sibilía (2016) shows that new technologies and the incorporation of their functionalities into single digital devices, such as the digital cameras found in computers and mobile phones, promote changes in visibility – in relation to previous periods, such as modernity. Thus, it is not discussed necessarily as a generation issue, but rather a phenomenon of contemporary societies. The visible becomes, then, intrinsically allied to the intense connectivity of the mobile Internet.

This phenomenon accounts for the triumphant combination of visibility and connection, two features that exemplarily embody these devices known as “smartphones.” (...) Visibility and uninterrupted connection are two fundamental vectors for the ways of being and being in the world more in tune with the rhythms, pleasures, and demands of the present, guiding the ways of relating to ourselves, others, and the world (Sibilía, 2016, p. 21, author's translation).¹⁹

¹⁹ Original text in Portuguese: “Esse fenômeno dá conta da triunfante junção entre visibilidade e conexão, dois recursos que encarnam de modo exemplar nesses dispositivos conhecidos como ‘telefones inteligentes’. (...) A

Despite the possibility for the youth to appropriate these technologies and build on their visibility online, previous research (Béni & Veloso, 2022; Foster, 2022) point out to social media platforms reinforcing certain offline aesthetic patterns via online visibility practices. As discussed in the section about Instagram, Béni and Veloso's (2022) study about the representation of Africa shows that the platform favors content that is trendy on a general level when automatically classifying "Top Posts" on its explore page. Another research conducted by Foster (2022) about online appearance, attractiveness, and authenticity has shown that visibility on Instagram has a hegemonic pattern, especially concerning what is considered "attractive" across fashion influencers' profiles.

Foster's (2022) study based on netnographic online observation and interviews with influencers and industry personnel demonstrates that there is an aesthetic of "sameness": the reproduction of hegemonic ideals of attractiveness and appearance online, despite the call for (and beginning of) more diversity in fashion representation on Instagram. Thus, the platform still reproduces, at least to an extent, ideals of beauty that are found in the social, cultural, and economic offline landscape. "Their popularity and embodied privilege both reflect and reinforce widely shared ideals along the lines of race and class, rendering some users subordinate to others in a status hierarchy that rewards beauty and its visibility above all else." (p. 9).

The interconnection of new visibility practices with visual mobile communication has been one of the key characteristics of the saturation of images, which materiality reflects on Instagram Stories and the strategy to avoid overposting (at least to the feed), as discussed previously. The vast amount of visual content posted online daily makes it impossible for a person to follow up and cognitively process all the visual information they receive through social media. Adding to that, the companies behind those platforms found in this trend the opportunity to launch content that can be seen and disappear, reducing the number of available images and raising the urge for mobile connection to consume the visual content, giving rise to ephemeral mobile visuality.

visibilidade e a conexão sem pausa constituem dois vetores fundamentais para os modos de ser e estar no mundo mais sintonizados com os ritmos, os prazeres e as exigências da atualidade, pautando as formas de nos relacionarmos conosco, com os outros e com o mundo" (Sibilia, 2016, p. 21).

3. Methodology

3.1. Introduction to the mixed qualitative methodological approach

This research takes a multimethodological qualitative exploratory approach (Jaeger & Halliday, 1998; Bauer & Gaskell, 2002; Morse, 2003; Flick, 2014) relying on three main methods for data collection and one to unify the data analysis, as elaborated in this chapter. Furthermore, the research aligns with the interpretive paradigm in communication (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015), more specifically with the phenomenological approach, which recommends researchers look for varied interpretations or different meanings within the data to provide a wealth of information about it (p. 51).

In this chapter, I explain based on the associated literature – and in the empirical procedure – each of the methods and techniques applied to both data collection and data analysis. The organization of the chapter follows the timeline of the research development, which reflects on how it was designed, tested, and applied. Hence, each of the following sections will provide the theoretical association of the respective method and explain the procedure adopted in that stage of the research.

A specific section is dedicated to discussing the ethical considerations and consistency of the proposed design from a practical perspective (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015, p. 15), further supporting the transparency of the research. Furthermore, at the end of the dissertation, I provide additional resources in the appendices to clarify and exemplify the procedure, which material can be adapted by other researchers for future work related to thematic analysis of visual self-presentation in ephemeral online content.

Research associated with the interpretive paradigm shares the belief that reality is constructed through subjective perceptions and interpretations of an object; thus it cannot be observed separately from its context. Or as Cochran and Dolan (1984) point out, “reality is what one perceives it to be, and, therefore, reality is different for different people” (p. 26). Additionally, interpretivists are not interested in predicting human behavior but rather in exploring human experiences. As Croucher and Cronn-Mills (2015) explain, the main research goal for interpretivists is to understand how people construct meaning in their communicative practices and experiences (p. 54).

Likewise, I investigate the youth’s self-presentation practices on Instagram Stories from a qualitative perspective. Cochran and Dolan (1984) noted around 40 years ago a need by researchers in social sciences to challenge the notion of “objective” face-value knowledge (p.

27) and to qualitatively scrutinize the “what, how, when, and with whom”. Flick (2014) explains that qualitative studies can help discover, classify, interpret, and describe structures and processes that produce social or subjective meaning. This approach of adopting multiple perspectives allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the studied social phenomenon than a single method could provide, while also leading to more reliable results.

Qualitative analysis can be applied to describe a phenomenon in detail, compare cases, explain differences among the cases, and develop a theory about the object of study, while examining the context, meaning, and purpose of the data. However, Ritchie and Spencer (1994) argue that the qualitative researcher must provide some coherence and structure to the data set while maintaining the meaning from its sources. In the same direction, Flick (2014) defines qualitative data analysis as “the classification and interpretation of linguistic (or visual) material to make statements about implicit and explicit dimensions and structures of meaning-making in the material and what is represented in it” (p. 5).

Furthermore, in this research, I look beyond the numerical data and examine the stories and patterns in it, adding the participants’ voices to how I interpret their experiences – although also acknowledging that this is a narrative and meaning-making process based on the constant articulation of theories, participants’ contributions, and researcher decisions. This attitude aligns with Braun and Clarke’s (2019) discussion about what it means to develop a qualitative study, as they point out:

For us, qualitative research is about meaning and meaning-making, and viewing these as always context-bound, positioned, and situated, and qualitative data analysis is about telling ‘stories’, about interpreting, and creating, not discovering and finding the ‘truth’ that is either ‘out there’ and findable from, or buried deep within, the data (p. 592).

In connection with the qualitative approach, the empirical data was collected with focus groups (Stewart et al., 1990; Morgan, 1996; Vicsek, 2007, 2010), netnography (Langer & Beckman, 2005; Kozinets, 2014, 2020), and semi-structured interviews (Smith, 1995; Adams, 2015) in the years of 2021 and 2022. Morse (2003) defends that the combination of mixed methods and research strategies enables researchers to acquire “a more complete picture of human behavior and experience” (p. 189). Later on, the material was coded for themes based on hybrid inductive and deductive procedure (Reichertz, 2014) in 2022 and 2023, thus with thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) being the dominant approach (Morse, 2003) to its analysis. *Table 3* shows five different stages from the data collection to the data analysis process, helping to identify what method was adopted in each stage and to which research questions it is primarily

connected.

Multimodal Methodologies		Stage of the Research	Research Questions
			Stage 1 - Pilot Research
Thematic Analysis (Hybrid)	Focus Groups	Stage 2	RQ1, RQ2
	Netnography	Stage 3	RQ1, RQ2
	Semi-structured interviews	Stage 4	RQ1, RQ3
	Revision of themes (TA) and findings	Stage 5	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3

Table 3. Stages of the methodological study design.
(Source: Own elaboration)

Although identified *Table 3* with consecutive numbers, some of these stages were developed concomitantly: for instance, when the last focus group happened (Stage 2), I was already reviewing recurring themes in the previous transcripts (Thematic Analysis + Stage 5); even after the interviews (Stage 4), I continued to retrieve images from their Instagram Stories (Stage 3). In this chapter, I present each of the methods adopted and how they were operationalized in the research.

The application of distinct methods and techniques, as adopted in this research, is also advocated by Martin W. Bauer and George Gaskell (2002) to grasp the complexity of the object. For these authors, the practice of plurality in qualitative research involving text, image, and sound allows “adequate coverage of social events requires a multitude of methods and data: methodological pluralism arises as a methodological necessity” (Bauer & Gaskell, 2002, p. 4).

By including this multimodal methodology, it is possible to cover the research purpose, while typifying the youth’s practices and experiences of mobile applications with ephemeral content usage, gathering in-depth understandings from the subject’s perspective as sender and receptor in the visual mobile communication process.

3.2. Participants recruitment and sample

Participants in this research were recruited via an online form taking the snowball effect (Goodman, 1961), shared on Facebook groups (mainly of international students in Budapest and job positions in Budapest), WhatsApp groups (mainly of foreigners working or studying in Hungary), and via email with bachelor students at the Corvinus University of Budapest

(mainly from Communication and Media Science and in International Relations degrees). On every focus group occasion, participants were encouraged to share the information with peers to register and participate. The description and invitations were in English, as it was the language of the research and volunteers would have to be able to communicate in it.

The online registration form contained a filter to help qualify volunteers, asking for their age, whether they had an Instagram account, and if they were able to attend the meeting face-to-face in Budapest, in addition to other information to support logistics matters (e.g., preferred day of the week for attendance, contact details, etc.). If a volunteer did not meet the main criteria of age, Instagram usage, and location the form would go straight to the last page with a message thanking them for their interest and the button to submit it. Only those who met these requirements were able to fill out the entire form, providing more information about their availability.

In addition to the automatic filters, the research description also informed how their data would be stored, treated, and used, the basic criteria for participation, and the research objective, offering a general understanding of the phases and the identification of the researcher. Moreover, although it was disclosed that their participation was entirely voluntary, the explanation clarified that by attending the focus group (first phase) they would receive 2.000 HUF – approximately 5,00 Euros – as a reward to help cover transportation costs. On the last page, a statement clarified that by submitting the form the person had read and agreed with the rules and was willing to participate in the research. A printed agreement document was signed by participants in the focus group — details are provided in the Ethical Considerations section of this chapter.

Throughout the recruitment process (November 2021 - September 2022), 83 people filled out and submitted the form, while 68 were qualified to participate in the research, meeting the main criteria of age, platform usage, and location. Every qualified participant was then contacted via email and invited individually for one of the following focus group dates based on their informed availability. Besides an invitation, the email included a brief overview of the research and why they were receiving that message, following guidelines from the Global Data Protection Regulation in Europe (GDPR).

In total, 43 youth from 20 different nationalities attended the six focus groups held in a classroom at the main building of the Corvinus University of Budapest. In this dissertation, focus groups are identified by a code according to their sequence: FGP01 for the pilot study and FG01, FG02, FG03, FG04, and FG05 for the main focus groups. Participants were also assigned a code that corresponds to the focus group they attended and their location in the room

(e.g. FGP01P01 for the first participant in the pilot research and FG05P01 for the first participant in the fifth meeting). As it is possible to notice from the codes, one extra letter (P) is used to represent data from the pilot study. More information about the demographic composition of groups and how they were organized is provided in the following sections of this chapter.

3.3. Pilot research: Testing and improving methods

The first step in evaluating the methods was pilot research (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002; Ismail et al., 2018) in the second semester of 2021 and first semester of 2022 to test and redesign the proposed methods, which was followed by the actual main research. The experimental study adopted the same multimodal methodology on a small scale, which included one focus group, two weeks of netnography, and two semi-structured interviews. The main objective was to evaluate the methodological framework for consistency and improve the techniques for data collection.

Van Teijlingen and Hundley (2002) explain that social sciences adopt pilot studies mainly as a small-scale of a research (feasibility studies) or to prepare for the main research (trial run). Likewise, pilot studies offer researchers the possibility to visualize in advance what could go wrong in the main research or if the methodological framework is appropriated, consequently avoiding extra expenses or unexpected outcomes due to the inadequacy of the proposed instruments. *Figure 5* supplies a further justification for the development of a pilot study, according to van Teijlingen and Hundley (2002).

Despite its benefits, a pilot study also has limitations, as previous literature has indicated (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002; Ismail et al., 2018). The main constraints are: It usually consists of a small sample compared to the main data, thus the reliability may be limited; and researchers should be cautious not to make inaccurate predictions or assumptions solely based on initial results, hence contaminating the analysis of the remaining data.

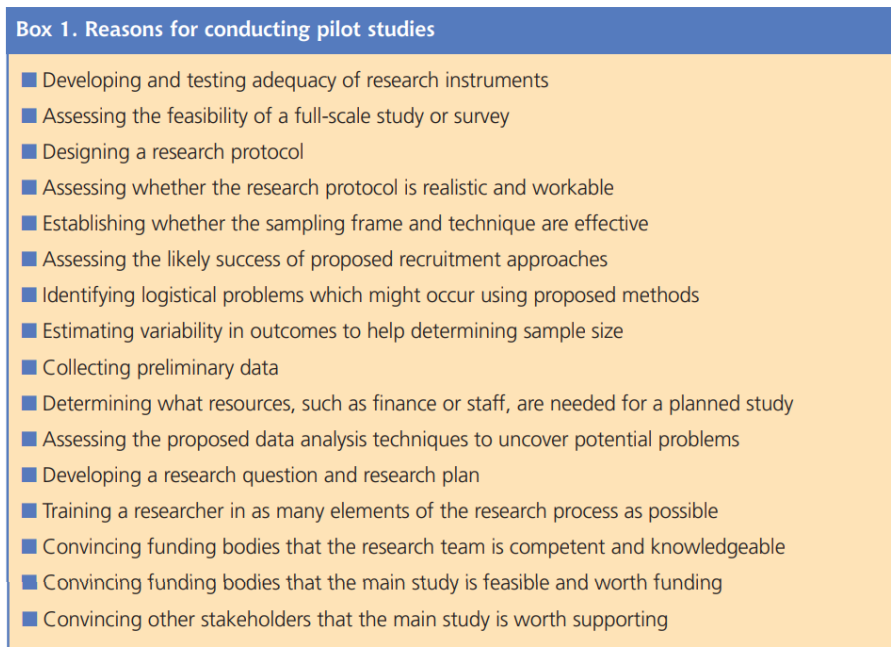


Figure 5. Reasons for conducting pilot studies.

(Source: van Teijlingen and Hundley, 2002, p. 34)

Throughout the trial, only small modifications were necessary in the design. The first group (code FGP01) was held on the 4th of December 2021 with six participants (FGP0101-FGP0106) at the Corvinus University of Budapest. The first modification happened in the structure of topics and questions used for the focus group, as the researcher noted that participants were able to communicate their thoughts exhaustively in six main topics (*Appendix 2*), instead of seven – the two last topics resulted in redundancy with unnecessary questions. Thus, the sixth topic became an open-ended general inquiry asking if they had any final thoughts or comments regarding the entire discussion. For each interrogation, the moderator prepared prompts in case participants didn't fully understand the topic.

Overall, this change in the questions did not negatively impact the following focus groups, since the mediator would still leave space for further contributions via the final open question. The focus group was recorded, and its content was transcribed (intelligent verbatim transcript) for posterior analysis. More details about the organization of the focus group are provided in the following section of this chapter.

For the netnography, an Instagram account (@Research_CUB) was created with the researcher's profile photo and a brief description of its purpose. Then, the account followed each participant's account and sent a direct message to them individually informing them about it. The information was already explained in the first phase when volunteers attended the focus

group and signed an informed consent form (*Appendix 4*) agreeing to provide their data and giving consent to their images' usage in the research. Over two weeks, the content posted on their Stories (N = 91) was retrieved via a screen recording application and stored in a private online drive, alongside information about their account's activity inserted in an Excel spreadsheet, for further analysis.

The two semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants who posted content in the previous stage (netnography), based on convenience: the three first participants who posted on Stories were contacted via email and Instagram DM (Direct Message) and the two who replied with availability for the call received an invitation via Microsoft Teams for it (FGP01P05 and FGP01P02). The interviews happened on the 12th of April 2022 and lasted for approximately 30 minutes, following the semi-structured questions guideline (*Appendix 5*).

The recordings in both the pilot study and in the main research were transcribed in a hybrid format: the initial automatic speech recognition (ASR) output from Microsoft Teams was used as a base, and then the research assistants²⁰ or the main researcher (the author) conducted a manual transcription over it, evaluating its correctness and accurateness. While transcribing, I adopted an intelligent verbatim approach (McMullin, 2021), as it preserves the relevant data and allows the conversation to flow naturally, but still in a comprehensible way, in the textual format. This decision was taken because I already had additional commentary notes from a research assistant in the focus groups to support the interpretation of the data whenever necessary.

The data generated throughout the pilot study were analyzed for patterns (Thematic Analysis) and evaluated to promote any needed modifications to the research design before proceeding with the further steps. As explained in the following sections, only small changes were applied to improve the clarity of questions and reduce unnecessary redundancy. Hence, the material was also incorporated into the final analysis along with the remaining dataset.

3.4. Focus groups: Debating youth's visual communication on Stories

The six focus groups (pilot group plus five groups) were organized from December 2021 to September 2022 and consisted of a heterogeneous approach with both male and female participants aged 18-22 years old who were living in Hungary during that stage. Stewart et al. (1990) explain that focus group research dates back to post-World War II from studies about

²⁰ I express my gratitude to my Ph.D. colleagues Aizhamal Muratalieva and Utku Bozdağ; and my BA thesis mentee Ana Maria Cuesta López for their assistance in the focus groups and interviews data transcription.

group dynamics, persuasive communication, and the effects of mass media (p. 9), including analysis of Army training and morale films. The techniques were later adapted for group and individual interviews, becoming a relevant tool for research in social sciences. Among the first researchers to structure the process were Merton et al. (1956/1990), whose work has been cited as essential in the development of the technique (Stewart et al., 1990; Morgan, 1996).

Morgan (1996) defines focus groups “as a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher” (p. 130). Thus, the method is characterized as being collective, usually conducted with 5-12 participants, and generating a debate in which a moderator seeks in-depth contributions from the participants about a topic. Furthermore, the author emphasizes that it has three essential components: 1) it is devoted to data collection; 2) the interaction in a group discussion is the source of the data; 3) the researcher has an active role in the process (p. 130).

The specific size and design of the groups may vary – lacking consensus even among practitioners –, but Stewart et al. (1990) alert that small groups discussion may be dominated by one person while large groups can be difficult to manage and not allow the scope for everyone to contribute. Krueger and Casey (2000) suggest organizing three or four focus groups for each segment of the participant, in case the discussion is divided by specific demographics that will be used as a unity of analyses (e.g., by gender or age groups). However, if relevant information is still elicited at the fourth session, researchers should continue with a few more groups until no new information arises (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Moreover, Stewart et al. (1990) recommend that a specific site designated for the debate is the best environment for its development, as it may allow for observers and moderators to collect data (e.g., audio and video recordings) without disturbing the functioning of the interview. The moderator’s role is essential in this process, as they oversee the discussion and present the questions to participants, thus influencing the type and quality of the data generated (Stewart et al., 1990, p. 11). For instance, a good practice involves starting the discussion with a more general question to allow participants to feel more comfortable, before proceeding to a more specific inquiry.

The method is commonly used in combination with other techniques, such as in-depth individual interviews, as explained by Morgan (1996, p. 134). In this research, I followed these recommendations and used focus groups as the first method, adding two other separate strategies for data collection, namely netnography and individual interviews. The design enabled for initial identification of experiences in the collective discussion while also helping to increase the confidence in the researcher-participant relationship, which was relevant for the

data collection from their profiles on Instagram. Also, the addition of one-to-one interviews allowed for a more in-depth qualitative exploration of the topics identified in the group discussion and to the participants sharing behavior on Instagram Stories.

Stewart et al. (1990) also highlight the relevance of focus groups to obtaining qualitative data, as they “produce a very rich body of data expressed in the respondents’ own words and context” (Stewart et al., 1990, p. 12). Among the other advantages of this method, I can cite its cost-efficiency, as it produces a large dataset from multiple viewpoints; the possibility to interact directly with participants and discuss their perspectives on certain topics; and its results can directly reflect the opinion of those living the analyzed phenomenon (p. 16).

Despite these benefits, there are several limitations in the method. For example, it is debatable to which extent and how focus groups findings can be generalized to a larger population (Vicsek, 2010); the vast amount of content post-interview can make it difficult to summarize findings; in addition to the moderator and context/dynamic of a group influence on participants’ responses (Stewart et al., 1990).

Morgan (1996) advocates that the design standardization across focus groups is useful as it allows a “high level of comparability” (p. 142) between the several discussions. Thus, a structure of questions can guide the moderator’s work and provide a standard scope for the data. Another strategy presented by the author refers to sampling, which may follow a segmentation based on the levels of homogeneity or heterogeneity that are required to reach the research goals. Hence, age, sex, and other demographic characteristics are used to set the appropriate group based on the needs to generate certain discussions (e.g., when debating fertility issues, it may be advisable to conduct both sex-specific heterogenous and homogenous groups). The total number of groups suggested to reach “saturation” in the themes and to acquire relevant quality content within the discussion varies depending on the standardization and segmentation, but Morgan (1996) recommends four to six groups per segment – which to an extent aligns with the indication of Krueger and Casey (2000).

The focus group design for this research followed a semi-structured interview (*Appendix 2*) that was defined according to the research objectives and research question. As explained in the Pilot Research section, a pilot focus group was used to test and improve the design. Concerning the environment, the space for the focus groups at the Corvinus University of Budapest was equipped with cameras and microphones to record the discussion, the chairs were organized in a semicircle or U style, with participants being able to see each other easily while speaking. Before the start of the conversation, they were offered refreshments (juice, water, snacks, and chocolate) to make them feel more comfortable. The food was also available

on the desks throughout the entire process.

Every participant received a codename referring to their spatial distribution in the room and the number of the focus group. For instance, the first person in the semicircle from left to right in the third focus group would be FG03P01. The logic applied to all dates, with an additional letter to distinguish the pilot research, as explained in the previous section (e.g., FGP01P01). Participants were informed that these codes would replace their names whenever they were mentioned in the research to guarantee a level of anonymity, thus the same codes are used when referring to their data in the research, since the netnography and interviews were conducted with people who had already joined the first stage.

At the beginning of the meeting, the researcher explained how the discussion would happen, read through the informed consent form (*Appendix 4*) with the volunteers, and clarified their doubts before signing the documents. They were also informed that they could withdraw their participation at any moment, even after the focus group, by sending an email to the researcher. Although nobody withdrew officially from the research, two participants did not take part in the next stages, as explained further in the netnography section.

The focus groups lasted for approximately one hour and were moderated by the author of this dissertation with the support of a research assistant who helped to manage technical details (recording, collecting forms, taking notes).

Before finishing the meeting, participants submitted the legal consent forms and also filled out a demographic form (*Appendix 3*) to provide details about their usage of smartphones and of Instagram/Instagram Stories. Among the questions in the form, it was asked since when they have an Instagram account, who are their followers/following profiles, what topics they usually share on Instagram Stories, etc. The demographic data enable a contextualized interpretation of their experiences with the platform and can also be used for other analyses (e.g. triangulation), besides supporting the interview questions elaboration and the codebook design.

Table 4 shows the dates, the codes assigned to each group, the total number of participants, and the total nationalities represented per date.

Date	Focus Group Code	Number of Participants	Nationalities
December 4th, 2021	FGP01	6	5
April 22nd, 2022	FG01	6	5
June 10th, 2022	FG02	9	8

September 22nd, 2022	FG03	5	5
September 23rd, 2022	FG04	6	4
September 30th, 2022	FG05	11	8

Table 4. Schedule of focus groups with Instagram Stories users.
(Source: Own elaboration)

The focus group design (Appendix 2) took into consideration the research questions and objectives as a base, dividing the discussion into three main topics: smartphone camera usage, Instagram experiences, and Instagram Stories practices. As explained earlier in this chapter and illustrated in *Table 4*, the main objective was to collect data that would enable answering research questions one and two (RQ1 and RQ2), as the focus groups represented one of the three methods adopted for data collection, in addition to acquiring an understanding of their Instagram Stories usage for the next stages of the research.

The two first topics of debate (smartphone camera and Instagram) were broken down into two questions each, and the third topic (Instagram Stories) was divided into three subtopics, also with two questions each, covering types of experiences, motivations, and self-presentation strategies. The last part consisted of an open question for participants to share any further insights about their usage of Instagram Stories that could help the researcher understand it. In every question, they were instigated to share their opinion, exemplify the given question with practical examples of what they have experienced in the platform, comment on characteristics regarding people of their age versus the given topic, or reply to what other participants had commented.

The discussion of each focus group was recorded in video and audio using an event from the software Microsoft Teams, in addition to a separate audio recorder, and the material was later transcribed with an intelligent verbatim transcript, which a sample can be consulted in *Appendix 6*. The recordings were initially transcribed by two research assistants who had supported the organization of the focus group, and I revised the textual output to align their patterns, format the content, and correct any mistakes. Non-verbal and other cues from the meetings were also registered in the form of a note filled in by the research assistants for further contextual information.

3.5. Netnography: Collecting youth's data from Instagram Stories

Netnography (Kozinets, 2020) is a research method that combines various practices and viewpoints from different fields, such as computer science, cultural studies, media

anthropology, education, and marketing. It is a form of ethnography that has established parameters and guidelines for data collection, which involve simplifying, searching, scouting, selection, and saving operations. Additionally, the method includes a form of ethnographic participant observation called “engaged data operations” (p. 8) and emphasizes a cultural understanding of social media through the integration of data analysis and hermeneutic interpretation, while highlighting the need for researchers to comply with ethical and legal standards, including the European Union’s GDPR (Global Data Protection Regulation).

This research followed the indications of netnography when engaging in online observation and data collection from participants. Based on the information collected in the focus group discussion, a specific profile (@Research_CUB) of the research was created to follow the profiles of the participants, monitor their publications, and record the data. The immersion into the content published online and the pilot research supported defining the scope for the final data collection, while also providing initial information about their publishing behavior for discussion in the interview. Before further explaining my approach to netnography, I briefly expose its difference when compared to other similar methods.

Ardévol and Gómez-Cruz (2013) note that the tradition of adapting methodologies for analyzing offline communicative practices is still the basis that sustains most studies about the online environment. Alongside netnography (Kozinets, 2014), several other techniques and methods have been developed to study online or digital phenomena, sometimes in contrasting ways: virtual ethnography (Crichton & Kinash, 2008; Hine, 2008), online ethnography (Gatson & Zweerink, 2004; Hine, 2005) and digital ethnography (Masten & Plowman, 2003; Murthy, 2008; Ardévol & Gómez-Cruz, 2013) are some of them.

Virtual ethnography theory defends the role of a researcher as an embodied instrument for scientific practices, as it happens in traditional ethnography. Hine (2008) explains that it explores the richness of the online environment, and it was influential in establishing the idea of online community (p. 257). Thus, it takes the interactions based on (and around) the Internet as capable of enabling social formations independent of physical space. The author makes a distinction between virtual ethnography and online ethnography, considering the first as capable of transitioning between the offline and online cultural practices surrounding an object, while the second would be limited to the online spaces. Crichton and Kinash (2008) define virtual ethnography as a way to “actively engage with people in online spaces to write the story of their situated context, informed by social interaction” (2003, p. 2). Despite its theoretical development, virtual ethnography studies still center mostly on textual content on the Internet.

Gatson and Zweerink (2004) argue that a researcher in online ethnography has to take into consideration that “there is no such thing as non-participant observation” (p. 179), in connection with traditional ethnography. They studied a TV series community website and built a connection with the group to actively engage in their online/offline activities, thus becoming part of the studied subject in an experience that approximates to autoethnography. In this way, online ethnography is interested in the social practices that develop around online/offline interactions, not focusing on the content itself.

Masten and Plowman (2003) study digital ethnography with a focus on consumer experience. The authors explain that the method easily adapts to the fluidity and flexibility of contemporary cultures and communities, being used for analyzing a variety of objects, such as images, words, and audio files. Hence, digital ethnography considers a broader scope of digital objects and different types of connections, such as extranet, not only the Internet. This method has been thought of for business usage, focusing on how companies can adopt it to understand their customers’ behavior. Ardévol and Gómez-Cruz (2013) advocate for researchers to conduct digital ethnographies with digital technology devices, thus developing the “technological, social, and cultural competencies necessary to fully participate in these sociotechnical contexts” (p. 11). Despite its promising scope, digital ethnography still lacks clear and structured guidelines.

Finally, netnography is a method of studying digital environments that draws on traditional ethnographic techniques (Kozinets, 2010, 2014) for a close examination of the object to understand its meanings. The method has its roots in consumer behavior and ethnography studies but has evolved over the past two decades to consider the specific features and opportunities offered by the internet and social media.

Netnography is participatory observational research based on online fieldwork. It uses computer-mediated communication as a data source to arrive at an understanding and ethnographic representation of a cultural or communal phenomenon. Therefore, just like all ethnography, it will extend, almost naturally and organically, from a participant observation base to include other elements such as interviews, descriptive statistics, archival data collection, extended historical case analysis, videography, projective techniques such as collages, semiotic analysis and a host of other techniques (Kozinets, 2010, p. 60).

One of the characteristics that distinguish netnography from other similar methods is the clear and practical guidance with structured steps for conducting research on digital new media.

Langer and Beckman (2005) suggest that netnography is especially adequate to study sensitive topics, enabling the “researcher in an unobtrusive and covert way to gain deeper insights into consumers’ opinions, motives, worries, and concerns” (p. 200). Bowler (2010) explains that netnography is one of the most suitable methods for online culture and communities’ studies. The author highlights that Kozinets has managed to put together a work that offers researchers “a guide to conduct ethnographic research online with detailed, step-by-step guidance to introduce, explain and illustrate the method” (p. 1274).

For Kozinets (2010), netnography represents the attitude of a researcher toward adopting strategies, practices, and procedures that demonstrate the relevance of the online environment for the understanding of a studied phenomenon. Accordingly, it is necessary that the investigator immerses themselves in that environment, spending significant time observing and interacting with the community/culture. Equally, Kozinets (2010) highlights the relevance of adhering to ethical standards in all phases of the research, guaranteeing participants anonymity when it applies.

The author defines 5 main steps in the research process to guide netnographies (Kozinets, 2010, p. 61), as can be observed in *Figure 6*, which covers from the planning phase for the definition of research questions, going over the identification of the site and community to be analyzed, the specific observation and data collection procedure and concluding with the data analysis/interpretation and the report of findings. Ensuring the ethical procedures is discussed as a sixth step that follows the entire research.



Figure 6. Simplified flow of a netnographic research project.

(Source: Kozinets, 2010, p. 61)

In this research I applied netnography as an approach to exploring the online environment and as a procedure for Instagram data collection, following Kozinets (2010) guidelines. Firstly, it allowed me to acquire more knowledge about how participants behaved online, by following their accounts and observing factors such as frequency of publication, characteristics of participants' profile on Instagram (e.g., closed or open account), their sharing behavior on Instagram Stories (frequent publishers or sporadic content), etc.

Secondly, the netnography enabled me to collect data directly from Instagram users' profiles, including types of shared content (photos, collages, boomerangs, phrases, videos, etc.), visual elements used in their stories (tagging other users, geotags, hashtags, emojis, etc.), and to archive their ephemeral publications for posterior thematic analysis. This process has the support of an Excel table and a notebook for field annotation, in addition to a Google Drive to store the structured data collected via the screenshot and screen recording of their shared content over five weeks.

The operation for data collection consisted of entering the account created for the research (@Research_CUB) every day and playing Instagram Stories (watching it) while running an application on the phone that recorded its screen. After all the stories were watched, the video recording was paused and saved, then the content was uploaded to an online drive. Altogether, this action was done for 35 days including the pilot and main research, resulting in the collection of 782 images from 37 different users. Of the remaining six participants, two did not take part in this phase of the research (FG02P02, FG05P09) as they did not accept the invitation to be followed by the Instagram account and did not reply to emails. The other four participants (FG03P02, FG04P03, FG04P06, FG05P02) did not post any content throughout the period of data collection.

Finally, the 782 images were initially coded with the support of a codebook (*Appendix I*), developed during the pilot study, in which topics were grouped for thematic analysis to explore the themes adopted in the visibility practices for self-representation of young people on the digital platform. The content collected in this phase is kept anonymous (without revealing their codes) in the results chapter to provide a new layer of protection for participants' identity. Finally, one image posted by each participant was randomly selected to be included in their interview for further discussion, as I explain in the following section.

3.6. Semi-structured interviews: Exploring youth's self-presentation

The semi-structured interviews (SSIs) aimed at further exploring the youth's self-presentation practices and strategies on Instagram Stories by inquiring directly from participants about their experiences. Smith (1995) explains that semi-structured interviews enable researchers to acquire "a detailed picture" of participants' perspectives on specific topics (p. 9). The author focuses on qualitative analysis and defends that an interviewee's words are connected to the person's psychological constructs, while their meanings are negotiated within a social context (p. 10).

When planning for this type of interview, Smith (1995) suggests that the investigator should prepare in advance a set of questions based on the data they expect to obtain from respondents, but allow for flexibility in the process, since new inquiries/themes may arise as the conversation happens. The researcher indicates some positive characteristics for the use of this qualitative method: "It facilitates rapport/empathy, allows a greater flexibility of coverage and enables the interview to enter novel areas, and it tends to produce richer data" (Smith, 1995, p. 12).

Furthermore, the author makes a few recommendations when constructing the interview guide for an SSI: 1) Opt for neutral questions, avoiding bias/values; 2) Adopt a language that participants can understand clearly; and 3) Use open-ended questions to promote verbal elaboration on the topic. Additionally, Smith (1995) proposes to start interviews with more general inquiries and funnel them down to specific matters, with the inclusion of prompts to help clarify the topics when necessary. The interviewer may record the conversation for posterior transcription and analysis, address one issue at a time, give a moment for the answer, and verify if any further discussion can be elaborated based on the response.

In alignment with these suggestions, Adams (2015) indicates that the interviewer should include scope for a rapport at the beginning of the interview guide, keep more controversial or embarrassing questions to the end, and, when possible, conduct a pilot study to test its design. This decision prevents major changes after the beginning of the main research and allows for a better understanding of how to frame and/or how to organize the questions. Another important step is analyzing whether the inquiries “may evoke pressure to give socially acceptable answers” (Adams, 2015, p. 497), which could impact, for instance, on participants’ answers reflecting on what is expected from them (confirmation bias). A way to avoid this issue is guaranteeing respondents’ confidentiality and clarifying that any perspective is valued, trying to remove the stigma related to specific answers, especially when addressing sensitive topics.

The interview guide for this research consisted of 15 questions (*Appendix 5*), elaborated and tested with two participants in the pilot research and later on conducted with 18 more interviewees (N = 20). Participants from the previous stages (focus groups and netnography) were invited for the conversation via email and Instagram DM (Direct Message), sent from the research account, and the appointments were scheduled according to their availability and disposition. I also looked for a composition that would include people of all informed genders, who actively posted on Stories as well as those who weren’t so active in sharing on the platform.

While designing the questions, I planned to cover five main components of their Instagram Stories usage habits: 1) What strategies are used for their self-presentation; 2) How they describe their self-presentation; 3) What influence the audience and its feedback may play in the self-presentation; 4) How their self-presentation changes over time (if it does); 5) their motivations for adopting specific self-presentation strategies (why). These topics were divided into 15 questions which, whenever necessary, included some examples or further clarify them for the participants.

As explained in the Pilot Research section, the interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams individually (one-to-one), being tested initially with participants FGP01P05 and FGP01P02 on the 12th of April 2022, and lasted for approximately 30 minutes. I worked as the interviewer on all the occasions and the SSI followed the planned guide, with only a few follow-up questions being added (e.g., *Could you tell me one example of when this happened? How did that make you feel? etc.*) to acquire a more in-depth understanding of the discussed topics, giving space for each participant to explain their responses and to openly talk about the subjects.

At the beginning of each interview, I explained the purpose of the conversation, quickly reminded the participant about the entire research process (each stage) and gave an overview of what they would talk about. I also informed them that the meeting would be recorded, but the information would be kept anonymous with their names being replaced by the initial codes from the focus group, and asked for their consent to start the recording – this request was accepted by everyone who attended the call. Due to a slow internet connection or the environment where they were at the moment, some people opted not to keep their cameras on throughout the entire talk.

In addition to addressing their perspectives about the studied communicative practices, one of their images published on Instagram Stories in the previous stage (netnography) was selected and presented at the end of the interview (Question 14) for them to describe it and discuss how that content relates to their self-presentation strategies. This specific approach of presenting their images and talking about them contributes to answering the second Research Question and also provides further empirical evidence for the third Research Question.

This specific activity was placed towards the end of the interview following Adams's (2015) recommendations, as it could influence how the respondents would frame their answers to comply with this specific example if it were presented early in the conversation. It could also generate a bit of embarrassment, discomfort, or other reactions by facing them with content that they had posted a while ago and that may relate to events they didn't want to discuss. However, I observed that none of the participants avoided the discussion, and most of them felt prompted to talk openly about their images.

All interviews were conducted online in English via the software Microsoft Teams between December 2021 and October 2022, recorded in video and audio, and later on, transcribed (intelligent verbatim transcript). A research assistant supported the transcription process of five interviews (I transcribed the other 15), but I revised and edited the final material before coding it. When transcribing, I aimed at following the participants' observations closely,

while also adjusting minor grammar mistakes or reducing speech marks that were too frequent to produce a more clear text.

3.7. Thematic analysis: Building a common ground for the data analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) is a method focused on qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2019) such as transcripts of interviews or focus groups, that has gained much popularity in social sciences in the past three decades. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that thematic analysis is the foundation for most qualitative analysis, but also a method in its own right that can be applied across many theoretical and epistemological approaches (p. 78). Thus, TA is defined as “a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (p. 79) by organizing, describing, and discussing it in detail.

The authors, who have broadly contributed to TA’s methodological development and popularity, explain that there are several approaches to thematic analysis, but they can be grouped into three major clusters based on their philosophical assumptions and procedural practices: coding reliability TA, codebook TA, and reflexive TA. The typology comes from a distinction between the positivist coding reliability approaches and the reflexive TA the authors propose, which is more exploratory, flexible, organic, and iterative (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 593).

A critique to these other techniques, namely the coding reliability TA and codebook TA, based on Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019), is that they see themes as buckets to which the data awaits to be passively placed. In this sense, many researchers think of themes as “emerging” or “being discovered” in the data, not acknowledging their active role in the process. Although codebook TA is based on an initial framework or template, it still allows scope for critical interpretations, thus being placed halfway between the other two approaches, but not the main format of analysis advocated for by the authors.

Beyond the definition of what thematic analysis is and its variations, the theorists provide contributions to the conceptualization of themes, identified as “patterns of shared meaning underpinned or united by a core concept” (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 593). Additionally, they propose a distinction between *themes* and *domain summary themes*, arguing that the latter usually represent underdeveloped themes that just summarize the data, being “organized around a shared topic but not shared *meaning*” (p. 593). Thus, the researcher has an active role in determining what a theme is within their data and the themes are not necessarily bounded to a specific frequency/prevalence. Hence, some themes may appear

scarcely across the data set, but they can still be relevant to the interpretation of the studied object.

Braun and Clarke (2006) differentiate between semantic and latent thematic analysis. The first focuses on describing the surface meaning within the data and explaining the patterns in the semantic content, often relying on previous literature. The latent form goes beyond the semantic level and seeks to identify “the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations – and ideologies – that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data” (p. 84). Hence, it involves an interpretative process beyond describing the patterns/themes that resemble other methods, such as discourse analysis.

Furthermore, Braun and Clarke (2006) propose a step-by-step guide for conducting thematic analysis, which consists of six phases that go from the familiarization with the data to the production of a report, as clearly described in *Table 5* reproduced from the author’s work (p. 87). However, they explain that this is not a linear process and many times a researcher will have to go back and forth throughout the phases to develop their thematic analysis.

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Table 5. Phases of thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke.
(Source: Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 87).

In this research, I adopt Braun and Clarke’s guidelines since it still enables me to explore the data from a flexible approach and then evaluate, re-create, and develop the themes thoroughly. Thus, I applied their steps and generated my own table (*Table 6*) which shows an additional step in the process: a comparison of the themes generated across the different data sets to produce a somehow unified report, although I still kept themes that were prevalent only in one set. This decision allows for more coherence in the final report, as I am not looking only for how the themes are developed in each phase of the research, but also how they connect. Lastly, this procedure is relevant to demonstrate how the discussion (focus group and interview)

approximates/differentiates from the visual self-presentation practices found on Instagram Stories (netnography).

3.8. Accuracy, research rigor and replicability in thematic analysis

Each research paradigm, and therefore the methodologies that align with them, has its own ways of assessing accuracy and guaranteeing that the research can be assessed and replicated. There are other methods that are similar to thematic analysis, such as qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004). However, this specific method is more related to codebook TA than reflexive TA (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2019), due to its paradigm alignment and philosophical underpinnings. On the one hand, content analysis research is closer to positivist or post-positivist approaches, thus interpreting data in a systematic, objective, and quantifiable manner (i.e., counting frequency and co-occurrence). On the other hand, reflexive thematic analysis is closer to essentialist and constructionist paradigms, being a more flexible process that recognizes and embeds the researcher's role in the investigation journey to generate a reflexive and interpretative output.

In this sense, while content analysis follows a linear approach, usually based on co-coders agreement to justify its reliability (i.e., applying Cohen's kappa coefficient or Krippendorff's alpha to measure inter-rater reliability for categorical items), Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) thematic analysis is an iterative, back-and-forth process, centered on understanding the meaning and context of themes. Both methods have their strengths and flaws: content analysis is more structured, allowing for simpler reproduction of a research, but it may leave out contextual information that can not be systematically categorized (i.e., not fit in the codebook or not be too recurring), as well as a more detailed interpretation that involves the researcher's own perception of that subject. In contrast, TA enables this recursive data analysis that can result in a thorough and exhaustive examination of a phenomenon, taking into consideration multiple rounds of reading and coding to acquire an in-depth comprehension of the data set, but as it involves the researcher actively in the process (background knowledge and contextual information), the reliability is facilitated by the level of transparency, description and triangulation (i.e., data sources, methods), not by co-coding steps.

In fact, when developing reflexive thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013, 2019) suggest that the researcher should avoid using positivist vocabulary and approach, such as words "themes emerge" (as that would mean a "natural act" and not an interactive work) or relying on inter-rater reliability tests as a measure of quality (as that denotes a quantifiable

assessment, contrasting with the method subjective and interpretative alignment). A better decision is including other researchers along the process to openly discuss the results with them, bringing other perspectives and interpretations into the analysis, and clearly describing each step of the journey, which were both considered in the present research. Therefore, reflexive TA contradicts with some content analysis approaches and should not be measured following those criteria that are positivist, but rather by the depth of analysis, the clarity of the steps, and the critical interpretation of the results.

Hence, as shown in *Table 6*, I started the familiarization with the data in a structured process by reviewing the material collected in each phase. All the data sets were produced in an organized way, with transcripts following the discussion/interview guide (questions/answers) and the recordings being separated by days, following the order they were watched on Instagram. After reading and watching the content several times, I started to identify relevant themes and patterns in it. This step was done inductively in the transcripts, although still structured by questions/topics, and deductively in the visuals, following the codebook (*Appendix 1*).

The adoption of the codebook, developed throughout the pilot research and with contributions of previous literature, allowed me to focus on specific characteristics of the data that are important to answer my research questions and to provide evidences of the self-presentation strategies based on the theory, which could be more difficult to follow in an unstructured way due to the diversity and complexity of the information on Instagram Stories. Despite this approach differentiating from Braun and Clarke’s (2006, 2019) suggestions for reflexive TA; it is done as a starting point, from which the content is further scrutinized and compared for the themes, thus the codebook is not as a positivist framework that shapes the entire analysis, following the authors’ considerations. Hence, I take much inspiration from Braun and Clarke’s work, which serves as a standpoint from which I look at generating a critical discussion within my research, not merely producing the set of themes and describing them with samples.

Procedure for thematic coding according to phases and data types				
Phase	Data set	Focus Groups	Netnography	Interviews
Familiarization		Structured transcripts	Structured recordings	Structured transcripts
Gen. initial codes		Inductive	Deductive	Inductive
Searching for themes		Inductive	Deductive	Inductive
Reviewing themes		Hybrid	Hybrid	Hybrid

Comparing themes	Hybrid	Hybrid	Hybrid
Naming final themes	Hybrid	Hybrid	Hybrid
Writing final report	Structured based on final themes and data samples		

Table 6. Thematic coding of mixed data in a hybrid format.
(Source: Own elaboration)

Furthermore, from phase three on I adopted a hybrid approach for the themes revision and comparison (phase five), always looking for ways to interpret the data and to understand how it connected to the research questions and the theoretical framework. Only in phase five, which is new when compared to Braun and Clarke’s (2006) table, I started comparing the themes across the data. This decision was taken to first generate the themes separately according to the discussions and material collected in each method because a simultaneous coding of all the textual output together could eventually lead me to focus more on what was prevalent, characteristics that would be aligned across all the content, and then miss unique themes that weren’t so frequent or that related to one-to-one discussions (interview). Additionally, it also prevents me from interpreting the visual material only as an illustration of the themes, enabling me to look at it and interpret it based on the theory and the other characteristics found in the transcripts; thus generating a richer set of themes at the end.

From a practical perspective, the coding process began with the organization of the data in Word files (focus groups and interview transcripts), in an Excel spreadsheet (data about Instagram accounts), and the images retrieved from Instagram (netnography) were stored in a Google Drive. The second step consisted of transferring all the data set to a qualitative analysis software (MAXQDA), in which the data set was grouped (e.g., 20 interview transcripts) and became individual projects, and each data item (e.g., single transcript) was coded one by one. As explained above, the process was repeated over and over until a level of consistency was noticed throughout the data set, and in phase five I then combined and compared themes across the different types of data sources.

3.9. Ethics: Explaining the research transparency and ethical considerations

Scientifically analyzing human behavior and communication practices is a task that requires attention to detail, care for the subjects involved, and precautionary measures to ensure ethical principles of research (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015). Regarding this last consideration, the assertiveness of the work can be defined based on the methodological approach – including how the data is collected, treated, and analyzed. Croucher and Cronn-Mills (2015) offer

guidelines on how to design and develop this process ethically. Along with the respect for individuals, beneficence, and justice of research practices, the authors indicate that researchers should take some practical actions to ensure their processes are ethical: acquire informed consent from participants, guarantee the necessary level of participant privacy, and debrief the research proposal with participants (Croucher & Cronn-Mills (2015, p. 15).

Throughout my research I repeatedly questioned and evaluated how my actions could impact participants; thus creating a research design that could reduce the chances of causing harm to volunteers, guarantee confidentiality, and still enable the research development. Firstly, every participant filled out an online registration form in which they agreed that their data could be stored and used in the research. The form was the primary way to recruit volunteers for the first phase of the study (focus group) and even those people who were referred by friends via email were asked to fill it out (N = 83).

The document consisted of a Google Form with the title “Participation in Ph.D. Research - Instagram” and a few paragraphs of textual description, in addition to the sections to be filled out. The text informed the objective of the form itself; the research goal; explained who was eligible to participate in it; clarified the voluntary nature of it, with a small financial support (2000 HUF) after attending the first phase; exposed the data collection agreement, being tied to the form submission; and provided the researcher contact details. At the end of the form, a new message highlighted again the criteria for participation and informed them that I would send them an email after its submission.

Secondly, every volunteer who attended the focus groups and thus directly participated in the research filled out a second printed informed consent form (*Appendix 4*), which is inspired by the Informed Consent Form Template for Qualitative Studies from the Research Ethics Review Committee of the World Health Organization (WHO ERC) and aligned with the GDPR (General Data Protection Regulations). Titled “Informed Consent Form”, the document is divided into two parts: 1) Information Sheet, and 2) Certificate of Consent, covering the participation in all phases of the research.

The first part introduced the research briefly and presented the researcher; explained the purpose of the research; named the types of research interventions that would be conducted; reminded of the participant selection process; elaborated on the procedures (focus group, netnography, and interviews) that would happen in each phase; set the duration of the research (October 2021 to June 2023); detailed openly the image consent rights; exposed risks and benefits of participating in the research; elucidated the voluntary process with its small financial retribution; delineated the confidentiality and data protection rights; expose how the

results would be shared; clarified their right to refuse or withdraw their participation; and finally, listed the contact details of the researcher.

The second part consisted of two sentences confirming that the person undersigning the document had read and understood its clauses and had agreed to take part in the research. This text was followed by the space to provide the name, signature, place, and date of signing it. The paper was signed by both the participants and the researcher and is kept under the researcher's tutelage for five years, after which they shall be destroyed. At the beginning of every focus group meeting, participants received the document, were given time to read it carefully, and the researcher went over its content before starting the discussion, to ensure that the volunteers had comprehended the information.

Moreover, these ethical and transparency decisions also follow Kozinets' (2010) guidelines for netnography: (1) identify yourself and inform relevant constituents about your research, (2) ask for appropriate permissions, (3) gain consent where needed, and (4) properly cite and credit culture members (Kozinets, 2010, p. 140). Besides Kozinets proposals, it is important to remember the characteristics of Instagram and its ephemeral content. Therefore, although I have stored and analyzed the data after its duration on the platform, only samples of it that do not directly disclose the identity of participants are used to illustrate findings.

4. Data analysis and results

4.1. Structure and organization of the data analysis

In this chapter, I will present the data analysis and results of the empirical research in three main sections (steps), with respective subsections, and then summarize the findings in a final section. Firstly, I cover the demographics and contextual information regarding the participants and their mobile communication practices to provide the background in which their self-presentation happens. After that, similarly, I analyze their Instagram usage, also evidencing it with both demographic data and content from the thematic analysis. These two initial sections follow the approach proposed by Vicsek (2007), who highlights the relevance of considering situational factors of the research – and already discussed in the methodology chapter – to enable a better understanding of the conditions in which the data was collected.

After the circumstances are clarified, I present the specific discussion on Instagram Stories usage, supplying evidence from the three levels of data: 1) focus groups demographic forms and discussions, 2) netnography, and 3) interviews. I also illustrate the outcome from the thematic analysis, showing the relationship between the different themes developed from their discussions. This section offers the scope to comprehend the information provided by participants in the focus groups and interviews regarding visual mobile communication applied to Instagram Stories. Also, I connect the discussed themes with their visual practices in Stories, based on the analysis of the posted images collected in the netnography. The main goal is to explore the interrelation of what is said (self-report/discussion) and what is done (practices); however, without a strict separation of the two levels, but rather an analysis of their interconnectedness, overlaps, and distinctions.

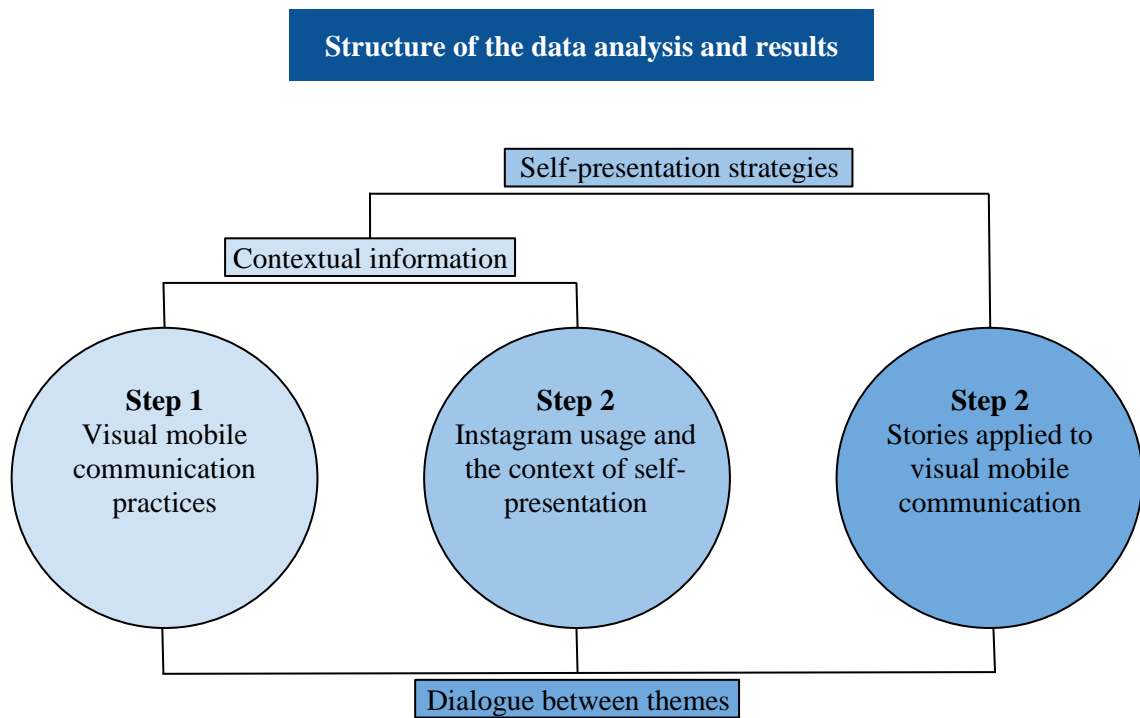


Figure 7. Proposed framework for the data analysis and results chapter.

(Source: Own elaboration)

Finally, connected with the data analysis, I further discuss the empirical results and produce a dialogue with my proposed theoretical framework to answer the three research questions, thus a) analyzing ephemeral content as a form of visual mobile communication, b) elaborating on the youth visual self-presentation strategies on Instagram Stories, and c) exploring the characteristics that distinguish the use of ephemeral images as a communication practice among the studied subjects. Hence, the organization of the chapter follows the research objectives and the layout of the entire dissertation, maintaining the three topics of debate and the structural unity. *Figure 7* illustrates the information flow in the chapter and illustrates how the text will develop from this point on. As exposed previously, the following section covers the first step to contextualize the research results.

4.2. Step 1: Contextual visual mobile communication practices

This section provides an overview of the participants' demographics and their mobile communication practices supported by data from a form (*Appendix 3*) filled out in the focus group, their contributions regarding the first topics (*Appendix 2*) of the focus group discussion, thus offering contextual information for the analysis. Furthermore, the data shown here enables

an in-depth understanding of socio-cultural and technological dimensions that intersect with the qualitative results presented further from the focus groups, interviews, and netnography. However, these statistics should be considered within the scope of the research and not as a general pattern in society.

The study involved 43 participants aged 18-22 years old throughout the research²¹. Considering their indicated birth date in the forms (*Appendix 3*) filled during the first meeting (focus group) and 2023 as the final year in the study, the average age of participants was approximately 21 years old. All participants were born between 2001 and 2004 and the highest proportion was composed of people born in 2002 and 2001.

Participants could also indicate their gender based on a list of four items, which resulted in the following demographics: Female, 30 people (69.7%); Male, 11 people (25.5%); Genderqueer, 2 people (4.6%) and Other, which wasn't pointed out by anyone. Despite the prevalence of female volunteers, all the focus groups included more than one gender, maintaining at least a small level of heterogeneity, which was also kept for the interviews (1 genderqueer, 14 females, 5 males). Since the recruitment process was based on registration and attendance was voluntary, it wasn't possible to keep a gender balance across the sample.

Regarding their origin, the research included 20 nationalities and more than four countries represented per focus group meeting, as indicated in the methodology chapter. Participants from the following nationalities took part in the research, with the number in parentheses indicating how many identified with them: Kyrgyzstani (9), Brazilian (7), Hungarian (5), Kazakhstani (3), Turkish (2), Moldovan (2), Mongolian (2), Mexican (1), Moroccan (1), Nigerian (1), Ukrainian (1), Vietnamese (1), Latvian (1), US American (1), Kosovan (1), Jordanian (1), Croatian (1), Russian (1), Montenegrin (1), Italian (1).

The form also inquired about their mobile communication practices, seeking to find four main pieces of information: 1) When they first had contact with a smartphone; 2) when they owned their first smartphone; 3) how many hours on average they spend on their phones daily; and 4) what are the most used mobile applications on their phones. It is necessary to highlight that, as this represents self-reported data, it is not possible to control its accuracy entirely, since participants may inform, deliberately or unintentionally, different data than their real relationship with mobile devices.

²¹ As the study was developed for more than one year, people who registered when they were 18 years old had already turned 19 years old in 2023. During the registration process, they were 18-21 years old, but their age changed throughout the research.

Nearly half of the participants (48,8%) had their first contact with a smartphone (*Figure 8*) when they were 10 to 15 years old, while another significant proportion (46,5%) experienced it while they were still young children, between 5 and 10 years old. Nobody reported having used the device before turning 5, and only a small percentage (4,7%) indicated that their first contact was between 15 and 20 years old. Thus, the data shows that above 95% of the group started using smartphones in an early stage of their lives, thus being already acquainted with mobile communication for a long time.

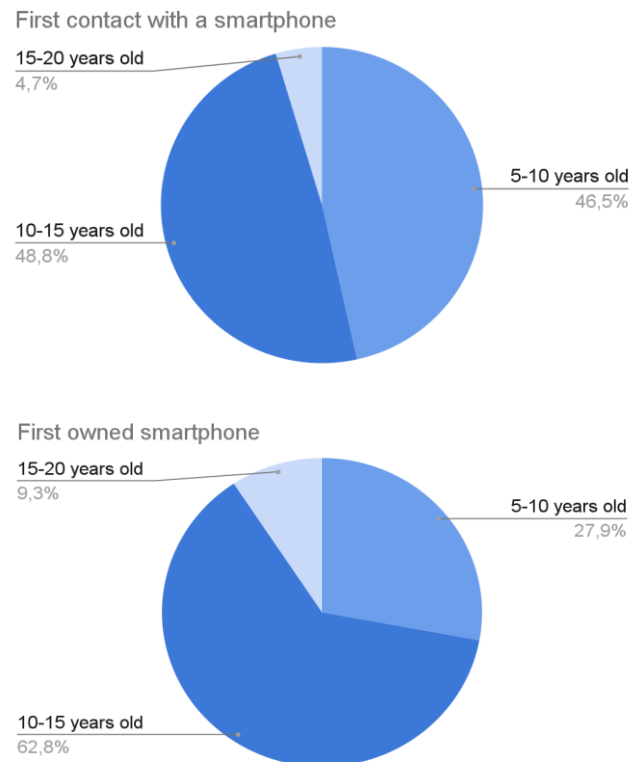


Figure 8. First contact (top) and first owned (bottom) smartphone by participants' age.

(Source: Own elaboration)

Additionally, most of the participants (62,8%) reported that their first owned smartphone was obtained when they were between 10 and 15 years old, while a proportion under one-third (27,9%) acquired it at a younger age, from 5-10 years, and less than one out of 10 (9,3%) owned the device after turning 15. A comparison between the two data sets also demonstrates that most respondents had their first owned smartphone around the same age as their first contact with the device. This information is relevant as it shows that a significant proportion of the group did not necessarily depend on borrowed equipment (e.g., from parents or older siblings) to get access to its functionalities. Hence, they could experience and experiment with mobile

communication from an early age using their devices, which reinforces the notion of being born and/or growing up in a digital environment (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008).

The third point investigated relates to the time spent on smartphones daily, which can indicate characteristics of their mobile usage and be compared with other data from previous reports on youth connection. As illustrated by *Figure 9*, almost 42% of the youth use the equipment for four to six hours per day, and nearly 21% spend six to eight hours on it. It is necessary to reinforce that, although the numbers were provided by respondents, this is not an easy activity to be reported, since they may use their phones more or less time than indicated, but the numbers still represent their conception of the average time spent on these devices.

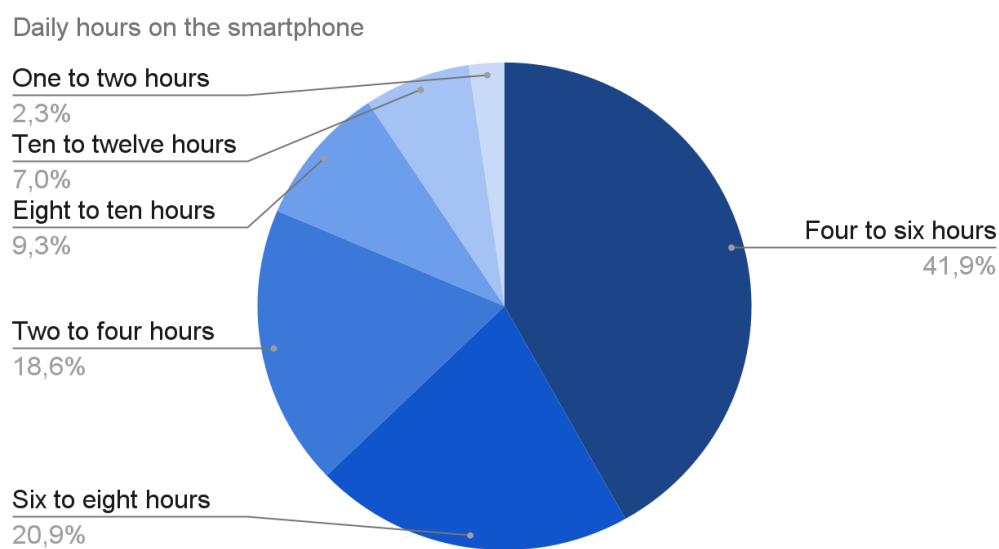


Figure 9. Self-reported number of hours spent on smartphones daily.

(Source: Own elaboration)

Furthermore, these indicators align with other international market research and demonstrate the pervasiveness of mobile communication nowadays. For instance, a report published in 2022 (State of Mobile 2022) with data from around the world showed that on average, mobile users spent around 4.8 hours per day on the screen, which would be equivalent to one-third of the waking hours. The report also pointed out a continuous trend of increase in mobile app usage daily over the past two years, with a rise of 30% in 2021 compared to 2019 in the top 10 markets for this segment, which includes Brazil, Indonesia, South Korea, Mexico, India, Japan, Turkey, Singapore, Canada, and the USA.

Finally, participants in my research were asked to indicate the five most used applications on their smartphones. Not surprisingly, Instagram was the most recurring app among their answers (20%) and was mentioned by 42 of the 43 participants, followed by

WhatsApp (11%), TikTok (10,6%), YouTube (7,5%), and Spotify (5,5%). Understandably, the app would be popular among the group since one of the recruitment requirements was being an Instagram user (although not necessarily a frequent user of the app). In the appendices, I present three themes that were discussed during the focus groups and that contribute to the understanding of their mobile communication habits (See *Appendix 10*). In the following sections, I analyze more in-depth the participants' visual mobile communication practices on Instagram, and more specifically Instagram Stories, to exemplify how visual communication and ephemeral content have become ubiquitous and interconnected with many of their daily activities.

4.3. Step 2: Instagram usage and the context of self-presentation

In this section, I present findings from the empirical research based on three primary data collection methods: focus group demographic form (*Appendix 3*), focus group discussions (*Appendix 2*), and netnography. The main purpose of these results is to provide evidence demonstrating Instagram as a visual mobile communication application, thus funneling down the analysis started in the previous section and offering a bridge to the specific feature of Instagram Stories.

First, the demographic and netnography data enhances my contextual explanation regarding participants' usage of the social media platform in which ephemerality is studied. In this sense, six questions were asked to address topics such as when respondents started using Instagram, their daily connection to the application, and the characteristics of their sharing behavior on the platform. These data are supplemented by notes and observations I made when analyzing their profiles on Instagram throughout the netnographic research. Additionally, I present relevant themes developed from their contributions when discussing the second topic in our focus group, specifically questions T2Q1 and T2Q2 (*Appendix 2*).

4.3.1. Instagram appropriation and integration into daily life

Respondents were asked to indicate when their Instagram account was created, and they were instructed about how to check it on their smartphones. For the few cases of people who had started a second account, after deleting an initial one, they indicated the approximate year that they had started using the platform. Out of the 43 participants, 33 were already Instagram users when the feature Stories was first introduced, in 2016. Hence, they have become acquainted with its functionalities and appropriations over the past seven years, developing a certain level

of maturity as users. This observation is necessary as the social media and its feature usage could be a temporary trend that disappears after a short time, but the data shows that they are still relevant to the public even after passing its novelty phase from the initial years.

Furthermore, by crossing two answers from the demographic form, the date of birth and the year in which they joined Instagram, it is possible to notice that the majority of them first connected to Instagram at an early age, mostly in the pre-adolescence and adolescence phases. This means that, by 2023, most of them have adopted and used the platform through different stages of their development, from turning into adolescents who had a specific lifestyle to becoming youth, being admitted to a university, or starting to work. Since Instagram was launched in 2010 and only people born in/after 2001 participated in the research, it is understandable that nobody was younger than 10 years old when they created their account.

I questioned participants about when they spend more time on Instagram regularly (*Figure 10*) and they could choose from a list of options. Although this is self-disclosed information, meaning that it is an estimate – thus affecting its level of accuracy – before filling out the forms I oriented them to think about the moments that they often check it. More than half of the responses (53,5%) indicated that they use the platform throughout the whole day, with nighttime before bed being the second most mentioned time (14%) and all the other options not reaching 10%. These results demonstrate how pervasive social media is in their routine, which is also reinforced by some of the topics elaborated on in the thematic analysis of our focus group discussion presented further on in this section.

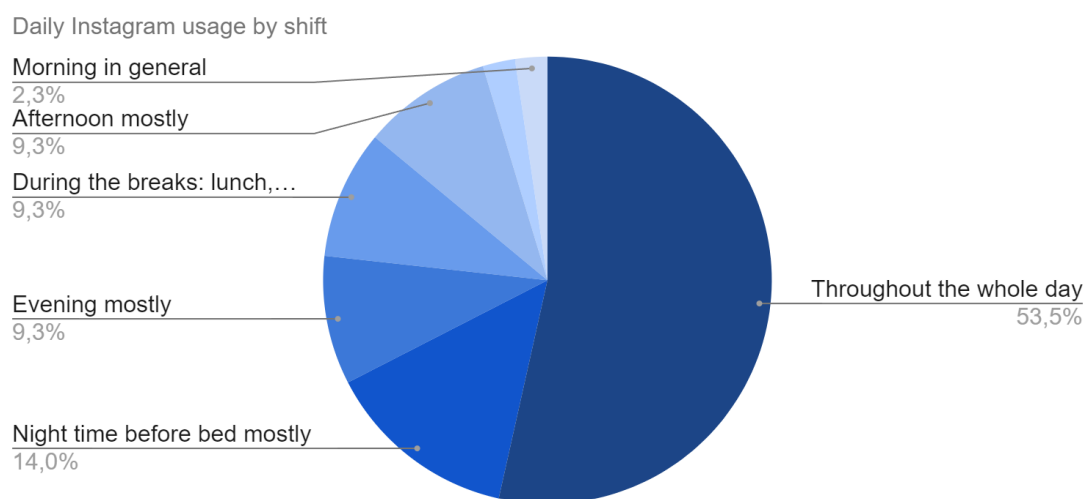


Figure 10. The most frequent shift for Instagram access daily.

(Source: Own elaboration)

To explore their usage of Instagram, I also inquired how many times they opened the application every day, offering a list of options to choose from. This question helps to understand if their previous answer (*Figure 10*) was related to sporadic manipulation or if it represented a frequent behavior. As can be noticed from *Figure 11*, nearly 42% of the respondents reported accessing the platform more than ten times daily, while 16,3% say the app stays open most of the day. The proportion of people who rarely use it or do so for a short period is the smallest, only 4,7%.

Connecting and interpreting the demographic data about their Instagram usage, it is possible to notice that most participants in this research have had an account on the platform for many years already, but they are also continuously operating it multiple times throughout the whole day (*Figure 11*). Not surprisingly, these findings corroborate previous results from the Pew Research Center (Vogels et al., 2022) about youth Internet consumption, which found that nearly 35% of teenagers (a slightly younger group aged 14-17 years old) in the USA report using at least one of the top five most popular platforms (YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook, in order of popularity) “almost constantly”.

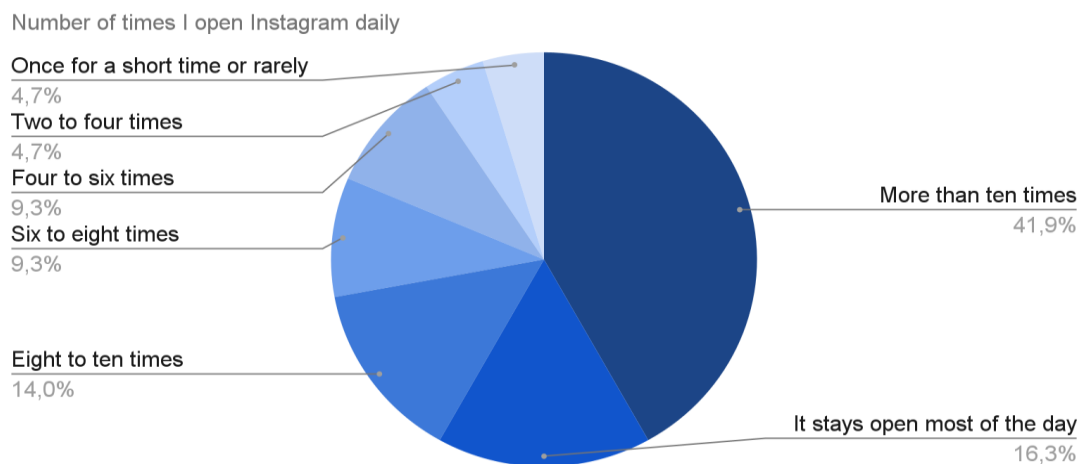


Figure 11. Frequency of Instagram usage daily.

(Source: Own elaboration)

Furthermore, I asked about what other activities the participants commonly do while accessing Instagram on their phones, as an open question that enabled them to write anything but provided some examples for clarification. what can be first noticed in the data is the diversity of responses: There were 21 unique activities reported from a total of 101 listed. As respondents could include more than one event, some reported up to four, while two participants did not specify anything. *Figure 12* highlights the six main activities that reached at least 5% of

mentions, which is topped by eating (26,7%), in-class/studying (21,8%), and talking to people (9,9%).

Moreover, the category Others (25,7%) was used to group up the remaining miscellaneous activities that did not reach up to 5%. Thus, it includes one activity with 4% (resting), two with 3% (watching TV/videos, working out), four specific tasks with occurrence of 2% (listening to music, lying in bed, when bored, and traveling), and eight that only reached 1% (walking, at the bus stations, not specified, before sleeping, working, short breaks, weekends, and using the toilet). These categories were not shown in the table for better data visualization. However, they provide further information about the youth’s appropriation of Instagram, illustrating its penetration into several environments of a person’s everyday life.

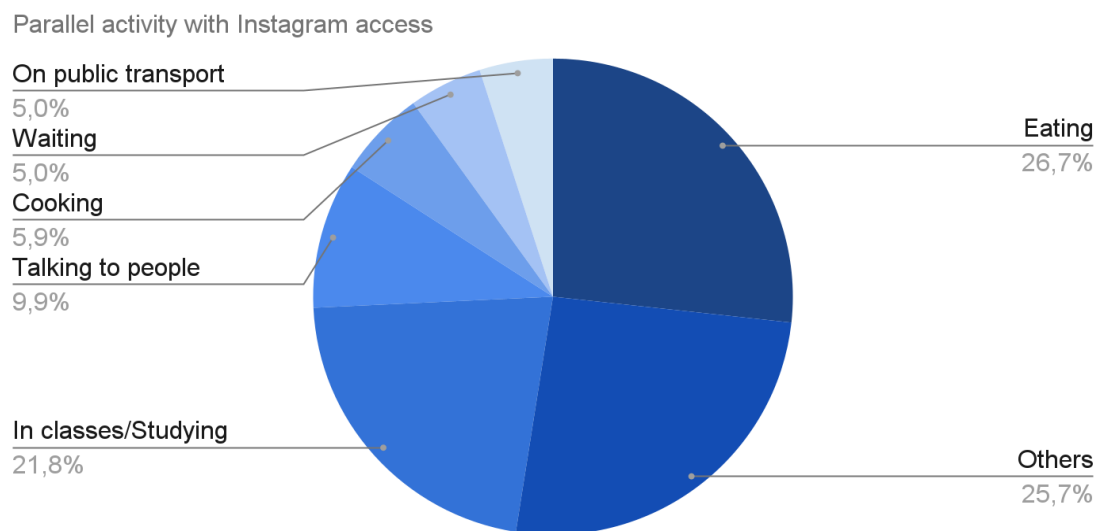


Figure 12. Identification of other parallel activities while using Instagram.

(Source: Own elaboration)

Likewise, the analysis demonstrates that the production and consumption of content (mainly the latter) on these platforms are not only ubiquitous practices nowadays, but they are occurring simultaneously with other routinary chores. Hence, this makes Instagram usage a more usual or commonplace element of their lives, becoming a companion to relieve boredom, offer entertainment, or pass time, as further discussed in the following sections. It also shows the capacity (or need) that the youth have to multitask, which connects to previous research about their behavior related to digital technologies (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Tapscott, 1998; 2009).

4.3.2. Instagram audiences: Followers and following

Finally, participants indicated the audiences that they connect to on Instagram, specifying who those people/accounts are in an open question that sheds light on who they follow and who are their main followers (*Figure 13*). In the first instance, they mentioned 130 unique categories of accounts that they follow, which could be summarized into 13 main types. They are following mainly friends (31,5%), influencers (20%), university colleagues (12,3%), and family members (11,5%). For better visualization purposes, the figure only highlights six main categories that reached more than 5% in the list, thus the other seven miscellaneous references that reached only 2,3% (fitness/sports pages, acquaintances, strangers/unknown) or 0,8% (quotes pages, memes pages, news outlets), were classified under the category Others in the chart.

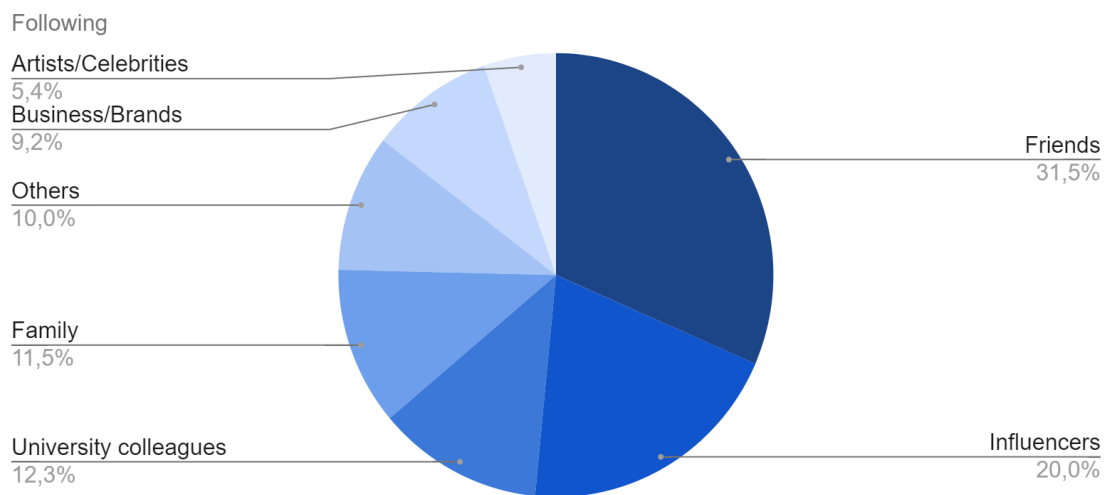


Figure 13. Accounts that participants are following on Instagram.

(Source: Own elaboration)

When it comes to the accounts that the youth allow to follow them, there is much less diversification than those they follow on Instagram. Only five categories were identified (*Figure 14*), plus one person who did not specify, from a list of 97 unique entries. Once again, their friends appear in the first place (40,6%), with university colleagues in the sequence (20,8%), their family in third (19,8%), strangers or unknown people in fourth (14,2%), and acquaintances in last place (3,8%), and one form did not specify anyone.

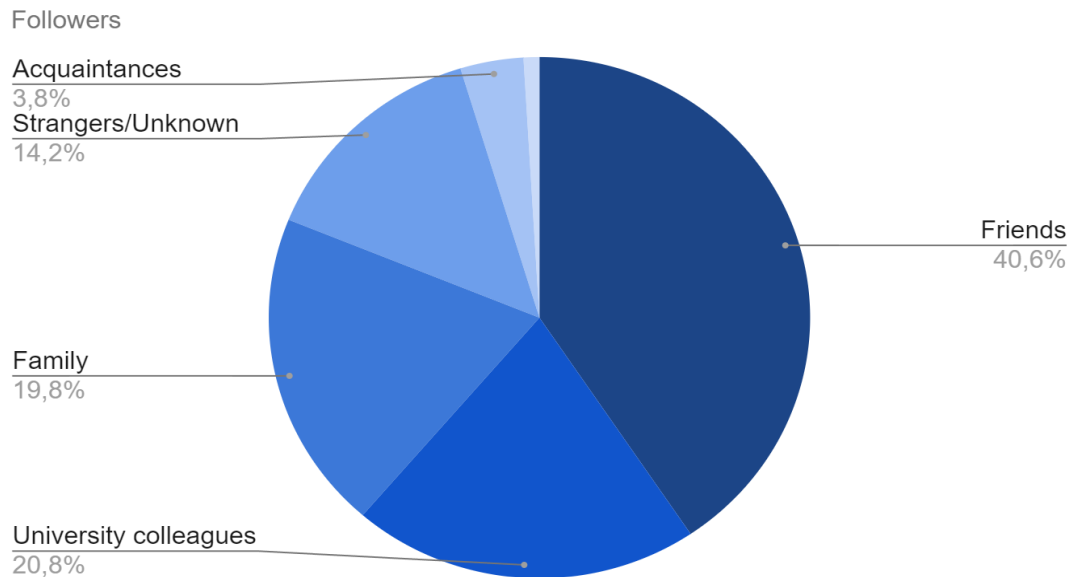


Figure 14. Accounts that follow participants on Instagram.

(Source: Own elaboration)

A curious behavior of these audiences is that many participants don't seem to allow their relatives to see what they are sharing (as followers) on the platform and also don't want to view their activities (following). This characteristic also appeared as a topic in the focus group discussions, with respondents indicating that many family members, especially older ones, may interpret their Instagram content in a judgmental or wrong way, providing comments that make them feel uncomfortable.

To complement the audience analysis, when conducting the netnography, I observed how their accounts were set, either as open (public) or closed (private). Of the 43 participants, 55,8% maintained a closed profile, while 44,2% left their content open to any user. These results mean that while they inform limiting who could follow them for regular updates, only slightly above half of the group took practical steps to limit the visibility of their content. I discuss this behavior more in-depth with the thematic analysis in the following section.

4.3.3. Instagram applied for visual communication

The youth who participated in this research provided data about their Instagram usage in two main ways, via the demographic form and during the focus group discussions. The former was presented in the previous section, while the latter is discussed here. I will introduce and elaborate on the prevalent themes that I developed throughout the analysis of two questions (see T2Q1 and T2Q2 in *Appendix 2*) concerning participants' image-sharing habits on

Instagram. First, they were asked about how they use the platform nowadays, to provide characteristics about this usage. Second, they talked about what are their main motivations to employ it for communication.

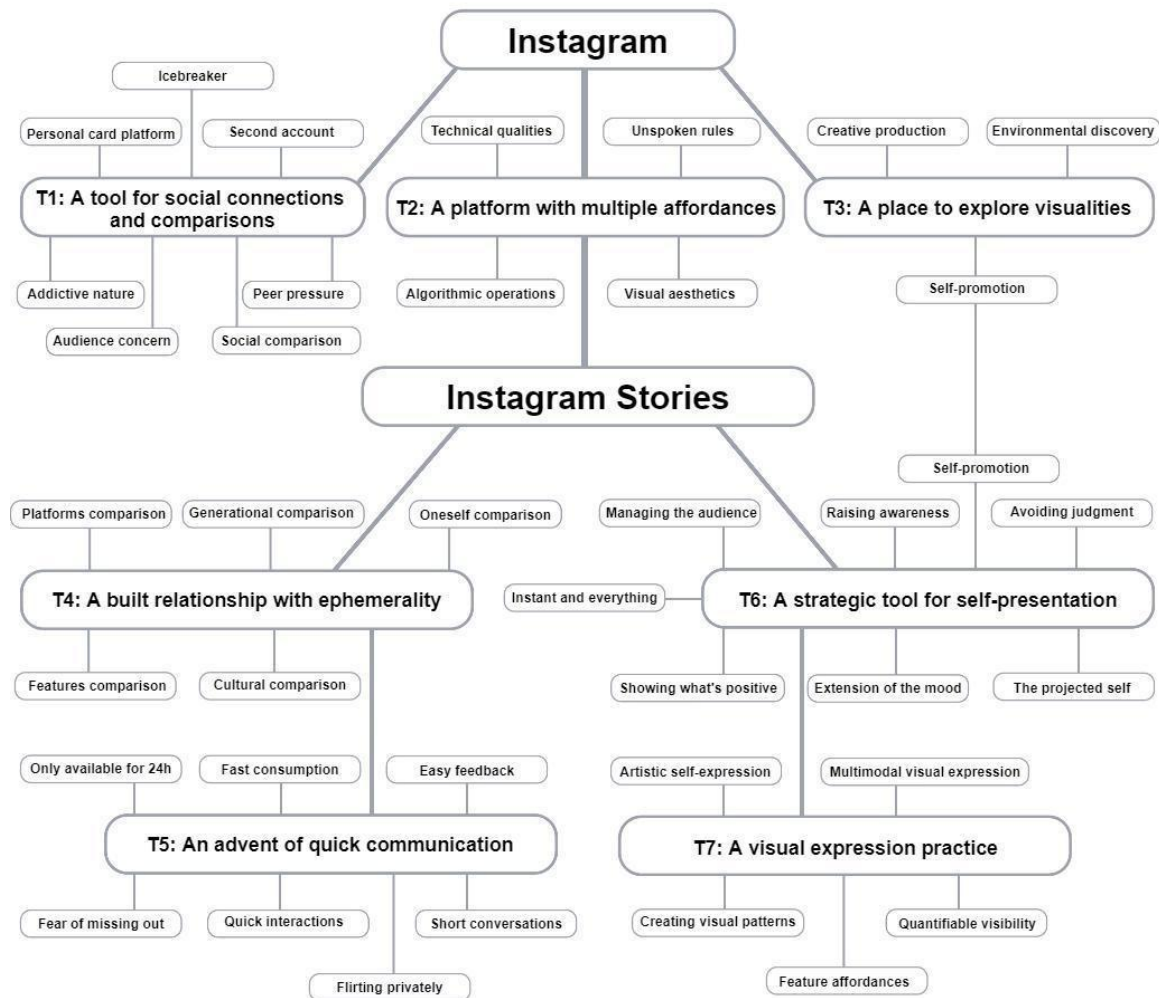


Figure 15. Visualization of the thematic analysis map.

(Source: Own elaboration)

Three main themes are presented below and can be seen in *Figure 15*, covering how the users talk about Instagram to connect with peers and for interpersonal communication; their description of the platform based on its affordances and functionalities; and the appropriation of the application to explore visualities, be it their own self-presentation or discovering broader visual opportunities (e.g., checking how a place look like on photos). These themes further expand the understanding of the conditions in which ephemeral communication via Instagram Stories occurs and connect with new approaches to comprehend contemporary visual mobile communication.

4.3.3.1. Theme 1: Instagram as a tool for social connections and comparisons

The possibilities brought by Instagram for people to connect with others, see their life events, exchange messages, and depict themselves through images are among the topics that participants indicated when talking about the platform. For many, it serves as a personal card, highlighting their interests, but it also raises concerns related to self-presentation, control over the audience, and the sharing of personal or controversial information. Additionally, the adoption of Instagram can be influenced by peer pressure, as its widespread popularity and trendiness create a fear of exclusion.

Instagram usage for social connection is evidenced in topics such as a “*personal card platform*”, where users can promote themselves and showcase their interests and experiences. They note that it is more personal space than LinkedIn, for instance, and can provide a quick introduction to someone’s personality and lifestyle. People often ask for Instagram accounts to connect with others and find mutual interests, instead of a phone number or a WhatsApp, because they can find other information about the person on the social media, as described by FG01P05: “For example, ‘They study in this school’ or ‘They are interested in this music because they were in this concert’ or, ‘They love this food’”, explain the user, complementing that “it just makes you more united with people, you get more information about them and find some common points”.

FG03P03 adds to this scenario: “What I noticed is that most people use Instagram not just for entertainment, but also as a short and quick way to introduce themselves, what experience you have been through... who you are as a person”. Equally, the discussants point out that it can also be used for a second step after the initial introduction, as an “*icebreaker*” to start a conversation. FG02P07 illustrates it with a situation: “There are a lot of times, for example, like you would meet a new person, they show you their Instagram, you know, ‘Oh my God, it was literally there last week’. And then, again, the conversation begins”.

Despite the facility to connect with others via Instagram, the youth also demonstrated apprehension about their visibility, mainly on how to control their self-exposure to prevent judgment and scrutiny. This is perceived in comments related to an “*audience concern*”, exemplified by allowing or preventing certain people from seeing your account, which can be for security reasons or more personal motivations, as informed by FG03P04: “I don’t really have family members on Instagram, and I prefer that to be honest. Yeah!”. In the same conversation, FG03P05 agrees with their peer and adds:

“Yeah [agrees]. Because I have my target all there in this app. When I do share something on Facebook, older people give really interesting comments [*laughing*]. You know what I mean. Like my grandma: ‘You are so beautiful’ and you are like ‘No!’. So, yeah, because on Instagram I do not have that kind of comments” (FG03P05).

Some people go beyond limiting their followers and take more preventive measures, such as creating a “*second account*” that is only used for specific motives (e.g., to stalk someone). The topic appeared in multiple group discussions, and it’s explained by FG05P01 with the example of acquaintances and friends. “The normal account is open and the second is messy [all laughing]. In this private account, we only accept people we trust; it’s way easier to post things. And on the normal account, your life looks perfect.” This topic also appeared in a conversation between two other participants of the FG04, as follows:

— FP04P03: “Can I ask something? Other than closed accounts, do you guys have, like, private accounts?”

— FP04P05: “Yeah, I know that many people have two accounts. I don’t use two, but I have friends that use two accounts for their closest friends.”

— FP04P03: “So that’s what I have because in one account nothing has been posted ever. Yes, it’s the main account where I have like 600 friends. And then the other one has like 30-50 friends and gets posted almost every day.”

Another case is indicated in the same discussion by FG04P04 with a very particular type of alternative profile, which is used to stalk other accounts: “I know that lots of people do ‘long nail accounts. All the girls have this kind of account to stalk other girls. (...) Maybe if you don’t want to follow someone you use a second account”. Hence, they find alternative ways to preserve their anonymity and limit their exposure while investigating other people’s lives, since watching someone’s stories could make their account (and act) visible to that person.

The adoption of Instagram, however, is not always from pure interest or to enable more control of their image. Some youths comment that they joined the platform due to “*peer pressure*”, as FG03P05: “I didn’t have it for so long and my friends were like ‘Did you see my post?’. ‘No’ [*laughing*]. So that’s why I made it as well. So, I think it’s because it’s really, really popular.” In the same conversation, FG03P01 complements it with a similar situation, indicating that most of their friends are on this specific platform: “I still have some friends who are on other social media, but all of my friends are just going to see it on Instagram. So that’s the main reason!”. On another focus group, discussant FP04P03 is incisive: “Once you meet

someone, and they were like ‘Oh hey, I’m on Instagram’ and if you don’t have an account, you’re basically a ‘weirdo’.”

Therefore, the popularity of the platform and the fact that most people use it make Instagram a convenient way to connect with peers and share content. Not having an account can make one feel left out and not trendy. The pressure to fit in and keep up with friends’ posts can lead to the creation of a profile, even if one does not post as frequently. In this sense, the platform is also seen as a social construct that is important for understanding their generation, their humor, and staying connected with friends.

Moreover, “*social comparison*” appears as a significant particularity of Instagram in the participants’ discussions, impacting users’ motivation, mental health, and the pressure to present themselves in a particular manner, reinforcing previous studies findings about the platform (Lup et al., 2015; Stapleton et al., 2017; Baker et al., 2019). FG05P11 points out some of the reasons they engage in sharing and comparing themselves online, informing that is is a way to be part of society: “It’s like we have a necessity of existing in society, so not posting about the trips we did it’s almost like we didn’t do the trip. We have to do it so our friends would know about it.” FG02P07 clarifies their need to search for an inspiration through visual correspondence on other users’ accounts: “I think it also has to do with us looking at other people’s feeds. For example, I look at somebody else’s – like a cool influencer – and I am like ‘Oh, my life could look like that’, you know.”

However, this comparison can reinforce the “*addictive nature*” of the platform, as users place importance on receiving “likes” and gaining “followers” as a social value. FP04P02 recognizes this issue: “I think it’s an addiction... I don’t know how to say, like... I think most people of my age, and I too, use it because we need to be approved by society”. FG01P06’s contribution to the debate raises the concerns that comparing each other’s profile may lead to disappointment: “For most, it could be so delusional, especially the younger generation being introduced to unrealistic standards, a poisonous feed. For beauty standards or talent standards, it’s really unrealistic to certain points; it can create a lot of problems”.

The topics discussed under the theme of “*Instagram as a tool for social connections and comparisons*” shows that participants were able to identify various facets of the platform usage. It was seen as a way to connect with others, showcase interests, and exchange messages, but concerns arose regarding controlling one’s audience and sharing personal or controversial information. Peer pressure plays a role in the creation of accounts, driven by the fear of exclusion and the desire to fit in. Social comparison leads users to share and compare themselves, although it can result in unrealistic standards.

Therefore, partakers explain that Instagram provides a forum for interpersonal interaction and self-expression, offering the scope for users to share their passions and adventures. However, although the platform enables a quick way to introduce oneself and start conversations, there are worries regarding visibility control and judgment. As a result, some people set up two accounts—including private ones—to maintain their online persona and perform particular tasks such as stalking other users. Finally, despite Instagram being considered a tool for social comparisons, self-presentation, and building relationships, participants also expressed concerns about privacy and mental health.

4.3.3.2. Theme 2: Instagram as a platform with multiple affordances

The focus group interviewees prefer using Instagram over other social media platforms due to its user-friendliness, organization, and editing options. They appreciate the quick sharing of information through features such as Stories and Direct Messaging (DM), and the community-oriented nature of the app. Taking these components into consideration, this section presents the discussions identified with topics under the theme of “*Instagram as a platform with multiple affordances*”.

While presenting their justifications for using Instagram, participants commented both on the positive and negative characteristics of the platform. Certain qualities are technical, such as the possibility to edit content quickly; some are concerns due to how its algorithm operates; and others are more related to how it enables the construction of recognizable aesthetics and specific “unspoken” rules that apply to its usage. In the following paragraphs, I examine these topics and present examples based on the conversations held in the six focus groups.

The first topic, which is positive, refers to the “*technical qualities*” that Instagram offers, making it a more versatile and complete platform for several different purposes. Among the features mentioned by participants, there is messaging function, which allows them to send content that disappears, as well as the support for different formats of media (e.g., photos, videos, text, GIFs, etc.), in addition to those specific to Instagram Stories (polls, music, temperature tags, etc.). A summary of these practical affordances is provided by FG05P04:

“There are several features from other apps. For example, we have the Stories which were first on Snapchat; we also have the feed, which makes us think of Facebook. Then with the new Reels videos, it’s a bit like TikTok. So, I think it’s one app (Instagram) where we have several of these functions combined, which makes it easier to just be on one app and do all these different things without having to switch between them. So

that's why I personally spend a lot of time on Instagram instead of on those apps separately" (FG05P04).

Differently, for participant FG05P06 it has become the primary texting application and justifies it as part of a culture in their country between young people: "I don't remember the last time I texted my best friend on WhatsApp or something. We just usually text each other on Instagram because it's easier to share media, I don't know, voice messages and everything."

Despite its advantages compared to other applications, there are also negative sides due to its "*algorithmic operations*" that were indicated by users. The constant changes on the app have annoyed FG02P03: "As Instagram is progressing and changing, putting in a lot of new features, it's just getting more out of touch with reality. You actually start feeling like it's more of a negative space to be on." FGP04P01 also remembers that the platform has been flooded with advertisements and suggested content beyond their following circle: "Yeah, I used to scroll my feed a lot, but now it's just, like every two posts there's a sponsored thing or that I really have no interest in. (...) So, it's really annoying."

Beyond technicalities, there is another topic that appears in almost every question about Instagram: Its "*visual aesthetics*". Cultural differences and design preferences can influence what users post, with some prioritizing a clean and organized feed while others opting for candid and spontaneous content. Particularly, many participants expressed a desire to appear effortlessly cool and creative, often using filters and editing tools to enhance their photos and videos. Some also mentioned the importance of maintaining a cohesive theme or color scheme on their feed.

Regarding the visual design, FG03P04 describes the filters that enable quickly changing the appearance of an image: "I usually don't just post right away, I 'filter' it, make it look prettier, and then post it. (...) So, I use the filters available and they're usually nicer than in any other applications". For FG02P08, the visual expression enabled via Instagram is connected with new forms of self-presentation:

"I think because now it's like a form of art, like taking photos of how you can dress or show your fashion style or humor or whatever. It is definitely the biggest way that you can express yourself without having to introduce yourself to others. (...) And, personally, I use it most for self-expression or, you know, just like sharing photos that I think are pretty." (FG02P08)

The use of filters or other features was highlighted as a way to create a perception of oneself. FG02P06 explains that this characteristic is among those that make Instagram the chosen platform for many young people, especially concerning the features available on Stories: “It’s my favorite over other platforms because it’s so aesthetic. There are many colors, and forms for fonts, like typing things. You can edit it really visually and compare it to, for example, Facebook”. In summary, the participants emphasized the importance of creating a profile that reflects their style and interests, while also being visually pleasing to their followers.

Finally, another topic that can be detected in the conversations refers to the “*Unspoken rules*” that are applied to Instagram. The focus of the discussion is on the trends that determine what is cool or not cool on the platform or across different social media. One of the rules is not to post all the time, as this can be seen as a sign of despair for attention. Also, the user should curate the content according to each platform, thus avoiding cross-posts. There is also a clear generational hierarchy of social media platforms, with Facebook being a place for more mature adults, Snapchat and Instagram for youngsters, and TikTok for teenagers.

FG02P08 explains some of these directives that help understand how they use it: “There are these rules, like not posting all the time. This isn’t true for everybody but for a lot of people who pay attention to their presence online”. Another similar example is presented by FG02P07: “It depends on the post, on the person, and what they usually post. For example, if you never post stories and then, all of a sudden, one day you share 100 TikToks, it’s kind of weird”.

The discussions throughout this second theme, “*Instagram as a platform with multiple affordances*”, clarifies on the reasons why users favor it over other social media networks, including how easily content can be organized, edited, and how quickly information can be shared using tools like Stories and Direct Messaging (DM). Additionally, participants also discuss both the positive and negative attributes of Instagram, including its technical qualities, algorithmic operations, and the construction of recognizable aesthetics and unspoken rules. Finally, the use of filters and editing tools to improve their images and develop a consistent theme is another relevant component of visual aesthetics on the platform.

4.3.3.3. Theme 3: Instagram as a place to explore visualities

Similarly, to the exploration enabled by the smartphone camera (See *Appendix 10*), Instagram is also applied for spatial and visual discovery. However, the application makes this process more specific to its available technical functionalities and to collective uses or trendy patterns, differently from the camera performance that is adapted across apps differently. Hence, in this

theme “*Instagram as a place to explore visualities*” I present the discussions that occurred in the focus groups about the forms in which the platform is adopted by the youth for visual discovery.

The topics brought to debate by participants include digital photography and image creation, the app appropriation for self-promotion through visual means, and the ways it enables users to explore their environment, events, and the world visually. In this sense, Instagram is understood as one platform that brings together an optical experience that encompasses features and products (see also *Theme 2*) that were used apart in the past, such as for the act of photographing (camera), sharing images (printed or digital albums, messaging apps, etc.), and visual self-presentation (face-to-face, painting portraits, etc.).

When discussing “*creative production*”, the discussants pointed out the importance of inspiration and creativity in content creation on Instagram. Besides using the platform for its filters and aesthetic appeal, already discussed in the previous section (see *Theme 2*, topics “*technical qualities*” and “*visual aesthetics*”), people also use it to get inspired, express themselves through artistic images, and share inspiring content.

FGP01P0 indicates that the application allows them to do at least three different things, which include enhancing their imagination through other users’ content, being in touch with their peers, and also expressing themselves: “Firstly, I use Instagram to watch photos... to get inspired, I don’t know. Secondly, I use it to communicate with my friends. And, thirdly, to post photos and stories”. In the same conversation, FGP01P02 explains that social media facilitates the creation of a community that shares visual characteristics: “It makes me feel like I’m in a community. Because, for example, Instagram compared to Facebook is less official. It is a place where you can express yourself, be artistic, be creative...”.

For some users, “*self-promotion*” has become a key point of Instagram, where people share extraordinary moments and what is in between. This topic relates to Theme 1 (mainly topics “*personal card platform*” and “*social comparison*”) but focuses on the app usage for self-presentation in a more distinctive way when the youth refer to how they build on their identities beyond an introductory purpose or based on contrasting it with others’ content, which was the previous theme analysis. It is also connected to the evidenced self-presentation strategies on Instagram Stories (See *Theme 6* in the following section). Hence, participants describe sharing events, travel, nature, and aesthetically pleasing content to demonstrate who they are. Some prefer not to post often or share their everyday life, characterizing themselves as “low-profile”, while others share many daily activities.

FGP01P05 refers to their home country to exemplify the practice of image-sharing. “In Brazil, in my point of view, we use Instagram mostly to show ourselves in a better way than it really is... and get to know what’s happening in others’ lives.” In another group, FG03P05 shares a similar thought, believing that some people may generate a different online persona than their offline selves based on the images they share:

“Some people use it to show off now, and some of them not to showcase themselves, but they actually manage whole different new personalities there. Like, they post things that they actually wouldn’t do in real life, and they depict themselves in a way that they are not like. They have a separate personality online.” (FG03P05)

There are participants, like FG02P06, who evaluate that the purpose of the platform is self-centered, on the environment and experiences around the user. They store pictures of themselves, of important moments from their life on Instagram. “Unlike other platforms where you interact with so many people, and so many different stories, on Instagram you post everything about yourself and the life surrounding you”, explains, adding that visuality is a key factor of their decision to use the social media: “I like fewer words and more pictures to express many things. I really like it and I think it’s more personal, more self-expressive”.

In the same conversation (FG02), another participant offers their perspective about how Instagram is used for self-promotion. FG02P05 indicated that a person can demonstrate and promote their artistic creations, which would show their personality. “For example, if there’s a person who’s an artist, paints, or does sculpting, it’s much easier for other people to know this and see your artwork”, points out, informing that creative content creation could lead to popularity: “And the more you post, people will like it, interact with it, it gets more views, and you might get recognition when you... let’s say become popular.”

However, the opposite of showing off too much, when someone doesn’t post regularly, can have double meanings depending on who is interpreting it, as FP04P06 comments: “There are people who prefer those who have no posts and people who think that’s a red flag. Many of my friends say that a guy with zero posts is attractive. And for me, no picture - No!” Despite the similarity to traditional face-to-face self-presentation, these cases show that visual online self-presentation presents complex nuances due to varied audience expectations and interpretations of the same act (e.g., oversharing or not sharing at all).

Finally, to conclude the elaboration of Theme 2 “*Instagram as a place to explore visuality*”, I present the topic of “*environmental discovery*”, which can relate to physical places (e.g., a restaurant), to products, events, and other experiences that users want to register

visually. As pointed out in the introduction of the theme, it resonates with another topic about smartphone camera usage presented in *Appendix 10*. On Instagram, this process is facilitated by regular navigation through the app, in a spontaneous encounter with content that can be “saved”, or via a more direct search in the Explore Page, through hashtags or geolocation tags.

For FG01P05, visual exploration through Instagram can even determine their purchase choices, as images may reveal the quality of products. They use it to see events and to check on the company’s accounts. “For example, if I want to send flowers to my mother or buy some cakes, I can check their profile to ensure that the content and the product that they provide for customers is of good quality.” This is also a function recalled by FP04P01: “I just remembered that I use my search bar for, like, places to go. (...) I check Instagram because I think, like, ‘how they took their picture’, the restaurant, the menu, drinks...”. Therefore, the platform provides them with the opportunity to assess a company’s or product’s quality through their visuals, while also getting inspired on ways to register their images when visiting those places.

More than affecting customer’ relationships with companies, Instagram visuals may reflect on decisions in the travel industry, thus influencing where people want to travel and how they want to experience those places. This can be exemplified by FG01P01’s comment from the same conversation, which indicates that they can learn more about other cultures online and check out beautiful places that they plan to visit. “I think it is useful for traveling as you can see more on Instagram than on television, because they’re not only the most popular destinations. For instance, you can see the streets, the people, and their street food...”

FG05P04 mentions the Explore Page as a regular function they use to discover new things and organize a kind of creative portfolio with their ideas: “One is ideas for inspiration. And also, this one is very specific, if I see wedding rings or wedding dresses which I like, I also save those for later”. This approach to Instagram resembles another visual social media, Pinterest,²² which is commonly used as a source of inspiration.

As could be noticed from the examples and topics presented throughout the theme “*Instagram as a place to explore visualities*”, the platform plays a role in spatial and visual exploration, which is particularly relevant for the youth. The discussions within the focus groups highlight how the platform is used for visual discovery, image production, self-promotion, and creative expression. Furthermore, its optical nature is interpreted as a direct representation of offline environments and products, reflecting how users make decisions about purchases and travel destinations. In the next section, I focus specifically on Instagram Stories,

²² See Pinterest official website <https://pinterest.com/>

exploring its usage and appropriation for self-presentation among the participants in this research.

4.4. Step 3: Instagram Stories applied for visual mobile communication

In this section, I analyze the ephemeral character of Instagram Stories content, its functionalities, and the features used for self-presentation among the youth. The evidence provided here come from three main sources: the netnography, including observation and image analysis; the focus group discussions, more specifically topics 3 (T3Q1 and T3Q2), 4 (T4Q1 and T4Q2), and 5 (T5Q1 and T5Q2); and from the semi-structured interviews conducted with 20 participants.

I have organized the results according to the previous data analysis sections, first offering demographic information and then presenting relevant themes for discussion. However, as an additional step, I have also incorporated images collected and coded during the netnography. Regarding the visual content, they were initially coded following a codebook (*Appendix 1*) inspired by previous studies and focusing on five main characteristics: Image category, People depicted, Image type, Style of image, and Activity. I examine each category, its variables, and their connections to the topics and themes generated in the thematic analysis in the following sections.

4.4.1. Characteristics of Instagram Stories usage among the youth

In this section, I present the most recurrent types of images posted on Stories, their frequency of usage, and the most watched images in the feature based on self-reported information and the netnography. For the first and second elements, I compare two sets of data from the focus groups form and the retried images on Instagram; and for their watched content I rely on participants' disclosed data.

An analysis of their responses regarding the topic of their images on Stories shows an extremely diverse description, with 33 different categories mentioned by the youth in the forms, from a total of 159 unique entries. The most prevalent ones refer to landscapes (15,1%), travels (13,2%) city/architecture (11,9%), selfies (11,9%), events (10,7%), food (8,8%), friends (4,4%), animals (2,5%) and quotes (2,5%). From these topics, only two concerns directly humans, which are friends and selfies, although people could also appear in events or other categories. Moreover, 24 topics did not reach up to 2% of mentions, which included news, memes, songs, and human rights, among others.

Despite their self-disclosed data indicating a multiplicity of image topics, when coding the data retrieved in the netnography, a less diverse scenario is noted. Only 11 categories were identified, namely: person/people (30,7%), city/architecture (21,5%), food/drinks (7,5%), nature/landscapes (7,4%), action/activity (7,4%), texts/quotes (6,4%), objects/gadgets (6,1%), memes/humor (5,1%), art/culture (3,3%), animals/pets (1,2%) and other/miscellaneous (3,3%).

This reduced number of topics can be explained by at least three main reasons: Firstly, the most evident one is that participants posted a smaller variation of content than they initially described. Secondly, it can also reflect a categorization in the coding that was more general (e.g.: Person/people to include both selfies, friends, etc.), which was done to distinguish between the topic of a photo, its style (e.g., selfie, close-up, etc.), the type of content (e.g., photo, video, etc.) and the activities depicted (e.g., posing, traveling, eating, etc.). For this latter, I will explore the other categories and variables later in this section to demonstrate whether there is diversity or repetition in the data. Thirdly, it could be that a few participants who post more often (see *Table 7* below), and sharing the same topics, would influence the overall results. However, a comparison of the data including or excluding these participants only shows a small change in the proportions but does not affect significantly the distribution of the covered topics (See *Appendix 9* for comparisons).

Therefore, considering theories of self-presentation, especially concerning impression management (Baumeister and Hutton, 1987), the results denote that participants have a different perception of how diverse their own visuals are when compared to the actual content. They adjust their content to fit what their audience expects to see, or what their followers are already used to continuously seeing through their Stories. In this sense, they might not be entirely aware of the repetitions that occur, since the material expires every 24 hours. Likewise, these Instagram users might be trying to denote one specific presentation of who they are, thus unconsciously or consciously curating content that aligns with the persona they wish to project, rather than an unfiltered reality.

Furthermore, these results can also be connected to Hu et al. (2014), who identified eight primary categories of images shared on Instagram: friends, food, gadgets, captioned photos, pets, activities, selfies, and fashion. In my analysis of Instagram Stories, I identified 11 categories, as described in the previous paragraphs, which include but are not limited to person/people, city/architecture, food/drinks, nature/landscapes, and memes/humor. Therefore, the sample in my study aligns with Hu et al. (2014) in certain categories, which suggest that, despite the differences in platform features (posts vs. Stories), certain types of visual content remain consistently popular among users. However, my research introduces new categories

that were not explicitly identified by Hu et al. (2014), such as "city/architecture" and "memes/humor," denoting that the casual environment of Stories enables users to share multiple fleeting content that they wouldn't necessarily post on their feed, thus giving more glimpses of their routine and identities than through "permanent" publications.

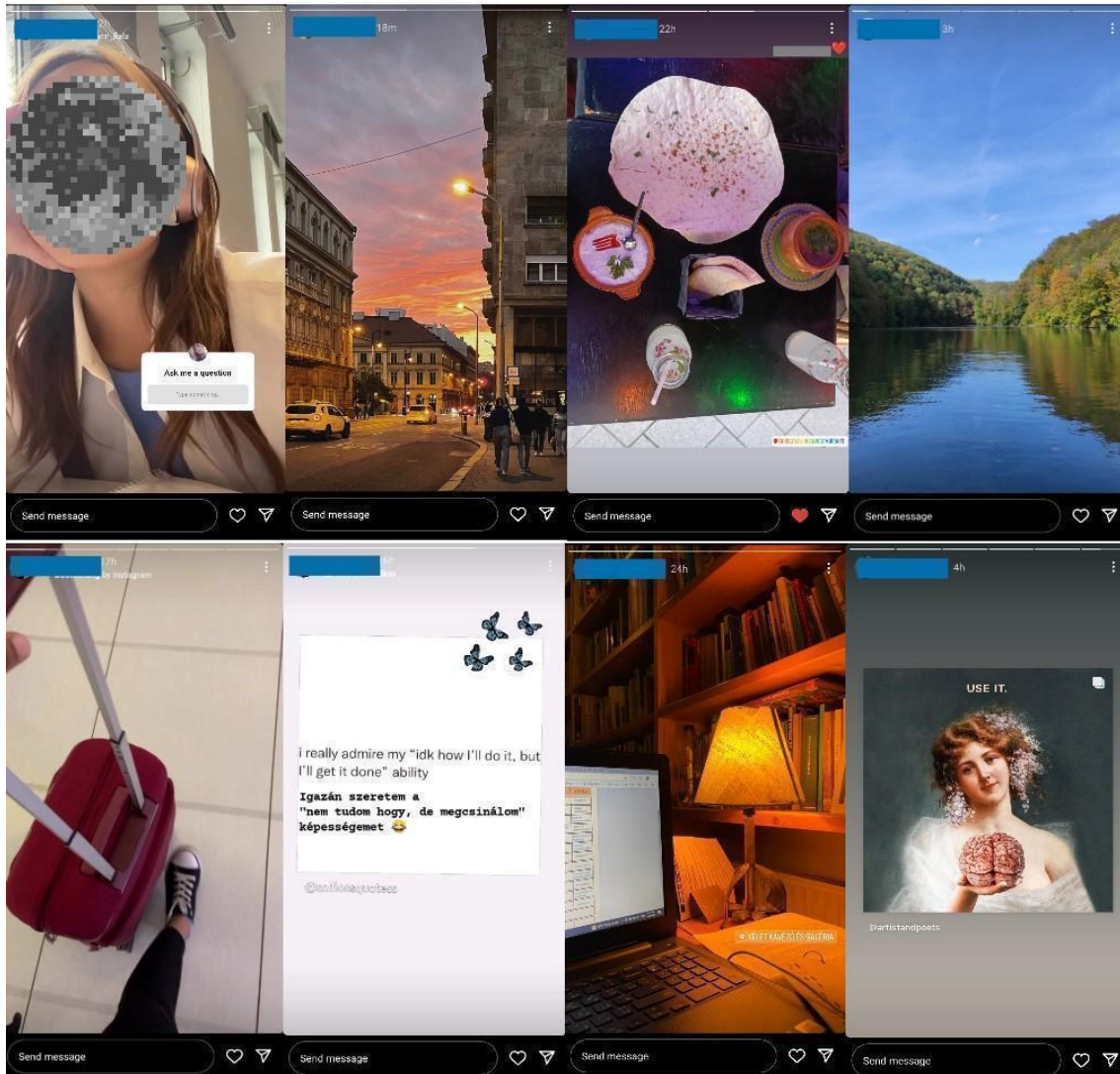


Figure 16. Samples of stories from categories identified in the netnography.

(Source: Instagram Stories/Reproduction - October 2022)

As can be seen in Figure 16²³, despite the retrieved data demonstrating a less diverse set of topics covered by the participants' content concerning their self-reported information, there is still a significant variation in the visuals presented by participants on their Instagram Stories. The collection of images illustrates the eight most prevalent categories presented above, in order of

²³ I deliberately omitted the codes of participants who shared the images to guarantee a higher level of anonymity.

their recurrence. The first story in the upper left part is a video that shows a person and includes two details over it, a question box in which followers can ask something and an augmented reality frog that walked over the person's face (hidden in the screenshot for privacy purposes). In the second post, although people are also visible in the distance, the eyes are driven toward the architecture and the sunset delineating the horizon. The third image reveals food and drinks over a table, with another account tagged on the top of it, followed by a heat emoji, and on the lower part, the place is informed in rainbow colors with a geolocation tag. The fourth image is very clean and depicts a natural landscape with trees and a blue sky reflecting on the water, doubling the perspective in harmonic lines.

In the four lower images, the first left content is a screenshot of a video that displays an action as the person walks pulling luggage, indicating that they would be traveling. The next story was reposted from another account and has a quote followed by its typed translation to Hungarian and a GIF of butterflies added to the corner, overlapping the shared post. The third image in the lower part shows part of an object/gadget (a laptop) with some papers on the side, a lamp illuminating the environment, bookshelves in the background, and the geolocation tag of a cafe, suggesting that the person may be studying or working. The last post is humorous content reposted from another account's feed with a painting-style figure holding a brain in their hand as if offering it to the viewer, and the words "use it" written at the top to add a sarcastic meaning to the meme.

The next question answered by participants dealt with the frequency with which they shared content on their Instagram Stories. As illustrated by *Figure 17*, there is a variation in their posting behavior, with the largest proportion not following a specific regularity in their schedule (25,6%), and a significant number (20,9%) indicating that they rarely post. However, the percentage of people who specify their content-sharing regularity is the majority, with many times a week (18,6%) and once weekly (18,6%) having the same results. Lastly, some respondents also indicated posting many times daily (9,3%) and once daily (7%).

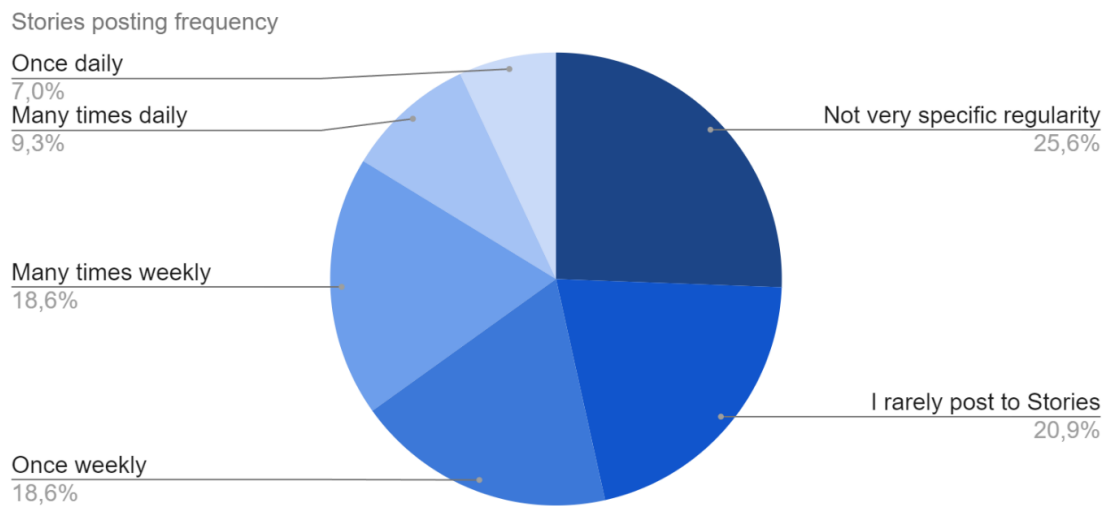


Figure 17. Frequency of publication on Instagram Stories among the youth.

(Source: Own elaboration)

Observing how many stories each user shared throughout the data collection period (*Table 7*) reveals that their posting frequency aligns with their descriptions. In 35 days, 37 users shared 782 images, but the distribution among them is uneven. Three participants stood out as the most active users during the data collection period. FG02P04 shared the highest number of stories, with a total of 90, followed closely by FG02P09 with 80 stories and FGP01P04 with 77 stories. These individuals demonstrated a high level of engagement with the Instagram Stories feature, consistently posting a significant number of images.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, four participants did not upload any stories throughout the entire duration of the study (FG03P02, FG04P03, FG04P06, FG05P02). Additionally, three participants only shared a single story, and four participants had two publications during the 35 days. These results demonstrate a significant difference in Instagram Stories usage among the youth, but at the same time, it shows certain repeated patterns in their frequency of posting.

Distribution of stories per participant in the sample					
Participant	No. stories	Participant	No. stories	Participant	No. stories
FG01P01	14	FG02P09	80	FG05P05	14
FG01P02	19	FG03P01	1	FG05P06	5
FG01P03	9	FG03P03	7	FG05P07	5
FG01P04	26	FG03P04	26	FG05P08	38
FG01P05	12	FG03P05	8	FG05P10	38

FG01P06	1	FG04P01	2	FG05P11	43
FG02P01	18	FG04P02	20	FGP01P01	26
FG02P03	2	FG04P04	20	FGP01P02	2
FG02P04	90	FG04P05	1	FGP01P03	17
FG02P05	18	FG05P01	2	FGP01P04	77
FG02P06	33	FG05P03	3	FGP01P05	20
FG02P07	1	FG05P04	34	FGP01P06	29
FG02P08	21	Total 782			

Table 7. Distribution of Instagram stories published per participant.
(Source: Own elaboration)

While there is a significant variance in the frequency of posting, there are also some noticeable patterns in the data. Certain participants consistently engaged with the feature, frequently sharing stories, some tend to be more moderate users, while others showed minimal or no activity. This data highlights the diversity of behavior and preferences among Instagram Stories users and indicates that when analyzing the feature, it is important to consider individual differences and similarities in content production/consumption.

The demographic form filled out in the focus groups also inquired what were the images and topics that they usually watch on Stories. Although this question doesn't allow the same comparison conducted above, since I can not access each participant's profile from their login (user side) to see what their following base shares, it still sheds light on their self-informed perspective of content consumption on the platform.

Respondents reported 225 entries, which represented 20 different categories of content. Once again, they indicated a varied range of information being consumed on Instagram Stories from the accounts they follow (or external accounts, in the case of advertisements). However, despite the multiplicity of topics, only nine were mentioned by ≥ 10 participants: travels (16,1%), events (14,6%), selfies (14,1%), landscapes (10,1%), food (9%), city/architecture (7%), animals (5%), fitness/sports (5%), and quotes (5%). In the remaining 11 categories that did not reach up to 2% individually, participants reported watching news, memes, brands/ads, music, university/education, influencers, fashion, lifestyle, candid photos, friends (specifically), and one person did not specify anything.

4.4.2. Instagram Stories visual content specifications

After analyzing the participants' posting behavior on Instagram Stories, I further investigate the characteristics and specifications of their visual content in this section. I classified the 782 stories into four main categories, namely image type, referring to technical features of the post

based on what Instagram enables (e.g. photo, video, boomerang, etc.); if there was a person depicted in the image and who appeared in it; the style of shot used (e.g., close-up, extreme close-up, selfie, full shot, etc.); and what activities are depicted, which reflects the action performed and is connected to the topics of images discussed previously – if there is a person or a place, what are they representing (see *Appendix 1* for full description).

A closer look at the images reveals that participants posted different amounts from eight types of media (*Figure 18*), which I classified based on Brown Jarreau et al. (2019). Hence, they add mostly photos (41,2%), followed by videos (26,9%), and reposts (19,7%), when they share something from their feed or other accounts to Stories. Other options, that were less recurring, include collages (5,8%), illustrations (2%), screenshots (1,7%), and text (0,3%). It's possible to notice in the data the prevalence of visual elements, which is a strong mark of Instagram itself.

In this sense, reflecting on previous theories about the pervasiveness of visuality nowadays (Villi & Stocchetti, 2011; Villi, 2015; Serafinelli and Villi, 2017), the predominance of photos and videos on Stories relates to a broader shift towards visual communication in the digital age, in which images have increasingly become the primary medium for self-expression and social interaction. However, it also shows that users are not actively exploring the platform full potential, since the results point out a concentration on the type of content shared within two categories.

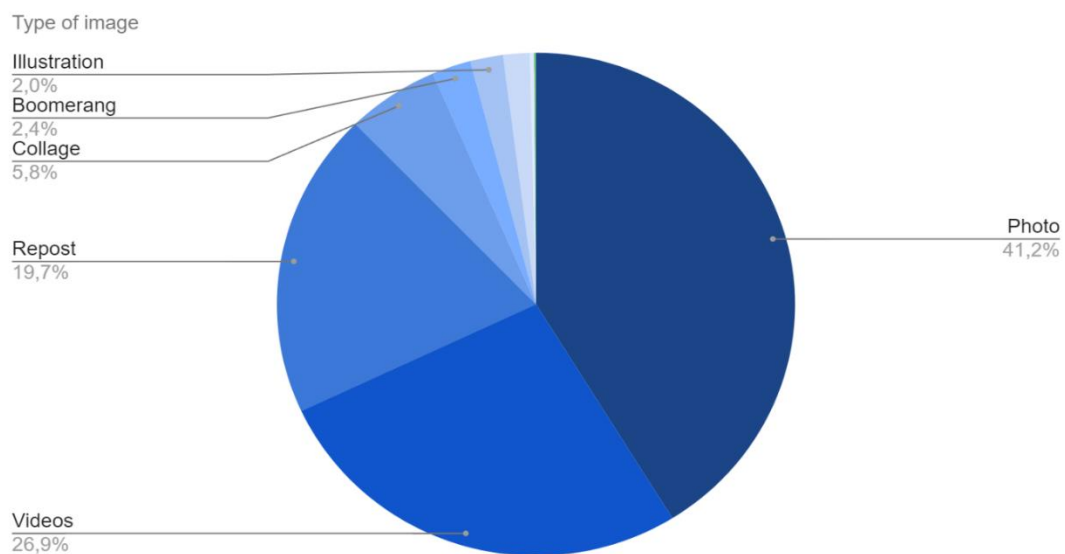


Figure 18. Type of content shared by participants on Instagram Stories.

(Source: Own elaboration)

Figure 19 provides an example of the eight different types of content identified from participants' content throughout the netnography. The four upper images represent photos, videos, reposts, and boomerangs, respectively from left to right. Two slices of pizza can be seen in the first image, placed with a natural background showing water and trees. The second content is a video from inside a church posted during a trip to Germany, which also generated several other videos in the same sequence. Next, we have a repost content raising awareness about women's rights and safety due to a femicide, which is reflected upon by the participant with the addition of their thoughts in a text. The fourth image is an organic boomerang (recorded directly with the Stories feature), which can be identified by small letters right below the user's name, and depicts a box opening to reveal three empanadas.

The four lower posts (*Figure 19*) are screenshots, collages, illustrations, and texts. First, on the left corner, a user shares a screenshot of a comment someone made apparently on a Facebook post about rental prices, which receives a critique from the participant in an additional overlaying text. Following, we have a collage of four images taken during an LGBTQI+ march in Budapest, showing the crowd in different moments and a paper sign with lyrics from a song that says, "I could be a better boyfriend than him". The illustration, which is a category comprising images modified by participants to change its meaning (e.g., self-created memes) or proper illustration where the source can't be identified (not clearly a screenshot, not a repost), depicts the user's avatar from another platform and a text above it followed by a skull emoji. The last image has a plain background and text in a foreign language about the participant's experience in a stand-up, which uses irony to classify the performer as slightly inappropriate and "cringe" (outdated).

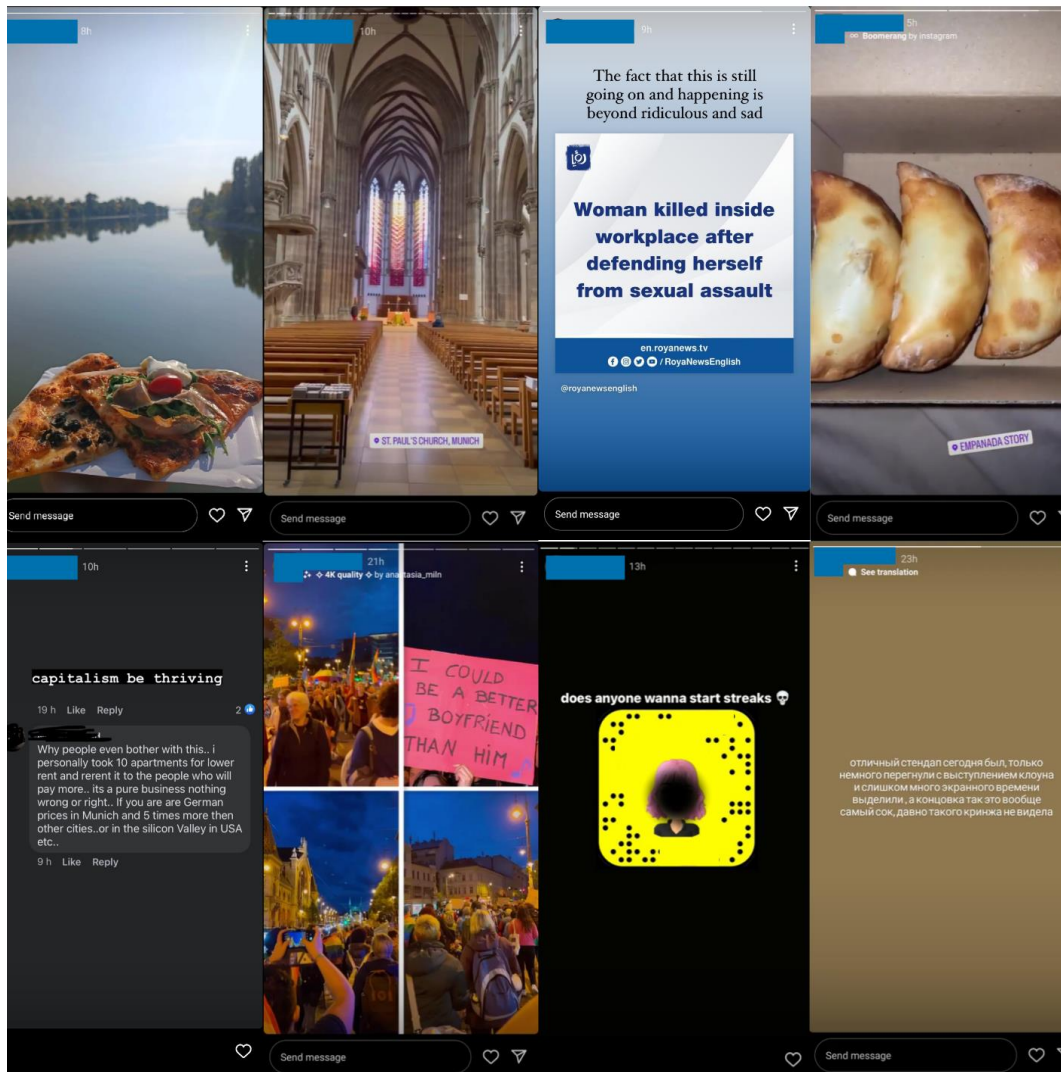


Figure 19. Collage with examples of the type of content shared on Instagram Stories.

(Source: Instagram Stories/Reproduction - October 2022)

Furthermore, I evaluated whether the stories contained a human in the focus and if it was possible to identify the person. This analysis was based on previous studies (Bakhshi et al., 2014) that indicate social media content depicting people's faces is more engaging, which is also information known and discussed by participants in the focus groups (they also highlighted those images in which they appeared received more attention and reactions). As I already knew all volunteers face-to-face and had followed them on Instagram for a while, I could determine if they were shown or not in the images. Moreover, the specific situation depicted provided context to support the interpretation.

Surprisingly, almost half of the 782 images (47,2%) did not contain any human on focus (Figure 20), while only a smaller proportion depicted the participants alone (14,7%) or with

friends. Other random people (17,6%) were also visible, as for strangers on a train, party, or public space; and a few stories (3,7%) included humans who could not be identifiable, as for when someone is photographed from their back, or the photo is blurred. These results show that the users prefer sharing their environment and what they “see” than themselves. Hence, when they register topics such as travels, events, landscapes, food, city/architecture, and fitness/sports, they are not necessarily present in the frame but rather provide the vision that they perceive.

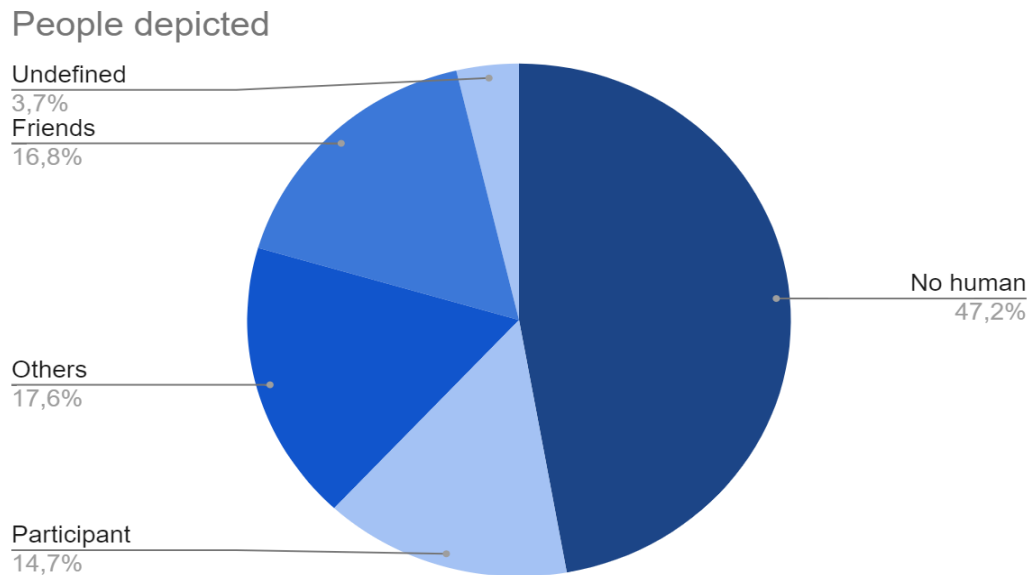


Figure 20. Human agents depicted on participants’ Instagram Stories.

(Source: Own elaboration)

Additionally, I analyzed the style of shot applied when registering the images to better comprehend how participants positioned their cameras (or themselves) in relationship to the depicted items. This evaluation was inspired by the category “Distance to Subject” from the codebook of Brown Jarreau et al. (2019), with updates to include selfies and group selfies based on the pilot study. It offers insight into the perspectives that volunteers take when sharing their lived experiences with others on Instagram Stories.

The evaluation points out full shot (28,3%) being the most prevalent style, which was followed by landscape (22,4%). The third and fourth most used styles were close-up (17,3%) and extreme close-up (7,7%), respectively, showing another spectrum of the frames to emphasize a detail of the entity being registered. Interestingly, selfies (6,5%) and group selfies (5%) were not very common in the data set, and some images included a mix of types (5%), as for the cases of collages with multiple photos. Part of the content (7,9%) could not be classified

under any style, because it referred to texts, illustrations, cartoons, and other non-photographic components.

This analysis of image styles demonstrates how the youth position themselves and their smartphone cameras when producing and sharing content on Instagram Stories. The prevalence of full shots and landscape styles demonstrates a desire to provide viewers with a broader context, depicting the environment, while close-ups and extreme close-ups highlight specific details. The limited occurrence of selfies and group selfies in the dataset suggests alternative approaches to capturing and sharing their experiences. Also, the inclusion of mixed styles and non-photographic items further indicates the multiple ways they express themselves through visual mediums beyond traditional image styles.

As indicated in the previous section, most images shared on Instagram Stories were classified under 11 topics: person/people, city/architecture, food/drinks, nature/landscapes, action/activity, texts/quotes, objects/gadgets, memes/humor, art/culture, animals/pets and other/miscellaneous. Based on these results, on the data participants informed in the demographic form, and in an initial analysis conducted throughout the pilot study, I elaborated a list (See Codebook, *Appendix 1*) to define which activities were depicted in the scenes.

The data illustrates a prevalence of five main actions (see *Figure 21*), with nine others being less frequent events. Participants shared images related to traveling (16,2%), posing for the camera (16,9%), touring or walking around²⁴ (15,1%), partying and celebrating (11,1%), and advocating or promoting causes (8,8%). On a smaller scale, they also shared images while studying (5,6%), eating (5,1%), talking to the camera/audience or singing (2,6%), drinking (2,4%), doing sports (1,4%) and cooking (0,5%). There were also other miscellaneous activities (8,6%) and a few images that could not be defined (1,7%) or in which a clear action was not visible (4,7%), such as quotes posts or illustrations.

²⁴ Traveling referred to images of the person/people or their view while in any means of transportation (airplane, train, car), stations, images taken outside of their current city (Budapest) identifiable via geolocation tags or in famous tourist spots. Touring and walking relates to images that clearly show the person exploring an outdoor place (mainly in Budapest or a non-identifiable location). It includes images around their current city, on the streets, in markets, etc. Refer to the Codebook for details (*Appendix 1*).

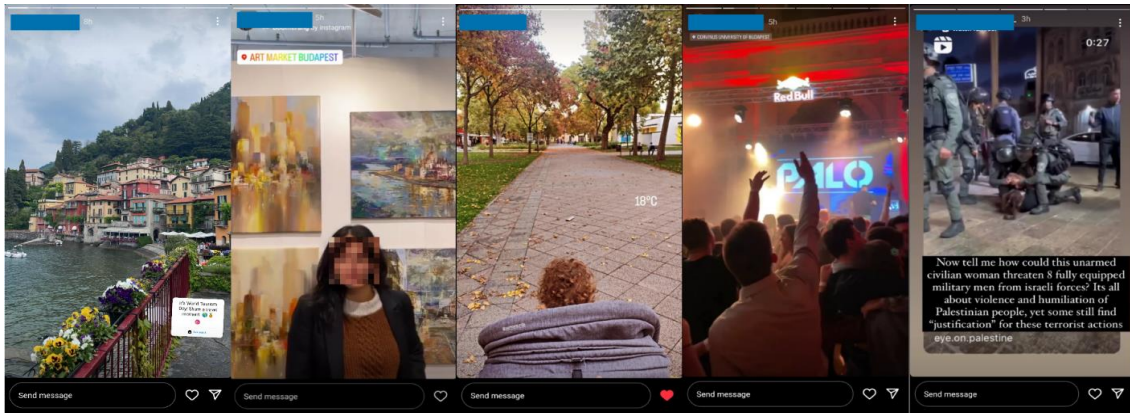


Figure 21. Five most prevalent actions represented in the stories of participants.

(Source: Instagram Stories/Reproduction - October 2022)

As can be seen from Figure 21, the first story (left) shows a tourist town in Italy shared as part of a trend on the feature that encouraged users to post a travel moment to mark World Tourism Day. The second content is a boomerang in which the participant poses for the camera in front of art pieces, which have a geolocation tag indicating that it was registered in an art market. The third photo reveals the perspective of the participant while pulling a stroller with a kid around a park, while the temperature sticker and the orange leaves inform the change of seasons. The fourth story is a screenshot of a video from a party organized at the university, with the crowd dancing and singing to the music in the background. The last visual was reposted from another account and shows Israeli police brutality against a Palestinian civilian, to which the research participant adds a text to advocate against the act and express their opinion.

Finally, it is possible to interpret that the most prevalent activities suggest an intent from users to document and showcase their experiences while exploring different locations, everyday experiences, and journeys (e.g., traveling or walking around). They also engage in more direct self-presentation (e.g., posing) and share moments of joy and social gatherings with their audience (e.g., partying, drinking). Finally, participants used the platform to raise awareness about social issues or support specific causes, expressing their beliefs (e.g., advocating).

Therefore, the data highlights the diversified usage of Instagram Stories as a place for self-expression, social engagement, and documentation of experiences. In the following sections, I explore more in-depth the volunteers' perspectives about the feature based on their contributions via a thematic analysis of their focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews.

4.4.3. Thematic analysis of Instagram Stories uses and perspectives

In this section, I present the themes generated based on the focus group discussions about Instagram Stories (See *Appendix 2* T3Q1, T3Q2, T4Q1, T4Q2, T5Q1, T5Q2, and T6) and on the semi-structured interviews (*Appendix 5*), which are complemented with examples from the netnography. The thematic analysis covers four themes that relate to Stories (*Table 8*) with debated topics about participants' relationship with ephemeral content, the advent of quick communication, their self-presentation strategies, and the multimodal visual expression enabled by the transient images.

Themes and topics developed in the analysis		
Themes	Topics	Description
<p>Theme 1: Instagram as a tool for social connections and comparisons</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Personal card platform - Icebreaker - Audience concern - Second account - Peer pressure - Social comparison - Addictive nature 	T1 highlights how Instagram serves as a tool to connect with others, showcase interests, and exchange messages, while also raising concerns about controlling visibility, self-presentation, and the impact on mental health.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Technical qualities - Algorithmic operations - Visual aesthetics - Unspoken rules 	T2 discusses why Instagram is favored over other social media platforms, indicating its multiple affordances such as user-friendliness, organization, editing options, visual aesthetics, and the unspoken rules for its proper use.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Creative production - Self-promotion - Environmental discovery 	T3 discusses how Instagram is used for exploring visual elements, encompassing digital content production, pictorial self-promotion, and visual discovery of one's environment, impacting travel choices and purchasing decisions based on visual representations of products and places.
<p>Theme 4: Instagram Stories as a built relationship with ephemerality</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Platforms comparison - Features comparison - Generations comparison - Oneself comparison - Cultures comparison 	T4 explores Stories' position as an early adopter of transient content, the informal and self-expressive nature of Stories compared to the Feed, generational differences regarding its use, personal usage changes over time, and cultural variations in content curation and societal norms.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Only available for 24h - Fast consumption 	T5 discusses Stories as a place for quick communication, allowing swift

	of quick communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fear of missing out (FOMO) - Easy feedback - Quick interactions - Short conversations - Flirting privately 	and ephemeral interactions through its features, the phenomenon of fast-paced content consumption, easy and immediate feedback, short interactions and conversations, and private courtship.
	Theme 6: Instagram Stories as a strategic tool for self-presentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Self-promotion - Avoid judgment - Raising awareness - Managing the audience - Showing what's positive - Extension of the mood - Instant and everything - The projected self 	T6 explores how stories are utilized by young people as a strategic tool for self-presentation, allowing them to curate and project desired facets of their lives, raise awareness for causes, avoid lasting judgment, and maintain connections with peers.
	Theme 7: Instagram Stories as a visual expression practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Multimodal visual expression - Artistic self-expression - Creating visual patterns - Feature affordances - Quantifiable visibility 	T7 delves into the use of stories as a visual expression practice, highlighting its multimodality capability, and the scope for artistic self-expression, resulting in curated pictorial content patterns and measurable visibility practices.

Table 8. Distribution of themes and topics developed in the analysis.
(Source: Own elaboration)

In the first theme of this section (*Theme 4*), I present a series of comparisons brought to the conversation by participants that refer to differences between platforms, features, generations, features, and countries/cultures. Next, I provide evidence of how ephemeral content aligns with quick communication practices (*Theme 5*) through topics such as the 24h temporal duration of stories, its coverage of mundane and brief content, the facilitation of fast consumption of information, allowance of easy two-way feedback, the swift interaction via reactions, short conversations, private flirt, and the fear of missing out (FOMO) brought by Stories transience.

Theme 6 is dedicated to explaining participants' self-presentation strategies, thus showing their self-promotion through stories, the actions taken to avoid judgment and embarrassment, the ways they advocate for causes and ideas, their strategic management of the audiences, building clear patterns about themselves, exploring their mood, reflecting on a projected self, focusing on positive attributes, sharing the instant, and maintaining connections. Dialoguing with the previous discussion, *Theme 7* elaborates on participants' multimodal visual expression through artistic expression, the establishment of an aesthetics self, how realities are constructed and interpreted, forms of quantifiable visibility, the repetition of visual patterns, the cross apps compatibilities, youth adoption of AR and filters on Stories, and specific affordances from the feature.

4.4.3.1. Theme 4: Instagram Stories as a built relationship with ephemerality

The theme of “*Instagram Stories as a built relationship with ephemerality*” was developed from participants’ contributions about their experiences and perspectives on various attributes of the platform. In this sense, they highlighted several comparisons of the ephemeral nature of Instagram Stories from multiple dimensions, including a contrast of platforms (e.g., Stories versus Facebook, WhatsApp, and Snapchat), features (e.g., Stories versus Feed), generations (younger and older individuals), personal growth (contrasting their current selves with their past selves), and cross-cultural variations in Instagram Stories usage. The theme collectively reveals how participants engage with the transient and fleeting essence of Instagram Stories, indicating the deliberate cultivation of relationships with ephemerality within the context of the platform.

In the topic of “*platforms comparison*”, participants shared their perspectives on Instagram’s unique position as one of the early adopters of transient content, its informal quality in relation to other social media, and how practical it makes to consume ephemeral content. FG01P06 remembers that Instagram was one of the first social media to incorporate the feature (in popularity, just after Snapchat): “I believe that what makes Instagram different is that, like, it’s one of the oldest platforms that suggested this functionality of stories. And then it came to WhatsApp, TikTok or now YouTube”.

FG02P07 explains that each platform has its own type of content, and it is not advisable to share the same image in two places: “There’s like, this hierarchy of social media because, for example, you would never post the same Story on Snapchat, you would never also post the Snapchat on Instagram. Those are different types of stories”. For FGP01P02, Instagram Stories is not as formal as Facebook: “It makes me feel like I’m in a community. Because, for example, Instagram compared to Facebook is less official. It is a place where you can express yourself, be artistic, be creative...”. Another indicator provided by FG05P07 is the platform’s practicality: “It is way more practical than WhatsApp, where you have to go on another page. But on Instagram, it’s right there when you open the app. So, it’s way more practical, people will see your story” (FG05P07).

Participants also point out differences within the same platform via a “*features comparison*”, as to how Stories distinguishes from the Feed or Highlights. One example of a technical component related to visibility is provided by FP04P02, who presents the size of the image as a characteristic that distinguishes feed and stories content: “When you post, it shows on 4:3 sizing and then you share on Stories and it takes up the whole screen. So, it seems more

realistic.” According to FG02P08, their Feed content tends to be more curated to present a certain image, while their stories are more lighthearted and humorous: “I find that my stories are more fun, a lot more of my friends, maybe a silly photo. Something that’s not as aesthetic as a post on my feed. So, they are more self-expressive than my actual posts”.

When reflecting on Instagram Stories in the “*generational comparison*”, participants distinguish themselves from both older and younger people. While the former is perceived as outdated or judgmental, the latter needs education and protection. FG05P04 explains that sometimes they cross-post content to target specific audiences on another platform:

“On Facebook, most of my friends’ parents and other grown-ups can also see those stories. So, I try to avoid that. If I post one of my Instagram Stories on Facebook as well, then it’s the kind of story that I want my friends’ parents to see, so they have a good image of me [all laughing].” (FG05P04).

In the case of FP04P06, family debates develop from discussions that start after touching on subjects (e.g., news) that they saw on Stories: “Sometimes when I and my dad have this agreement about something that’s going on, he will say ‘where did you learn about that? On Instagram?’. But yes, I did.”, admits, justifying that news outlets have realized how the platform is relevant to reach young people. FGP01P03 highlights a concern regarding their three younger siblings’ online presence, indicating a perceived risk due to safety: “My sister is 16 years old, and she started posting ‘those pictures’. And who knows who sees them? There are many bad people. I’m worried about the younger generation because online platforms are becoming more dangerous, I think.”

Another topic raised in both focus groups and interviews refers to “*oneself comparison*” (when a participant compares oneself *now* with their *previous self*), demonstrating their reflexivity about Instagram Stories usage changes over time. Some of them have become more comfortable with the platform and post more frequently, while others are more selective in the content they post, shifting their focus to more professional or travel-related content. Moreover, these changes are also attributed to personal growth, societal changes, and the evolution of the platform itself, with most participants indicating that they become more conscious of what they posted and how often they posted it.

An example of differences in the posting activity is provided by FG01P03, who used to post more content about themselves when they were younger. “As I’m growing up, I’m sharing more of like this work-related stuff or this artistic stuff. For example, I play the piano, so I share videos with my friends like that.” In the interview, participant FG01P01 informed that

due to moving to a new country (Hungary), with new social experiences, their usage of the feature also increased, and they are more active on social media: “I changed my place of living and more interesting events are happening in my life right now. For example, traveling, studying, or just going out. I think the main reason is that my life became more engaging”.

However, the other way around also happened, with FG01P04 informing that they have limited their Stories usage. They started using Instagram Stories in 2017 and remember that they posted a lot of filters and boomerangs, which is not a common practice anymore. “I use Instagram a lot right now, but back then everything I did, I took pictures. If I went to a party, I was like recording the whole event”, comment, adding that now they save some content for themselves or just share with close friends. For FG05P06 their content became more curated and aligned: “Before it was anything and everything: Run, what I was listening to, where I went. Now I started having specific types of stories. It’s usually where I traveled to, or if I saw something nice, like landscapes or architecture.”

The last topic under the theme of “*Instagram Stories as a built relationship with ephemerality*” refers to participants’ “*cultural comparison*”. In the discussions, respondents highlighted the cultural differences and societal norms that shape individuals’ behaviors on the platform. Based on their perspective, while in some regions people value curated content, in others, individuals may prefer candid and spontaneous images. Similarly, some of the youth indicated that the social media usage behavior would vary depending on a mentality prevalent in specific geographies where people are more close-minded or where reputation is considered of extreme relevance.

A distinction between the two different countries is provided by FP04P03, indicating the cultural differences: “In Turkey, most people try to keep their feed clean and nice. But in Norway, they post whatever they would like, they post on relevant stuff, or just with tying their shoes”. The role of social norms could influence the stories someone posts, according to FG02P05: “I am Palestinian and if someone is smoking, or drinking, or partying, they wouldn’t necessarily want everyone to see it, because people will start talking...” Another example regarding reputation and social media usage is added by FG01P06: “Yeah, I wanted to tell the same, because, in our country, it’s like a ‘Central Asian mentality’, other people’s opinions are more important than your own.”

Reflecting on Lipovetsky's (1990) understanding of ephemerality as a defining feature of contemporary societies, this theme shows that transient experiences are prevalent not only in consumer behavior, but also on how users engage with content on social media. In this matter, Instagram Stories reflects a broader trend that values what is ephemeral, bringing it to

how individuals express their identities and communicate with their peers. Hence, telling a story or sharing an experience doesn't have to carry the pressure of permanence, with a focus on the present moment, a more fluid visual construction of the self.

Participants in this study discussed various elements regarding “*Instagram Stories as a built relationship with ephemerality*”. For instance, they compared Stories with other platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Snapchat, emphasizing the unique position of Instagram as one of the early adopters of transient content. Also, they pointed out differences within Instagram itself, such as the informal nature of Stories compared to the more formal Feed, and how stories are more lighthearted and self-expressive. They distinguished themselves from other generations, pointing out the outdated views of older individuals and the need for education and protection for younger users. Additionally, partakers reflected on changes in their usage of Stories over time, with some becoming more comfortable and active while others became more selective. Finally, they point out variations on the ephemeral feature usage based on cultural differences and societal norms, noting how content curation and the influence of reputation or social norms on Stories differ across countries/cultures.

4.4.3.2. Theme 5: Instagram Stories as an advent of quick communication

In the era of ephemerality, when nothing is made to last (Lipovetsky, 1990, p. 240), Instagram Stories represents a place for youth to engage in quick and ephemeral interactions. One compelling theme that was developed from the thematic analysis of focus groups and interviews is the notion of “*Instagram Stories as an advent of quick communication*”, reflecting the unique characteristics and features that facilitate swift and immediate exchanges among users. Participants indicated several topics that contribute to this discussion, discussing the ephemeral quality of the content, the brief and low-duration of the posts, the fast-paced consumption facilitated by the platform, and the fear of missing out (FOMO) that arises from these characteristics. Furthermore, the theme also encompasses the ease of feedback and interaction through various engagement tools, the ability to initiate short conversations related to daily events shared online, and how it is used for flirting, as replies are not publicly visible.

The ephemeral nature of Stories content, available only for 24 hours, adds a sense of urgency and timeliness to the interactions, prompting users to engage swiftly. Participants in the research acknowledged this brevity, with posts being short in duration and, sometimes also in relevance. One of the topics that appeared many times throughout the discussions refers to the fact that stories are “*only available for 24h*”. This is evidenced in the comment of FG05P07:

“I think it just kinda makes it special. The fact that it’s gonna disappear at some point. You know that certain people will be able to see it and people will miss it.” For some people, even one day is already a long time to expose certain images, as FG02P09 points out: “Honestly, sometimes 24 hours is too much for me. I would like to limit the time to five hours for some stories”, explain, providing the example of breakfast/coffee content that represent daily repetitive experiences.

The short duration of the content also means that there is less pressure to filter or curate the most appealing or interesting posts. In this sense, users can freely express their opinions, share random pictures that don’t meet high-quality standards, and post embarrassing or more personal images. FG05P11 exemplifies it: “The things that go to Stories are probably the embarrassing ones because you wanna keep them just for 24 hours and then they’re gone. It’s like a shirtless picture or getting drunk with your friends”. The discussion is complemented, in another focus group, by FG03P03:

“When the stories are just for 24 hours and disappear afterward, people see it only once or twice. That means you don’t need to filter the content that much and pick the most beautiful or the most interesting, you can just post the regular opinion or a random picture that you took, so people will watch it and just keep going forward”. (FG03P03).

Considering that stories do not remain for too long, participants related the content with a habit of “*fast consumption*”, another topic that closely relates to the previous one. Instagram users often utilize the feature as a form of relaxation or entertainment, scrolling through content quickly, without the need to process the content for many seconds. In this sense, Stories allow for the rapid delivery of messages and information, catering to the youth’s needs and practice of quick consumption. This usage contrasts with traditional feed-based content, which is perceived as slow and tedious by participants.

The practice is noted in FG01P02’s comment when saying that Instagram is used for relaxing time, like consuming food or watching TV. “And I think it’s easier for humans to consume the content in this kind of like the fast and temporary way”. The fast consumption is facilitated by the feature’s user-friendly interface, making it effortless for users to share and view stories, which is further clarified by FP04P04: “I think you can consume information really fast on the Stories, while on a feed it could be so really slow and boring”. The user illustrates the story with their parents’ behavior, who don’t watch stories but scroll slowly over the feed. “They read all the information; they watch the whole video. I just play ‘Ok, he was in

the bar. Next person!'. I think it's about consuming information and it's really fast, especially for young people".

However, the need to always check on Instagram Stories to see what is happening can lead to a feeling that, if they don't check "soon enough", they may miss something that will disappear. This "*fear of missing out (FOMO)*", although not so explicit in their talks, appears as a reason to constantly open the application and is associated with "addictive" behavior, as expressed by FG03P04: "I think it's addicting because you wanna see what's happening before it's gone. If I miss it, then it's gone, and I didn't get to see it. That's why we're always checking it." This sense of urgency further reinforces Instagram Stories as a platform for quick communication, as users strive to stay up to date.

A more positive perception of Stories appears on the topic of "*easy feedback*", reflecting on the facilitated ways that the platform enables them to assess and evaluate their communication. Hence, the topic refers to individuals' attitudes towards feedback expectancy and audience response, with users seeking instant evaluation and compliments on their appearance or posts. One of the ways that users can receive quick and easy feedback is by checking who views, likes, or replies to their content, with participants informing that they pay attention to the reactions they receive and using them to gauge interest in their content. Similarly, Stories offers other tools to obtain responses from followers, such as the addition of stickers with polls, question boxes, or a Likert-scale style emoji bar.

These tools enable quick and immediate responses, fostering engaging interactions among peers. One example is provided by FG02P05 in the straightforward manner they can manage feedback: "You can add questions or polls. If you just want to ask it for fun or you really want someone to help you decide something, you can post and people vote, answer the question, or give their opinion". Participant FG02P09 informed in an interview that they also use the question box to receive opinions about matters they need to decide over: "Yeah, I use that one when I need advice when I'm looking for a place. It's a very convenient thing to collect all the answers in one window instead of people just replying to the stories directly."

In another interview, FG03P05 says that curiosity is one of the reasons they seek feedback and check on their audience by analyzing who saw their story: "I'm just curious, like, who is watching it. Actually, I think everybody has expectations of who will watch their stories, and it feels good to see that." However, for some participants, the reaction or other forms of review means a boost in their mood, as in the case of FGP01P02: "Yeah, and it helps to get your confidence back. It also means that you feel more loved. There is a love language:

Someone puts a 'like'. I think people also want to be loved". Thus, the number of responses they receive from people on Stories may signify an increase in popularity.

Connected with "*easy feedback*", other two interrelated topics can be identified in the conversations, namely "*quick interactions*" and "*short conversations*". The first refers to the use of quick replies offered as a functionality to express their thoughts towards a post. Users appreciate the ability to reply to someone's story privately, without the need to publicly comment or send a separate message. These reactions are facilitated by interactive features, such as the emojis (e.g., fire, heart eyes) and the heart button (similar to a "like"), which allow the youth to express thoughts or opinions without the necessity of engaging in a full conversation.

Participants inform that the platform has made it faster to react by adapting its features over time, as pointed out by FG02P05: "I really want to know other people's opinions. With the new feature, a little 'heart' in the corner, it's a good way to see who actually liked or engaged with the story, or at least read what I wrote". The feedback expectancy through a reaction from the audience can be seen in the comment of FG05P10, who explains that they share content already envisioning that people will respond: "I take something [photo/video], I write a funny caption and just sit like this, so let's wait, who will send me the reaction."

According to the partakers, posting selfies, pictures of themselves, or images that seem "realistic" usually gets more reactions than posting about places or events, but they seek a balanced distribution of themes not to look egocentric. This is confirmed by FG01P06: "I'm not gonna lie. Whenever I am taking a picture of myself, I have more reactions than if I post just a normal post talking about something else". Therefore, the "*quick interactions*" through reactions provide a way to keep in touch, show attention, and seek validation or assessment on posts. For FG02P01, replies and reactions are among the most relevant functions of Stories, since they work as a way to share meaning without the need to say exact words.

"So, if you think that 'Wow, this guy is beautiful', you can just, you know, send this fire [laughs]. I don't really like to say, 'Oh my God, this guy is so beautiful. Thank you for sharing this'. I just send the fireworks and stuff. So it takes less time, I guess. And with that, keep in touch with the person." (FG02P01).

A similar thought is expressed by FG03P04, who demonstrates that a swift action may replace the need for actual words to convey meaning: "I just wanted to say that the 'like' button, you know, you can just 'like' someone's story now without having to talk to them or say anything. Also reacting.". Hence, they also serve to initiate conversations, particularly in cases where

direct messaging might feel awkward, intimidating for a more introverted person, or intrusive as the viewer doesn't know if the initial sender would be inclined to engage in interactions.

In this sense, depending on the person who reacts and on the user's interest in extending the communication beyond that act, an initial prompt can lead to "*short conversations*". These brief dialogues are often spontaneous discussions, enabling users to connect and communicate in real-time about shared experiences and catch up with acquaintances or friends. However, in other situations, the content can be planned strategically to generate replies from specific people, as exemplified in the next topic (See "*flirting privately*" below). Although the respondents expressed contentment with the audience's replies and with the possibility to keep in touch with other people, sometimes they turn off the function when feeling overwhelmed.

Based on the respondents, they often engage in brief exchanges, typically consisting of a few messages, but these conversations are usually not deep or lengthy, and they occur within a group setting. Two insights about these communicative practices are supplied by FG05P10: "Whenever I feel strange to start talking to somebody out of nowhere, I just send a DM and a quick comment on it. The reply on the story, basically, is useful to start a chat." The participant explains that these interactions are very brief: "It doesn't develop into deep conversations. Usually, it's like 2-3 messages, we don't drill it into long chats on Instagram. So, to show that we appreciate each other's interaction, we put 'likes' on each message." Accordingly, a response to a fleeting message doesn't need to be another word or sentence, but just the visual sign or a "heart" that pops after reacting to that content.

Some of the conversations are more advice-oriented, such as asking about a place they visited or offering feedback on a post. For example, FG03P01 likes to share architecture content and describes that their content also generates "*short conversations*" with their followers: "Most of them are interested in that sort of stuff and will ask 'What's this place?', 'I'd love to be there', or just react positively. So, it's mostly curiosity and appreciation for what I post." Another similar situation is presented by FG02P09, who indicated that the initial prompt usually doesn't produce a further lengthy conversation: "If I go out, they'd ask 'Oh my God, did you like that place?'. So, it's like a bit of advice, giving feedback about what I post. The conversation usually ends there, because they only wanted to ask this specific thing."

While sometimes the conversations do not extend further, they may still serve as a means to show appreciation, initiate interactions, and start chats with peers or strangers. Thus, the ability to react and reply to stories provides a convenient and low-pressure way to engage in short exchanges without the need for extensive messaging. These practices can also help reconnect people after a time without interpersonal communication, as illustrated by FG03P05:

“When we haven’t talked for a while and I want to initiate a conversation, I post a quote or me, something I think this person also likes. So, they comment on it and then we have a conversation”.

The last topic under “*Theme 5: Instagram Stories as an advent of quick communication*” relates to the usage of this feature for “*flirting privately*”, which offers users an opportunity for discreet and intimate communication. Participants mentioned how they could engage in courtship through direct responses to stories, as their replies would only be visible to the story poster. Hence, this appropriation for the feature adds another dimension to its role in mobile communication, allowing for personal and flirtatious exchanges away from the audience’s attention. A dialogue between three participants carried out in the fifth focus group exemplifies some of the users’ thoughts:

- FG05P03: “I use it to flirt with sometimes (all laughing). Sending the fire (emoji), hearts.”
- FG05P09: “Stories may help you to find the person.”
- F05P10: “You can find the person; you can know where this person is.”
- FG05P09: “If you don’t know each other and if you don’t like texting, and if you just want to meet this person, you can use the stories (all laughing).”

Moreover, the youth express that a connection with potential partners through stories can be a less time-consuming way to show interest. At the same time, the feature introduces someone’s personality and interests, making it easier to connect with them, as informed by FG05P10 in the interview: “Once I posted a musical video of me, and this girl – we had never texted each other – sent a smiling emoji, a quick reaction. I felt quite good because she’s actually paying attention to what I post then”.

As exposed throughout the theme of “*Instagram Stories as an advent of quick communication*”, there are many forms in which the youth adopt stories for quick communication, demonstrating the unique uses and characteristics of the feature. Likewise, the transient nature of the content, the ease of providing/receiving instantaneous feedback, the facilitation of short conversations, and the private flirting opportunities collectively contribute to the perception of stories as a means for swift and immediate communication. Therefore, the format of these communicative practices adds a sense of urgency and timeliness to interactions.

Furthermore, the short duration of the content allows users to freely express themselves without the need for much curation, while the fast-paced consumption facilitated by Stories may lead to the fear of missing out (FOMO), driving users to constantly check the platform.

Additionally, the ease of feedback and interaction through features like polls and question boxes, enable swift and immediate responses, and these quick reactions are interpreted as a means of communication with the occurrence of short conversations initiated through the feature. Lastly, Stories are seen as a tool for private flirting, allowing discreet and intimate exchanges away from public attention. To expand the comprehension to other uses, in the next theme I cover how the feature is applied for self-presentation.

4.4.3.3. Theme 6: Instagram Stories as a strategic tool for self-presentation

Young people are adopting ephemeral platforms and features as a forum to depict themselves and perform acts to their audiences, in reference to Goffman (1959). The theme of “*Instagram Stories as a strategic tool for self-presentation*” was developed mainly from the focus groups and interviews, but also provides visuals from the netnography that connect to the theme. The discussion I will carry out in the following paragraphs emphasizes the deliberate and purposeful ways in which participants use this function to build their online selves.

Within this theme, several topics were assessed, showing the multiple forms in which Stories is applied for self-promotion, to avoid judgment, advocate for causes, for audience management, to create patterns about their online selves, as an extension of their mood, to show positivity, share the instant, and to maintain connections with peers. The findings reveal that the youth strategically use Instagram Stories to curate and project desired perspectives of their lives, while also navigating the complexities of social judgment and personal branding. They share personal content such as daily routines, hangouts with friends, and beautiful pictures, but also informational content on social topics such as human rights violations and politics. Hence, the feature allows them to present themselves through diverse self-descriptions and interests.

The first topic discussed by participants is the role of Stories for “*self-promotion*”, which is one of the topics related to Instagram as a whole and previously discussed on *Theme 3 (“Instagram as a place to explore visualities”)*. By capitalizing on ephemerality, young people can emphasize and showcase different sides of their identity in a distinguished and curated manner. Likewise, users indicate that the feature helps them shape their online persona, advertise themselves, exert influence on others, establish a social presence, and make a lasting impression over time. Some individuals create personal brands on Instagram but recognizing its potential impact may be confined to the platform itself. Furthermore, they carefully select the content that aligns with their desired self-image and present it to their audience, utilizing

features such as filters, stickers, and captions to enhance the visual appeal and narrative of their stories.

In comparison to the self-promotion on the Feed, Stories enable a wider scope of opportunities for users to craft their image, thus allowing them to present a polished and curated version of themselves or a more varied and “realistic” depiction of their routine. For participant FG03P01, the platform facilitates impression management: “It’s a quick way to create a perception of who you are to other people. You promote yourself in a way that, you know... So, it’s just a representation of yourself and what you do basically.” This deliberate self-presentation serves as a way for individuals to craft a specific image of themselves that connects with their values, interests, and aspirations. The majority of respondents agree that personal content, particularly pictures of themselves or with friends, receive the most engagement on social media. Other popular types of content include travel, food, and personal opinions.

They acknowledge that posting content that receives positive feedback can be satisfying and encourage them to post more of the same type of content. However, they also express a desire to diversify it and not solely focus on what receives the most reactions, although some individuals mention being influenced by their friends’ approval. Therefore, they strive to find a balance between posting what they enjoy and what receives the most attention from their audience, as mentioned by FG01P06 in an interview:

“To be honest, I’m not gonna lie. I think this is more psychological than I even think of myself. Cause whenever I see a lot of interaction, I just feel a bit happier. Like I feel more satisfied. So, even being someone who doesn’t share as much, sometimes I just go back and say like ‘ohh probably it’s time to get like attention again’.” (FG01P06)

In some cases, the promoted self may differ from characteristics of their offline self or from how they depict themselves in other online places, as indicated by FG02P09, who has accounts on six different social media platforms: “I still think through what I post, but I don’t care if it resembles me in real life because I’m aware that I am creating a certain persona that might only be limited to my Instagram”. FGP01P05 also reflects on the possibility people have to depict themselves in a way that could be unrealistic: “It’s sad, but we post stories of good moments we are living or to show off. So other people know that we are doing well in our day. Even if it’s fake. It is mostly fake”.

This performance may also be done to reduce the risk of embarrassment or to “*avoid judgment*”. The temporariness of the medium allows them to experiment with self-expression,

share opinions on pressing social issues, and advocate for causes without the fear of long-term consequences or scrutiny. Accordingly, many of them use the “close friends” list to share content that they don’t want to be seen by everyone. This freedom from lasting judgment fosters a sense of authenticity and empowerment, enabling young users to voice their perspectives and engage in conversations without the fear of permanent records or potential repercussions.

The perception that they can avoid being scrutinized by the public eye is indicated by FGP01P02 as a reason to use Stories: “It might be because I don’t want to be judged. Some people may look at my feed and judge me based on that. If I post on Stories, it’s a current [momentaneous] situation, it’s fine.” However, this sensation of safety can be misleading, because other users could screenshot the content and remove its “ephemerality”, which happened with FGP01P03 when they shared a video with close friends while shaving their beard, “just for fun”, but someone managed to save and repost the content. “She made an account and was stalking me... Yeah, she just did a screen recording and reposted it on the feed. Gladly she didn’t have many followers [laughing].” (FGP01P03).

Although they can still be judged by what they share, the youth express feeling more comfortable with the fact that their content will disappear in one day. FP04P06 highlights the transient nature of the media as a motivation to publish more: “Because it feels very... without any commitment or something that you’ll regret, because it just disappears, so you don’t have time to overthink it.” This can also be seen in the conversation between two participants from the pilot focus group, who indicate measures to prevent embarrassment:

— FGP01P05: “And they only judge you for 24 hours.” [all laughing].

— FGP01P06: “But if you don’t want to be judged, you can just hide these people from the list of followers. I hide sometimes stories from relatives.” [all laughing].

However, not everyone is necessarily concerned about other people’s opinions or judgment regarding their content. In fact, many participants engage in the debate of controversial or polemic topics, including politics, war, conflicts, human rights (e.g., women and LGBTQI+ rights), social issues, etc. Their contribution to the topic of “*raising awareness*” can be noted in all three types of data, focus groups, netnography, and interviews. According to the partakers, being open-minded and spreading awareness, even about disputed matters, is important to influence others and change their perspectives through a strategy that connects to Jones and Pittman’s (1982) exemplification (showing oneself as committed and exemplary).

Based on the netnography, the main way they present themselves as a person concerned with these causes is by reposting content from other accounts, usually news outlets, that have already covered and explained the topic. In some cases, they add text overlaying the initial post and other thoughts about the depicted event or issue, further emphasizing its relevance or directing the comprehension of their audience towards one specific side of the story. This can be seen in conflicts between Israel and Palestine and in the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, which were recurring discussions in the content.

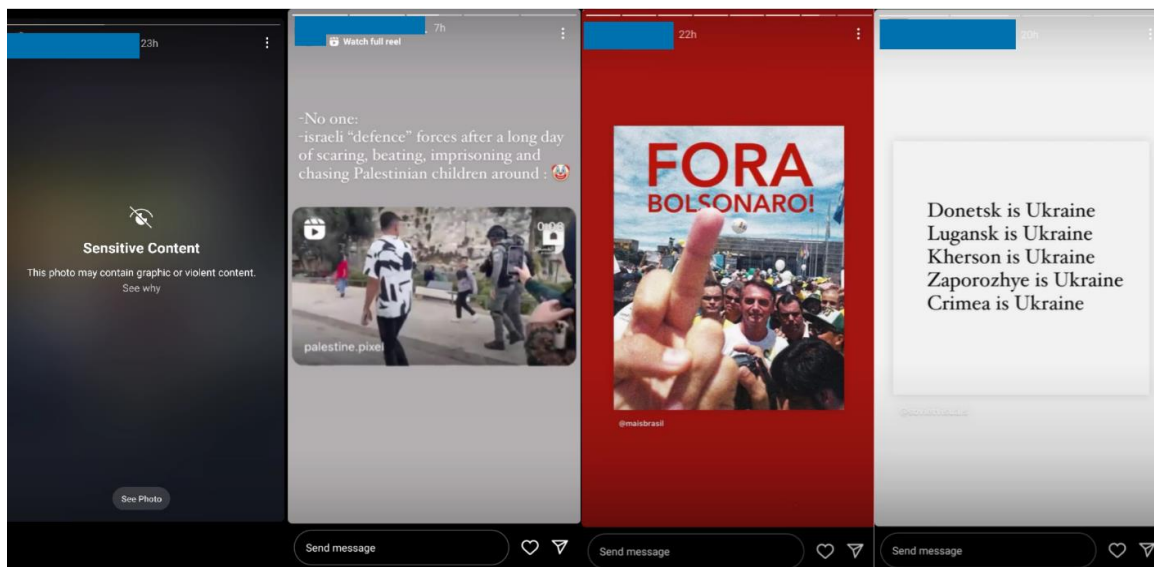


Figure 22. Stories depicting controversial and polemic topics.

(Source: Instagram Stories/Reproduction - October 2022)

As demonstrated by *Figure 22*, some of the youth actively posted on polemic subjects, thus not being concerned about judgment or embarrassment. The first image on the left shows a warning given by Instagram Stories for one publication that contained graphic or explicit content (the corpse of a toddler killed by a bomb), thus offering the audience a chance to decide if they want to view it. The second post shows a reposted video of Israeli police in an operation that included mostly children, to which the participant wrote a comment to express their opinion and offer an interpretation of the event from their perspective. The third image was reposted from another account during the Brazilian presidential election period and depicts a hand with a middle finger up, while Brazilian former president Jair Bolsonaro is seen in the back among supporters, and lettering on the top of the photo says “Fora Bolsonaro!” (Out Bolsonaro!). The last content refers to the Ukrainian invasion by Russian forces in 2022 and is a plain text with sentences claiming that five occupied territories are part of Ukraine.

The potential to raise awareness for causes on Instagram Stories was discussed by participants, who explain that they share stories and opinions as a way to also encourage others to do the same. They expect to create a dialogue and bring attention to what they consider important issues. FG02P08 mentions how their sister raised money during the war in Ukraine, and they expressed gratitude on Stories, receiving positive feedback from people:

“When the war in Ukraine broke out, my sister, who owns a business, raised a bunch of money for me to buy supplies here and donate to people at the train station. So, then I posted a little thing that’s saying ‘Thank you to my sister and her customers for raising money’. And people were commenting ‘Ukrainian flags’, saying ‘this is great’, ‘we’re very proud of you’, and ‘say thank you to your sister’. And that definitely made me really happy. It brought me tears of joy, honestly, and I don’t cry so easily.” (FG02P08).

For FG02P05, their content is mostly informational, focusing on social problems, and they believe it’s important to keep spreading information to bring about change: “I like to share awareness on different topics, such as social issues, inequality, violations of human rights. I feel it’s really important that people should know about it and if we stop, then nothing will change.” They also find the audience’s reactions and responses enjoyable, which encourages them to continue acting pro-causes, although FG02P05 states that they would still advocate even if the engagement was low: “I would still share because I know that people should see it, even if they skip through it. I feel calmer deep inside that at least I did something”, comments the participants, despite confessing they experience satisfaction with the viewers’ response. “I get really happy when people react when they respond, and it does encourage me to post more of the content related to these topics.”

Another person, FG01P02, shares their experience of discussing feminism on Instagram, where they engaged in a conversation with others by reposting what they considered relevant content from a peer regarding an issue in their country. FG01P02: “A friend of mine posted something like ‘Why do people judge girls when they do this and that’. I reposted her stories with my opinion, and many people gave their reactions and comments, adding their thoughts”. In this sense, participants express that, by sharing content related to social issues, fundraising campaigns, environmental concerns, etc. they can leverage their online presence to inspire others, spark conversations, and encourage positive change.

While the shared content may not be available indefinitely, participants recognize the value of using stories as a catalyst for spreading awareness and mobilizing support for what they believe. One more example is provided by FG05P08 regarding the power of Instagram

and Stories in influencing government policies, holding public officials accountable, or even correcting misinformation, recounting an incident where a falsely accused individual was freed due to research and support generated on the platform:

“One man from our country was caught during the protests in the neighboring country and he was accused of starting this thing. But then due to the news we learned about it, people researched, and we found out that he’s just a piano player who went there for the concert. Yeah, he was freed from prison and went back home. So, it was only because of the awareness and Instagram power.” (FG05P08).

Despite their online advocacy, participants are also concerned about who can consume the information they share, which reflects on another topic related to “*managing the audience*” for their Instagram Stories. Similar to the topic “*audience concern*” (See *Theme 1: Instagram as a tool for social connections and comparisons*), the specific ephemeral feature enables users to have certain control over their visibility. Some care about their follower-to-following ratio and feel popular with more followers, while others are concerned about who is watching their content (e.g., exes, former friends, relatives, strangers) to avoid conflict.

To manage their audience, they can take measures such as posting to a “close friends” list that can be curated to add or remove users, as explained by FG02P07: “I’m a big fan of the close friends’ list because I can select who I want to see my stories. And on the regular story, I share things that I don’t have to commit to an actual post.” This is the same approach taken by FG01P04 to limit the visibility of their content: “I also use a lot of close friends, because I don’t like people, for example, my family, to see what I am doing (laughs)”.

However, some of them are aware that this control is not entirely reliable or effective, since other users in the closed list can copy the post and share it with others, as indicated by FP04P01: “If you share something important or like gossip, they will take a screenshot and it will go to everyone. I think it’s not an important thing, but people think like ‘Oh, somebody is keeping it from us’”. A confession is made by FG01P02 about another function, the possibility to hide content from their followers: “I hid stories twice from my relatives. I didn’t unfollow them because I know there would be some issues with that and a huge argument in the family”.

Although most strategies for audience management mentioned by participants are related to restricting access to their visuals, some look for alternatives to increase visibility and reach more people (e.g., using hashtags and engaging in trends). According to FG03P04, some of the youths have concerns about the number of followers or how often they publish content since this could be an indicator of popularity: “I know that sounds horrible, but we judge

someone based on their profile. So, that's just how it is: 'Well, they seem to have a lot of friends', 'they seem to do a lot of things', 'they seem interesting'."

Another common segment from participants' contribution, but that contradicts the "*raising awareness*" topic, is the mention of how Instagram Stories content seems to be "*showing what's positive*". The contradiction happens because of multiple preferences and styles among respondents, thus while some avoid negativity and heavy subjects on the platform, others still like to discuss complex and polemic matters. Regarding the topic of positivity in their self-presentation strategy, it can take two main forms: Covering mostly light events, beautiful visuals, and nice experiences (e.g., travels, parties, food, memes, quotes), and avoiding negativity (e.g., sadness, personal struggles).

Some people mentioned that they do not share their vulnerable or emotional side, while others avoid posting about their daily struggles or political views that could spark disagreements. Whenever they feel like posting something that is not optimistic, they prefer to keep it limited to their close friends or private circles. This is exemplified by FG03P05: "I most definitely don't post about everyday struggles. For example, about eating disorders. I mean, I don't have an eating disorder for now, but I did have it several months ago and I didn't post anything about that". A similar thought is described by FG02P01: "I don't like to show my emotions on the Internet. It is only my close friends that can see what I'm thinking of, what I'm feeling".

Therefore, there's a shared belief among partakers that negative content could be perceived as improper usage of the platform and that Stories should be used for creating and consuming uplifting and inspiring material, thus fomenting a positive online atmosphere. FGP01P04 describes that there is a difference in the levels of moods visible to each audience: "In my public stories, they never know that I'm sad or that I'm going through something. I rarely share this with everyone, but I do it with my close friends".

This selective self-presentation can sometimes create a false perception of a perfect or idealized life to the viewers, potentially causing feelings of anxiety or inadequacy, as indicated by FG03P03: "People post mostly optimistic things, interesting things, and some extraordinary things. Sometimes maybe it will make other people feel kind of anxious about themselves because their lives are not as interesting as this person's [life]." Another direct example comes from FG05P03, who says that they only posted good things and the nice places they have visited since they moved to Hungary:

"I didn't post anything about the problems that I faced. A lot of problems. And a person seeing my stories thinks 'Wow, her life is amazing' [all laughing]. But it's not the real

thing that happened daily. So, I think we sometimes just show our good side and keep the bad side for ourselves”. (FG05P03).

To a certain degree, Instagram Stories can represent an “*extension of the mood*”, offering cues concerning their self-presentation through transient content, and it may even influence how they feel about themselves. For example, participants reported that during intense or interesting times they tended to post more, while during lazy or boring days, they posted less. On this basis, the content visible to users reflects one’s current mood and experiences, according to FGP01P05: “I can tell that my mood interferes in how much of my life I want to share. Like, when I’m happy I want people to see that I’m happy.” The participant adds that the feature is used to boost their confidence, reinforcing previous studies (Hufad et al., 2020): “If I don’t feel confident about myself, the way I look, I post it and I keep waiting for compliments, and I use it to get better”. Hence, the engagement and validation they receive through these interactions contribute to a sense of social support and enhanced self-esteem.

Additionally, self-recording on Stories may work as a “media training” technique, which could help the youth improve their communication skills, as exemplified by FG01P06: “It made me train myself to be less anxious when I’m filming myself, as a method to... when I’m talking to people to be less worried, it’s like a training”. Connected to the mood, FG04P04 argues that it can reflect a person’s inspiration as a result of their current activities: “This is the reason why during traveling you tend to post a lot of things because you have full of interesting daytime; and if it is interesting, you want to share it.”

Although there is a prevalence of optimistic content on Stories, the feature is described as a place to share the “*instant and everything*”, which is a topic highlighted by many respondents both in the focus groups and interviews. Hence, it allows for sharing moments and updates in real-time, providing a glimpse into their daily lives. They mention that stories are useful for quickly informing others about what is happening instantaneously, keeping friends updated, and sharing immediate experiences. Moreover, participants use stories to document everyday activities such as going to museums, traveling, or even mundane tasks like drinking coffee, having breakfast, or their way to school.

The relevance of immediacy is demonstrated by FP04P01: “On Stories, you share the moment, if you are somewhere like ‘I’m doing something’. Maybe you just wanna share it to show people that you are there”. A similar notion is presented by FG02P09, who shares what’s going on in their life instantly and illustrates with a recent trip to a Hungarian town: “I went to Szentendre just on Tuesday. So, I’m like, ‘Ok, I’m on my way there’, ‘I’m there’, ‘I went to

a museum’, ‘Ok, I’m going back’. So, it’s what’s happening in my life as of now”. Likewise, users can see what’s happening in their friends’ lives, follow instant news, and showcase their personality traits and events, which is pointed out by FG05P04: “I post every day on my Stories just to keep my friends updated on what I’m doing.”

One example can be seen from the sequence of five photos and videos in *Figure 23* posted by one of the participants to register several phases of their trip. The images were posted over two days and presented a line of events, trying to engage with the audience in different ways. For example, the first post is a video from inside a train that shows a monitor, seats, and the text “Guess where I am going”, prompting followers to respond in inbox. A few hours later, the second story was shared with a close-up of the monitor revealing the destination and the words “Here we are”. Next, the user invited “People in Debrecen, let’s meet up”, adding the geolocation of a Hungarian city they were visiting for the weekend. The two last images bring more clarification of their touring activities around the visiting place, depicting a historical building in the background with a person standing in front of it (story 4), and some ducks swimming in a lake (story 5). Therefore, the feature offers users a way to live vicariously through others’ travels, thus feeling closer to people.

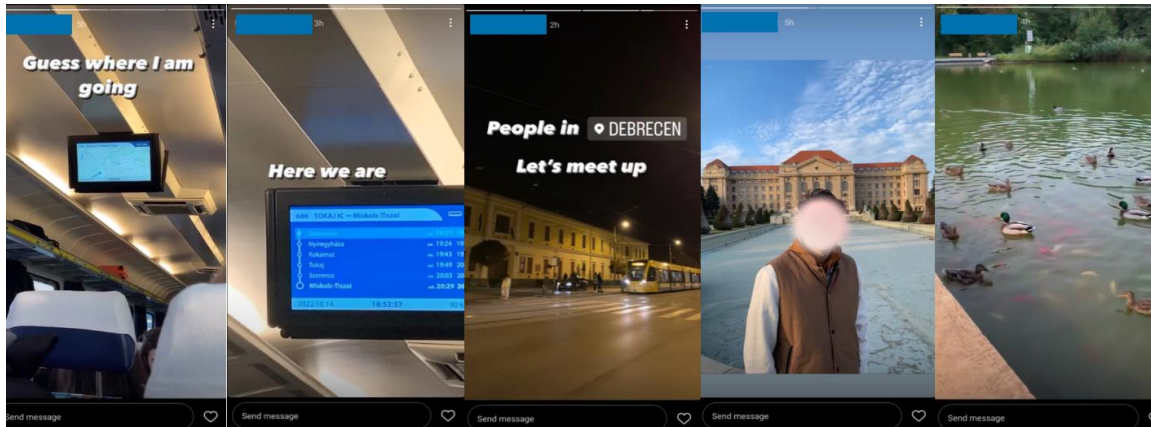


Figure 23. Stories as a place to share the instant and tell a story over time.

(Source: Instagram Stories/Reproduction - October 2022)

The final topic associated with self-presentation strategies enabled by Instagram Stories refers to its facilitation of a reflection on “*the projected self*”, which means self-feedback from users. Participants demonstrated in the focus groups and interviews a keen awareness of their projected self on Instagram Stories and the value of impression management through the feature. They could actively reflect on how they want people to perceive them and carefully

align their content and storytelling to create a desired image, thus trying to reduce cognitive dissonance (Baumeister & Hutton, 1987; Vaidis and Bran, 2017).

When questioned in the interviews about how they would describe themselves through their stories and, later, how they thought people perceived them, all respondents aligned the two answers, although they were apart. For example, FG05P04 described that they post regularly, depicting their everyday life, and in the sequence, they reflected that this action would mean openness: “I want people to think that I’m fun and open, and I think that’s also what I why I am posting so many stories because I want them to feel like they can always come to me with anything.”

Over time, their content and sharing activity have changed, with some becoming more comfortable when showing themselves on social media and posting more frequently, while others adapting the visuals to better show the self they want to depict. By actively managing their projected self and utilizing the storytelling capabilities of the platform, participants aim to present themselves in a way that is authentic yet curated. To understand their self-presentation, some of the youth developed a habit of going back to their shared stories to rewatch them, either to assess their quality or to see how their audience may perceive them. They review their content to see if it flows well and to acknowledge their online presence, as explained by FG02P08:

“I acknowledge it might be a little bit of an ego or narcissist thing, not in that negative way... let’s say, if it’s a group of videos I kind of methodically laid out on my stories, I’ll go back and look at it to see if it flows. If I were like this person [viewer], what would I think”. (FG02P08).

Similarly, FG02P09 finds it entertaining to assess their ephemeral posts and evaluate their standards: “I just like watching my own stuff. I think it’s very funny. So, yeah, I like rewatching the stories, especially if I look at it and see it is really worth being on the Stories”. The thought is also reinforced by FG03P04, according to whom they spend a considerable time reviewing what they have shared: “Well, for me, the most important part and probably what I spend my time is the stories, and especially mine. I will rewatch my own story like 50 times [laughing].”

By managing their visibility through “Close Friends”, curating their content, and carefully balancing between self-promotion and the avoidance of judgment, participants engage in a behavior that reinforces Baumeister and Hutton’s (1987) concept of self-presentation. According to the authors, individuals strategically manage the impressions they convey to others, trying to please the audience or reinforcing an ideal self. In this case, when a

user curate their content they are not only managing how they are perceived by others (in a positive manner) but also reinforcing their own self-concept, persistently portraying themselves in a way that aligns with their desired identity.

The discussions in the theme “*Instagram Stories as a strategic tool for self-presentation*” contemplated how users deliberately curate and project desired parts of their lives on Stories, shaping their online personas and advertising themselves. The ephemerality present in the feature allows them to experiment with self-expression, share opinions on social issues, and advocate for causes to raise awareness, spark conversations, and encourage positive change, without the fear of scrutiny or long-term consequences on their image. Finally, they also manage their audience by utilizing features such as the “close friends” list to control who can see their content. Contrastingly, while some still express concern about judgment and conflict, others aim to reach a wider audience and increase their visibility.

4.4.3.4. Theme 7: Instagram Stories as a visual expression practice

In this section, I present the last theme developed through the data analysis process, “*Instagram Stories as a visual expression practice*”, which is based on the three data sets (focus groups, netnography, and interviews). I demonstrate how the feature is used for multimodal visual and artistic expression among the youth, their understanding of ephemeral images as a constructed reality, how Stories enable a quantifiable visibility practice, the repetition of visual patterns, in addition to technical elements and feature affordances. Similar to the previous theme, this one also contributes to an understanding of their self-presentation strategies, but with a focus on the visual characteristics.

The first topic that can be noticed from an evaluation of images retrieved during the netnography is the possibility of “*multimodal visual expression*”, which demonstrates that Instagram Stories enables users to add many items to a single content. However, this does not mean that participants will include all the functions at once, but that they have access to a variety of components when expressing themselves, such as filters, text, augmented reality tools, hashtags, geolocation tags, stickers, GIFs, etc.

Among the identified practices, they applied multimodality intending to translate content (e.g., sharing a meme in one language and adding a text in a second language), to clarify the meaning of a post (e.g., when information is controversial or polemic, they state their viewpoint), to reinforce the message they want to convey (e.g., using a heart emoji to tell that they love someone/something), and to promote engagement with their audiences (e.g., adding

a question box). Hence, the most common multimodal combination observed in the data set is that of an image (photo or video) with text (written or in the form of tags), followed by using emojis.

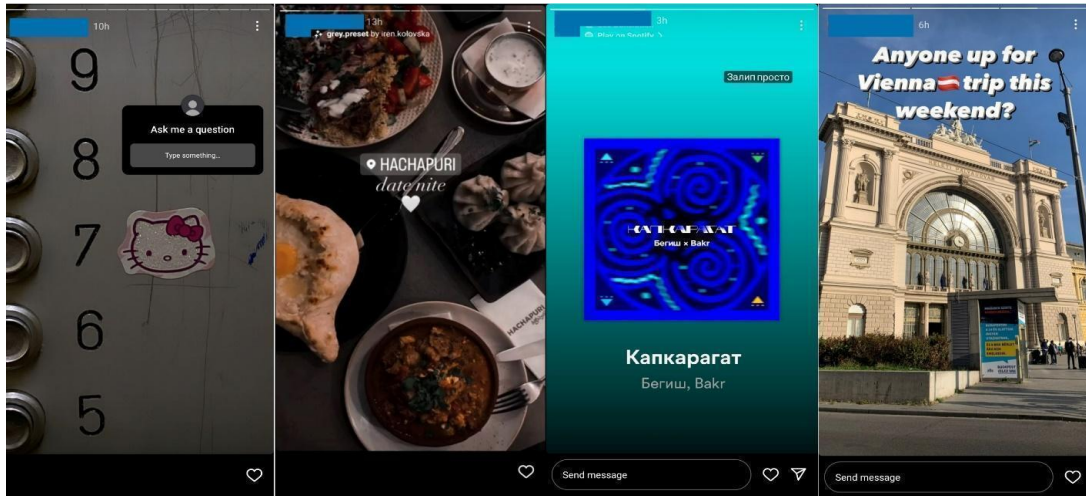


Figure 24. Representation of multimodal visual content on Instagram Stories.

(Source: Instagram Stories/Reproduction - October 2022)

In Figure 24, we can see four examples with diverse multimodality usage over the images, incorporating textual, audio, and visual functions. In the first story, a user shared an image from an elevator in which there is a sticker of the Hello Kitty character, and a question box icon is added for their followers to interact and send inquiries. The second post shows a few dishes on a table and was shot with a preset filter from Instagram, over which the user added the geolocation tag of a restaurant, followed by the words “date nite” (*sic*) and a white heart emoji, thus conveying that they were spending time with a beloved person. The third content shows the cross-app compatibility with Spotify, shared through another app, and represents the song that this user was listening to, with the addition of the words “just obsessed” (in Russian). The last image depicts a train station in Budapest and has the sentence on the top of it: “Anyone up for Vienna [Austrian flag emoji] trip this weekend?”, thus inviting their followers to interact and showing visually with the emoji where they were traveling to.

Participants also commented in the interviews about their use of these items and how multimodal content helps express who they are, as explained by FGP01P04 who cites regularly adding the temperature and the time stickers, beyond other components. “Sometimes I post with the location because it gets more views, and with GIFs: ‘Good morning’, or the day of the week, such as ‘Happy Thursday’, just to put a hint of my personality in the post.” Another example is given by FG05P10 regarding the geolocation tag used to inform people about their

location. “Maybe they will make a conclusion. For example, I usually attend a lot of sports events, whether to participate or to watch, and I tend to add the location. So, people can know that I’m interested in sports”.

For FG02P08, the cross-app compatibility is an advantage of the multimodality on Stories, as it allows users to share content from/to other platforms, such as Apple Music or Spotify: “If you want to share a song or lyric, just click the share options and it will put it right on your Stories. It’s another way of integrating music, which is a big thing that we all post”. Although it is not a function available in Hungary during the research, the youth also mentioned the possibility of adding background songs directly to their stories, as a soundtrack, which helps them to denote or reinforce the meaning of their activities.

Similarly, Instagram Stories allows users to engage in “*artistic self-expression*”, another topic identified as part of their visual self-expression. In this sense, people use the ephemeral content feature to get inspired, express themselves through artistic images, and share inspiring texts and stories. For instance, one explicit usage could be seen a couple of times with a user playing the guitar and singing throughout the netnography. However, another more subtle performance is noted by those who regularly share images that resemble professional videos or photography with an attention to detail (e.g., alignment of objects, patterns, etc.). This topic connects with the “*visual aesthetics*” (Theme 2) and “*creative production*” (Theme 3), demonstrating that Stories reflect Instagram affordances and work as a place to explore visualities.

In the focus group discussion, FG01P06 explained that Stories allows them to perform without being worried about the audience. The participant considers themselves an introverted person and enjoys playing the violin since they were six years old. “Stories made it possible for me to post what I like and play it without being anxious about what I’m doing. It’s not like playing it in front of people, so it is less panicking for me”. FGP01P02 shares that the possibility of artistic self-expression is among the motives they use the application: “Yeah, one thing [reason] is to express myself through artistic photos or something”. A third example of artistic self-expression and art criticism is presented by FG01P05: “I’m a person who loves drawing and painting, and I always considered myself as a person who loves being in arts. So, for me, Stories is something that I can express my opinions too”.

While allowing creative expressivity, Instagram Stories may also contribute to excessive use of image manipulation as an appeal to be seen as creative and pretty. By using filters and editing tools to enhance their photos and videos, participants may generate a curated and unrealistic representation of themselves, which is an issue identified in the topic of

“*constructed reality*”. However, there is a controversy in this matter, with some participants indicating that the ephemeral content feature favors a more authentic and realistic expression. What seems to be the connecting point in the discussions is the importance of creating visually appealing content, be it highly edited or simpler, that reflects their style and interests.

Based on FGP01P04’s opinion, social media users are more concerned about shaping a specific perception about themselves than offering an accurate depiction of their lives: “We don’t present our real selves, just what we want people to think about us. I mean, it’s possible to share what we really are, but only if you want to”. This disparity between the digitally mediated reality and what happens outside of the screen is also evident when evaluating characteristics of their body that they may not enjoy, as in the comment of FG05P11:

“Most people don’t like posting pictures without filters or something like that. It’s almost like we don’t accept our faults anymore. If you have a pimple, a red mark, or something on your face, you’re gonna most likely use a filter, because nowadays it’s almost not acceptable to be yourself anymore.” (FG05P11).

Contradictorily, some participants express valuing simplicity and minimalism in their posts, with a focus on expressing their true selves and their daily experiences without much curation, as specified by FG02P08: “A popular thing on Instagram is something raw, these photos dump things, you know, just something authentic.” Another partaker, FG03P01, follows a similar approach to their content: “Whenever I post something, I try to keep it simple because I’m a very minimalistic person. It’s usually just a short text or the location where I am. I try to keep it simple and sharp. That’s it.”

Therefore, although most participants have grown up immersed in digital technologies such as smartphones, and are fluent in image manipulation, some value the authenticity of immediate and unfiltered visuals, as noted by FG01P02: “On Stories, people are more... more alive I think, they are more natural.” This type of genuine content reflecting on “real-life” offline experiences can generate more engagement, according to FG01P05: “I found out that people react more to those stories that are more realistic, and I personally love more of those stories that are realistic.”

Furthermore, it was observed in the discussions and from the netnography that the youth aim at “*creating visual patterns*” on Instagram Stories for their self-presentation. This topic can be noticed when talking about their likelihood of sharing more content that engages the audience (interviews data) and from their sharing habits on the platform (netnography data). For example, some users described themselves as involved in social causes, as discussed

previously, and that would reflect the extent of the content they share online. Other participants who refer to themselves as funny would post humorous visuals, or those considered travelers would be posting more about their trips.

However, these patterns are not solid structures and may change over time as the person's life moves on and they find new hobbies or experiences. One example comes from FG02P05, whose online persona on Stories used to be based on daily videos showing their in-the-moment experiences and now is related to advocacy, but it still follows one thematic pattern: "If I went somewhere fun or interesting, I'd make videos as a memory. Now, because I'm interested in politics and history and many things are happening in the world, my stories are mostly for spreading awareness."

A different situation is described by FGP01P05, which not only demonstrates the patterns but also how they are reinforced through a feedback loop: "When you post one and you get good comments, good reactions, you tend to post more in the next days just to get these reactions again." The participant, then, shared one specific example of a situation that happened to themselves while traveling: "I was in London or Barcelona, I posted some pictures, and I got a lot of reactions. And the next day I came out of my Airbnb just to take more pictures to Stories as people reacted more". Based on respondents' answers, as indicated previously, even if a topic generates more interaction with peers (e.g., selfies or group selfies), they look for ways to balance it with what they like, such as humorous posts (e.g., memes) and architecture (e.g., buildings).

FG01P04 contributes with another example of this communication habit related to a thematic or visual framework perceptible on Stories: "I have friends who are influencers, and they just post things to have more likes or if they know that their followers like food, they will just post more things about food to get more followers." Correspondingly, FG02P07 adds other two scenarios and reflects on these content-sharing patterns:

"If you want people to know that you travel a lot and that's your biggest personality trait, probably your whole Insta is going to be about traveling. And then if you're spending time with friends, you want everybody to know that you are friendly. It's the picture you want others to see. It's not necessarily a bad thing." (FG02P07).

Additionally, partakers acknowledge the relevance of visual (e.g., color schemes, type of image) and thematic patterns (e.g., travel, nature) in their Instagram Stories to reinforce their identity over time. In this sense, by repeating certain elements they create a recognizable and consistent aesthetic that reflects their personal style and brand while serving as visual cues

about their interests, moods, or overarching narrative. Contrastingly, although they try to keep patterns that would be representative of who they are, users also follow visual trends across Instagram, posting images that repeat almost the same angles or styles as other people's content. An example can be seen in *Figure 25* about the repetition of visual patterns in two categories, namely architecture (staircases) and landscapes showing nature (water, land, sky), illustrated with images from six different participants.

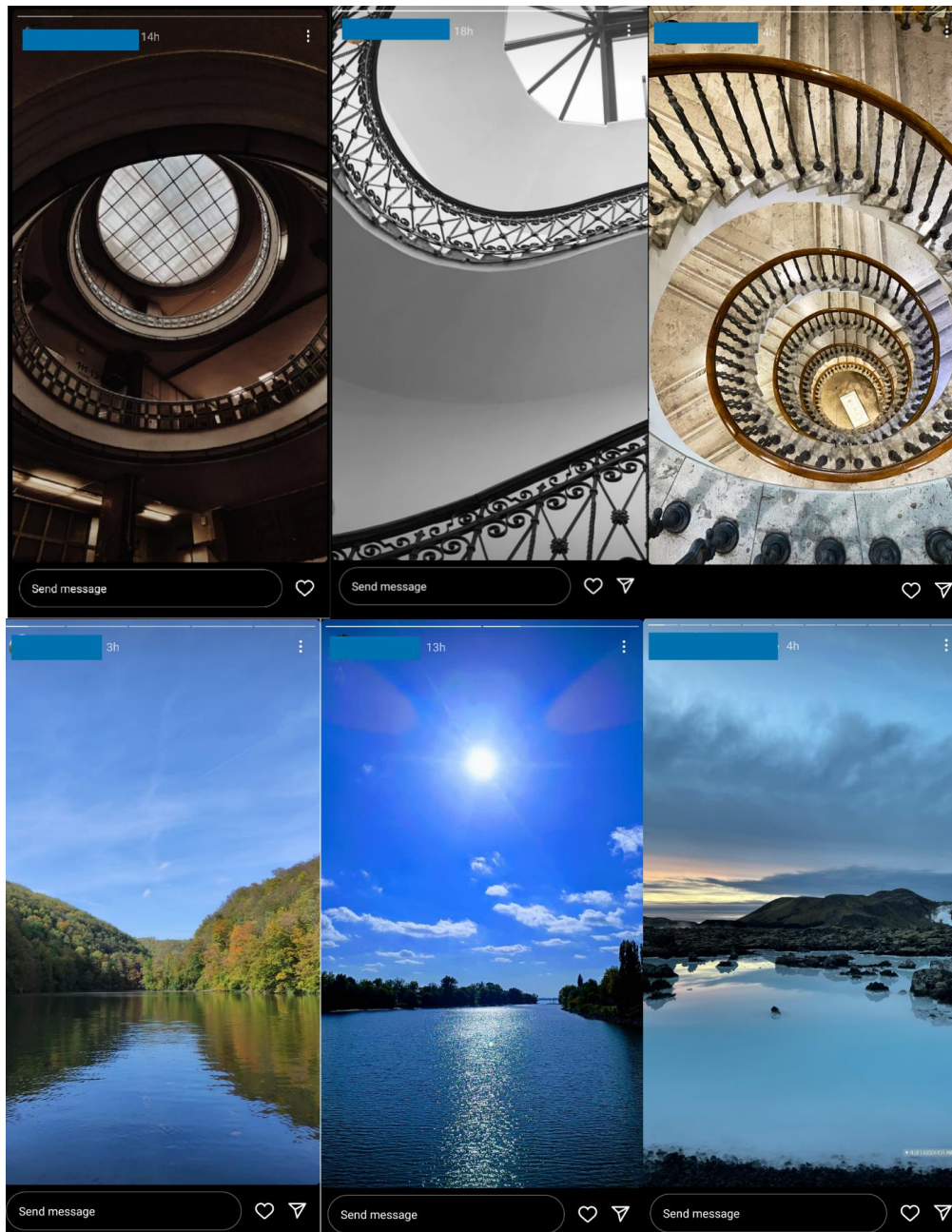


Figure 25. Repetition of visual patterns on Instagram Stories.

(Source: Instagram Stories/Reproduction - October 2022)

Similar to the discussion regarding Instagram capabilities (See *Theme 2*), participants indicated several functions on Instagram Stories that facilitate their communication and that are here organized under the topic “*feature affordances*”. The discussions cover how Stories’ functionalities, such as collages, filters, AR masks, polls, reply/reactions buttons, question box, tagging, etc. make the feature easier to use, while also promoting users’ visual expression and social interactions.

Some examples of the practicality are listed by FG03P04: “They have a lot of features I can use, like collages, filters, boomerangs. I can just pick four pictures and put them straight away, like, it’s just so much easier.” FG03P01 illustrates another function that enables interpersonal communication and encourages engagement with interactions: “Something that makes them good, cooler, and attractive is the reply button. If you post a story, you’re allowing other people, who maybe haven’t been talking to you that much, to just reply and reach out.”

Another possibility to interact with peers is via tagging their profiles, which is mentioned by FG03P03 as a useful resource: “If someone tags another person, you can visit their profile and see what they are doing. When they tag you, it appears in your messages, and you can repost to your story without creating the same story again.” Additionally, partakers informed frequently using their close friends’ list to limit their content visibility (See also the topic “*managing the audience*” in *Theme 6*), but also adding the most relevant images to Highlights, a function on the profile to maintain a story “permanently”, thus altering its ephemeral essence.

Finally, they express mixed opinions on the use of filters and AR masks, which are classified as attractive features but may also lead to distorted interpretations of the person’s appearance and unrealistic standards (See also *Theme 1: Instagram as a tool for social connections and comparisons*). For FG02P09, the use of augmented reality masks and filters makes it easier to take pictures: “You can just take it with the app itself, those masks that change the appearance. It has in-built filters I can choose from, which is quite unhealthy (laughs).”

The last topic identified under *Theme 7: Instagram Stories as a visual expression practice* refers to the capacity of evaluating their performances, reflecting on a “*quantifiable visibility*” that allows them to assess in numbers their self-presentation. One of the ways Stories users can quantify their visibility is by reviewing who’s watching their content since the feature offers them a function to see the number of people consuming it and who those users are. This technical operation, available only to each creator (not openly accessible to their peers, as a regular “reaction” on Facebook), results in a specific behavior of “watching the watchers” reported by partakers in the focus groups and further elaborated in the interviews.

For example, FG05P10 comments on the main reasons for this practice, including their content reach and the evaluation of how successful they were in their presentation strategy: “Sometimes I just wanna see how many people watched it. I posted, for example, 1/2 an hour ago something funny, then I wait for the reactions or for the audience to assess. Was it funny or not?” Likewise, FP04P01 points out how easy it is to trace who watched a Story: “You can track who saw it, but you cannot do it on the Feed. I can just scroll down and not interact with them. However, on the Stories, if I see it, then my name is there...”.

Nevertheless, the determination of visibility is sometimes thought of on a small scale, as Instagram Stories allows a curated audience (See also “*audience concern*”, from *Theme 4*; and “*managing the audience*”, from *Theme 6*). In this sense, instead of planning to reach a higher number of viewers, participants may determine an indirect visual interpersonal communication, when sharing something with specific people – or even a single person – in mind or selecting only those users in a closed list (expecting them to see and/or give feedback), but without addressing them directly in a message.

The theme “*Instagram Stories as a visual expression practice*” covers how users utilize the various functions of the feature for multimodal visual and artistic expression. For example, participants indicate the possibility to add multiple items such as filters, text, geolocation tags, stickers, GIFs, using augmented reality tools, etc., to create engaging content. The reasons for adopting these components are many, including translating content, clarifying meaning, reinforcing messages, and promoting engagement with their audience. Moreover, partakers follow visual or thematic patterns in their images to reinforce their identity and engage with the audience. Interestingly, despite some users valuing authenticity and simplicity, others may rely on image manipulation and curation to present a constructed reality. Lastly, participants indicate how the platform allows for quantifiable visibility, in which they can assess the number of people watching their content and evaluate the success of their presentation strategy.

The development of visual patterns by participants, such as consistently using specific filters, color schemes, or types of content, connects with the broader shift towards visual communication in mobile interactions pointed out by Villi (2015) and Serafinelli and Villi (2017). As the latter authors explained, many aspects of contemporary life are mediated through smartphones and their cameras, affecting how people relate to their surroundings and events (think of how attending a concert has changed with the advent of smartphones, for instance). By utilizing the phone cameras to snap and share on Instagram Stories, users build their social interaction and communicate their identities through carefully designed visual narratives. What differs from the context already explained by Villi (2015) and Serafinelli and

Villi (2017) is that, nowadays, these interactions are not only visual, but they follow certain patterns afforded and reinforced by the platform and, most importantly, are also ephemeral.

Overall, the youth demonstrated a broad understanding and usage of Instagram Stories, thus resulting in an extensive set of topics that highlights the relevance and complexity of ephemeral multimedia content. A summary is presented by FG05P08, who reflects on the platform and its employment for communication: “Although there are many debates whether it’s good or bad, I think that Instagram is about ‘what’ and ‘who’ you follow. So, judging the whole platform is silly, because it depends on what you’re looking for in this app. Maybe we’re on one platform, but we see completely different things.” In the next section, I propose a dialogue between these findings presented throughout the chapter and the theoretical framework.

4.5. Discussion: Connecting empirical practices and theoretical framework

The data analysis and results chapter was divided into three main steps, covering contextual information on the visual mobile communication practices (Step 1), Instagram usage, and the context of self-presentation (Step 2), with an analysis of the self-presentation strategies among the youth, discusses in the second and the third phases, namely Stories applied to visual mobile communication (Step 3). This last section of the chapter reviews the main results and seeks to answer the three research questions while generating a dialogue with the theoretical framework.

4.5.1. Summary of results

As demonstrated throughout the chapter, I presented a contextual background on the topic, supplying demographics and other self-reported data that contributed to the understanding of youth’s communicative practices conditions. A total of 20 nationalities were represented in the research, with heterogeneous gender participation (30 females, 11 males, and 2 genderqueers). More than 95% of the participants have started using smartphones before turning 15 years old and nearly 74% spend more than four hours daily on the devices, with Instagram being among the most used applications in their equipment. When it comes to the social media usage, 33 out of the 43 already had an account when Instagram Stories was introduced in 2016, thus being acculturated with the feature. They access the platform multiple times in a single day (only 4,7% reported rarely using it) and do so in a multitasking approach, usually while eating, in-class/studying, or while talking to other people. Their audience is composed of mostly friends,

university colleagues, family members, and strangers, with 55,8% of accounts being set as closed (private) and 44,2% open (public) at the moment of the study.

The analysis showed that participants shared diverse content on Stories, but their self-reported information about the categories covered in their posts (33) was broader than the retrieved images (11), thus implying they may believe that they're sharing more diversified visuals than it happens in practice. However, a closer analysis of the data indicated a variation in how they depict themselves, although certain patterns could also be observed: For instance, they repeatedly posted about the same events, reinforcing one perspective about who they are (e.g., traveler, funny person, intellectual, etc.). Only 20,9% of the users informed that they rarely post on Stories, but they still consume content from other users. Throughout the netnography (35 days), 37 users shared 782 posts, often photos and videos, with three participants being more active in their posting habits and only four not sharing anything (and two did not take part in this stage).

In the thematic analysis, seven themes were developed, three about Instagram as a whole (contextual) and four about Stories. The first theme covered Instagram as a tool for social connections and comparisons, discussing how it is used for personal expression and to connect with others, while partakers also use it to seek validation from their peers. These results reinforce previous studies (Lup et al., 2015; Stapleton et al., 2017; Baker et al., 2019) about the platform's role in youth social comparison, more specifically in assessing self-worth, but I did not evaluate psychological outcomes as it was not the focus of the research. The second theme highlighted the multiple affordances of the platform, with participants' views on its technical qualities; a reflection on the algorithmic operations and interference on their self-presentation; the visual aesthetics fomented by Instagram; and the unspoken rules for its users. The last theme on the general level covered how the social media is used to explore visualities, with the youth discussing their creative content production; their online self-promotion strategies; and the platform usage for environmental and spatial discovery – thus also aligning with Meier and Schäfer (2018) findings that pointed out how Instagram offers the scope for creative practices and inspiration.

Regarding the analysis of Instagram Stories, theme four explained how it is a built relationship with ephemerality, with partakers making comparisons between platforms, features, generations, and themselves regarding ephemeral content production and consumption, thus distinguishing themselves and their practices from others. The fifth theme described the advent of quick communication, relating transient multimedia with a contemporary phenomenon of limiting its availability to a certain time (e.g., 24h); the habit of

fast consumption; a fear of missing out (FOMO); easy feedback facilitated by quick interactions through reactions and short conversations; which may also include flirting privately. This theme relates to Lu and Lin's (2022) study that has demonstrated Stories' usage for social sharing and relationship building, while also indicating the prevalence of ephemerality not only in the content (images programmed to disappear) but in the users' practices, thus supporting the arguments of Lipovetsky (1990) about transience as a ubiquitous contemporary symptom.

The sixth theme covered Stories as a strategic tool for self-presentation, demonstrating its application for self-promotion; the benefits of transience to avoid judgment; participants' engagement in raising awareness about social causes and other matters (e.g., politics, human rights, war, etc.); the possibility to manage their audience and limit the visibility of their content; show positive and beautiful visuals; adopt the feature as an extension of their mood; share the instant as events happen; and reflect on their projected self. This theme can be associated with Leaver et al. (2020) argument that Instagram incites spontaneous snaps of events 'as they happen' (p. 103) and with Lu and Lin (2022) identified motivations for using the feature, including entertainment and fun, novelty, and surveillance.

The seventh exhibited the usage of stories as a visual expression practice, highlighting its adaptation for multimodal visual expression through photos, videos, text, sound, emojis, and other means; how it allows artistic self-expression of users; the understanding of ephemeral images to construct certain realities; the ways participants create visual patterns over time or across the platform by following trends; the feature affordances that enable users' visual communication; and an observed need to quantify their visibility by reviewing who's watching their stories either to assess the success of their self-presentation strategy or to restrict its visibility.

These two last themes also align with Georgakopoulou's (2021) socio-technical description of the feature, thus sharing life-in-the-moment and the immediacy of events, seeking to show authenticity through mundane experiences, and the possibility of quantifying the views (p. 7). Finally, the main motivations to produce, share, or consume stories reflect those pointed out by Caldeira (2016) concerning Instagram as a whole, which were connected to traditional photography practices: protection against time; communication with others, and the expression of feelings; the capacity for self-realization; the demonstration of social prestige; and photography as a hobby (Caldeira, 2016, p. 142).

4.5.2. Interpreting visual mobile communication on Stories

The advent of smartphone cameras has influenced how we communicate in the 21st century, with previous research suggesting an increase in visual communication practices (Nyíri, 2003; Villi, 2007). For instance, nowadays we can share images in mobile interactions as a way to connect with relatives and friends or to express our thoughts and support the meaning-making process (Ling and Horst, 2011). In this sense, the established theories and empirical investigations denote that mobile phones with cameras play an important role in the development of visual mobile communication (Villi, 2010), allowing people to use pictorial means such as emojis, photos, and videos to communicate complex ideas and emotions.

In more recent years, the pervasiveness of visuality in our daily lives gained one addition: The production and consumption of transient images on social media platforms, with the content being automatically programmed to disappear after a certain time (Verstraete, 2016). The third decade of this millennium saw a proliferation of ephemeral content online, with Instagram Stories accounting for more than one billion users in 2023 (Kemp, 2023), while other platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, and BeReal also incorporated ephemerality in their functionalities. The latter was designed for image-sharing experiences that are centered entirely on fast consumption through phones.

Taking this background into consideration I reflect on and answer my *RQ1: How does online ephemeral content influence visibility practices among the youth in the context of visual mobile communication?* Similar to smartphones, the feature allows individuals to communicate complex ideas, emotions, and experiences through visuals, providing a real-time and immediate sharing experience. However, Stories offers a widespread visual connection, enabling users to choose if they want to communicate in a one-to-many (as on other social media) or one-to-few directions (as via the phone). One example of how this happens is described by participants in the research when commenting about how they control their visibility and decide on each story if they want to share it publicly or only with their close friends' list.

Furthermore, through the feature, youth can create a sense of presence and connection in interpersonal interactions, describing via multimodal means their daily experiences – with a single post combining multiple items over it (e.g., image, text, location cues, etc). An important difference between these visuals and MMS or other social media platforms is that the ephemeral content is set to vanish, thus fomenting an urgency for its consumption. Hence, on the one hand, some partakers in the research informed that they feel motivated to constantly

post about their mundane experiences since it won't be available for too long; while on the other hand, they are emotionally impelled to constantly check Instagram Stories to see if there is something new, which feeds the fear of missing out (FOMO).

Lastly, ephemeral content features offer a unique feedback loop between the sender and the audience, which is constant and synchronous, allowing for immediate responses and reactions to the shared visuals. For instance, a person shares a Story and constantly reviews who has watched or reacted to it. Another example is the act of posting and then watching their content to assess how their followers would see it. Practically, the sender now plays a dual role as the sender and also belongs to his own audience, since swift replies are part of this communicative practice. This creates an interactive communication experience in which the sender continuously assesses the reactions received, allowing for adjustments and improvements in subsequent communication. However, this can also foment the previously discussed sense of urgency and FOMO.

As Lester (2006) indicated, our society is increasingly reliant on visual communication, with images being the primary way for many people to gain an understanding of the world (para. 7). More recently, visuals produced with smartphones have become ubiquitous and there is a tendency of young people consuming mobile images right after their capture, making them transient and, consequently, forgetful on a long-term (Villi, 2010, p. 92). Moreover, this practice has become a way to mediate presence, allowing people to experience distant events (in space) through photographs and videos in a quasi-simultaneous way (Villi, 2010, p. 151). In this sense, this research's findings reinforce previous studies and demonstrate how Instagram Stories is connected to visual mobile communication both as an ephemeral object produced for immediate consumption and as a visual mediator of experiences that enables users to visualize what is happening in other people's lives instantaneously.

4.5.3. Exploring the patterns of self-presentation strategies on Stories

The concept of self-presentation has been extensively studied in social psychology (Jones and Pittman, 1982; Baumeister and Hutton, 1987), communication science (Berger, 2013), and other fields, particularly about impression management (Leary & Kowalski, 1990), visibility (Bayer et al., 2015), and online self-presentation (Hollenbaugh, 2021). As previously discussed in the literature review, it involves individuals conveying information or creating an image of themselves to others, influenced by their motivations and the social-cultural context. The process encompasses various strategies, including intimidation, self-promotion, and

supplication, and entails managing behavior and expressions to create a favorable impression, often aligning with societal expectations and cultural norms. Additionally, it implies adapting these strategies to different situations, audiences, and goals, while also impacting an individual's own beliefs and consistency, guiding their social interactions.

More contemporary research analyzes how the development of the Internet and new media has affected self-presentation strategies (Russmann and Svensson, 2017; Schlosser, 2020; Hollenbaugh, 2021). Among the main modifications, social media allows users to carefully curate their online personas, considering factors such as levels of anonymity, audience contributions to the process, and context collapse (Hollenbaugh, 2021). Hence, the rise of visual social media platforms like Snapchat and Instagram has further influenced self-presentation, with ephemeral content allowing for spontaneous and in-the-moment sharing, as I discuss in the following paragraphs.

Elaborating on the youth's visual communication habits, I address and answer my *RQ2: What specific strategies are used for visual self-presentation mediated by ephemeral images on Instagram Stories?* Participants take advantage of the platform's ephemeral nature to showcase different components of their identity in a distinguished and curated manner, while some also explore it to create a more authentic and accurate presentation of their daily experiences. This contradiction in the feature usage reflects its versatility and affordances, thus allowing users to decide how they want to engage in online visual self-presentation. They use various strategies to shape their visibility, which includes adding many elements to a single content that would help reinforce or convey a message, repeating visual patterns over time to create a consistent personal style and brand, and using filters and/or editing tools to enhance their content.

However, similar to other social media uses, concerns about impression management persist, now with the pressure to make everyday activities appear interesting to their audiences. For instance, users aim to present themselves authentically (Davis, 2014) while still following online trends that would show that they are up-to-date with how their generation communicates visually. Likewise, ephemeral features such as Instagram Stories facilitates users' privacy management (e.g., via close friends list) and reshapes visibility levels: A story can be watched by a few or by many people, and it will be available to the audience only for 24 hours unless it is saved to the "Highlights". This management is also applied to prevent embarrassment or to reduce the risk of judgment from peers and family members.

In connection with that, participants in an interaction adopt different methods to control their online image, while the effectiveness of self-presentation is measured by audience

response, which now can be as simple as just watching the content or reacting to it privately. Previous research indicates that self-disclosure and self-expression coexist online (Schlosser, 2020), and now individuals are being prompted to express more of their true selves (or spectacularized small portions of them) than in face-to-face interactions. Hence, although partakers in the research indicated that they feel Instagram Stories is more “authentic” and allow them to depict many daily activities that wouldn’t necessarily make it to the feed and usually not be seen by an audience in an offline environment (e.g., bathroom mirror selfie), they also recognize that users choose carefully what they want other people to see from those mundane experiences, thus not removing completely the curation process.

Another identified strategy refers to self-promotion, common in other platforms and offline interactions (Jones & Pittman, 1982, p. 231), which on Stories encompasses users sharing extraordinary moments and presenting themselves in a distinctive way to gain recognition from their peers or establish social connections. In some cases, they confess to creating a separate online persona that may differ from their offline selves. Based on their contributions, personal content, especially pictures of oneself or with friends, receives the most engagement, and positive feedback encourages users to post more. However, they also express a desire to strike a balance between personal enjoyment and audience attention.

A more subtle strategy in the analysis was ingratiation (Jones & Pittman, 1982, p. 231), in which users depict themselves as nice and friendly. This can be identified in group selfies where they are among friends and directly associate themselves with a social group. It is also noticed more indirectly through images of events that may or may not show them clearly in the frame, from parties to smaller gatherings (e.g., dining out), thus indicating that they are engaging in social activities. In the interviews, participants also demonstrated an intention of being perceived as cool, friendly, and open-minded through the content they share on Instagram Stories.

Still based on Jones and Pittman’s (1982) taxonomy, the results indicate that some Instagram Stories users adopt exemplification as a self-presentation strategy by showcasing their commitment and being moral examples to others. In a practical way, this is developed through sharing social causes, discussing human rights issues (e.g., women’s rights), or debating relevant contemporary international problems, such as conflicts and wars. Two other strategies named by the authors (supplication and intimidation) regarding face-to-face interactions were not identified in the analysis, as people shared more positive content on Stories, avoiding negativity or depicting it as an engagement in causes.

When it comes to the self-presentational motivations (Baumeister & Hutton, 1987), both motives were present: Pleasing the audience and self-construction. Regarding the first, participants mention that they take into consideration the response received from their followers, thus looking for ways to satisfy their interests when posting something, be it as a topic (e.g., travel, food) or as a carefully thought visual design. However, they seek to align this incentive with self-construction by sharing information that is consistent with their personality and interests (e.g., social causes) and by maintaining consistent patterns to avoid self-contradiction (Baumeister & Hutton, 1987, p. 77).

Additionally, the user’s visual self-presentation strategies become highly complex, following the platform affordances: The exposure time is usually shortened to a few seconds per story; the content can be hyper-connected with the addition of hashtags, geotags, or trendy features (e.g., a sticker that allows other users to post about the same topic). Also, partakers can distinguish their audiences (e.g., close friends list) and communicate different information to each one, thus filtering and curating their self-presentation according to the spectators. On top of that, the visual content itself enables several layers of multimodal information to be conveyed simultaneously, while in other social media or on the feed they represent separated elements apart from the image. For instance, a single story with a photo can have a filter added to correct or highlight certain attributes, a text and emoji may complement or reinforce the message, a geotag supports the setting/environment identification, etc.

To conclude (see *Table 9*), Instagram Stories allows for a wider scope of opportunities for users to craft their image, presenting a polished and curated version of themselves or a more diversified and “realistic” depiction of their routine. The feature is seen by participants as a more practical platform for self-presentation compared to other social media platforms, as it allows for more direct and immediate communication with one’s audience in a less formal tone. Finally, Stories is used strategically by young people to curate and project desired perspectives of their lives, while also navigating the complexities of social judgment and personal branding.

Summary of results related to Instagram Stories usage among the youth		
Themes developed in the TA	Self-presentation strategies	Visual mobile communication
A built relationship with ephemerality	Audience management in distinct levels	Ubiquitous/pervasive visual presentation
An advent of quick communication	Curated routinary self-promotion	Instantaneous/simultaneous sharing of daily events
A strategic tool for self-	Indirect and direct ingratiation	Feedback loop feeding into self-

presentation		presentation habits
A visual expression practice	Exemplification through advocacy	Swift visual interactions to convey meanings

Table 9. Summary of results related to Instagram Stories usage among the youth.
(Source: Own elaboration)

4.5.4. Discussing ephemerality and visual self-presentation

In the past decade, we have witnessed a surge and increase in the use of ephemeral content. Instagram Stories, introduced as a response to the popularity of Snapchat, allows users to share transient images that disappear after 24 hours. Other social media platforms have incorporated similar features and, more recently, an application (BeReal) entirely centered on the idea of ephemerality was launched. The practical design of these features/apps encourages spontaneous and authentic sharing, apparently relieving the pressure of producing curated content, while offering various creative tools, such as filters, stickers, and text overlays for users to personalize their stories.

The notion of ephemerality itself is deeply rooted in contemporary society, where constant change and novelty are valued (Lipovetsky, 1989). The concept extends beyond social media, impacting other areas, including the appearance of seasonal fashion and ubiquitous photography. In this context, I defined ephemeral content as the information automatically programmed to disappear, which includes ephemeral media on Stories and BeReal. Intersecting with ephemerality, we have noticed the phenomenon of quick communication: The process of interacting swiftly or for a brief time, while still conveying meaning through actions such as reaction to a story, “liking” a message, or just the fast consumption of online content on social media (e.g., succinctly assessing stories or TikTok and skipping to the next content).

To continue and expand the previous discussion, I will reflect in this section upon (and answer) the *What characteristics distinguish the use of ephemeral images as a communication practice on visual social media?* Participants adopt ephemeral content as a dynamic and fleeting forum to depict themselves, using Instagram Stories for quick communication, demonstrating the unique uses and attributes of the feature. Therefore, the youth’s self-presentation strategies, as described above, include sharing personal content such as daily routines, as well as informational and extraordinary topics such as travels and human rights issues. From a more technical perspective, their image styles include full shots and landscapes to provide viewers with a broader context, but also close-ups and extreme close-ups to highlight

specific details, while selfies and group selfies suggest approaches to insert themselves as part of the depicted event/experience.

Moreover, the youth indicated that self-presentation through ephemeral content is directly connected with what they are doing in their life. For instance, moving to a new country where they face different experiences, traveling, or meeting with friends to socialize can generate visuals that are worth sharing. On a smaller scale, mundane events such as cooking, eating a meal, shaving a beard, looking in the mirror, or going for a walk, may still reach external visibility as long as the user considers the act relevant or the images aesthetically appealing. Therefore, visuality has a significant role in their self-presentation, with the events being thought of concerning how they can be depicted. Some examples are organizing a meal on the table to look good in the picture or thinking strategically about a trip to register each step in a way that will result in coherent visual storytelling over time.

Another element of Instagram Stories pointed out by partakers refers to its deliberated application for specific interpersonal communication purposes, including flirting and courtship, which reflects the unique characteristics and features that facilitate swift and immediate exchanges among users. For example, users may share content that is thought of in advance to attract the attention of a particular person, who in consequence will react to or reply to the Story, offering the scope for a dialogue to begin. These cues are different from face-to-face interactions or to other online platforms, as the main purpose is not to generate an open discussion (e.g., as in comments from a post on the feed), but rather bring the conversation to a private sphere (Direct Messaging area).

Exploring how ephemerality intersects with self-presentation among the studied subjects, it is observed that the constant feedback enabled by affordances on the ephemeral content platform favors the youth's self-understanding (e.g., seeing themselves as funny, beautiful, famous, etc.). Additionally, this audience response contributes to shaping specific continuous visual patterns of/for the user's self-presentation. For example, if an individual sees themselves as funny and receives good feedback when posting related content, they may be prompted to share humorous visuals that align with those qualities/perception of humor and that equally generated a positive engagement with their audiences.

5. Conclusions, limitations, and further research

This research focuses on the influence of Instagram Stories, a popular ephemeral content feature, on the self-presentation of young people from a multidisciplinary perspective. More

specifically, it examines the use of transient images in visual mobile communication and analyzes how they are appropriated and interpreted by the users. Adopting diverse theoretical perspectives, I incorporated and proposed a dialogue with literature from visual communication, self-presentation, and Instagram studies, and employed a mixed-method approach, including focus groups, netnography, and interviews, to gain a comprehensive understanding of youth behavior and motivations in using ephemeral content for self-presentation.

This dissertation aimed to explore how visual mobile communication, specifically ephemeral images from Instagram Stories, affects the self-presentation of young people. To pursue this main objective, I divided the challenge into three more specific objectives: 1) To provide a theoretical basis on how social media applications with ephemeral content intersect with visual mobile communication, 2) to typify the visual self-presentation strategies mediated by ephemeral content of Instagram Stories among the youth, and 3) to investigate how the usage of ephemeral image features and platforms influences self-presentation among young people.

Including a heterogeneous group of young people, the study demonstrated that while some participants believed they were sharing diverse visuals on Stories, the actual content showed a certain level of repetition and patterns, particularly in the topics they depicted. The research also investigated their Instagram usage to offer a contextual background, including its role in social connections and comparisons, its technical qualities and affordances, and its usage to explore visualities. When it comes to the ephemeral content feature, the findings underlined the relationship between ephemerality and stories as a contemporary sociocultural practice, with the advent of quick communication that is centered on a fast consumption of information, even in interpersonal relations (e.g., swift reaction to a message/Story). Participants strategically adopt transient content for self-presentation by controlling the audience, exposing mundane experiences, seeking authenticity in multimodal visual expression, and limiting the visibility of their content.

From a visual mobile communication perspective, Instagram Stories allows individuals to use multimodal images to express complex ideas and emotions, thus impacting visibility practices. The feature provides real-time and immediate sharing experiences, allowing users to control their visibility and choose who they share their content with. As a consequence, ephemeral visuals create a sense of urgency for consumption and further foster a fear of missing out (FOMO). Additionally, it offers a unique feedback loop, enabling constant and synchronous interactions between the sender and the audience. In this sense, Stories mediates visual mobile

communication by providing an ephemeral and instantaneous visual connection, allowing users to experience events in real-time, gain insight and offer feedback into other people's lives.

Furthermore, contemporary self-presentation has also been affected by visual platforms, such as Instagram Stories, offering youth – and other audiences (e.g., older generations, companies, politicians, etc.) – new venues to explore their visibility. For instance, they curate their online personas using various strategies to showcase different facets of their identity and to create a consistent personal style. However, a negative side is that ephemeral features can foment pressure to make daily activities interesting (share-worthy), while users strive for authenticity and to balance personal enjoyment with audience attention. From previous studies regarding face-to-face interactions, self-promotion, ingratiation, and exemplification are identified as self-presentation strategies used in stories. The youth indicates that they consider the followers' response and align self-construction with pleasing the audience; while visuality plays a significant role in their presentation – for instance, by evaluating how events can be depicted in relation to their constructed aesthetic.

Finally, ephemeral features are deeply rooted in broader consumption practices in contemporary society, where constant change and novelty are valued, thus also fomenting transient information on social media. Participants in the study adopt ephemeral content as a forum to depict themselves, sharing both personal mundane activities (e.g., meals) and extraordinary experiences (e.g., travels). They use visuals to present not only themselves (e.g., selfies) but to provide contextual information regarding their environment with details of synchronous events. Ultimately, Instagram Stories serves as a platform for specific interpersonal communication purposes, such as flirting and courtship, providing a more “private” venue for reactions and interactions that are not visible to the general spectators.

To conclude, this research's significance within communication science has been demonstrated by its contribution to establishing connections between visual mobile communication, social media studies, and self-presentation theories. In this sense, the dissertation offers evidence of the communicative practices prevalent in the digital era among the youth and sheds light on how they utilize ephemeral content for self-presentation purposes. Lastly, the study addresses a knowledge gap by qualitatively exploring the usage of transient images on Instagram Stories, an area that has not been extensively researched despite being a popular empirical object among the studied public.

5.1. Limitations: Recommendations for researching ephemeral content

This research presents some limitations that could not be overcome, as in most scientific studies. In this section, I clarify some of the challenges I encountered while conducting the data collection and analysis, further justifying the approach taken in the study. These constraints refer to characteristics of ephemeral content itself, the chosen platform (Instagram), the sample collected for analysis, and the observed public, as well as methodological choices. In regards to this latter, the qualitative exploratory nature of this research means that its results offer a comprehension of the phenomenon, but the findings do not aim for generalization. As explained in the methodology chapter, one of the measures to guarantee a certain level of reproductivity and reinforce reliability was adopting a multimodal approach, thus exploring the object from more than one angle with the use of focus groups, netnography, and interviews.

Connected with the procedure for data collection, the research has a limited sample of participants (43) and images (782) which supports the analysis but does not represent the entire population. Concerning the first issue, partakers were volunteers and it was challenging to encourage a bigger number of people to join the discussions. There were specific characteristics to qualify for the participation that further limited the volunteers' availability but were necessary for the scope of the study, including age (being born in/after 2001, but above 18 years old), geographical location (being able to attend the focus group face-to-face in Budapest), and technology usage (being an Instagram user). Regarding the images, I aimed for a significant sample that could contribute to a robust qualitative analysis based on the initial pilot study, as it would be complicated to manually retrieve and analyze a larger sample, as they are mostly multimedia content.

Another limitation refers to how/what participants allowed me to see as a researcher. This applies to both their self-disclosed and discussed information (focus groups and interviews) and the data retrieved from Instagram (netnography). There are factors beyond the research setting (e.g., cultural background) that could reflect on how much they felt comfortable sharing with me throughout the conversations, especially as it was recorded, but I tried to make them feel comfortable and guaranteed the protection of sensitive data. When it comes to the online environment, some of them added me to their "close friends" list, enabling a closer observation of information that not all their followers could receive, but this wasn't a mandatory step in the process, hence not everyone did it.

Related to the data collection, I also faced constraints regarding the chosen platform. Firstly, the images could not be automatically retrieved due to two reasons: Instagram limits

the use of software to collect data regularly, which is even more difficult when the images are from closed (private) accounts. In addition to that, due to safety and privacy reasons, using third-party software could expose the participants' information to external agents, thus not being an ethical approach. Therefore, I had to set a manual screen-recording software every day to register what users had posted in the past 24 hours and save it as a single video, thus making the identification and analysis of each story a bit more difficult, although it was still pursued. Furthermore, Instagram does not make it totally transparent how stories are ranked or displayed to other users (e.g., my account as a researcher), which limits what can be discussed in regard to the visibility affordances from a platform level. That is, I can only observe and analyze what is shown, but it is not possible to fully explain how the application and its algorithm interfere with what users see from their peers; and as described previously, when their content is seen (and reacted to), it can influence the feature usage.

Although there are some limitations to the research, I also followed recommendations from previous studies on each step. For instance, the focus group data included demographics and themes that provide an understanding of the contextual background for Instagram Stories usage among the youth, as recommended by Vicsek (2007). I also followed Kozinets' (2010) guidelines and ethical considerations for the netnography. Finally, a personal commitment I made refers to enabling as much transparency as possible in all the research processes, thus presenting an extended set of appendices with support material that allows further research replicability.

5.2. Further research: Directions for new scientific inquiries

There are still many dimensions of ephemeral content usage that have not been fully investigated scientifically. This dissertation covered one aspect of the object, proposing a dialogue between visual mobile communication, social media studies, and self-presentation theories as a framework to interpret the youth communicative practices on Instagram Stories. Future research could further address this topic from a quantitative perspective, thus expanding on the demographics and longitude of the sample. In this sense, a cross-cultural quantitative comparison of how users in different countries use stories for self-presentation could elicit new findings about the topic.

Some of the results indicated in this study may also contribute to novel research, by following the initial findings to delve into particular specialized matters. For example, specialists in behavioral sciences can analyze specific angles of the relationship between the

feature and users' impression management, especially from a psychological view (e.g., focusing on traits such as FOMO or social comparison and ephemerality). As noted in the systematic literature review (SLR), many fields and disciplines have already shown interest in the object, hence opening the range for peer scrutiny and scientific testing/replication.

Moreover, communication and media or marketing researchers can explore the platform usage from multiple approaches: Firstly, how youth consume advertisement and sponsored transient content, thus comparing the habit with other social media/features to better comprehend their perception of advertising in an ephemeral context. Secondly, how companies can utilize these features to strengthen their relationship (e.g., branding) with younger audiences on social media, analyzing current practices in different sectors of society (e.g., fashion, creative industries, etc.). Thirdly, more investigation can be developed with respects to the platform affordances, evaluating how they change over time and in which ways they affect users' self-presentation differently over time.

Furthermore, since ephemerality is popular not only on Instagram Stories nowadays, future studies could investigate self-presentation through transient content with a cross-platform comparison. For instance, how people adopt Stories, BeReal or TikTok in multiple (or similar) ways to convey messages about themselves, their environment, and their experiences to distinct audiences. A multi-platform analysis may elicit new characteristics of their usage that are not fully grasped by a single feature exploration.

Finally, as indicated in the literature review and as a personal annotation throughout the study, there is a lack of methodological frameworks to study ephemeral content. Although methods and techniques already established for the investigation of other phenomena permitted a significant examination of the youth self-presentation, other researchers could propose more direct guidelines for the observation, retrieval, and analysis of multimedia transient visuals beyond stories. I am currently working on initial discussions about this matter in a different publication (Veloso da Silva, in press), but the proposal of a unified methodological approach is still an open area for development.

5.3. Practical implications: Applicability and contributions of findings

This study shed light on the contemporary phenomenon of youth self-presentation with ephemeral content on Instagram Stories. Considering the popularity of the feature nowadays, counting on more than one billion users globally (Kemp, 2023), exploring its communication usage is relevant as it contributes to a better understanding of the socio-cultural and

technological aspects of youth's social media practices. Therefore, the findings contribute to the understanding of contemporary digital interactions, particularly among young people, and the impact of transient visuals on visibility practices.

On a broader perspective, these research findings also contribute to the comprehension of how contemporary societies – more specifically young people – produce, share, interact with and consume images on the Internet. This is an operation that has changed consistently for decades, from visual communication on websites to the more recent development and popularization of new technologies, such as smartphones, leading to visual mobile communication. Thus, I offered new angles and contexts regarding the intersection of visuality and self-presentation nowadays, with Stories fomenting certain (visual) patterns/trends.

From a more practical approach, the findings can be used by communication and marketing professionals when creating visual graphics directed at this audience. Therefore, understanding how the youth present themselves allows the market to better communicate with them on social media, especially with visual mobile applications, following similar styles and strategies as those identified in the research. Thus, companies that want to target young users on Instagram can get inspired by this study while designing their social media campaigns, considering the topics/events that attract their attention and how they interact online. Finally, the dissertation demonstrated that ephemerality is a pervasive attribute of contemporary online interactions, with quick communication practices reflecting its empirical occurrence.

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8. Appendices

Appendix 1 - Codebook for Instagram Stories

This codebook follows guidelines proposed by MacQueen et al. (1998) for qualitative research coding, being inspired by previous studies (Hu et al., 2014; Saeideh Bakhshi et al., 2014; Brown Jarreau et al., 2019). The categories were updated and expanded based on the information provided by the research participants and on the netnography of Instagram Stories in the Pilot Research.

Categories	Criteria
1) Image category	This category relates to what element/object is depicted in the image and helps to understand the visual topics shown on Instagram Stories.
Person/People	If the image depicts a human agent directly. It does not include humans far from the camera in open or public places.
City/Architecture	If the image shows buildings, bridges, city skyline, urban areas, streets, windows/doors, halls, squares, etc.
Nature/Landscapes	If the image depicts outdoor green areas, such as parks, trees, lakes, rivers, flowers, or other related elements.
Objects/Gadgets	If the image shows isolated objects without a clear surrounding or understanding of the <i>Action/Activity</i> , such as smartphones, sunglasses, etc. It does not include objects that are related to Art/Culture, Fashion/Beauty, not to Food/Drinks.
Text/Quotes	If the image has text as its main element, as for motivational quotes.
Memes/Humour	If the image adopts the content with a humorous intention or to raise awareness, as for memes, cartoons, etc.
Animals/Pets	If the image has as a primary agent an animal, as for cats, dogs, etc.
Art/Culture	If the image depicts clearly one object or space that can be identified in relation to its artistic or cultural aspects, as for paintings in a museum or a movie in the cinema.
Fashion/Beauty	If the image refers to objects that are related to fashion or beauty, such as makeup, shoes, dresses, etc.

Food/Drinks	If the objects in the image are related to meals/food or drinks, such as a plate, hamburger, glass/bottle of beverage, etc.
Action/Activity	If the image clearly depicts one activity instead of the place/person. Two examples are images inside of a classroom without any human as the primary agent and without focus on the building/objects, which would refer to the activity <i>Studying</i> ; and images inside a bar/club without focus on the building/objects, which would refer to the activity <i>Partying</i> .
Others	If the image still has a clear agent but it is not one of the above and it is also not a recurring category throughout the sample.
Undefined	If it is not possible to distinguish the agent of the image and no action/activity is visually represented.
Category 1 (Photo Category) and its subcategories are inspired by Hu et al. (2014, p. 597), but they have been updated and expanded in this study to represent more clearly the Instagram Stories content. Refer to the original work for comparison.	
2) People depicted	This category relates to images that depict a human agent as the main information. It does not apply to people appearing in the background or randomly on the streets and public places.
Participant	If the owner of the account appears alone in the image.
Friends	If the image depicts a group together (more than one person) in a friendly way, as talking or users posing with other friends. It applies if the Participant <i>appears or not</i> in the image.
No human	If there is not a person or a group depicted primarily in the image or if only a few people appear in the distant background, without being the main focus of the content.
Others	If the participant mentions that those are strangers or if the image shows crowds or groups in public spaces.
Undefined	If it's not possible to define if the people appearing are directly connected to the Participant.
Category 2 (People Depicted) was created by the author based on information from the focus groups and on the netnography in the pilot phase.	

3) Image type	The category relates to the definition of technical characteristics that determines the type of content posted on Stories, such as videos, still photos, texts, etc.
Photo	If the content is a still image that has not been majorly edited to get movement. It includes still images with the addition of simple stickers or GIFs that don't alter the main information nor give movement to its main visual elements.
Videos	If the content shows a moving image, as a video or a collection of a still image, put together in the sequence. It also includes images that had GIFs or stickers added to them to symbolize movement (e.g., a running/walking figure on a running path, a door being opened, etc). It doesn't include the Boomerang type.
Boomerang	If the image is a video loop that goes back and forth on purpose, created as the Boomerang type.
Text	If the image contains majorly textual information, such as a quote, a sentence, or a written dialogue. If the textual content is a screenshot (e.g., chat on WhastApp), then it will be classified under that category as a Screenshot.
Collage	If the content includes a series of images organized collectively, of any type.
Illustration	If the image shows a designed or manipulated image with clear intentions, as for humorous memes or cartoons.
Screenshot	If the image shows a clear screenshot of another content, as for screenshots of a laptop screen, a smartphone screen, an application interface, etc.
Repost	If the image is a repost from the participant's account or from other accounts, which can be seen/opened by clicking on the content (does not include screenshots of posts).
Other	If the image is of another type, but not a frequent category throughout the sample.
Undefined	If it is not possible to distinguish the specific type of image shown in the content.
Category 3 (Image Type) was inspired by the category Visual type from the codebook of Brown Jarreau et al. (2019). Refer to original source for more details.	

4) Style of Shot	When a human or object/building is shown in the image, how is the subject depicted in relation to the photo type and distance to the camera
Selfie	If only <i>one person</i> appears in the image and the picture seems to be taken by the same person, usually while holding the smartphone/camera or with a selfie stick device from a close distance.
Group selfie	If the image depicts a group of people while one of them takes the Selfie. Some subjects may be further, but someone is close to the camera (the person taking the Selfie).
Extreme close up	Intimate detail or focus on specific body parts, such as feet, hands, etc., or for specific small details in an object, food, or building (when the environment is excluded and the focus is on a single piece of visual information, usually depicting a part of an object).
Close-up	Intimate, with the image showing only the face or upper body, as for portraits. It distinguishes from the Selfie for not showing the same subject holding the camera/smartphone. When referring to non-humans, it shows details of an object with bits of its surrounding/environment (e.g., a mug over a table).
Full shot	If the image is taken from a medium distance and it usually depicts the entire body or most of it in the image. When referring to non-humans, if the entire object (e.g., building) can be seen.
Landscape	Outer space, when the subject is distant from the camera or not directly visible, and the image ratio shows more of the environment than of the subject. When referring to non-humans, the image depicts more than a single object and scans the landscape/environment.
Mix	If the content depicts more than one type of image, as for a collage that contains multiple photos (e.g., a Selfie and a Landscape).
Not applicable	If the image does not show a clear subject, human agent, or body part in it, as for textual content or memes.
Undefined	If it is not possible to determine what type of relationship is established between the subject and the camera/smartphone.

Category 4 (Style of Shot) was inspired by the category Distance to Subject from the codebook of Brown Jarreau et al. (2019), with updates to include selfies and group selfies.

It also relates to Saeideh Bakhshi et al. (2014) work that suggests images with faces generate more engagement on Instagram. Refer to original sources for more details.

5) Activity	Definition of the main action or activity happening in the scene depicted by the images, such as partying, eating, drinking, walking/touring, etc.
Partying/Celebrating	If the image directly refers to a party place (e.g., bar, club) or shows people at a party. Images of the environment of the party.
Drinking	If the image depicts beverage as the primary visual element, as for glasses, bottles, mugs, or cheering with drinks. Image with a focus on the drinks, not on the environment of the drinking place.
Cooking	If the image shows the Participant or other people manipulating food or in an environment that resembles the kitchen while other elements show food-related objects (e.g., ingredients and kitchen utensils).
Talking	If the image shows an interaction between more than one person and it resembles a conversation/dialogue, if not clearly in any of the other activities (e.g., socializing while cooking/partying or clearly simulating a conversation in a pose).
Posing	If the image doesn't show much of the place/environment to distinguish it and focus on the person/people, who are looking at the camera or it's possible to notice poses for the photo.
Traveling	If the image shows the person/people or their view while in any means of transportation (airplane, train, car). It includes window views and stations. It doesn't include images in tourist places in Budapest, only if the image is taken in another city/country and this information is identifiable (e.g., via a geolocation tag or in the sequence of images).
Touring/Walking	If the image clearly shows the person exploring an outdoor place or a postcard view in Budapest, as long it is not necessarily a station or an identifiable touristic place in a different city/abroad (for Traveling). It includes images around the city, on the streets, in markets, etc.
Doing sports	If the image depicts gyms, any sports activity (e.g., soccer, basketball, etc.), or if the person is shown in sports clothes within an environment that resembles a sports venue (not a close-up pose, which stands for <i>Posing</i>).

Studying	If the image shows an action/activity related to studies, such as a board, a classroom, books, assignments, etc.
Advocating/Promoting	If the image shows information related to identifiable causes or campaigns (e.g., human rights, wars, political views, etc.). This category has mostly informational and persuasion objectives, as the participant wants to show “what’s happening” in relation to a group/community to inform/sensibilize their audiences.
Not applicable	If the image doesn’t depict any direct activity or action, as for quotes or still objects not related to one of the activities coded.
Others	If the image depicts any other activity clearly identifiable but not connected to the other variables in this category.
Undefined	If it is not possible to distinguish which activity or action is happening in the image.
Category 5 (Activity) was elaborated based on data provided by participants in a form during the focus groups and on the netnography from the pilot research.	
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Appendix 2 - Focus group research design and questions guideline

Corvinus University of Budapest
Doctoral School of Sociology and Communication Science
Communication Science Doctoral Program

Research Title: “Forever ephemeral? Youth self-presentation through Instagram Stories in the context of visual mobile communication”

Researcher: Admilson Veloso da Silva, Ph.D. Candidate

Supervision: Doctor Ágnes Veszelszki

The Researcher is sponsored by Tempus Public Foundation with the Stipendium Hungaricum Scholarship Programme.

This focus group has the objective to provide data and information that will contribute to answering the dissertation Research Questions 1 and 2:

RQ1: *How does online ephemeral content influence visibility practices among the youth in the context of visual mobile communication?*

RQ2: *What specific strategies are used for visual self-presentation mediated by ephemeral images on Instagram Stories?*

Focus group identification _____

(Pilot Research or FG1, FG2, etc)

Date of the focus group: _____

Place of the focus group: _____

Time of the focus group: _____

Number of Participants: _____

Number of Participants ideally 6-10 | Duration: one hour

Retribution: chocolate for all participants + transportation fare (2000 HUF) and snacks

Other tasks: sign and collect Consent form + Demographic form from Participants

Method:

Demographic Form - Following the 5 topics of the discussion

Discussion of five main topics, two questions for each (focusing on What, How, Why)

Participants will be identified with a *code* by chair location (space distribution)

Record the discussion in video and audio

Transcript the records with the support of the Research Assistant (RA)

Orientations:

The RA tasks will be: 1) record the focus group in audio and video; 2) assist in the two forms distribution, signature and collection; 3) identify Participants with codes; 4) take notes during the discussion; 5) help transcribe the focus group content. The Researcher will lead the focus group discussion, transcribe/review the transcripts, and code and analyze the data.

Topics for the focus group (questions are directed to Participants = “you”):

Topic 1 - Smartphone camera usage among the Youth

Q1: *How do you use your smartphone cameras in your daily life?* (Prompt: For instance, what activities you use it for, places you take it with you, etc).

Q2: *Why is the smartphone camera important for you nowadays?* (Prompt: How do you connect it with your daily life? For instance, comparing its use to how we used analog cameras).

Topic 2 - Image-sharing habits on Instagram among the youth

Q1: *How do you use Instagram nowadays?* (Prompt: the characteristics of Instagram usage and habits that are important and maybe not so common)

Q2: *What are your main motivations/reasons to use Instagram?* (Prompt: Imagining that we have several social media, the motivations to using Instagram specifically).

Topic 3 - Instagram Stories usage (type of experiences) among the Youth

Q1: *What kind of experiences do you share on Instagram Stories?* (Prompt: Which activities and experiences become visible there; if possible, give a practical example. For instance, I post my running/workout activity).

Q2: *Why do you share these specific experiences on Instagram Stories?* (Prompt: Think of the differences in the experiences/activities shared there regarding the feed, for example; or why is it shared on the Stories and not necessarily on other places).

Topic 4 - Instagram Stories usage (motivations) among the youth

Q1: In your opinion, *which elements make Instagram Stories popular among the youth?* (Prompt: think of its tools, functionalities, settings, and what makes it attractive to young people).

Q2: Thinking about other people of your age, *why are they using platforms with ephemeral content?* (Prompt: In your opinion, what motivates them to post to the Stories in comparison to Facebook feed, for example).

Topic 5 - Self-presentation through Instagram Stories among the Youth

Q1: In your opinion, *how can Instagram Stories impact/influence the way you present yourself online?* (Prompt: think of what are the changes in the forms you present yourself in comparison to older generations or older platforms, for instance).

Q2: Thinking about your peers of the same age range, *what characteristics of their relationship with Instagram Stories do you think it's important to understand this behavior?* (Prompt: When you think of young people and Instagram Stories, what are the things that come to your mind).

Topic 6 - Open comments

Q: *What other thoughts or elements do you think are important when talking about Instagram Stories and the youth? Any additional comments on all the topics we talked about?*

Appendix 3 - Focus group demographic form

Corvinus University of Budapest
Doctoral School of Sociology and Communication Science
Communication Science Doctoral Program

Focus Group - Smartphone and Instagram Usage
Researcher: Admilson Veloso da Silva - Ph.D. Candidate

Full name: _____ // **Code name:** _____
Instagram account (@): _____ **Email:** _____
Date of birth (Day/Month/Year) _____
Gender: () Male / () Female / () Genderqueer / () Other _____
Nationality: _____

1) When did you start using (first contact) a smartphone? (e.g., from parents)

- 1) () Before turning 5 years old
- 2) () Between 5 to 10 years old
- 3) () Between 10 to 15 years old
- 4) () Between 15 to 20 years old
- 5) () After being 20 years old

2) When did you get your first (own) smartphone?

- 1) () Before turning 5 years old
- 2) () Between 5 to 10 years old
- 3) () Between 10 to 15 years old
- 4) () Between 15 to 20 years old
- 5) () After being 20 years old

3) Overall, how many hours do you spend online on your smartphone daily?

1. () Less than one hour (<1h)
2. () One to two hours (1h-2h)
3. () Two to four hours (2h-4h)
4. () Four to six hours (4h-6h)
5. () Six to eight hours (6h-8h)
6. () Eight to ten hours (8h-10h)
7. () Ten to twelve hours (10h-12h)
8. () More than twelve hours (>12h)

4) What are the five applications/tools that you use more often on your smartphone?

5) Since when do you have an Instagram account?

_____/_____(month/year)

How: Open Profile>click 3 lines ≡ top right>Settings>Security>Access Data (Data and History)

6) When do you use Instagram more often?

1. () Early morning mostly
2. () Morning in general

3. During the breaks: lunch, breakfast, dinner
4. Afternoon mostly
5. Evening mostly
6. Night time before bed mostly
7. Throughout the whole day

7) What other activities do you usually do simultaneously while using Instagram/Stories?
(i.e.: eating, studying or in classes, working out, talking to people, cooking, none, etc)

8) How many times do you open/use your Instagram app daily?

1. Once for a short time or rarely
2. Two to four times
3. Four to six times
4. Six to eight times
5. Eight to ten times
6. More than ten times
7. It stays open most of the day

9) Who are your main connections on your *Instagram account*?

(i.e.: friends, family, university colleagues, strangers/unknown, influencers, business/brands)

Followers: _____

Following: _____

10) What types of images do you post more often to *Instagram (feed)*?
(i.e.: selfies, landscapes, food, fitness, travels, animals, quotes, events, city/architecture, etc)

11) What types of images do you usually post to *Instagram Stories specifically*?
(i.e.: selfies, landscapes, food, fitness, travels, animals, quotes, events, city/architecture, etc)

12) How often do you post to *Instagram Stories*?

- Once daily
- Many times daily
- Once weekly
- Many times weekly
- I rarely post to Stories
- Not very specific regularity

13) What types of images do you usually watch/see on *Instagram Stories (people you follow)*?

(i.e.: selfies, landscapes, food, fitness, travels, animals, quotes, events, architecture, etc)

Other comments:

Appendix 4 - Research participation informed consent form

<p style="text-align: center;">Corvinus University of Budapest Doctoral School of Sociology and Communication Science Communication Science Doctoral Program</p>

Informed Consent Form for the youth participating in the research “Forever ephemeral? Youth self-presentation through Instagram Stories in the context of visual mobile communication”, divided into a focus group, a netnography, and a one-to-one semi-structured interview. This form is inspired by the Informed Consent Form Template for Qualitative Studies from the Research Ethics Review Committee of the World Health Organization (WHO ERC) and aligned with the GDPR (General Data Protection Regulations).

The study is conducted by the Ph.D. Candidate Admilson Veloso da Silva, under the supervision of Doctor Ágnes Veszelszki, at the Corvinus University of Budapest. The Researcher is sponsored by Tempus Public Foundation with the Stipendium Hungaricum Scholarship Programme.

This Informed Consent Form has two parts:

- **Information Sheet (to share information about the study with you)**
- **Certificate of Consent (for signatures if you choose to participate)**

You will be given a copy of the full Informed Consent Form

Part I: Information Sheet

Introduction

You are invited to participate in the research entitled “Forever ephemeral? Youth self-perception through visual self-representation in the digital culture”, as part of the Doctoral Studies in Communication Science at Corvinus University of Budapest of the Ph.D. Candidate Admilson Veloso da Silva (hereinafter the Researcher). The research will be divided into three phases: a focus group, a netnography, and a one-to-one semi-structured interview described in the Procedures section.

If you do not understand some of the words or concepts, you are entitled to ask for further explanation from the Researcher.

Purpose of the research

Instagram and Instagram Stories have become popular platforms among the youth, with thousands of images shared there daily. Hence, the purpose of this research is to analyze, within visual mobile communication, how the mediation of images for self-presentation on Instagram Stories influences the youth’s self-perception. Thus, it will touch upon the Participant’s usage, relationship with, and habits regarding the platform Instagram Stories.

Types of Research Intervention

Three interventions will take place throughout the research: a focus group of approximately one hour with up to ten Participants, an explorative netnography to collect images posted online, and an individual interview with Participants.

Participant Selection

You were selected to participate in this research based on a form that you filled online and because you a) were born in or after 2001, b) you are an Instagram user.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. It is your choice whether to participate or not. You may change your mind later and stop participating even if you agreed earlier. If a Participant wants to withdraw their participation from the research, they should inform the Researcher via email: milsonvelososilva@gmail.com or da.veloso@stud.uni-corvinus.hu

Procedures

- Focus group: you and other people will be asked to share your opinion in a round of discussions regarding smartphone photography practices, Instagram, and Instagram Stories usage. You are free to express your thoughts without judgment and everyone's opinion should be equally respected. The focus group will be video and audio recorded for the sole purpose of review, transcription, and codification. Participants' confidentiality is protected and their identity will not be disclosed. When necessary, Participants may be assigned a codename in the study. A Research Assistant will be present at the focus group to support in data collection.
- Netnography: Participants will provide their Instagram account (username) and the profile will be followed by the research account. Throughout this phase, the researcher will record and store publications made by Participants for later codification and analysis. The material will be protected to preserve Participants identity and it may be used solely for academic purposes. When the content appears in any academic publication, including the dissertation, the identity of the Participant shall be omitted and any human face will be covered with pixelization.
- Interview: the third phase consists of a one-to-one interview in which Participants will be asked about topics regarding Instagram and Instagram Stories usage, images consumption habits, self-presentation on Instagram Stories, and self-perception through Instagram Stories photo-sharing practices. A Participant may be presented to one of their own publications and asked to comment on it. Their names and identity shall be preserved and, when necessary, a codename will be used. If you do not wish to answer any of the questions during the interview, you may say so and the interviewer will move on to the next question.

We will not ask you to share any confidential information and you do not have to share any knowledge, information, or experience that you are not comfortable sharing. The Focus Group and Interview will happen at Corvinus University of Budapest, while the netnography will be conducted online on Instagram. The interview can be done online on Teams or Zoom platforms.

Duration

The research takes place in Budapest from October 2021 to June 2023. During that time, we may contact you via email or Instagram to clarify any information. The focus group will last for approximately one hour, the netnography will be conducted online throughout the research

timeframe, and the interview is expected to last 30 minutes.

Image Consent

The Participant gives the Researcher permission to record and reproduce images posted to Instagram or Instagram Stories throughout the period of the research. The Participant grants full rights to use the images resulting from the research data collection, and any reproductions or adaptations of the images for academic and research purposes to help achieve the research objective. This might include (but is not limited to), the right to use them in printed and online format in the dissertation, papers, press releases and other publications regarding the research and its results. Participants are entitled to confidentiality and their identity will be preserved in any content that uses their images.

Risks

We are asking you to share with us some personal experiences regarding your habits of image-sharing and consumption on Instagram Stories, and you may feel uncomfortable talking about some of the topics. You do not have to answer any question or take part in the discussion/interview if you don't wish to do so, and that is also fine. You do not have to give us any reason for not responding to any question, or for refusing to take part in the interview.

Benefits

There will be no direct benefit to you other than understanding about the research, but your participation is likely to help us find out more about how Instagram Stories influence users' self-perception.

Reimbursements

You will not be provided any incentive to take part in the research. However, we will give you 2000 HUF (two thousand HUF) when first attending the research center at the university for your time and travel expenses.

Confidentiality and Data Protection

The research is being done in the Corvinus University of Budapest and if you participate you may be asked questions by other people in its community. We will not be sharing information about you to anyone outside of the research team. The information that we collect from this research project will be kept private. Any information about you will have a number or a codename on it instead of your name. Only the researchers will know your number or codename. It will not be shared with or given to anyone except the research team who will have access to the information.

We kindly ask you and others in the group not to talk to people outside the group about what was said in the group. We will, in other words, ask each of you to keep what was said in the group confidential. You should know, however, that we cannot stop or prevent Participants who were in the group from sharing things that should be confidential.

Sharing the Results

Nothing that you tell us today will be shared with anybody outside the research team, and nothing will be attributed to you by name. The knowledge that we get from this research may be shared with you before it is made widely available to the public. Following the research phase, we will publish the results in the dissertation and in papers so that other interested people may learn from the research.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

You do not have to take part in this research if you do not wish to do so, and choosing to participate will not affect your job, studies or related evaluations in any way. You may stop participating in the research at any time that you wish.

Who to Contact

If you have any questions, you can ask them now or later. If you wish to ask questions later, you may contact the following:

Admilson Veloso da Silva

Phone number: +36 70 580 9349

Email: milsonvelososilva@gmail.com

This proposal has been reviewed and approved by the Doctoral School of Sociology and Communication Science at the Corvinus University of Budapest. If you wish to find out more about the Doctoral School of Sociology and Communication Science, contact its Coordinator: Kálmán László laszlo.kalman@uni-corvinus.hu

Part II: Certificate of Consent

I have been invited to participate in research about Youth self-perception through visual self-representation in the digital culture.

I have read the foregoing information, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it and any questions I have been asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent voluntarily to be a Participant in this study

Name of Participant _____

Signature of Participant _____

Place (City, Country) _____

Date _____

Day/month/year

Name of Researcher _____

Signature of Researcher _____

Place (City, Country) _____

Date _____

Day/month/year

Appendix 5 - Semi-structured interview questions guideline

The interview meeting starts with a brief summary of this phase in the research and the request for permission from the participant to record the Teams Meeting. As participants and researcher are acquainted, the conversation usually starts with a quick icebreaker/raport created from what the researcher saw on their account (without specifying this information).

1. How do you describe yourself from the Instagram Stories content? *Prompt: Taking what you share, think of how you'd describe the person that is shown in those images/content.*
2. Do you usually review who is watching or reacting to your content on Instagram Stories? Please, comment on your initial answer (the reasons for it). *Prompt: For example, after posting, you check who has seen it, if they have interacted (i.e.: via poll).*
3. What are the common reactions you get from followers on Instagram Stories? Tell me about the response people give to your content.
4. What kind of content usually gets more reactions from your followers? Any specific topic (travel, politics, events) or type of content (photo, video, boomerang, quotes).
5. How likely would you be to share more content of a style/type (i.e.: selfie, food, landscapes) that gets more reaction, that is more popular for your audience? Please, comment on your initial answer (the reasons for it).
6. How would you describe your relationship with your followers? *Prompt: if they're more active, more passive watchers, strangers, distant friends, friends, etc.*
7. What elements from Instagram Stories do you usually add to your content? And how does this content connect to your identity? *Prompt: For instance, poll, geolocation, hashtag, GIFs, music, etc.*
8. How do you think people see you from the Instagram Stories you share? *Prompt: Considering their reactions and comments, imagine the perception they have of you.*
9. How would you like to be seen by other people via Instagram Stories? *Prompt: Now, tell me how you would like to be perceived, the image you would like to build of yourself via that content if you could control it completely.*
10. What aspect from your identity people can't see via your Instagram Stories content? *Prompt: Think of those things that you never or very rarely share about yourself there.*
11. How people's reaction (or lack of reaction) impacts on your posting activity? *Prompt: If their feedback and interaction makes you want to post more or less content.*
12. Could you tell us one specific situation of reaction/feedback from a Story you

posted and how did that make you feel? *Prompt: it can be a simple reaction or a talk.*

13. How have your content and sharing activity on Instagram Stories changed over time? *Prompt: For instance, what you used to share three years ago, one year ago, nowadays in relation to topics or type of images...*

14. How is your use of Instagram Stories daily/weekly? *Prompt: For example, if you post more on specific days/times, and watch more on other days/times.*

15. You posted this photo (IMAGE SAMPLE) on your Instagram Stories. Tell me a bit about it: What is the image about (tell the experience it depicts)? Please, comment on how it helps to describe who you are.

16. Are there any other comments you would like to make about your use of Instagram Stories? *Prompt: Maybe a situation or something that happened and you find it interesting to share*

Appendix 6 - Focus group transcript sample (FG03)

Corvinus University of Budapest
Doctoral School of Sociology and Communication Science
Communication Science Doctoral Program

Focus Group - Transcription Form

Question: Which Question of the focus group was addressed

Time: Exact moment of the recording a person started talking

Code: Attributed code of Participant (FG01P01)

Speech: all the speech shared by the Participant (entire talk)

Question identification: T1Q1, T1Q2, T3Q2, T5Q1, etc.

Focus group identification: FG03 - Date: 22/09/2022

Question	Time	Code	Speech
T1Q1	17:48	FG03P01	Well, I mostly use it to take pictures usually. I sometimes use it as a mirror too to check something...Yeah, mostly pictures of myself.
T1Q1	18:21	FG03P02	Yeah...I use camera as a kind of a journal I take pictures of anything (indistinct) because I have all my pictures backed up and I like to think that I'm 20 years old back. But if it would come to a more specific things, I would...every day as a rule...I usually take a couple of pictures on my girlfriend every day and I just like doing that and she doesn't like that very much. But she has to put up with it.
T1Q1	18:55	FG03P03	So, I usually use camera on the phone to send snaps like those are just photographs on Snapchat or just random photographs. Also, I use it to take photos of some information that I need to remember, or I need to use: like passwords or some school related information that I need to take pictures of and just for regular photographing of, of the city of the views, that's mostly.
T1Q1	19:32	FG03P04	Yeah, yeah. I do the same thing. So usually I like taking pictures of, like, landscapes or something pretty that I see, literally anything. I'll just take a picture of it, to check myself. I use it. I, also in class, like, if I'm taking notes, and it's too fast, I'll take a picture of it, so I can write it down later. Also,

			documents, whatever, it's. Basically, the most important things are on my phone.
T1Q1	20:02	FG03P04	Both (taking pictures and scan documents). Sometimes less, and sometimes that.
T1Q1	20:11	FG03P05	I think (I am) the most boring here because, yeah, I just take pictures. Like, I don't do anything special with it. I don't check my tab (indistinct) or use it as a mirror or something. I just say picture of some things that I can relate.
T1Q2	21:11	FG03P04	There are now apps that, like, there's two: one's called Locket one's called Vibrio. Me and my friends, because we're in different countries, we'll take pictures of, like, ourselves or somebody, something we're doing, and we'll send it to each other. And that's kind of how we keep in contact now.
T1Q2	21:51	FG03P03	It's important for how young people communicate and share information because most of us use smartphone cameras to record videos and make different content on Instagram on TikTok. People don't use professional cameras anymore, they just use their smartphone. So, I guess this is the way how it is important to create content,
T1Q2	22:26	FG03P01	So yeah, I agree that it's very important to keep in contact with your friends, especially for us, students who are abroad that we want to share with our friends and family what we're doing or what we're seeing. But also like, it's also important to that it keeps you in touch also with your pest because after all, it's just the camera that serves a purpose that it served 50 years ago for what people used camera back in the time. We just use it, you know, to have a memory of something that happened and just keep it there. For example, it's a very good feeling when I see Snapchat, Snapchat memories from like three years ago or four years ago, it's like them, and time has passed, you know.
T1Q2	23:03	FG03P02	I think the same. As I said the last time, so, I use it to document my days. It's the...I think that at this point your memory, your app is no longer considered a reliable source of information or whatever happened. Plus, there's this expression 'you have pics, or it didn't happen'. So, you basically take pictures to prove that you did some work, that you were somewhere.

T1Q2	23:38	FG03P05	My friends use their cameras to take pictures of, like, school stuff and documents, so, actually they use it for word and that's why it's important for them. I don't like my gallery to be full with that school stuff, so I don't keep it there, but they have like the all these notes and just, like, they took it, take pictures of the board and stuff like this.
T2Q1	24:54	FG03P01	I can begin. I mostly use it to kill my time, like, or just send memes to my friends or just, yeah, the updated, like keep updated with my friends. We talked there like we sent messages, jokes and stuff like that. But I also follow like stuff that interested me like, for example, some news pages or like some political pages or whatever. Like, I just follow their things that I like so that you know, I can just waste my time in it sometimes or just. Yeah, see some cool video that I would like real, but it's mostly for friends and for fun.
T2Q1	25:31	FG03P01	Yes, (I send memes) inside Instagram...what appears on my Instagram. It's full of memes and stuff like that, yeah.
T2Q1	25:41	FG03P05	I usually use this for messaging. When I am on the feed page, I'm just waiting for the other one to reply (laughing). So yeah, when I find something interesting, I sent it to the person so...friends mostly.
T2Q1	26:02	FG03P04	Well, for me, the most important part and probably what I spend my time is the stories, and especially mine. I will rewatch my own story like 50 times [laughing]. I have like, I love to collect my memories and highlights on Instagram, so like my goal is to keep memories on Instagram. So I have, like, a lot of highlights, but yeah, so that's what I use Instagram for.
T2Q1	26:30	FG03P03	I use Instagram for stories also to keep my friends, my family, my distant relatives updated...what's going on in my life, because I don't chat with them. I just post stories. So they just see what's going on here (smiling). Also, I text mostly with my friends. Yeah, use it for entertainment purposes and...erm... I'm also following uh...the news pages...uh, some topics that I'm interested in, like workouts, trading. Just to keep myself updated with what's going on there.
T2Q1	27:17	FG03P02	My Instagram usage is boiled down to point, first, being strictly cheap entertainment consistent of purely memes. If you would see my feed, it would just

			be memes for kilometers, and I use them to either send them as everyone else does...talking now... in group chat with the friends and, the second, being keeping up with them (friends) because each one of us (indistinct) for example...in different countries and so on and they like...keeping up with them as far as posting goes, though, I would only post things that...uhh myself in predicaments of situations that my friends would find either funny or cool. You know, that's why.
T2Q2	29:03	FG03P05	I think the most important one that it's popular. Many people are using it so when I first started using it...it looks like the pressure, that maybe it's because I didn't have it for so long and my friends were like 'Did you see my post?'. 'No' [laughing]. So that's why I made it as well. So, I think it's because it's really, really popular. Look, we're going to go (there).
T2Q2	29:22	FG03P04	Uh, yeah, I think it's that's one of the main reasons and also because if you're looking for friends and people you want to connect with, most people have Instagram. So it's just the easiest thing to ask for or to.. like... have. And the 2nd is, because I feel like it's like the most user friendly out of all of them (applications). Like, it's really easy to use and it's very organized. So that's...I think...that's why.
T2Q2	30:13	FG03P04	Just to add...Can I just add something? I think that also because, you know, Tik Tok is very popular, and Instagram is basically all Tik Tok now or your feed is just full of Tik Tok (videos). So, it's basically like a mix of the most popular platforms and I think that's why we also gravitate towards it.
T2Q2	30:33	FG03P03	What I noticed is that most people use Instagram not just for entertainment, but also as a short and quick way to introduce themselves, what experience you have been through... who you are as a person. What's interesting in you, it depends on what stories do you post, what posts do you post, what comments do you get under your post. So, this is one way that I've noticed and the other way is that some people who are... uh, mostly creative, they create different content like entertainment content mostly on Instagram and this is the way that people use it in my circle.
T2Q2	31:56	FG03P02	I believe that uh, my theory at least is that Instagram popped up when me and my friends first started using

			social media. That being said, we used to use Facebook as well, but now it's commonly known that Facebook is home for old people only (all laughing) so (we) just stuck to Instagram. That's just my idea. Just purely time points.
T2Q2	32:35	FG03P01	Yeah. Yeah, I agree with most of the statements. It's just a quick way to create a perception of who you are to other people. Like, you just promote yourself, to advertise yourself in a way that, you know... So it's just a representation of yourself and what you do basically.
T2Q2	32:56	FG03P03	Also, I just wanted to add (as I said) that most popular people, not just popular people, but people who do something, they always use Instagram and use Instagram ads to target their own audience to get subscriptions and to start some, their own courses or to sell their products, or to advertise something. That's what they mostly use Instagram for, as a kind of business.
T2Q2	33:32	FG03P04	Yeah, also in my opinion, or at least the people that I know, like my circle of friends, it's, like, if you don't have, like, a big following on Instagram or if you don't have a lot of posts or, like, you know good posts at least. And I know that sounds horrible, but we judge someone based on their profile. So, that's just how it is: 'Well, they seem to have a lot of friends', 'they seem to do a lot of things', 'they seem interesting'. So, I think we just, like, at least in my circle (I'm saying) and, like, we connect the person to their profile. So, if you don't have an interesting profile, you're just, like, not an interesting person.
T2Q2	34:17	FG03P04	Ooh... that's different I guess (not having a profile). We wanna know why (all laughing), why don't you have a profile.
T2Q2	34:24	FG03P05	Also, Some people use it to show off now, and some of them not to showcase themselves, but they actually manage whole different new personality there. Like, they post things that they actually wouldn't do in real life, and they depict themselves in a way that they are not like. They have a separate personality online.
T2Q2	34:53	FG03P01	Yeah, I definitely seeing people who do that, like who are not like that in real life. So, I don't know, maybe just some people try to represent what they would like to be in real life in their social media that, I don't

			know, I 't think that's a very healthy thing to be (indistinct) in my opinion.
T3Q1	36:08	FG03P04	The most that goes into mine (stories) is the locations or traveling, but also, like, any...like, if I'm walking on the street and I see something cute and I post it, it's like, but like, it's certain things that like, it's not just like anything. I don't just post anything. It's, like, something cool or like, interesting. Then I would post it. But yeah, that's it basically.
T3Q1	36:39	FG03P04	Well, I just recently posted. I was going up in my dormitory and I I saw a little porcupine. So, I took a picture, a video of it, and I put on my Instagram because, you know, like, most of my followers at least they are my friends from back home. And we 't really see a lot of worthwhile. So I was like "here, look at this". It's interesting, you know? So yeah, so like that.
T3Q1	37:05	FG03P05	If you would follow me by my (indistinct), you could tell who I am, because usually everything is so personal, life, that when I am in Google or something I always (send) memes or something that I relate to and I share those.
T3Q1	37:24	FG03P03	Some extraordinary news, some political news or some financial news, technical. Something interesting and connected to nature, like, couple of days ago, there was flooding rain in Budapest and I just recorded that and posted and also there was a rain another day. Yesterday or two days ago when it was sunny, but it was still raining a little bit, it was very beautiful and I just recorded that and posted that in my stories. And I don't post anything else, just kind of selfies, sometimes, but I mostly try to post either something interesting, beautiful, news or something neutral. I don't post anything very personal.
T3Q1	38:18	FG03P01	For me it's mostly like architectural, like, beautiful things that I see on the street like a full building or something. And after that, it comes, like, if I'm in a cool event or something that looks cool or interesting or that I want people to know that I'm there or that I want just to share with people, I just post that as a story. Yeah, it's usually these two. I don't post that much stories usually, but neither posts, yeah.
T3Q1	38:45	FG03P02	My posting experience is divided into different cycles. Daylight, my day-to-day life, usually when I post is something that I find I either really funny or

			really interesting. For example, look at this cool graffiti or funny graffiti. Or look at this T-shirt with Donald Trump, Donald Trump's face, (indistinct), can you believe it? And my extraordinary life is when I either travel or when I have the event, something that breaks up the monotonous routine, like, look, we are eating pizza and we are in Milan or something.
T3Q2	40:37	FG03P04	First of all, I think Instagram because all of my friends are on Instagram. Also, I don't really have family members on Instagram, and I prefer that to be honest. Yeah! So, it's just to reach all my friends, everyone I want to reach. And because I always post, like, I only post the things I want to put in my highlights. So, whatever I post, I put it straight into my highlights. So that's why I don't use Snapchat. I don't use anything else.
T3Q2	41:25	FG03P05	Yeah [agrees]. Because I have my target all there in this app. When I do share something on Facebook, older people give really interesting comments [<i>laughing</i>]. You know what I mean. Like my grandma: 'You are so beautiful' and you are like 'No!'. So, yeah, because on Instagram I do not have that kind of comments. And also if somebody wants to comment on that content in the stories, it goes straight to you. So nobody else sees that. So it's more personal.
T3Q2	42:06	FG03P01	Yeah, basically, it's the same for me. All my friends are there and, like, if I share it anywhere else in my social media like, OK, I still have some friends who are on other social media, but all of my friends are just going to see it on Instagram. So that's the main reason! And mostly most of my friends just don't use Facebook anymore. So like, there's kind of no reason to share, only my teachers are going to see it on Facebook and high school teachers.
T3Q2	42:39	FG03P04	Also use Instagram for filters, like, I usually don't just post right away, I 'filter' it, make it look prettier, and then post it. Because usually it's like landscapes and stuff, so, yeah. So, I use the filters available and they're usually nicer than in any other applications.
T4Q1	43:48	FG03P02	They're quick and people my age usually don't like waiting around too long. Ohh, there, look, here is a quick overview of everyone. You know what they did during the past 24 hours. I think that's the most (important).

T4Q1	44:03	FG03P03	What Instagram did that it only shows a stories of people that you usually interact with mostly and, but you usually watch the stories, and when you pick the stories of someone to watch, they always put it in the 1st place. And after you've just started to watch their stories, you just go through other people and you just stay on Instagram and you're like, stuck in it.
T4Q1	44:53	FG03P04	They have a lot of features I can use, like collages, filters, boomerangs. I can just pick four pictures and put them straight away, like, it's just so much easier. And like I mentioned, the filters. Also the Boomerang can be very helpful sometimes and so that's mostly why. And also, like, I like that they have highlights like that feature is my favorite out of everything on Instagram. So I think that's usually why people use it. My entire friends, friends' friends, my circle, everyone usually does the same thing. Like, we're just all just posting what we're doing on a daily basis or the events and stuff, that we're doing something special and then they put it in their highlights as well, so...yes.
T4Q1	45:46	FG03P01	Something that makes them good, cooler, and attractive is the reply button. If you post a story, you're allowing other people, who maybe haven't been talking to you that much, to just reply and reach out. So maybe this is another cool feature about them which makes (it) some interesting.
T4Q1	46:15	FG03P04	I just wanted to say that the 'like' button, you know, you can just 'like' someone's story now without having to talk to them or say anything. Also reacting. That's probably that's the best form.
T4Q1	46:27	FG03P05	I wanted to say the same (laughing)
T4Q1	46:29	FG03P04	Oooh, so sorry (laughing)
T4Q1	46:40	FG03P05	Yeah, sometimes, I mean, you can heat up on someone. Keep up with somebody, like if you just like somebody's story, it shows now that you like their story and, like, you can restart (communication)
T4Q1	46:46	FG03P04	But without showing anyone else that you like their story
T4Q1	46:47	FG03P05	Yeah, yeah
T4Q1	46:48	FG03P04	So it's not embarrassing for you either (laughing)

T4Q1	46:52	FG03P03	Also, if someone tags another person, you can visit their profile and see what they are doing. When they tag you, it appears in your messages, and you can repost to your story without creating the same story again.
T4Q1	47:17	FG03P04	You're just in this never ending cycle of stories
T4Q1	47:18	FG03P03	Yeah
T4Q1	47:41	FG03P04	I use close friends A LOT, more than I post on regular story. I would post memes, I would post like these things to my close friends story all the time. But on my actual stories, there are acquaintances or people I've met at college or that I've met somewhere or whatever. There this content wouldn't be normal for them, so I'll just post something prettier.
T4Q2	49:20	FG03P04	Use content that makes it disappeared? Because there are embarrassed that they'll see it in a year and they'll regret posting it. So it's like to make sure they don't, you know, make something permanent because people are scared of permanent things. So I guess that's why.
T4Q2	49:32	FG03P03	When the stories are just for 24 hours and disappear afterward, people see it only once or twice. That means you don't need to filter the content that much and pick the most beautiful or the most interesting, you can just post the regular opinion or a random picture that you took, so people will watch it and just keep going forward.
T4Q2	50:16	FG03P02	Your Instagram pages, your personal gallery with all the things that you're most proud of and the stories are like a sketchbook. Basically, you don't want them representing you, but you like showing them out anyway, but not long, too long.
T4Q2	50:33	FG03P01	But also maybe another reason to why these are used. All because they are just constructed in a way that make you addicted to it. You know, like, just go all the way down and, like, just feed your eyes and your brain uncontrollably, with just a big thing, in a way. So maybe that's another way to describe it.
T4Q2	50:52	FG03P04	I think it's addicting because you wanna see what's happening before it's gone. If I miss it, then it's gone, and I didn't get to see it. That's why we're always checking it.

T4Q2	51:10	FG03P01	But yeah, but also like, for me, it's just that maybe I'm not interested in the stories themselves. I just want to see those purple circles gone away (all laughing)
T4Q2	51:31	FG03P01	If there's something interesting, I just stop and then I continue.
T5Q1	53:04	FG03P05	Like influencers and people, use it as a daily diary. She said. And, like, they show, I'm talking about basically those fitness influencers when they show their day and what they ate and, like, they are real normal humans who have a belly at the end of the day. So they showed before and after as well. So it's like basically depicts the mask, being just human and true to themselves and, like, showing the everyday side, not just the pretty pictures, like, on their feed and main page, that could be also happening to others to see that. Yeah, you see that very nice angle - the lighting picture with the six pack and stuff. But also there is something behind that picture.
T5Q1	53:49	FG03P04	I think I see the opposite. Like yeah, like, at least my feed or the things that I see, it's usually not realistic. You know? It's like not the realistic stuff that you usually see. So, like, for me at least, it sounds really bad, but, like, saying it, it's like, you want people to perceive you in a certain way. You want them to think "oh, she is cool" or "oh, she's just nice" or whatever. So you, at least me, like, I don't really post every day. I don't post like without makeup or without dressing nice or whatever, but I will post these things on my close friends. You see, so it depends on what you want people to see I think. And influencers at least to me, you know, I barely, I barely see that that side of influencing. I see the side of, like, "ohh you have to look good on social media". So, like, it does play to your mind as much as you don't want it to.
T5Q1	54:59	FG03P05	It depends on who you follow.
T5Q1	55:06	FG03P04	I don't follow people (influencers). It's just like it's on my discovery or whatever, you know, whatever.
T5Q1	55:12	FG03P01	Well, I totally agree with her because, like, everyone's just gonna post, like, a sort of a way of themselves that they think looks good to others and in general good to everyone. So, like, nobody's gonna post, like, if you're going to compare companies gonna post about that. So like most of people who just

			<p>see your stories and stuff, they're just going to think that it's reality. Well, in fact, like, you're just as every other human. And you go through your stuff, like through your struggle, but you don't pose those. But like, everyone is just gonna, you know, perceive you as you post yourself in Instagram and stuff like that. And there are like tons of examples. I had a friend and, like, he was telling me, like, how bad his situation with his girlfriend is or something like that. But, like, before he told me that the whole time he was posting, like, good stories with her and I was like, the most fun. Like, "you seem very fine, like in your stories". And he was like "nah, Instagram is just not reality". That's what he told me. So yeah, I think it's far from reality. It's mostly unrealistic what people just post all the time.</p>
T5Q1	56:28	FG03P04	<p>Well, I don't personally, like, for something that I'm not in real life, but I will also not post things that are like the bad side if that makes sense. Like if I feel good, if I look good, then I'll post it. But if I don't, then, you know, I'll keep the picture to myself, like, nobody else needs to see it for me, so.</p>
T5Q1	56:52	FG03P02	<p>Uhh, I feel like I am much funnier online. It's representative, quite well, because I don't really try showing off because I don't know who to show them off (indistinct).</p>
T5Q1	57:32	FG03P03	<p>People post mostly optimistic things, interesting things, and some extraordinary things. Sometimes maybe it will make other people feel kind of anxious about themselves because their lives are not that interesting as this person's [life].</p>
T5Q1	57:57	FG03P04	<p>I would actually disagree. So, I would disagree which is weird because you know that's what we usually think. But for me or for my friends at least, like if we see something cool, we don't really think too much about it. It's like it's fine. But also, like, about positivity, posting about positivity. I feel like that's exactly how it is. Like people will post positivity and if someone doesn't like... You know, there's always that person who's posting this really sad quote or this, like, really depressing thing. But like, nobody really wants to see that. So, we're just like skipping through their (stories), skipping through. No one really, like, "Oh my God, are you OK?" or whatever. You know, it's like, "Why are you posting that?". I don't want to</p>

			feel that, you know, so that's just, I think, that's the reality of this.
T6Q1	1:00:05	FG03P02	One of my friends had a full mental breakdown and in his stories posting blank background and text talking about betrayal and so on. That's how our larger friend group found out he has been failing all in this business venture and so on. But his story was the first thing that really notified us all of this happening is in his life. He didn't care to tell us, but we found out through his Instagram account.
T6Q1	1:00:42	FG03P05	One thing I did (it's embarrassing) is when I'm talking to somebody and we haven't talked for a while and I want to initiate a new...start conversation, then I post something that I like, your friend like, quote or me or something what I think that person would also like. So, like, they comment on it or like do you like and then we have a conversation.
T6Q1	1:01:25	FG03P04	Well, I can just say this one thing that, although close friends like you know, safe, like, you can just like to these people. You know, like once there was this girl and she started, like, talking about one of our friends who started a business. She was talking about how bad the business days and she was like basically like, talking a lot of smacks about him and his business on her close friends' story. And so, you know, people will screenshot or record that story and then send it to him. And then he'll find out. And so, it's like, it's like, even if we try to make safe spaces on any platform, it's still, it's still on the internet like. You're posting evidence. Basically, it's always evidence, and that's why that's how I always think of it's like evidence, evidence, evidence. So, like, never post something you shouldn't post or don't want to post, or, you know, that's just. Yeah.
T6Q1	1:02:21	FG03P01	Yeah, I have. I have, like, kind of similar story. I agree. What she's saying about this because. So I have this group of friends and something like that. So there was this guy, this one of our friends kind of got distant from us or I don't know. But he only kept me in the close friends' group, but I didn't care that much. But the other friends who were not part of his close friends' group were like using me as a Trojan horse to just look at his close friend from my account and see what she's doing. Yeah (all laughing)
T6Q1	1:02:	FG03P04	Exactly! Exactly! So it's like you have to be so careful

	54		at these things.
T6Q1	1:03:00	FG03P03	Also, interesting thing how people use Instagram, so it's just to ask for help. If uh, someone travelling from another country to here, for example, some of my friends use the story to find another guy who's coming from our home country to here to bring something to them. Or if someone's trying to sell their phone, they would post a story with their phone description and the price and people would, of their own circle, with learn about that and maybe help them repost that story to make it even more wider. Or some buyer just finds out that and just buys that directly.
T6Q1	1:03:45	FG03P01	Yeah, it's because if you post something, the post is just gonna lose (lost) through the other post. But if you just post something on your story, it's like just going to stay there. And most probably people are going to see it, they're going to go through it. So, it's also a good way of advertising. And then especially, like, I had the case when some guy not telling hadn't tragic accident, so like our school community and stuff we were asking for charity and stuff. So, we were all putting the same post on our stories. Like, you know, it goes kind of viral and people just share it. You know, learn more about it and contribute. So yeah, it's also good advertising tool.
T6Q1	1:04:22	FG03P04	I would like to add something funny. I don't know why I remembered, but on Instagram, it's basically how I learned about all the news. Like all the news, OK, about different countries, about celebrities, whatever. So, my school. Back home, I'm sure you all know Andrew (influencer). So, Andrew Tate is a big problem in society right now. I recommend you research who he is. Ohh, yeah, an influencer a really bad one. But whatever. I I'm in a different country, right? So, I can't. I don't know what my school is doing, but so they posted on their story and that Andrew Tate was banned from our school, which, he never went to the school. But like, talk about him as banned, whatever is banned. So, like, you know, that was hilarious to me. But that's, that's how we found that news about my school in a different country, you know. Yeah, that was funny to me.
End of transcription			

Appendix 7 - Semi-structured interview transcript sample (FG05P04)

Q1. How do you describe yourself from the Instagram Stories content?

Umm... I post almost everything that I'm doing during the day. So whether I'm going to university or I'm having coffee with someone. I'm trying to use it almost as if I'm documenting my life, and also because it makes it easier for me to look back at it later to see what I was doing on a specific day.

Q2. Do you usually review who is watching or reacting to your content on Instagram Stories? Please, comment on your initial answer (the reasons for it).

I always look at who have watched my stories also because it's interesting to see the dynamics that I have with some of the people that are following me. Obviously I, well, it's not only friends that are following me, so there are some people with whom my connection has gotten a bit worse over the years. So also, for example, I would just provide an example. My sister's two exes are still following me, but she has removed them from her following list. So it's always interesting to see if they are still watching my stories in order to see if they can maybe know what she is up to. So yeah, and the same with me. I also look at whether my ex is still watching my stories. Because yeah, as I've said, and also former friends with whom my connection is not as good anymore as before. It's just interesting to see whether they are still interested in my life. And well, yeah, I guess if you want to, because you don't have to watch someone's stories if you don't want to. So if you are watching it, it either means that you are generally interested in a good way or because you want to know what they are up to in order to either be able to gossip about them or things like that. So it's always interesting to see whether some people are still watching my stories or not.

Q3. What are the common reactions you get from followers on Instagram Stories? Tell me about the response people give to your content.

Well, there are the few very close people to me who always react to my stories, either by just liking them. My dad, for example, he likes every single one of my stories. So that's just the basic, showing me that he has seen my stories. Then there are my best friends who always either quick react with the heart eye emoji or if they have some specific comments like "ohh, that was funny" or something, then they write DM from the Story. Well, there are some guys who try to show interest by liking your Story. So that's also interesting to see. When I post something about myself where I can be seen on the picture or in the video, It's funny to see when a guy reacts because that usually means that they are interested, but they don't necessarily want to message me.

Q4. What kind of content usually gets more reactions from your followers?

Umm, I think it's mostly when I post about myself, when I can be seen because, well, girls are trying to show their support so they always like that or when I post with my boyfriend. That's also it's a bit interesting because I think in this generation, often, if there are girls who know both my boyfriend and I they tried to show that they are not interested in him by liking the Stories that I posted about the two of us, just to show that they are supportive of our relationship

and they don't want to get between us, because there are people who do not support this relationship. So those always get many reactions, I think. Well, I try not to post about politics, but if I do, then the people who agree with what I'm saying, they always react just to show that they support this point of view and that they agree with me. And there are also, not as many people, but some people who then come to argue with me. So I think that politics is always divisive. So that gets many reactions. And yeah, I think that's about it.

Q5. How likely would you be to to share more content of a style/type (i.e.: selfie, food, landscapes) that gets more reaction, that is more popular for your audience? Please, comment on your initial answer (the reasons for it).

Umm, I think it is kind of likely because, well, receiving any sort of reaction is like a sort of validation from others. So I think it's the same with other platforms. If you get many reactions or likes or comments then you try to post more of that in order to receive that validation from others and feeling like "ohh, other people like me" or the things that I do. So I think this also happens subconsciously. I don't know if I have done this before, but I guess I have. I think most people would do. So yeah, I think I am prone to doing this.

Q6. How would you describe your relationship with your followers?

Well, there are about 50 people who are my closer friends, who always watch my stories, who most of the time also react to my stories. And then there are about 200 to 300 people who, most of the time watch my stories. And then there are about 300 to 400 people who never watch my stories, and it's interesting. I don't know if it's because of the algorithm that they don't even see that I have posted a Story or it's because they just don't care. But it's interesting to see that it's always the same people who see my stories and react to it. It's always the same people who see my stories but don't react to it. And it's always the same people who don't even watch my stories at all.

Q7. What elements from Instagram Stories do you usually add to your content? And how does this content connect to your identity?

Well, Umm, I often use the close friends function just because it helps to to regulate who can see my stories. So if it's something more intimate, a bit, then I do it; or if it's in Hungarian, because when I post in Hungarian, most of the time I post it to my Close Friends list. So I use that a lot and also, well, just putting any sort of text on the picture. So also like writing on the Story. I used the location only if it's relevant, so when I want to show where I am or if I want people to also to be able to find me. So uh, if it's a concert, then for people to well... If there are some of my friends who are at the same place, so that we can maybe meet up. I sometimes also use polls, but only when I'm indecisive about something, so it might be about nail lolish or which shoe to buy. But I also use, what you have mentioned, the picture above the picture. So when I post a collage I tried to use this feature because it just enables me to make like a prettier composition. So yeah, I use these features the most.

Q8. How do you think people see/perceive you from the Instagram Stories you share?

Well, I think that they think that I'm kind of busy because I, well, I post every day. I think it is very rare that I don't post anything. Even when I'm just going for a walk, it looks like I'm doing something special because I posted about it. And I don't always mention the people that I'm with, so they can never know if I'm just walking alone or if I just haven't mentioned the people in the Story who are with me. So I think it looks like I'm a lot busier than I actually am in real life.

Q9. How would you like to be seen by other people via Instagram Stories?

Well, I want people to think that I'm fun and open, and I think that's also what I why I am posting so many stories because I want them to feel like they can always come to me with anything. Because, if I share this many things with them that they might feel like they can also share their problems, not necessarily just problems, but they can share their life with me. So I think that's how I want to be perceived by others, and I think it's also going quite well until now.

Q10. What aspect from your identity people can't see via your Instagram Stories content?

Well, I have quite many mood swings. I am not necessarily saying that I'm often sad, but I can have like a short period of sadness almost every day, and I don't think that I have... Maybe when I was younger and I wanted a bit more attention from people, then I was posting sad quotes and sat pictures of myself, but not necessarily now. So I think I don't really show when I'm sad or when I have problems in my life and that's what my followers don't always see.

Q11. How people's reaction (or lack of reaction) impacts on your posting activity?

[The question was skipped in this specific interview as the participant had already answered it in Q3-Q6 and the following question would cover the subject as well].

Q12. Could you tell us one specific situation of reaction/feedback from a Story you posted and how did that make you feel?

OK. And this one is very specific, but on the night when my ex-boyfriend broke up with me, he wanted to come home with me in order to make sure that I got home safely. And I try to deal with trauma with humor. So I thought, why not take pictures, like selfies, on the way home? And then when I got home, I took him off from my close friends list and I made a collage with the pictures that we took on the way home. And I wrote on the Story "well, these are the best pictures of our lives". And since no one knew that we broke up, because it just happened a few minutes before, all of my friends reacted with the heart eyes emoji, and one of my best friends wrote "Oh my God, you two are so cute". And that was kind of a bittersweet feeling because I was like "yeah, we were". And then I messaged her that we actually broke up and yeah, she was shocked and didn't understand why I posted the pictures. I think in this specific case I wanted attention. Just to see that, yeah, how many people would react to the pictures of us.

Q12. How have your content and sharing activity on Instagram Stories changed over time?

I think it has changed a lot also because of the new features that they are adding constantly. So at the beginning when... I still remember when... I'm looking at my archives, which was also a new feature. So you can only look back until 2017, I think. At the beginning, when

Boomerang was new, I noticed now that I almost only posted boomerangs. Although it's quite tiring for the eyes to have it go back and forth all the time. And then, while when I was younger I didn't really care about posting aesthetic stories, and I think this has changed over the past two years. Maybe that I tried to post stories that are more aesthetically pleasing, I think. And also not to put too many things on one Story. Let it be text or pictures just for it to be more, well, easier for the eye to see everything.

Q13. How is your use of Instagram Stories daily/weekly?

Well, I think I use it about the same amount of time every day. I don't think that there is a day in the week where I use it more, but I think before going to university, like before my first class, I use it a lot. And after coming home and also before going to sleep. So these are the three times when I use it the most. And also it depends... I used the Discover page a lot. And also with the new Instagram Reels, just watching the videos and scrolling. Yeah.

Q14. You posted this photo (show image sample) on your Instagram Stories. Tell me a bit about it: What is the image about (tell the experience it depicts)? Please, comment on how it helps to describe who you are.



Note: The Researcher was added to participant FG05P04's Close Friends list, where the image was posted. This is identified by the star on the top right of the content.

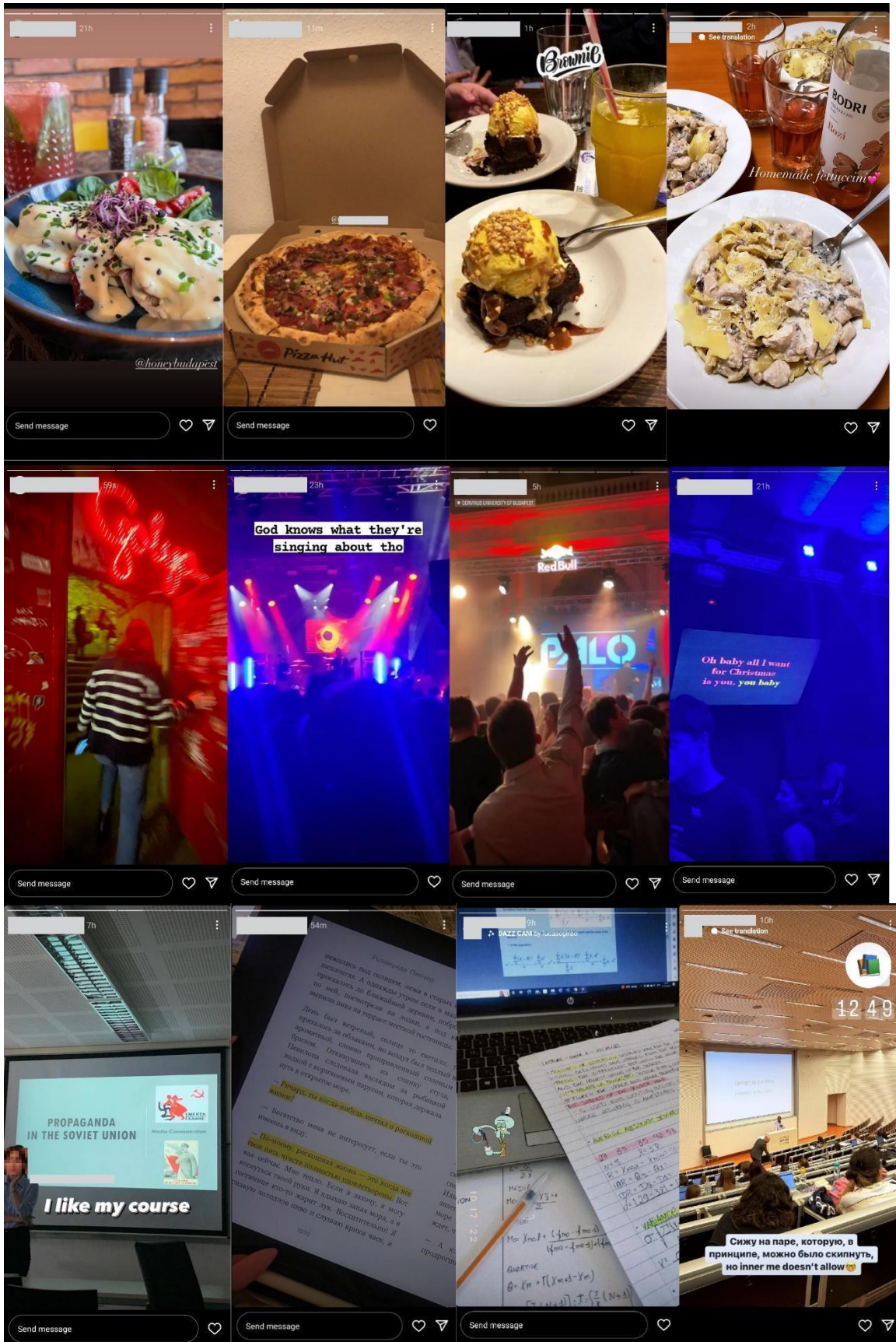
OK, so this is quite complex. UM, as I've said, I used the Close Friends list for my Hungarian friends and well I am Greek Catholic. So, most of the people who are on my close friends list are Hungarian and Greek Catholic, and then the rest are some of my closest friends from university who I feel like I can share this type of content with. Umm, so this was last weekend

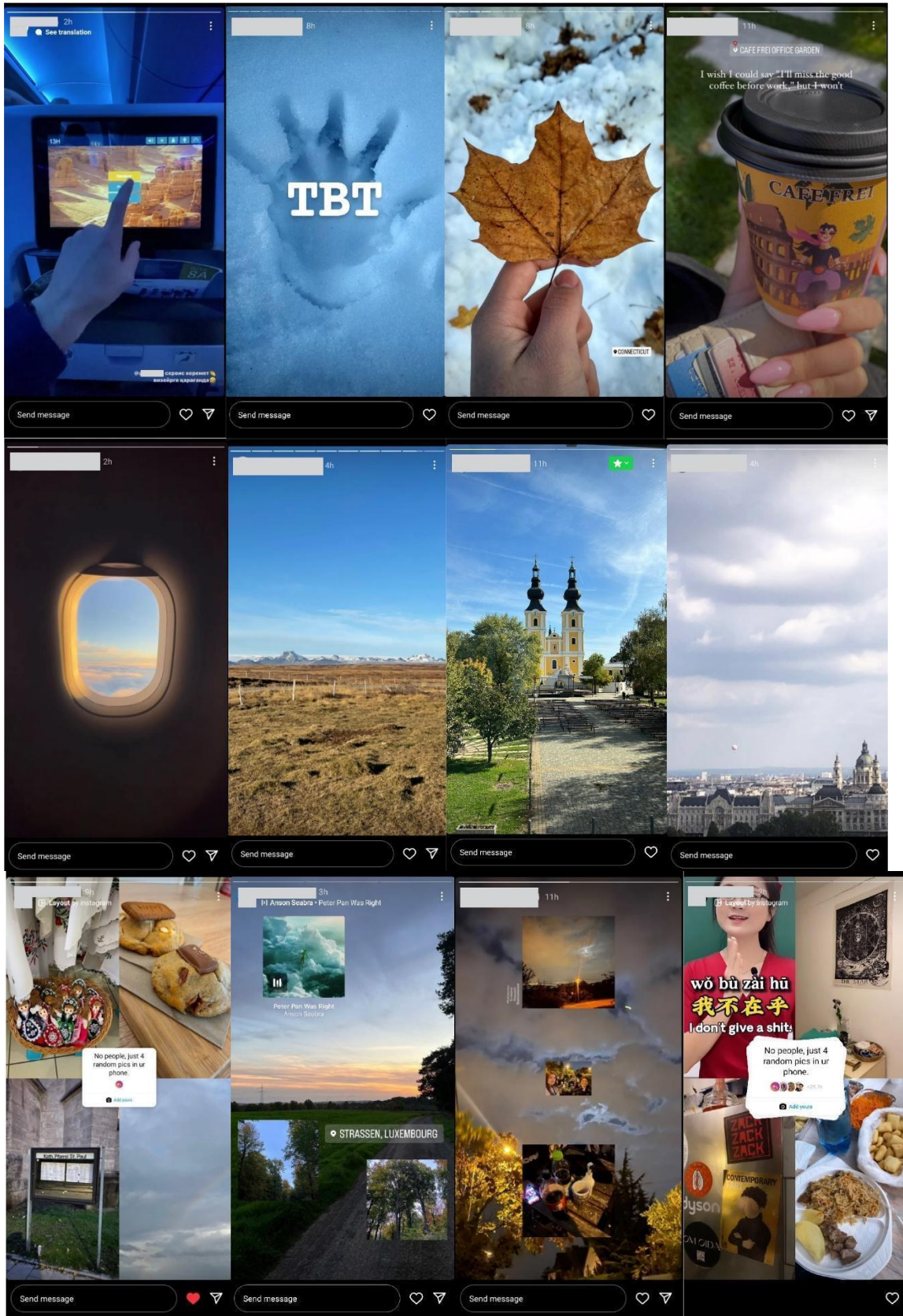
and I went to Maria Porch, which is a pilgrimage site in Hungary with my best friend and yeah, so everyone who is on my close friends list knows this church because it is very well popular and known in Hungary, so they instantly knew where I am. And many of my friends wrote to me as a reaction to this Story, like “ohh, why are you there?”, or “What are you doing there?”, “Is there some special event or did you just go there because you wanted to?”

Q15. Is there any other comments you would like to make about your use of Instagram Stories?

Umm. Maybe the fact that... What I find interesting about Instagram? Well, I am glad that it has this feature, but it also makes it a bit deceiving is that when you post a Story you can never know if it's at that exact moment or if it's a picture from, maybe, even several years ago. So, for example on Snapchat you can see when that picture was taken, if it's from your camera roll then it's written in the top left corner that it's from your camera roll. So other people can know that it was not taken at this moment. And you don't have that on Instagram. So I think it's just a general idea that you have to be a bit careful. Also, when seeing what how good other people's lives are because you can never know if they are just posting the good moments of their lives, also from the past, or if they are actually having that much fun at that moment, yeah.

Appendix 8 - Samples of images collected in the netnography phase





Appendix 9 - Additional graphs and tables

Two charts comparing the most frequent topics on Instagram Stories based on the data of all participants and excluding three most active users.

Image Category - All Participants

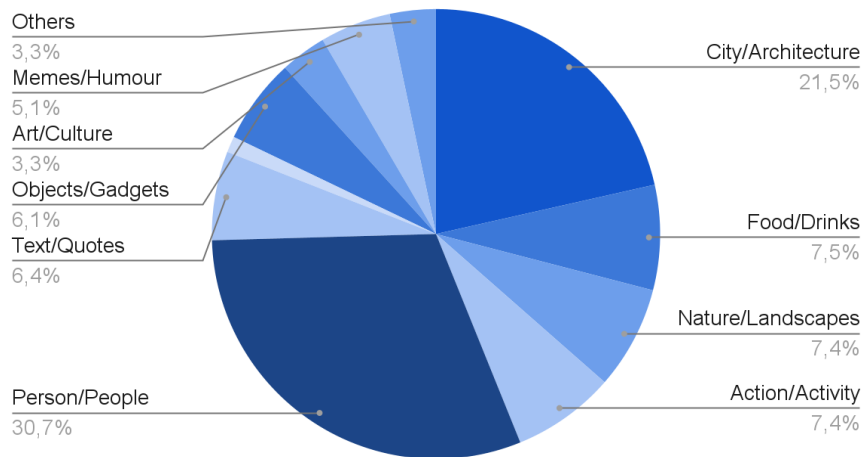
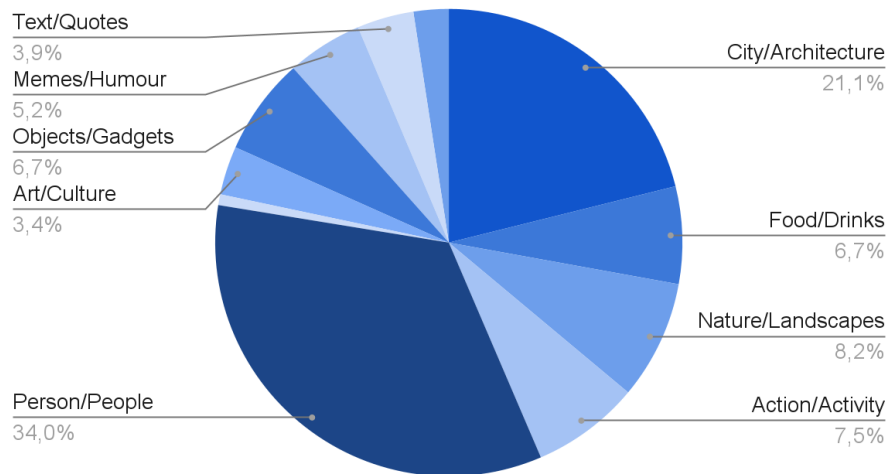


Image Category - Excluding 3 Users*



The modified chart excluded 277 stories from FG02P04 (90), FG02P09 (80), and FGP01P04 (77)

(Source: Own elaboration)

Appendix 10 - Themes associated with mobile communication practices²⁵

The youth's appropriation of smartphones for visual mobile communication was discussed as the first topic (See T1Q1 and T1Q2 in *Appendix 2*) in every focus group. This conversation was necessary for two main reasons: Firstly, it demonstrates the pervasiveness of visual mobile communication beyond interpersonal communication; secondly, it sets the background to understand ephemeral content platforms, as they are primarily mobile applications, thus directly connected to phone cameras. Hence, understanding the group communicative practices with smartphones also enables a contextualization of the studied ephemeral visual communication phenomenon, although not all the camera uses are for transient purposes.

Additionally, from the themes elaborated in this appendix and the identified topics, I will argue that contemporary visual mobile communication ubiquity goes beyond mediated human communication, generally interpersonal communication (Ling, 2004; Villi, 2007, 2010). Thus, I propose to extend its comprehension to actions that can be 1) human-machine interactions, including instances that are centered solely on oneself (i.e., self-checking on the camera), and 2) when the smartphone is mediating information between a human and an object (i.e., using facial recognition to unlock a phone). In this sense, the two first questions addressed in the FGs were related to *what activities the mobile phone cameras were connected to*, and *the relevance it had to participants' daily experiences*.

The debate indicated an appropriation of these devices for varied motives. The thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) shows that participants associated the smartphone cameras with topics that can be interpreted in three major themes, namely: As an extension of body functions; as technical support to facilitate daily tasks; and as a visual communication device, mostly for interpersonal communication, reinforcing previous studies about visual mobile communication (Villi, 2007, 2010, 2015; Villi & Stocchetti, 2011).

Theme 1: The smartphone camera as an extension of body functions

The camera's capacity to enrich bodily functions appeared in many of the conversations, with participants pointing out how it allows them to "see" what is happening in

²⁵ This content has been translated to Portuguese and included in a paper that will appear in the Brazilian magazine "PAULUS: Revista de Comunicação da FAPCOM", e-ISSN: 2526-3218. The article discusses visual mobile communication and new uses to the smartphone camera among the youth.

their friends' lives, to register and keep memories of events, and to visualize information (i.e., zoom in) or identify elements that may go beyond their knowledge. In the first topic, "*to 'see' what's happening*", they pointed out the relevance of cameras (their own and other peoples') to bring closer to their eyes visual information that wouldn't be accessible otherwise. FG01P03 explains that they take close-up pictures of the board in class or zoom in to see details: "That's one thing we can do, zooming in, because for me... like my eyes are not that good and it's like easier for me to do so".

In some specific cases, the camera is interpreted as part of applications connected to the Internet, such as Instagram or WhatsApp, not its sole function. However, this capacity for interpersonal communication [discussed in a separate theme below] is only enabled on other apps due to their access to the camera. As indicated by FGP01P05, the camera is important because it allows them "to see what's happening with my friends, in their lives". Likewise, FG01P05 also relates the possibility to see something via the phone while communicating with other people. "When I need quick advice, I send a photo: 'Which one to choose?'. Or when I don't understand where the person is, I send a video: 'Hey, I'm here, you can see the landscape. You can find me here'", explains.

Moreover, the camera is an important tool "*to register and keep memories*" of their experiences, exploring the smartphone's capacity to store the content. Participants inform taking photos to remember important details, moments, and information that they need to recall later, while also using the equipment to preserve visual memories that can easily be accessed in the future. This ability can be noticed in the comment of FGP01P03: "There are some things [information] that I have to keep, so I just take it [photo]...Sometimes in the dormitory, there are posters on the wall, and I can't write them down, so I take it."

There are instances in which the camera function overlaps the phone gallery or other repository purpose in the comments, thus respondents interpret the mobile device capacity as a camera and an album simultaneously. For instance, FGP01P05 points out its relevance "to register the moment and maybe see the same moment like 10 years later. And remember what you were going through". Likewise, FG04P04 provides a similar contribution: "I use the camera to capture the moments. I really often go to Google Photos and search for what I was doing one year ago, just to remember. And to think it's true, it's easier with the photos". In this sense, the photographs are also considered as cues to help them remember past experiences.

In other cases, the association is made with short-term memory, the ability to retain a piece of information temporarily and avoid issues brought on by forgetfulness. FG02P06 illustrates it with a practical scenario: "So I use the camera like a second memory. For example,

when somebody instructs me something, to buy stuff, I record it just to be sure that it will be no problem later”. However, there is also long-term relevant data storage, as indicated by FG03P03: “I use it to take photos of some information that I need to remember, or I need to use: like passwords or some school-related information”.

A third topic that was identified in the discussion related to the theme of body functions is the possibility to use smartphone cameras “*to help visualize information*”, which can be a visual description of an unknown object/event or a materialized proof of what the eyes witnessed. In the first case, FGP04P04 elucidates it with an artificial intelligence application that relies on the camera to describe objects.

“Google Lens is a really useful thing. Sometimes when I was home, and I couldn’t find some parts of an object... I didn’t know how to spell it even in my own language. Like, I didn’t know what it was. So, I just used Google Lens and it described ‘it is this kind of object, so you can buy it in this shop’ and stuff. So, it’s kind of helpful when you can’t define the name of the thing you need.” (FGP04P04)

The visualization of experiences or visual evidence facilitated by smartphone cameras is an argument that FG03P02 presents when discussing the relevance of the equipment nowadays: “There’s this expression ‘you have pics, or it didn’t happen’. So, you basically take pictures to prove that you did some work, that you were somewhere.” Similarly, FGP04P06 justifies that it could be a generational characteristic, as youth have become accustomed to visual communication and finds it easier to understand information when it is visualized. “People who are similar age [with us] are more used to visuals than describing things [in words]. And especially when we’re in different countries or just doing different things, I can’t really explain it to my friends”.

Theme 2: The smartphone camera as a support for daily activities

The familiarization youth developed with smartphones, aligned with the devices’ technical affordances, represents a change in how we mediate many routine experiences (Veloso da Silva, 2017). These objects have the capacity to encompass several functionalities that, in the past, were offered by other equipment, such as photographing and scanning. When discussing the relevance of smartphones in their lives, participants in this research presented information related to four main topics that are linked to the theme of technical support for

daily activities: language content translation, places/spaces discovery and exploration, documentation and studies, and self-check as in a mirror.

Regarding the topic “*to translate languages*”, this was especially relevant for foreigners living in Hungary, as most of them don’t speak the local language and rely on applications that use the phone camera for automatic translation. However, they also indicate its usage when traveling to other countries. The justification is presented by FGP01P03: “There are [unknown] words everywhere and there are some places I just use the camera translation. That’s it.” This is a straightforward topic, but not necessarily the first when thinking of cameras since it requires an additional app to work. Interestingly, it appeared in every focus group discussion, and for FGP04P06 it is one of the most relevant functions on smartphone cameras: “Yeah, that’s kind of my main camera usage these days. So, just different languages and different things, to quickly translate”.

Moreover, the camera also allows participants “*to discover and explore spaces*”. This topic appeared not only when discussing camera usage, but also as a possibility in other applications on the smartphone that have a visual focus, such as Instagram. For FG02P09, photography relates to outdoor exploration: “I also do like take pictures of the outside like nature and stuff like that”. Likewise, FGP04P05 relates the camera with a discovery of urban landscapes. “I think that when I’m walking (on) the streets and I see beautiful structures, beautiful architecture, I do also take pictures about this”. The spatial discovery experience enabled by the camera can be enhanced when connecting apps that use location-based technologies, as FG05P11 informs: “I take pictures of places I wanna go. Whenever you take a picture of a building, a restaurant, or someplace, it is connected to Google Maps, so you know the exact location, and then I can come back later”.

Another technical support offered by the cameras is “*to register study material*”, which relates to actions such as scanning files and photographing notes or the board. The participants take pictures of school notes, documents, and whiteboards to remember information and revise later. They also scan QR codes and apply the smartphone for more complex tasks, such as doing calculus or arithmetic. An example can be seen from the contribution of FGP04P03: “If you have statistics/math courses, Photomath²⁶ is great, because it does equations for you. You don’t have to do all the calculations on your hand. You don’t even need a calculator, just use your phone camera.”. The topic appeared in all six focus groups and another instance is

²⁶ Photomath is a mobile application that uses the camera phone to assist users in resolving mathematics problems. Refer to their official page <https://photomath.com/> for other details.

presented by FG01P06: “I use my phone camera for everything. I take a lot of pictures, and fewer selfies but, like, more of things. I use it more for documentation, mostly for schoolwork. Just like, picture papers and stuff.”.

Finally, within the technical uses of the smartphone camera mediating their routines, respondents indicated its adoption “*to self-check as in a mirror*”. The discussions cover various ways in which youth appropriate their devices for personal grooming and self-assessment, which includes checking one’s appearance, zooming in to see details on their own body, evaluating their makeup results, and even calming anxieties (e.g., when concerned about their appearance). FG02P03 indicates a reason for this usage: “I just use my smartphone camera mainly... Just to check myself, like in the camera. So, if I look ok, if there’s anything stuck on my teeth or something...”. Besides the practicality of this function, there is a matter of time, as pointed out by FG02P07: “Everything’s faster, even checking yourself out, you can walk through a street and try to find a mirror or just open the camera. It’s very fast and efficient, and it calms down people’s anxieties, maybe!?”

Theme 3: The smartphone camera as a visual communication device

The last theme developed from contributions regarding their smartphone camera adoption is directly connected with previous findings about visual mobile communication (Villi, 2010). Hence, this section reinforces the established knowledge – and to an extent, the most common usages – of mobile devices nowadays. Under the theme, we organize three main topics brought up by the youth in our focus groups discussions: a) the ways mobile images connect them with other people; b) the opportunity to maintain visual interpersonal communication via the Internet with geographically distant peers; c) the exploration of their creativity with the camera to produce visual content. Interestingly, these three topics were also elaborated on by the respondents when discussing Instagram as a whole, thus indicating the appropriation of the app for visual mobile communication, as discussed in the following section.

The two first topics are interconnected, since “*to connect with other people via images*” usually means “*to maintain interpersonal communication with family and friends*”. However, the former can include situations in which a person takes a photo with a group and then show it to them for an initial review (or approval), before sharing the content online. The latter relates mostly to cases of communication mediated by the phone while using the camera to see each other in video or photos.

Their connection with others and their social life can be seen from a look at the phone gallery, according to FG02P08: “On the days I’m with my friends I come home and there’s a million photos. Yesterday I was resting and there’s like 0 [photo]. So, I use my camera mostly when I’m out with my friends”. A similar purpose is exemplified by FG05P10 when referring to how the camera is part of their socialization: “Yeah, that’s actually... most of the pics in my gallery are... well while drinking with friends, we start taking pictures of us. That’s the most pictures I have”.

When it comes to interpersonal communication, as in many of the topics that cover camera usage beyond its conventional photographing and video graphing purposes, participants indicate how applications such as WhatsApp, Instagram, or Messenger allow them to see “face-to-face” geographically distant family members and friends. This is the case of FG02P07: “Uh, yeah, well, I use it a lot to communicate with my friends. Lots of group chats, and lots of FaceTime calls”. In the same direction, FG03P04 explains that images have become part of how they express themselves to their peers. “Me and my friends, because we’re in different countries, we’ll take pictures of, like, ourselves or somebody, something we’re doing, and we’ll send it to each other. And that’s like kind of how we keep in contact now”.

Moreover, the use of visuals helps youth to feel closer to their loved ones and, somehow, construct an imagined shared space. This is the case of FGP04P01 who maintains their ties with a partner by exchanging multiple images throughout the day:

“Probably the camera on my phone is the most used thing in my phone because I’m in a long-distance relationship with my boyfriend for three years. When I’m back home, we live together, but here we have 1000 kilometers, so I’m just basically taking pictures of everything. That ‘I’m drinking this’ or, like, ‘look at my breakfast’. Sharing my life and trying to feel like we are still in the same place. Also of course, like video chatting.” (FGP04P01).

The last topic concerning visual mobile communication with smartphone cameras refers to their usage “to get inspired and create visual content”, which in many instances is shared online on platforms such as Instagram. The equipment enables users to explore their creativity while experimenting with multiple shots until getting the best angles or by mixing multimedia content (e.g., videos with a voiceover for TikTok). FG03P03 demonstrates that the phone has been able to replace more sophisticated cameras while popularizing content production: “It’s important for how young people communicate and share information because most of us use smartphone

cameras to record videos and make different content on Instagram on TikTok. People don't use professional cameras anymore, they just use their smartphone.”

Another professional approach is taken by FG05P08, who even employs the mobile device for cinematographic work purposes: “I do documentary films, so I use the camera in this way, more professionally. That also taught me that it can show a personal world: Just by scrolling the photo gallery you can understand a lot about a person”.