ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS AS A HELPING TOOL TO COPE WITH LONELINESS DURING THE LOCKDOWN

LAS REDES SOCIALES ONLINE COMO AMORTIGUADORAS DE LA SOLEDAD DURANTE EL CONFINAMIENTO

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ABSTRACT

The mandatory lockdown to stop the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in 2,020 raised many challenges not only of sanitary nature but social and communicative as well. This paper is focused on the point where the two last areas meet, in order to answer to a general aim: knowing to what extent online social networks helped people not to feel alone, and a specific aim: to demonstrate whether there is any relationship between the aforementioned variable and the variables of age, sex, most frequently used network and the interaction frequency with their contacts. To do so, quantitative methodology was used, the online survey technique specifically by running the *Encuesta sobre redes sociales online en la provincia da Coruña 2022* and by analyzing the subsample referred to online social networks users (494 cases). The main conclusion is that such tools helped people not to feel lonely, especially in the case of young adults, women, frequent Instagram users and active online social networks users. This generated important benefits for both individuals and society, by enabling people to cope with loneliness and by preventing the decline of social capital.

Keywords: pandemic, loneliness, online social networks, social capital, youth, social interaction, well-being.

RESUMEN

El confinamiento impuesto para intentar detener la expansión del virus SARS-CoV-2 en 2020 planteó importantes retos de diversa índole, entre los que destacan, además de los sanitarios, los sociales y comunicativos. El presente trabajo se centra en el punto en el que convergen los dos últimos ámbitos, para dar respuesta a un objetivo

principal, conocer hasta qué punto las redes sociales online ayudaron a que las personas no se sintiesen solas y otro secundario, determinar si existe alguna relación entre dicha variable y la edad, sexo, red empleada con mayor frecuencia y frecuencia de interacción con cada tipo de contacto. Para ello, se empleó la metodología cuantitativa, concretamente la técnica de encuesta en su modalidad online, analizando la submuestra referida a las personas usuarias de redes sociales *online* de la Encuesta sobre redes sociales *online* en la provincia da Coruña 2022, submuestra que cuenta con 494 casos. La principal conclusión obtenida es que dichas herramientas ayudaron a la población a no sentirse sola, de forma especial a los jóvenes, mujeres, usuarios/as frecuentes de Instagram y personas que utilizan las redes sociales online de forma activa, lo que generó importantes beneficios tanto a nivel individual, amortiguando el sentimiento de soledad, como a nivel colectivo, evitando la erosión del capital social.

Palabras clave: pandemia, soledad, redes sociales online, capital social, juventud, interacción social, bienestar.

REDES SOCIAIS EM LINHA COMO AMORTECEDOR CONTRA A SOLIDÃO NO CONFINAMENTO

RESUMO

A contenção imposta para tentar impedir a propagação do vírus SRA-CoV-2 em 2020 colocou desafios significativos de vários tipos, incluindo, para além dos desafios de saúde, sociais e de comunicação. Este estudo centra-se no ponto de convergência destas duas últimas áreas, a fim de responder ao objectivo primário de descobrir até que ponto as redes sociais em linha ajudavam as pessoas a não se sentirem sós, e ao objectivo secundário de determinar se existe alguma relação entre esta variável e a idade, o sexo, a rede utilizada com mais frequência e a frequência de interacção com cada tipo de contacto. Para tal, foi utilizada metodologia quantitativa, especificamente a técnica do inquérito online, analisando a subamostra referente aos utilizadores de redes sociais online do Inquérito sobre redes sociais online na província da Coruña 2022, uma subamostra com 494 casos. A principal conclusão obtida é que estes instrumentos ajudaram a população a não se sentir só, especialmente jovens, mulheres, utilizadores frequentes do Instagram e pessoas que utilizam activamente as redes sociais online, o que gerou benefícios significativos tanto a nível individual, amortecendo o sentimento de solidão, como a nível colectivo, impedindo a erosão do capital social.

Palavras chave: pandemia, solidão, redes sociais em linha, capital social, juventude, interacção social, bem-estar.

1. INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of the pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus at a global level posed numerous challenges at all levels, including, and notably, social and communication ones.

The World Health Organization, in addition to recommending following the indications that were given at the local level, explained the best ways to protect yourself from the

virus, both to avoid catching and infecting it, among which was, first of all, maintaining physical distancing and also avoid crowds and close contact with other people (WHO, 2020).

In Spain, once the WHO declared the international pandemic on March 11, 2020, the State of Alarm was declared to face the health emergency, which included, among other measures, the need to stay at home except for activities listed in Royal Decree 463/ 2020, of March 14, declaring the state of alarm for the management of the health crisis situation caused by COVID-19. After an initial period of confinement, relief measures began, such as being able to go for short walks at designated times with cohabitants and gradually being able to travel to neighboring municipalities and meet with a variable number of non-cohabitants. These latter measures varied depending on the evolution of the virus incidence in each municipality. The state of alarm definitively ended on May 9, 2021 (Royal Decree-law 8/2021, of May 4, adopting urgent measures in the health, social, and jurisdictional order, to be applied after the end of the state of alarm declared by Royal Decree 926/2020, of October 25, declaring the state of alarm to contain the spread of infections caused by SARS-CoV-2). This work will refer to that initial stage known as the "lockdown," which lasted for two months, due to the radical change it represented in citizens' lives.

The society of that time, like the current one, was characterized by hyperconnection, not only offline, but also online, which is of special interest for this work.

Focusing on the development of the internet in the case of Spain, it can be observed how the evolution of internet users in terms of their numbers is rapid and positive, from the year 1996 when there were only 1% of users, to the year 2019 when 83.9% of the population was already using this tool (AIMC, 2022). This tool, according to data presented by the Association for Media Research, hereafter AIMC (2022a), was used in 2019 by both men (49.4%) and women (50.6%), of all age groups except for those over 74 years old (AIMC 2022b), and of all socioeconomic profiles (AIMC, 2022c).

Within the Internet, online social networks have become one of the most used services. In fact, according to the Annual Study of Social Networks 2019 by IAB and Elogia, 85% of internet users between 16 and 65 years old (inclusive) use these platforms, equally distributed by gender (51% women and 49% men) and age range (31% between 16 and 30 years old, 39% between 31 and 45 years old, and 30% between 46 and 65 years old). According to the same study, the most common activities on these networks are chatting or messaging contacts (65%), watching videos or listening to music (57%), seeing what their contacts are doing (45%), acquiring knowledge (39%), publishing or posting content (34%), or commenting on current events (31%). It also stands out, although with a lower percentage, meeting new people or making new friends (25%). One noteworthy aspect about all these activities is that the frequency with which they are carried out is significantly higher among people between 16 and 30 years old.

Therefore, it can be appreciated that people mainly used these networks to stay connected with others and stay up-to-date on current events in an active way, which corresponds to the preponderance of the use of functions oriented towards maintaining

social cohesion. This was especially relevant during the pandemic, as, to curb the spread of the virus and preserve public health, home confinements and restrictions on mobility and gatherings of people were established, something that, as Kovacs et al. (2021) indicate, drastically altered social life. Social needs could not be met as society was accustomed to doing.

However, although living in a hyper-connected society was something negative in terms of the spread of the virus, the tools that allowed citizens to be in constant connection during the years before the pandemic could help to face it. , especially when it comes to combating loneliness.

As Gioia et al. (2021) indicate, "the pandemic dramatically impacted individuals' well-being, reducing the opportunities for social encounters, consequently resulting in a greater use of social media in order to maintain social relationships" (p. 1). Following Gioia et al.'s study, during the lockdowns that individuals had to face, fears of feeling excluded and not mattering to others, as well as loneliness, emerged, with the use of online social media being a useful strategy for coping with social isolation. This was also recommended by the Canadian Psychological Association (2020), which reminded us that "disasters and emergencies are often times when people and communities would normally come together in friendship and social support" (p. 3), and that although we couldn't t physically be together this time, the possibility of remaining socially connected online still existed.

The present sociological study starts from this point, aiming to determine to what extent online social networks helped people feel less lonely, and to discover whether there are statistically significant differences when studying their relationship with gender and age variables, thus addressing one of the limitations mentioned in the previous study and examining whether there are differences by the most frequently used social network.

1.1. Loneliness and the importance of its study

As Cacioppo and Patrick (2008) state, "loneliness developed as a stimulus to get humans to pay more attention to their social connections, and to reach out towards others, to renew frayed or broken bonds" (p.7), which is essential for social life since institutional agreements to facilitate individual or collective well-being are formed in spaces of interaction (Guillén, 2021, p. 245 paraphrasing Nussbaum, 2012) and generate social capital. However, it should be noted that feeling lonely at a certain moment is common to all human beings (Cacioppo et al., 2015) and does not constitute a problem in itself. On the other hand, it is a cause for concern when it persists for a long enough time "to create a persistent, self-reinforcing loop of negative thoughts, sensations, and behaviors" (Cacioppo et al., 2015, p. 7).

As Banerjee and Rai (2020) argue following Wilson et al., (2007),

> loneliness is often described as the state of being without any company or in isolation from the community or society. It is considered to be a dark and miserable feeling, a risk factor for many mental disorders like depression,

anxiety, adjustment disorder, chronic stress, insomnia or even late-life dementia. (p. 526)

Regarding this definition, it is important to note that feeling alone does not necessarily imply being alone and that being alone does not imply feeling lonely (Cacioppo, et al., 2015).

And it is that social networks not only have intrinsic value, they also have instrumental value, since the quality of the bonds that a person has impacts various aspects of their life (Guillén, 2021), which leads us to talk about offline social networks and social capital, two terms that go hand in hand.

Among the different definitions of social capital, there are two that are particularly illustrative for this work. The first is from Putnam (1996), who argues that social capital is "features of social life – networks, norms and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives" (p. 66). Therefore, for this author, both social networks and the norms of reciprocity associated with them are social capital because "they create value, both individually and collectively, and we can invest in creating a network of relationships" (Putnam, 2003, p. 14). The second definition, which shows an economic perspective, is offered by Lin (2001), who maintains that the premise on which social capital is based is that it is an investment in social relationships from which something is expected to return in the market.

All of this involves strong and weak ties that connect people and have different functions. While strong ties are those that connect people who interact frequently, have high emotional intensity, and mutual trust (typically identified as family or close friends), weak ties are those that usually occur in formal organizations and workplaces (acquaintances, colleagues), with lower frequency and intensity of interaction, and lower levels of trust. As a result, the functions of each type of tie differ: while weak ties are especially useful, for example, for job searching, strong ties allow for meeting needs of security and emotional support (Granovetter, 1973). All the ties that a person has formed their social network, in the traditional sense.

Online social networks offer the possibility of maintaining the individual's existing connections and also strengthening them, as well as creating new ones, in addition to engaging in various activities. According to different studies, among which stands out the one carried out by Masciantonio et al. (2021), this is positively associated with well-being since it allows obtaining social support and feeling connected to others, as long as these tools are used actively and taking into account that not all networks offer the same result. In their study, active use of Instagram was positively related to life satisfaction, while active use of Twitter was especially related to social support. In contrast, active use of TikTok is not associated with well-being.

From all the aforementioned, it is clear that loneliness, both real and perceived, negatively affects well-being and social capital, with consequences ranging from health problems at the individual level to loss of social cohesion at the collective level.

Loneliness was one of the recurring problems that a significant part of the population had to face, especially during the lockdown, but also during the subsequent restrictions, which may have been mitigated by the active use of online social networks.

2. OBJECTIVES

The present research aims to investigate to what extent online social networks helped citizens not to feel lonely in a situation of forced social distancing and isolation, such as the case of confinement.

The working hypothesis is that, considering previous studies and the use of online social networks by the citizens, these tools would have significantly helped the population to not feel lonely during the studied period of time.

In addition to the aforementioned general objective, a specific objective is proposed: to determine if there are differences between the degree of help to mitigate perceived loneliness and gender, age, and the most frequently used social network.

Connected to the specific objective is the second hypothesis that young people, as they are already familiar with using these types of networks to socialize, will be the age group that perceives to a greater extent that these platforms helped them not to feel alone. It is expected that the effect of the interaction will be positive, meaning that those who have interacted more with their contacts will have felt more aided by the networks. The social media platform used most frequently will also be significant, as each one has a different function and even the age of those who use each one varies. Instagram may be the most helpful network, as it is the most commonly used by young people, and this could also contribute to the perception that these networks helped mitigate feelings of loneliness.

3. METHODOLOGY

Firstly, a literature review is carried out in order to contextualize the research, followed by the empirical part that will allow the hypotheses to be tested.

This work is based on the statistical analysis of the data obtained in the online survey: Survey on Online Social Networks in the province of A Coruña 2022 (Vázquez-Chas, 2022), which has a sample of 566 cases from over forty different municipalities for the universe of citizens between 18 and 65 years old (both inclusive) residing in the province of A Coruña. In this sample, both users and non-users of online social networks were included, but taking into account the objective of this study, we will work with a subsample, which refers to the citizens who are part of online social networks (N = 494).

Regarding the statistical analyzes employed, descriptive frequency analyses, bivariate correlation analyses, and contingency tables were performed to explore statistically significant relationships.

4. RESULTS

Analyzing the data related to users of online social networks from the Survey on Online Social Networks in the Province of A Coruña 2022, in response to the question "To

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what extent do you feel that online social networks helped you not to feel alone during the lockdown ?" with response categories of "Not at all", "A little bit", "Quite a bit", "A lot", "I didn't feel alone", and "NA", it was found that only 21.4% of the Interviewed users of these tools did not feel lonely. 78.6% of them did.

Table 1. *Percentage indicating the extent to which online social networks helped the interviewed social network users to avoid feeling lonely.*

Extent	%
Nothing	9,6
Modest extent	27,3
Quite extent	35,6
Great extent	27,5

Source: (Vázquez-Chas, 2022).

As shown in Table 1, 63.1% of those who use online social networks state that these tools helped them quite a bit or a lot in not feeling alone, compared to 9.6% who say that they did not help them at all.

Next, we will study the sociodemographic variables of gender and age. On the one hand, gender has a statistically significant relationship with the perceived degree of help that social networks provided to citizens to avoid feeling lonely (Cramer's V = .281; sig. = <.001).

Table 2. *Extent to which online social networks helped interviewed social media users not to feel lonely by gender, as a percentage.*

Gender	Extent			
	Nothing	Modest extent	Quite extent	Great extent
Male	18,2	28,8	39,4	13,6
Female	5,1	26,5	33,6	34,8

Source: (Vázquez-Chas, 2022).

LAs shown in Table 2, women felt to a greater extent than men that social networks helped them not to feel alone during confinement. By adding the categories "quite extent" and "great extent," it was found that social networks helped 68.4% of women to a great extent, compared to 53% of men.

On the other hand, considering the disparities and usage frequency of social networks among various age groups, it is intriguing to examine how the various degrees of aid they offered are dispersed, as this association holds statistical significance (Cramer's V = .140; p = .032).

Figure 1. *Degree of loneliness buffering by age group through online social networks.*
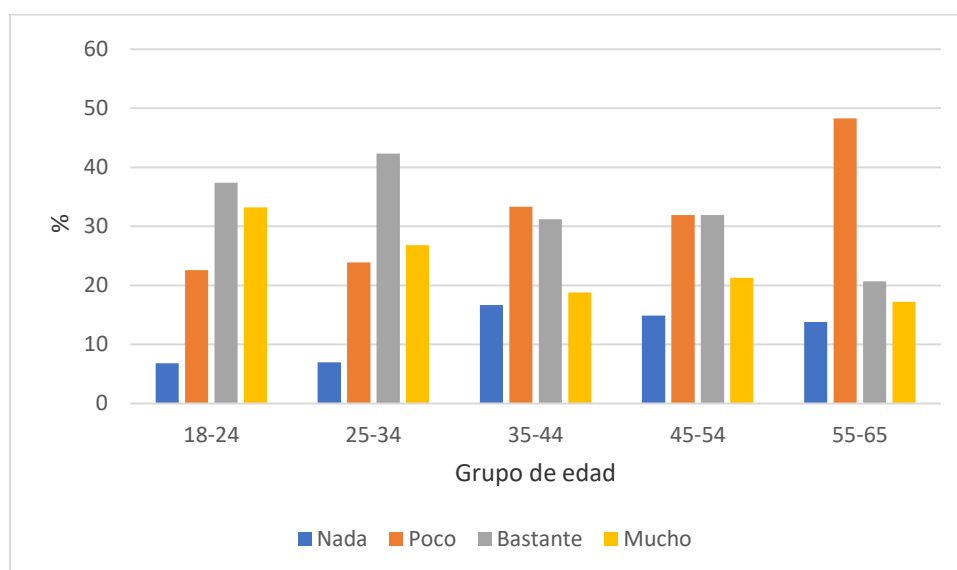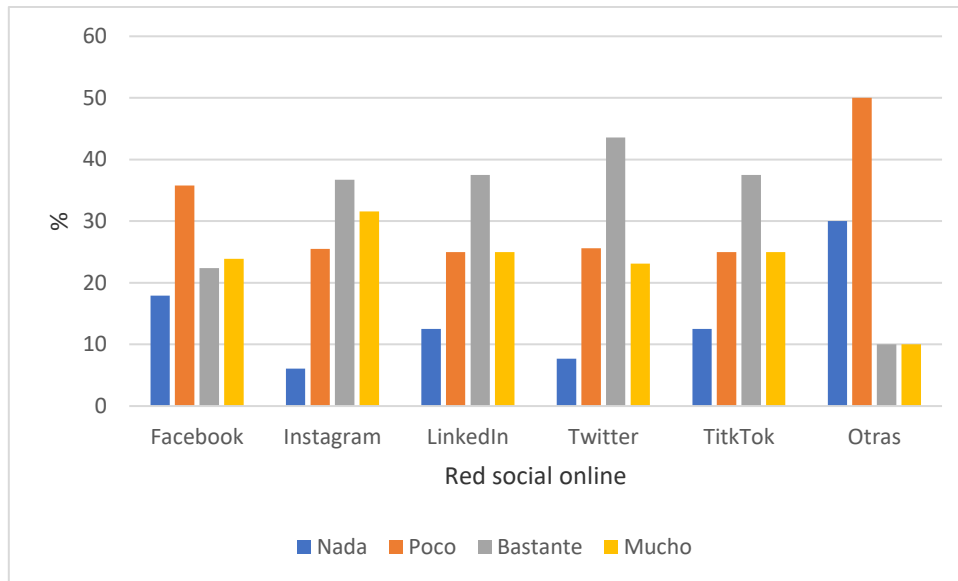

Source: (Vázquez-Chas, 2022).

As can be observed in Figure 1, the age group that felt most aided by online social networks in avoiding loneliness was the youngest, with 70.6% of them considering these tools to have provided considerable or significant assistance. The situation is similar in the next age group, from 25 to 34 years old, with 69.1%, but in this case, the difference between those who indicate significant or considerable help is greater (a 15.5% advantage for the "considerable" category) . At the other end of the spectrum are the older individuals included in this study, of whom 62.1% claimed that social networks provided them with little or no assistance in avoiding loneliness.

The cases of individuals between the ages of 35 and 44 and those between the ages of 45 and 54 are very similar to each other. There is practically the same proportion of people who indicate that social networks helped them quite or a little in not feeling lonely (around 32%), followed by the category "a lot," which represents 18.8% in the case of individuals aged 35 to 44 and 21.3% in the case of the age group of 45 to 54.

In general, it is noteworthy that the category with the lowest percentage of responses in all age groups is "nothing".

In addition to the sociodemographic variables studied, it is also of great importance to investigate whether the most frequently used social network is statistically significantly related to the extent to which social networks helped citizens feel less alone during confinement (Cramer's V = .156; p = .021).

Figure 2. *Extent to which the most frequently used social network helped to alleviate loneliness, expressed as a percentage.*

Source: (Vázquez-Chas, 2022).

As shown in figure 2, the people who use Instagram as the most frequent social network are the ones who state in a greater proportion (73.3%) that online social networks helped them to a great extent (adding the data from the categories "quite " and "a lot") to combat the feeling of loneliness, followed by those who use Twitter most frequently (66.7%), LinkedIn (62.59%) and TikTok (62.5%).

In the cases of Instagram and Twitter, it should also be noted that they present the lowest percentage of people who indicate that online social networks did not help them feel less alone (6.1% in the case of Instagram and 7. .7% in the case of Twitter).

On the contrary, individuals who primarily use Facebook and other social networks that were not specifically included in this study indicate in a higher proportion that social networks helped them to a small extent or not at all to avoid feeling lonely (53.7% in the case of Facebook and 80% in the case of "other" networks). Nevertheless, even in these two latter cases, the category "a little" surpasses "nothing" (by 17.9% in the case of Facebook and by 20% in the case of unspecified social networks).

Table 3. *Distribution of each age group by most frequent social network.*

Social Network	Age Group				
	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-65
Facebook	0,9	10,8	33,8	45,9	60
Twitter	18,8	29	23,1	16,4	7,5
Instagram	66,2	51,6	35,4	27,9	12,5
LinkedIn	0	3,2	4,6	8,2	7,5

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TikTok	11,5	3,2	1,5	0	5
Others	2,6	2,2	1,5	1,6	7,5

Source: (Vázquez-Chas, 2022).

Given this situation, it is worth asking whether the most frequently used social network varies among different age groups, and indeed it does, as 66.2% of people aged 18 to 24 use Instagram as their most frequently used social network, as can be seen in Table 3. Instagram is also the most frequently used network for the 25 to 34 age group, with more than half of them using it. However, when focusing on older age groups, it becomes clear that Facebook is the most frequently used social network. Almost half of people aged 45 to 54 years (including both ages) prefer this network (45.9%), while the percentage increases to over 60% for the oldest age group included in this study. It should be noted that this relationship is statistically significant (Cramer's V = .316; sig. = <.001).

Considering the study by Masciantonio et al. (2021), it is also noteworthy to explore if there is a statistically significant relationship between the frequency of online social media interactions during confinement with different types of relationships and their perception of the extent to which social media helped them cope with loneliness.

Table 4. *Percentage of how much social media was perceived as helpful against loneliness based on the frequency of interaction with different types of contacts.*

	Never	Once a month	More than once a month	Once a week	More than once a week	Daily

Family (V de Cramer = .199; sig. = <.001)

	Never	Once a month	More than once a month	Once a week	More than once a week	Daily
Nothing	52,8	5,6	0	5,6	5,6	30,6
A bit	36,9	17,5	7,8	11,7	6,8	19,4
Quite a bit	22,6	10,2	2,9	10,2	8,8	45,3
A lot	15,2	10,5	3,8	14,3	10,5	45,7

Friends (V de Cramer = .331; sig. = <.001)

	Never	Once a month	More than once a month	Once a week	More than once a week	Daily
Nothing	32,4	13,5	16,2	18,9	0	18,9
A bit	9,7	12,6	6,8	17,5	18,4	35
Quite a bit	3	4,5	2,3	12	9	69,2
A lot	1,9	1,9	1	8,6	2,9	83,8

Coworkers[1] (V de Cramer = .225; sig. = <.001)

	Never	Once a month	More than once a month	Once a week	More than once a week	Daily
Nothing	68,8	8,6	2,9	5,7	5,7	8,6

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[1] Excluding interactions for work-related reasons.

A bit	43	10	14	14	9	10
Quite a bit	34,8	6,1	8,3	14,2	11,4	15,2
A lot	22,8	4	4	26,7	8,9	33,7

Acquaintances (V de Cramer = .204; sig. = <.001)

Nothing	44,4	16,7	11,1	8,3	5,6	13,9
A bit	21,4	22,3	18,4	16,5	15,5	5,8
Quite a bit	17	17,8	17,8	23	17	7,4
A lot	15,4	4,8	11,5	24	26,9	17,3

Others (V de Cramer = .181; sig. = <.008)

Nothing	63,3	6,7	10	6,7	6,7	6,7
A bit	54,2	15,7	6	9,6	9,6	4,8
Quite a bit	60,7	10,7	9,	9,8	6,6	3,3
A lot	34,5	7,1	11,9	16,7	13,1	16,7

Source: (Vázquez-Chas, 2022).

As shown in Table 4, the relationship between the degree to which the sub-sample of online social media users felt that these tools helped them not feel alone and the frequency of interaction on social media with both strong ties (family and friends) and weak ties (coworkers, acquaintances, and others) is statistically significant in all cases.

Studying each group separately, it can be observed that among those who perceived that social media did not help them at all, more than half never interacted with their family members (52.8%), colleagues (68.8%), or others (63.3%). . Additionally, 44.4% never interacted with their acquaintances, and 32.4% never did so with their friends.

Among those who state that online social networks helped them little to not feel alone, more than half never interacted with "others", over 40% (specifically 43%) never did it with their colleagues, and more than a third (36.9%) never talked to their relatives. It's worth noting that almost a quarter of these individuals interacted once a month with acquaintances, and, especially, that 35% interacted with their friends on a daily basis.

In relation to the "enough" category, almost two-thirds (60.7%) never interacted with "others" during the confinement, and more than a third did not interact with their colleagues (34.8%); Almost a quarter (23%) interacted with their accounts once a week, with the noteworthy fact that 69.2% interacted daily with their friends and 45.3% interacted with the same frequency with their relatives.

Regarding those who consider that online social networks helped them a lot to not feel lonely during the pandemic, 45.7% interacted with their family daily, 83.8% with their

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friends, and 33.7% with their colleagues. 26.9% interacted with their acquaintances more than once a week and 34.5% never interacted with "others". However, in this last case, the "a lot" category shows the highest percentages in all interaction frequencies, except for "once a month".

5. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

After analyzing the data from the Survey on Online Social Networks in the province of A Coruña in 2022, specifically the subsample that groups online social network users (494 cases), performing descriptive frequency analysis, bivariate correlation analysis, and contingency tables to explore statistically significant relationships, it was possible to address the objectives set out in this research.

Thus, the results of this research allow us to meet the general objective, which is to know to what extent online social networks helped citizens not to feel lonely during the confinement, since it was shown that 78.6% of the subsample felt lonely during that period of time. Of the total of people who felt lonely, 63.1% stated that these tools helped them to combat this feeling to a great extent, which contrasts with the first hypothesis raised, which suggested that online social networks would have helped a lot to prevent the population from feeling lonely during the confinement.

The second hypothesis, aimed at determining the existence or not of differences between the degree of help to alleviate perceived loneliness and sex, age, and the most frequently used social network, was partially contrasted. Although young people aged 18 to 34 were those who noticed to a greater extent that online social networks helped them not to feel lonely, the sex of the interviewed individuals was not independent; women felt the help of online social networks to a greater extent. The use of a particular social network more frequently also affects the degree of help perceived, with Instagram showing a greater ability to deal with this feeling, in line with the hypothesis put forward, followed by Twitter. In addition, the results suggest that those who often interacted with their contacts, especially their strong ties, perceived to a greater extent that social networks helped them not to feel lonely. Therefore, the results obtained reinforce those achieved by Masciantonio et al. (2021) and Gioia et al. (2021).

Therefore, it seems that the individuals who actively used online social networks to communicate and maintain their social life during confinement not only alleviated their feeling of loneliness, with the individual benefits that it entails, but also helped alleviate the erosion of social capital that would have likely occurred without the possibility of online interaction.

However, the main limitation of this study is given by the research technique used for its realization, as it is not possible to extrapolate the results with complete certainty; Even though efforts were made to widely disseminate the questionnaire link and to have a representative sample, it cannot be considered that all residents in the province had the same opportunities to participate in the survey. Therefore, the main proposal for future research is to repeat this study with a sample that allows for such extrapolation.

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