
YOUNG ADULTS' CONCERNS ABOUT ONLINE PRIVACY ON SOCIAL NETWORKS**PREOCUPAÇÕES DOS JOVENS ADULTOS COM A PRIVACIDADE ONLINE NAS REDES SOCIAIS**

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates young adults' concerns about online privacy in the context of social networks. With the growth of data collection and threats to information security, online privacy has become a crucial issue. This study, based on a quantitative survey of young adults aged between 18 and 40, uses a questionnaire as the research method. The analysis focuses on the perception of privacy and the control young adults have over personal information. The results indicate that most young adults have significant concerns about online privacy. However, their behavior is contradictory. The feeling of privacy invasion, with personal data used without consent, diminishes trust in digital platforms. In that way, this study underlines the need for social media platforms and legislators to strengthen data protection practices to ensure user trust in the digital environment. Additionally, this article highlights the gap between privacy concerns and actual online behavior, emphasizing the complexity of privacy issues in the digital age.

Keywords: Data Protection, Digital Transformation, Online Privacy, Social Networks

RESUMO

Este artigo investiga as preocupações dos jovens adultos com a privacidade online no contexto das redes sociais. Com o crescimento da recolha de dados e as ameaças à segurança da informação, a privacidade online tornou-se uma questão crucial. Este estudo, baseado num inquérito quantitativo a jovens adultos com idades entre os 18 e os 40 anos, utiliza um questionário como método de pesquisa. A análise foca-se na perceção da privacidade e no controlo que os jovens adultos têm sobre as informações pessoais. Os resultados indicam que a maioria dos jovens adultos tem preocupações significativas com a privacidade online. No entanto, o seu comportamento é contraditório. A sensação de invasão de privacidade, com dados pessoais utilizados sem consentimento, diminui a confiança nas plataformas digitais. Desta forma, este estudo sublinha a necessidade de as plataformas de redes sociais e os legisladores reforçarem as práticas de proteção de dados para garantir a confiança dos utilizadores no ambiente digital. Adicionalmente, este artigo destaca a lacuna entre as preocupações com a privacidade e o comportamento online real, enfatizando a complexidade das questões de privacidade na era digital.

Palavras-chave: Proteção de Dados, Transformação Digital, Privacidade Online, Redes Sociais

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's digital age, the internet and social networks have become an essential part of everyday life, offering countless opportunities for interaction, communication and unlimited access to information. However, this environment raises complex questions. As data collection becomes

universal and threats to the security of personal information increase, online privacy has emerged as one of the most pressing and debated issues

This study focuses on an important part of the digital population: young adults. They are the ones who often use social networks, online services and apps as an integral part of their daily lives. With this growing dependence on the digital world, concerns naturally arise about how their information is collected, used and protected. These concerns end up influencing online behavior, decisions and even trust in digital platforms and companies.

In this sense, this research aims to answer two fundamental questions: "What are digital users' perceptions of their online privacy?" and "How do these perceptions and concerns influence their behavior and decisions in the digital environment?".

To answer those questions, a quantitative analysis of data from an online questionnaire was conducted to understand young adults' privacy concerns in social media and how these concerns relate to their online behavior.

2. DEVELOPMENT

2.1 ONLINE PRIVACY AND ITS VALUE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Privacy in the online environment is a complex and constantly evolving issue, as several authors have stated. Since ancient times, the issue of privacy has been discussed and shaped by social and technological changes. Authors such as Correia (2014) and Solove (2008) highlight the diversity of interpretations of the concept of privacy over time. Initially associated with the "right to be left alone", privacy now encompasses informational self-determination and control over personal information (Holvast, 2009; Machado, 2014; Solove, 2008).

In the Digital Age, the nature of privacy has undergone substantial changes, influenced by the increasing measurement of communication through devices (Marcinauskaitė & Razmetaeva, 2021). The disclosure of information in digital contexts, as well as the ability to store and access personal data, has raised concerns about the control and security of information (Marwick & Boyd, 2018). Privacy has therefore become a challenge given the ease with which individuals and institutions can collect and process personal data (Machado, 2014).

At the same time, there is also the privacy paradox, described by Barth & De Jong (2017) and Soffer and Cohen (2014), which reveals a discrepancy between privacy concerns and users' online behaviors. Although many young people value privacy, they continue to share personal information in exchange for minimal benefits, as pointed out by Hargittai & Marwick (2016).

Data privacy has emerged as a fundamental dimension of the right to privacy in the digital age. Ferreira, Pinheiro and Marques (2021) highlight the challenges faced by the collection and invasion of personal data, while Alafaa (2022) and Cloudflare, a company that provides internet security services, outline the importance of protecting and controlling the sharing of personal information online. Regulation, exemplified by the GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation), aims to oversee the processing and circulation of personal data, but faces challenges such as interpretation, enforcement and costs, as described by Alafaa (2022) and Lonsetta & Hayajneh (2020).

The future of online privacy depends on the ability to meet these challenges, balancing the protection of personal data with technological innovation and digital convenience.

2.2 SOCIAL NETWORKS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

The rise of the internet has caused a radical transformation in society, blurring the line between online and offline life. The development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and the consolidation of Web 2.0 gave rise to social networks, platforms that facilitate interaction and information sharing (Marcinauskaitė & Razmetaeva, 2021; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). However, the definition of social networks remains complex due to their rapid evolution and the variety of interaction tools (Boyd, 2014; Bayer et al., 2020).

Social networks play a significant role in the lives of young adults, providing dynamic spaces for interaction and expression. According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), social networks are online services that allow individuals to create profiles and establish connections within a delimited system. Delbianco and Valentim (2022) define social networks as means of connecting people and facilitating the sharing of information. Akram and Kumar (2017) broaden this perspective, describing social networks as online platforms where people build connections with others who share personal or professional interests.

The emergence of social media has transformed marketing strategies, providing companies with a direct way of connecting with customers. This is the case with Social Media Marketing (SMM), a growing trend that takes advantage of the vast audience of social platforms to promote products and services, allowing companies to reach their target audience effectively (Nadaraja & Yazdanifard, 2013).

Database Marketing and Targeted Advertising are powerful strategies that use consumer data to personalize marketing campaigns. While these practices offer benefits in terms of effectiveness and relevance, they also raise concerns about consumer privacy and trust, since consumers' personal and behavioral data is used (Domazet & Zubović, 2011; Moitra et al., 2022; Fourberg et al., 2021).

In this sense, social networks continue to play a central role in society, shaping social interactions, marketing strategies and digital culture.

2.3 SOCIAL NETWORKS AND ONLINE PRIVACY

Social networks have a significant impact on the perception of online privacy, especially for young adults, who face challenges due to the constant changes in privacy settings. Although they express concerns, they are often neglected by the platforms themselves, as Boyd (2014) and Hallam and Zanella (2017), point out, highlighting the difficulties faced, such as the case of Facebook, which repeatedly changes privacy settings.

The sharing of sensitive information on social networks raises additional concerns about young people's privacy and security. Young people share a significant amount of information on social networks, including sensitive data, despite the associated risks.

The advent of social platforms has made it easier to share information in real time, but it has also increased the risk of impulsive and excessive sharing of personal data (Frith, 2017; Osatuyi, 2013).

The lack of online privacy ends up exposing users to a series of vulnerabilities, including hacking and fraud. Hacking is defined as unauthorized access to digital devices or networks by illegal or unconventional means (IBM, 2024). Documented cases of account hacks on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook highlight the seriousness of these threats, which can result in the unauthorized sharing of personal information (Akram & Kumar, 2017). For example, Facebook's association with Cambridge Analytica highlights the growing concerns around the misuse of personal data in the digital environment. These incidents emphasize the importance of protecting users' personal data and adopting effective prevention measures (Calheiros, 2019).

Despite the risks, young people show awareness of the dangers and implement strategies to protect their privacy, as noted by Hargittai and Marwick (2016). Users can adopt various preventative measures to protect their personal information online. Regularly reviewing and reinforcing privacy settings on social networks is a fundamental practice, given the tendency of platforms to prioritize data collection over protecting users' privacy (Boerman et al., 2021).

Thus, it can be concluded that social networks play a significant role in the lives of young adults, but they also raise serious questions about online privacy and security. It is crucial that users are aware of the risks associated with sharing information on social media and take proactive measures to protect their privacy and security online.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH METHODS AND TECHNIQUES

The main objective of this research was to understand young people's perceptions of online privacy and their consequent concerns, as well as how these concerns influence their behavior and decisions in the digital environment.

To answer this problem, the quantitative method was used to obtain data by means of an online questionnaire survey.

In this study, a pre-existing questionnaire is used, entitled "Social Media, Privacy and Online Data: Implications for Communication and Marketing", developed by Maria Madalena Bello (Bello, 2020). The decision to use a pre-existing questionnaire is justified by its prior validation, saving time and resources. In addition, the topic addressed by Maria Bello is aligned with the topic of this research.

The questionnaire covers various dimensions of privacy, such as the perception of risks, control over personal information and the influence of social networks. The sample was made up of young adults aged between 18 and 40, using statistical methods to analyze the data collected. It should be noted that, according to the theory of psychologist Erik Erikson, young adults are those aged between 18 and 40 (Alves, 2020). This demographic group is the target audience for this research, as they tend to have a greater online presence. Therefore, responses from those outside this age range or not using social networks were excluded.

As such, of the 153 responses obtained, 138 were considered valid. The questionnaire was shared on various social platforms to reach the target population, with responses collected between April 2 and May 25, 2024.

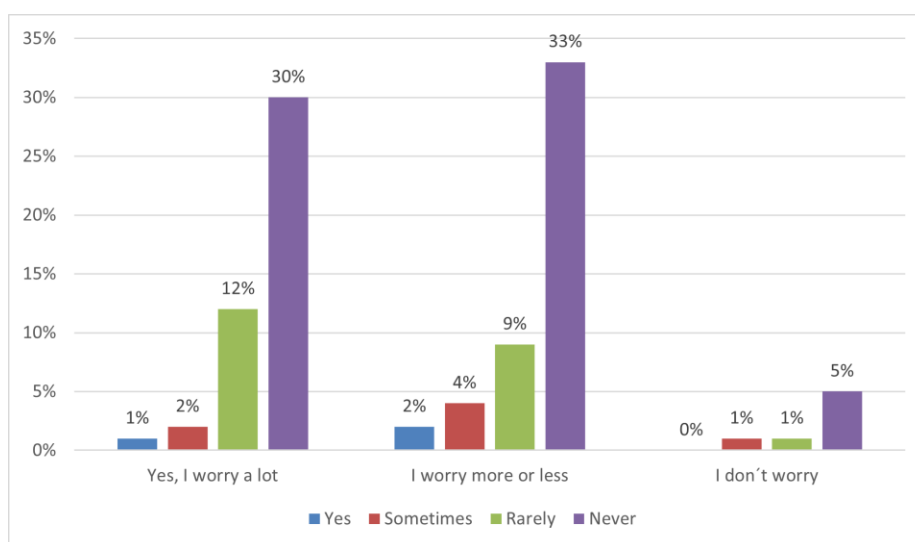
4. RESULTS DISCUSSION

The aim of this stage is mainly to explore the relationships between the different variables in the data collected.

With that being said, let's start by analyzing the relationship between online privacy concerns and user behavior.

Starting with figure 1, the data shows that most respondents, regardless of their level of concern about online privacy, rarely or never read the terms and conditions of service of the applications they use. At the same time, few read the terms and conditions fully or sometimes, even among those who are very concerned about online privacy.

Figure 1 - Concern about online privacy | "I fully read the terms and conditions of service of the applications I use"



By contrast, figure 2 shows that most people who are very concerned about online privacy tend to control their cell phone's privacy settings frequently (39%). Those who are more or less concerned about online privacy are more distributed between controlling "Sometimes" (27%) and "Yes" (12%).

The majority of those who don't care about online privacy don't control or rarely control their phone's privacy settings (2% in total for "Rarely" and "Never").

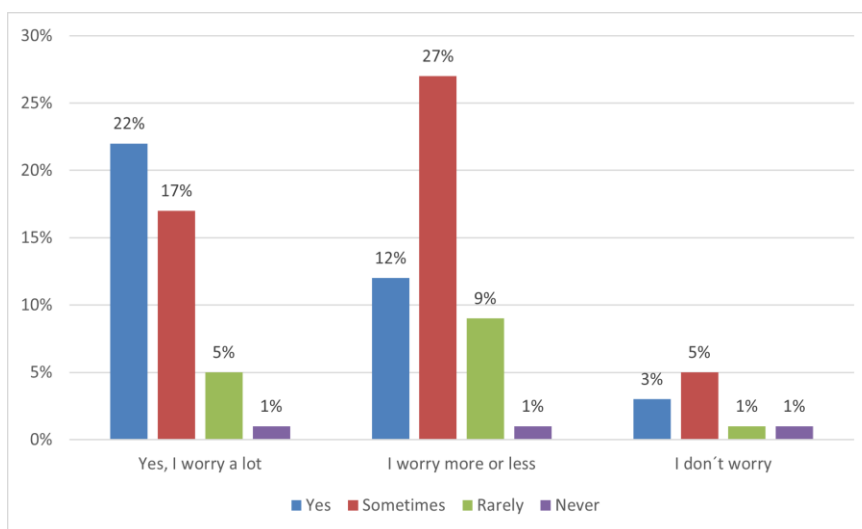
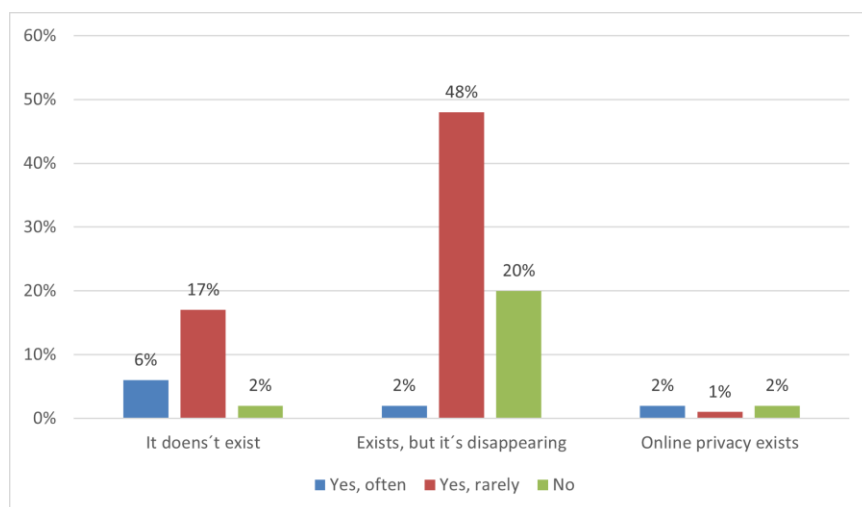
Figure 2 - Privacy concerns | "I control my phone's privacy settings"

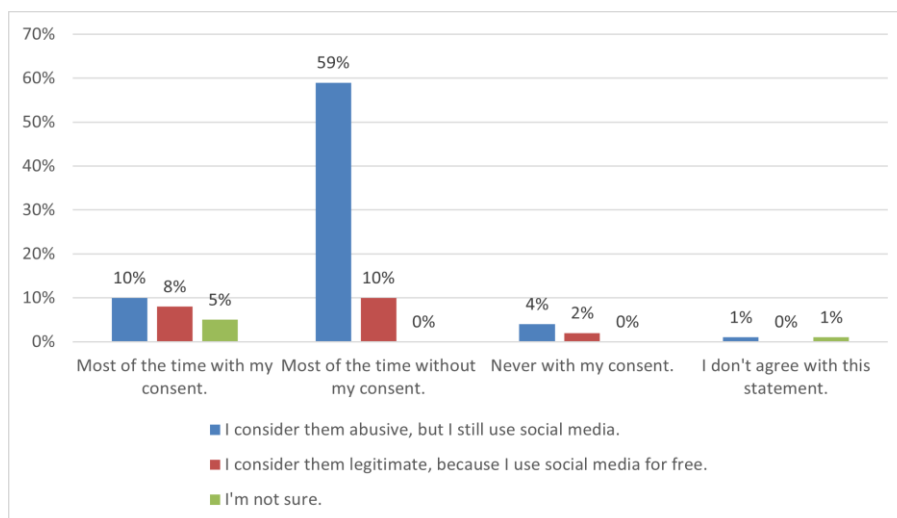
Figure 3 illustrates the cross between the respondents' perception of online privacy and the practice of avoiding certain online activities in order not to disclose too much personal information.

Figure 3 - Perception of online privacy | Interaction on social networks

The majority of people (70%) believe that online privacy is disappearing and among them, 48% have occasionally stopped interacting with publications for fear of revealing too much about themselves. On the other hand, a smaller proportion (24%) do not stop interacting with publications, even though they realize that online privacy is disappearing. It's also worth mentioning that around 25% say that privacy no longer exists, as opposed to the remaining 5% who say it still does.

For the cross-references related to questions about online advertising, see figure 4, that analyzes respondents' opinions on how online advertising appears in their feed.

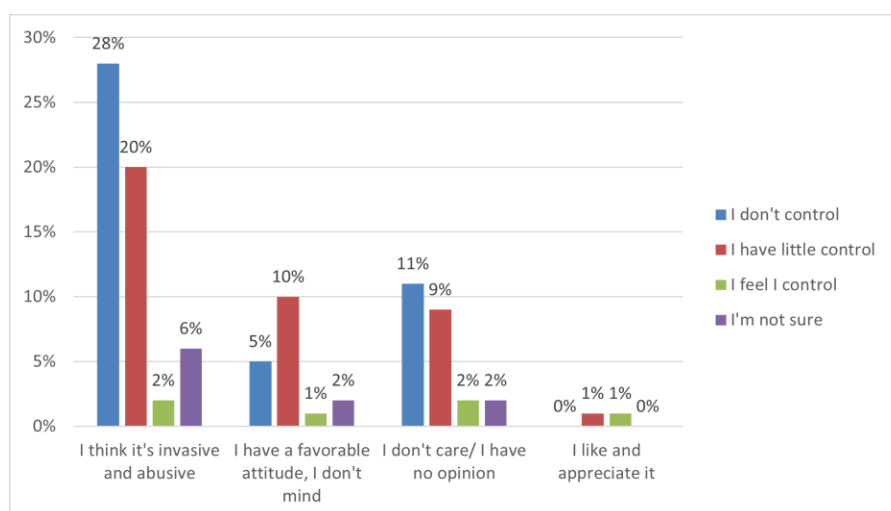
Figure 4 - "Do you consider that your personal data is used by brands, social networks and private entities for commercial purposes and to make a profit..." | Assessment of these practices



59% of respondents believe that they see advertisements most of the time without their consent and consider these advertisements to be abusive, although they continue to use social networks. Another notable analysis, representing 10% of participants, also feel that they see advertisements without their consent, but consider these practices legitimate, due to their free use of social networks. In addition, a small proportion of participants (4%) believe that they always see advertising without their consent, and 2% still consider advertising to be legitimate.

We now move on to cross-referencing questions about the number of ads users see online and control over where user data is used.

Figure 5 - Number of ads users see online | Control where data is used



As can be seen from figure 5, the majority of respondents (56%) think that the amount of ads and advertising they see online is invasive and abusive, with 48% saying they have little or no control

over where their data is used. On the other hand, people who have a favorable attitude towards ads are more likely to say that they control in some way where their data is used (10%).

We now move on to analyze the correlation between variables that reflect users' concerns and behaviors in relation to online privacy and data control on social networks. Using SPSS statistical analysis software, we sought to understand how these concerns and behaviors relate to each other. For this analysis, we used Pearson's correlation coefficient, a statistical measure that assesses the strength and direction of the linear relationship between two variables.

Let's analyze table 1:

Table 1 - Concern about online privacy | Control of privacy settings on mobile phone

		Do you consider yourself concerned about your online privacy?	I control the privacy settings on my mobile phone.
Do you consider yourself concerned about your online privacy?	Pearson correlation	1	,307**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		< ,001
	N	138	138
I control the privacy settings on my mobile phone.	Pearson correlation	,307**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	< ,001	
	N	138	138

The significance value is <0.001, reflecting that the correlation is statistically significant at the level of 0.01 (or 1%). Thus, there is a moderate and statistically significant positive correlation between concern for online privacy and control over mobile phone privacy settings. This suggests that people who are more concerned about their online privacy tend to be more attentive to controlling the privacy settings on their devices.

The same thing happens when we correlate concern about online privacy and the revision of social networks' privacy settings (see table 2).

Table 2 - Concern about online privacy | Review of privacy settings on social networks

		Do you consider yourself concerned about your online privacy?	I review the privacy settings of the social networks I use.
Do you consider yourself concerned about your online privacy?	Pearson correlation	1	,314**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		< ,001
	N	138	138
I review the privacy settings of the social networks I use.	Pearson correlation	,314**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	< ,001	
	N	138	138

On the other hand, when online privacy concerns are correlated with the feeling of control over where data is used on social networks, this is not statistically significant, with a p-value of 0.285, as can be seen in table 3. These results suggest that concern about online privacy is not strongly related to the perception of control over data on social networks in this sample.

Table 3 - Concern about online privacy | Control over where personal data is used on social networks

		Do you consider yourself concerned about your online privacy?	To what extent do you feel you control your data on social networks: Where it is used
Do you consider yourself concerned about your online privacy?	Pearson correlation	1	,092
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,285
	N	138	138
To what extent do you feel you control your data on social networks: Where it is used	Pearson correlation	,092	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,285	
	N	138	138

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to answer two main questions: "What are digital users' perceptions of their online privacy?" and "How do these perceptions and concerns influence their behavior and decisions in the digital environment?".

The research reveals that most young adults have considerable concerns about online privacy. This concern manifests itself in the way they manage privacy settings on their devices and social networks. For example, there is a positive and statistically significant correlation between concern for online privacy and control of privacy settings on mobile phones, suggesting that individuals who are more concerned about privacy are more attentive to these settings.

Online privacy concerns also significantly influence user behavior. Many avoid certain activities on social networks so as not to divulge too much personal information. The majority of respondents who are very concerned about online privacy tend to check their mobile phone's privacy settings frequently.

The results of this study corroborate the existing literature on online privacy and user behavior. Barth and De Jong's (2017) theory of the privacy paradox is particularly relevant, because although many users express concern about privacy, not all of them translate this concern into action. However, this study found evidence that a proportion of young adults take concrete measures to protect their privacy online, which may indicate an evolution in attitudes and behaviors towards the protection of personal data. However, even though some young people say they are concerned about privacy, they do little or nothing to protect themselves.

In summary, this study confirms that young adults' perception of online privacy is high and that these concerns have a significant impact on their digital behavior. The findings emphasize the need for social media platforms and legislators to strengthen data protection practices to guarantee user trust in the digital environment.

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PROCEDIMENTOS ÉTICOS

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