

## Article

# Evolution of the Digital Attention Market in the Pandemic: A Comparative Study of Young Spanish University Students (2019–2021)

Cristina Fernández-Rovira <sup>1</sup> and Santiago Giraldo-Luque <sup>2,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Communication, Faculty of Business and Communication, University of Vic-Central University of Catalonia, 08500 Vic, Spain; cristina.fernandez1@uvic.cat

<sup>2</sup> Department of Journalism and Communication Sciences, Faculty of Communication Sciences, Autonomous University of Barcelona, 08193 Cerdanyola del Vallès, Spain

\* Correspondence: santiago.giraldo@uab.cat; Tel.: +34-935814469

**Abstract:** The business figures linked to the economy of big companies have shown that large technology platforms are some of the few major beneficiaries of the global economic crisis generated by COVID-19. The study compares biannual results of digital consumption and links user monitoring methods with the realization of qualitative focus groups. It analyses the evolution of the consumption of digital tools (mainly social media) by young university students in Spain between 2019 and 2021. The results of the comparative study show a 36% increase in the time spent using digital applications between the two years studied, as well as a greater concentration of time spent on a few platforms. The qualitative results indicate a self-declaration of addictive dependence on the use of social media; an increasing trend in declaring that youngsters have no interest in stopping their use of these platforms, and a justification that technology companies may not pay the user for the content and data they subsequently use to generate revenue in exchange for personal privacy. This behaviour describes the consolidation of the attention economy concept, which denotes a discursive appropriation of the university students who justify a part of the economic, social, and cultural domination that the technological giants carry out.

**Keywords:** biannual comparative analysis; COVID-19; technological platforms; attention economy; social media; youth; oligopolies



**Citation:** Fernández-Rovira, C.; Giraldo-Luque, S. Evolution of the Digital Attention Market in the Pandemic: A Comparative Study of Young Spanish University Students (2019–2021). *Sustainability* **2021**, *13*, 11837. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su132111837>

Academic Editor: Antonella Petrillo

Received: 25 September 2021

Accepted: 24 October 2021

Published: 26 October 2021

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## 1. Introduction

Digital consumption has experienced a huge increase in Spain in the year of the pandemic, especially regarding the use of social media. In the year marked by confinement, more than eight million Spaniards started using social media. Thus, in 2021 there are more than 37 million users of the major platforms in Spain, according to the Digital Report 2021-Spain prepared by We are Social and Hootsuite [1]. This means an increase of 27.6% in users of social media in the last year, as in 2020 there were 29 million, representing 62% of the population and indicating an increase of 3.1% over 2019. According to the report, Spain has more than 42 million Internet users, or 91% of the population.

Eighty percent of the Spanish population regularly use social media, which is well above the world average of 53%. In addition, each Spanish user has an average of eight accounts. The increase in digital and internet consumption has occurred all over the planet, although social media users have increased in greater proportion. Globally, active users in internet networks increased by 13%, with 490 million more people in the last year. The use of internet in the world reached 59.5% of the population, 7.3% more than in 2020 [1]. According to Statista [2], mobile social media penetration in European countries ranges from 99% in Cyprus, Kosovo, and Albania to 94% in Estonia. In other words, most Europeans use social networks via their smartphones. Using data revealed by Statista in

2019 [3], it is observed that 56% of individuals used social media in 2018 in the European Union (EU) of 28 member states. This figure rises to 96% in 2021 in the EU plus the United Kingdom, according to Statista [2]. Although there are 27 countries in the EU in 2021, we have added the United Kingdom data to average the same countries as the previous figure. Thus, we can see an increase of 40%. Based on data from We Are Social [1], 79% of people are active on social networks in Western Europe, as well as in Northern Europe, as a proportion of the total population; while 72% of the population is active on social networks in Southern Europe.

The Spanish case, however, is paradigmatic for the increase in digital consumption that has occurred in the year of the pandemic caused by COVID-19 and the high level of penetration of social media with respect to the total population. According to data from We are Social and Hootsuite for 2021 [1], Spaniards spent an average of 6 h and 11 min a day connected to the internet, while, according to 2020 data, the connection time was 5 h and 41 min. This means that Spaniards spend a quarter of their day actively connected to the internet. In addition, 97% of them access social networks via smartphone.

The most used social media in Spain, according to Hootsuite and We are Social [1], are WhatsApp and YouTube, used by 89% of users between 16 and 64 years old, followed by Facebook (79%), Instagram (69%), Twitter (52%), and Facebook Messenger (45%). As can be seen, a large part of users' time and attention is concentrated on social media that belong to the same company (WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, and Facebook Messenger). If we look at the most used mobile apps by monthly active users, it becomes clear that the top four match the same ones that belong to Facebook Inc, followed by Amazon and Spotify. However, in the year of the pandemic, the ranking of downloaded mobile apps is led by TikTok, followed by Zoom Cloud Meetings, WhatsApp, Google Meet, QR and Barcode Reader, Instagram, and Amazon Prime Video.

The study elaborated by IAB, Interactive Advertising Bureau Spain [4], states that 87% of Spanish internet users between the ages of 16 and 65 use social media, representing 25.9 million people. In terms of network usage, the report states that WhatsApp is the most used network in 2020, followed by Facebook, although the latter decreases compared to 2019. Likewise, the study indicates that the social media platform that has grown the most has been TikTok. Significantly, YouTube, Instagram, Telegram, and Twitch have also grown. Although social networks have users of all ages, Generation Z (16 to 24 years) uses more social media, with 93% penetration, followed by the Millennial Generation (25 to 40 years), with 91%. The youngest are those who use more social media platforms (5.4). As collected by IAB Spain [4], the declared time of use has increased in 2020 with respect to 2019, as it has gone from 55 min to 1 h and 20 min on average. Men and those under 40 years old are the ones who spend more hours online. By age groups, between 16 and 24 years there is a consumption of 1 h and 27 min per day, while between 25 and 40 years there is a consumption of 1 h and 13 min. According to IAB Spain, the networks that monopolize more time of users are Whatsapp, Twitch, Youtube, Spotify, and Houseparty [4].

In 2019, Rastreator already identified a 12% increase over 2017 data in the time young people spend on their mobile phones, as 18–24-year-olds spent on average 366 min a day on their smartphones [5]. As for minors, Qustodio [6] notes a 180% spike in activity in the first week after schools were closed due to the confinement caused by COVID-19. In terms of usage time, the study conducted in Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States explains that the time spent by minors on social media has increased by 200% in the quarantine period.

Self-reported consumption by university students, however, often yields higher figures for time spent using social media than those described by more generalist reports. According to Ahmed [7], more than 50% of college students at the State University of New York reported using their mobile phone more than 9 h a day; while in China Guifang, Yuting and Jia [8] showed that 66.86% of university students used their smartphone more than 4 h a day. Similar results were collected by Amador et al. [9] for the case of Mexico, where students of the Faculty of Business at the University of La Salle Bajío recognized

that they used their smartphone 7 h a day. In Spain, according to Romero-Rodríguez and Aznar-Díaz [10], 31.5% of students at the Faculty of Education Sciences of the University of Granada use their smartphone more than 2 h a day, a figure that rises to 4 h a day for students of education at the University of Malaga and the Autonomous University of Madrid [11]. In the case of students at the Autonomous University of Barcelona and the University of Vic, a significant increase was demonstrated as early as 2019 in the time young people spend on social media [12]. Fernández-Rovira and Giraldo-Luque [11], after applying a survey to 572 young Spaniards pointed out that they use social media for an average of 5.5 h per day, mainly concentrated on Instagram. According to the same authors, their main motivations are to share photos and videos and to see what their contacts are doing daily.

Although university students' self-reporting of time spent on social media networks is higher than the reports discussed above, these perceptions tend to underestimate the actual time spent on social networks when compared to mobile device monitoring [13].

According to the data presented, social media control most of the time spent online. Moreover, the time of use is concentrated in a few platforms that become oligopolistic. This is a phenomenon that has worsened during the pandemic caused by COVID-19 and that may be consolidated in the future if legislation is not developed to prevent the concentration and control currently exercised by large digital platforms over users.

#### *Threats and Challenges of the Communication Oligopoly in the 21st Century*

In cognitive capitalism [14,15] or platform capitalism [16], the concentration of users' time and digital attention on a few platforms has multiple risks, both individual and collective. The affectation of digital health and well-being [17,18]; the alteration in the development of the economy and politics [19]; the intrusion in the practice of journalism [20]; the automation of common sense [21], or the construction of a society centred on the emotional conviction of the media narrative that promotes confrontation [22] with scarce levels of democratic deliberation [23], are major problems identified and continuously denounced in recent years.

Nevertheless, during the COVID-19 pandemic, much of the day-to-day business shifted to an online format due to restrictions on movement to contain the spread of the virus. Thus, to a large extent, the internet helped the development of many activities. In reference to social networks, Orben, Tomova, and Blakemore [24] observed that in times of social distancing, the use of social media can help adolescents to mitigate feelings of isolation. Specifically, during the pandemic, Hamilton, Nessi, and Choukas-Bradley [25] note that for teenagers who are in an unhealthy environment, social media can offer a community of support and resources for coping with COVID-19. The authors also consider that networks can offer a place for social connection and a site to develop one's identity, but also point to potential risks related to anxiety, body representation, or misinformation, as well as sleep disturbances. Prior to COVID-19, some authors pointed to increased social capital, support, or a greater capacity for self-exploration of one's own identity as possible benefits of social media use [26,27], and internet networks could even be conceived as a place where young people feel more connected to their friends [28]. Fuchs [29] points to a new type of exploitation based on the absolute commodification of the internet audience, a model that utilizes users as producers of free content for large oligopolistic platforms [30]. Fuchs takes up the approaches of the critical theory of society [29] that, through authors such as Marcuse, denounced the widening of the range of the sublimation of the worker as a slave of the productive model (without currently assuming the role of work as such). Slavery, in the 21st century, is not given by obedience or by the rudeness of the performance of a certain labour activity, but by the status of the instrument that is introduced in the individual and that reduces him or her to the state of an animated thing [31]. The reading of the new proposal of the critical theory of society also carries implicitly the denunciation of a controlled citizenship under the systemic and sophisticated exercise of power-communication [32].

The construction and application of the principles of the attention economy [33,34], by which the oligopolistic internet platforms are governed, turn attention into a commodity (such as work time and its extension to leisure and rest time). Thus, the domination of capital over life expands [21]. In the 21st century this is a sophisticated way to capture the users' attention time. This time is then sold and marketed as an attractive commodity resource [35].

In the logic of the attention economy, users have been stripped of their critical profile and have gradually ceded their frameworks of action and individual and collective identity projection to merge into the economic and ideological interests of the large platforms [18]. In this way, technology companies (through social media and the main streaming platforms) exercise control over the reference models of their users (almost 100% of young people in Spain). Through the centralized practice of publishing user-generated content and the psychological effects of notification and reward systems [19], platforms have established the dominant values of youth: narcissism [36], fame [37] and aesthetic conditioning exerted under the social pressure of social networks [38].

Other dangers focus on the continuous surveillance to which the user is subjected in social media [17,39], the emergence of anxious behaviours [40] or the fear of missing out (FOMO) on something if one is not continuously connected to the networks [41]. However, threats are also associated with sleep interference [42], problems in study development [43], and loss of socialization skills in children and young people [17,44].

However, the scientific literature on users' justifications for consuming and producing content for social media during a large part of the day is still scarce for the Spanish case. Having detected this knowledge gap and noted the increase in the consumption of social media among young people, the article sets out to analyse digital consumption in Spain by youngsters, both quantitatively and qualitatively and focused on social media platforms. The proportions of the phenomenon, moreover, make it a relevant social issue with repercussions in many areas, such as health, economics, and politics. For this reason, it is necessary to have reliable and up-to-date data on the current situation among a part of Spanish young people.

This research specifically investigates the increase in consumption and the qualitative explanations given by young university users for their intensive use of large social media platforms. The article uses young people's self-perceived consumption data (obtained through different focus groups); actual consumption data (obtained by monitoring smartphone use); and young people's qualitative explanations of their behaviour (obtained through different focus groups). In this way, it is possible to compare perception data and actual data from two years, and the justifications that young people elaborate. This last point also explores young people's views on how platforms use their data.

The text contributes to the scientific discussion in this field with novel findings such as the comparison between self-perceived consumption information and actual consumption. This is something that transcends most of the data that can be found in previous studies, as the data are usually based on surveys, but not on monitoring. For this reason, the article makes a contribution that may be useful in making progress in obtaining data that is closer to the real consumption that occurs among young Spaniards. Likewise, the qualitative part of the study is also a significant contribution, as it provides first-hand knowledge of the opinions of those involved in the phenomenon under investigation. Qualitative probing into young people's explanations of their behaviour in the digital world and their views on the use of data by large platforms can provide valuable information that can help to better understand high consumption times. The article describes the increase in digital consumption between 2019 and 2021 for the case of young Spaniards (aged 18–24 years old), focusing on the high penetration of social media and major streaming platforms. Specifically, the objectives of the research are:

- To compare the evolution of digital consumption made via mobile phones before and during the pandemic (2019–2021), which has led to different degrees of confinement in Spain;

- To check the concentration of usage time and attention of young people on a few platforms;
- To explore the justifications that young people give to the use of social media in a qualitative way, as well as their opinions on the use that platforms make of the data they generate.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The research proposes the attention economy as the theoretical underpinning of the configuration of oligopolies within the attention society [18] and the model of cognitive capitalism [14,15]. For the scientific development of the concept of the attention economy, the study establishes the monitoring and calculation of mobile phone and social media time as the main measure to determine the attention devoted to the devices and social networks applications by the analysed users [12,33,45].

The research methods used in the study are structured in two parts. Firstly, the researchers monitored the activity on the smartphones of a sample of the population studied. Using the smartphone's screenshots to show the actual time spent using the device, it was possible to see the time spent on the consumption of social media and the most used applications. With the monitoring carried out, we avoid the self-reported diagnosis of users' consumption through surveys, which is usually the study method applied to approximate the consumption of social networks by different users. Secondly, we carried out a series of focus groups with the students participating in the study. This technique had the intention of investigating the justifications for their use of mobile applications and, mainly, of social media. Moreover, during the focus groups, the researchers were interested in the opinions of users about their own generated data and the use that big technological companies make of them. Both methods were applied systematically in 2019 and 2021 with the intention of carrying out a comparative biannual analysis.

In both methods, the study sample is composed of university students, aged between 19 and 21, who are in their second or third year of the degrees of journalism, interactive communication, audio-visual communication, and advertising and public relations, at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) and the Universitat de Vic-Universitat Central de Catalunya (UVic-UCC). The focus groups and the monitoring exercise were designed under a systematic sampling [46], which allowed us to identify the typical profiles for the analysis in each participating university.

The choice of the sample is justified on the basis of preceding studies in which audiences of similar ages were analysed [17,47,48] and, more specifically, previous research with university students in various countries, such as the United States [7], China [8], Mexico [9], and Spain [10–12]. Focusing the research on communication students is an interesting contrast to other degrees, especially for future studies, insofar as communication students are assumed to have a greater knowledge of the field than those of other specialties.

The first methodological technique applied—monitoring—was implemented to measure the real time and, therefore, the attention that young people pay on the mobile device and on specific applications. The exercise consisted in the observation of a group of 25 (year 2019) and 50 (year 2020) randomly selected university students majoring in communication. Likewise, for the focus groups, the same students were convened. The demographic characteristics of the group were gender (with 60% female and 40% male); age (between 19 and 21 years old); and university degree (with 32% journalism students; 31% interactive communication students; 26% audio-visual communication students; and 11% advertising and public relations students).

For the monitoring technique, the participants examined their mobile phone usage for one week (between October and November 2019 and in February 2020) via the Screen Time app. In line with preceding studies, which have conducted similar tests during the same period of time [49–51], the monitoring allowed us to obtain real usage time data and to observe which apps are the ones that concentrate the attention of the analysed users. The variables studied from the data obtained by the Screen Time app were total mobile phone

usage time (in hours and minutes per week); the apps that were given the most attention during the week by each participant; and the attention poured into each app during the study week. The data collected by the participants were anonymized and systematized in spreadsheets for processing and comparison of results.

Monitoring for data collection was complemented by the development of 15 focus groups of between 5 and 6 university students, lasting approximately 45 min each. The focus groups were conducted in December 2019 and February 2021.

In the focus groups, three main themes were discussed through open-ended questions. These were then categorized for analysis:

- The assessment of the self-perception of the attention devoted to mobile phones and, in particular, to social media in terms of time;
- Contrasting self-perception with the real results of the attention devoted to smartphones and social media;
- The justification and motivations of the participants to explain the high amount of attention devoted to mobile phones and social media and their opinions on user's generated data and its utilisation by the platforms.

### 3. Results

The main result of the comparative study conducted is the significant increase in screen time of the students analysed. While in 2019 the smartphone usage time was 31.1 h per week, by 2021 the time increased to 42.3 h per week. The figures detected through the students' smartphone data indicate a 36% increase in usage time between the two years of study.

In general terms, the data collected show a generalized increase in all the main statistical values. Thus, apart from the average increase in average hours of weekly mobile phone consumption, the maximum and minimum values found, and the median value also increased. The minimum value of hours of usage per week increased from 758 min (12.6 h) in 2019 to 1042 min (17.4 h) in 2021; while the maximum value in 2019, 3353 min or 55.9 h, increased to 69 h (4141 min per week) in 2021. The 2019 average, 27 h, increased to 39.9 h in 2021, an increase of 47.8%. Similarly, the standard deviation of the sample, comparing the two measurements, decreased from 12.8 h of consumption to 11.9, bringing the behaviour of the users studied almost 1 h closer.

The increases in usage time also coincides with the growth in usage time of the main applications of social media networks or streaming platforms and that are part of a few companies, such as Facebook Inc. (Menlo Park, CA, USA), Alphabet (Mountain View, CA, USA), Amazon (Seattle, WA, USA), Twitter (San Francisco, CA, USA), and some video game applications. Table 1 shows the rise in the number of hours in almost all the main applications used by the students analysed and monitored. The table shows the applications most used, identified from the data collected in the monitoring process.

**Table 1.** Biannual difference in the average weekly hours of use of the main applications on the mobile phone.

Application	Year 2019	Year 2021	Difference
Instagram	10.1	10.3	1.98%
WhatsApp	7.4	9	21.6%
Twitter	3.9	4.9	25.6%
YouTube	5.7	7.7	35.1%
Twitch	1	3.3	230%
TikTok	Not specified	7.4	NA
Gaming Apps	4	4.2	5%
Browsers (Chrome and Safari)	2.1	3.2	52.4%
Total screen time	31.1	42.3	36%

The data in Table 1 reflect very significant increases in the time of use of Twitch, YouTube, Twitter, and WhatsApp, each of them with more than 20% growth in the number of hours of user attention in the two years compared. The case of Instagram is significant because, although it does not generate a significant increase in usage time, it remains the most used application by the analysed users with more than 10 h of average individual consumption per week.

The comparison between the two years studied (2019 and 2021) also reflects a higher percentage of users using each of the platforms. In addition to users staying longer on the attention centralizing platforms, more and more users are connecting to them. The most representative examples of the concentration phenomenon are found in Instagram and WhatsApp, which have a penetration of 96% and 98%, respectively, in the sample. Likewise, the irruption of TikTok as well as Twitch in the market of applications competing for users' attention also indicates a high increase in the number of users who are concentrated in a few platforms.

The data in Table 2 indicate that, except in the case of YouTube, which reduces the percentage of users who frequently use the platform by 5% (although it is the third fastest growing platform in terms of time of consumption), the major technology platforms have significantly increased the number of users connected to them. The higher growth indicated in the emerging platforms (TikTok, Twitch, and video game applications) reveal the momentum they had during 2020, but this did not imply, as can be seen in Tables 1 and 2, that users abandoned the more traditional platforms (such as Instagram, Twitter, or WhatsApp). On the contrary, new attention-grabbing offers were added to previous consumption to increase total screen time (by 36%).

**Table 2.** Biannual difference in the percentage of users who use the main streaming and social networking applications on the mobile phone.

Application	Year 2019	Year 2021	Difference
Instagram	84%	96%	14.3%
WhatsApp	92%	98%	2.1%
Twitter	52%	54%	3.8%
YouTube	80%	76%	−5%
Twitch	4%	16%	300%
TikTok	0%	40%	NA
Gaming Apps	20%	44%	120%
Browsers (Chrome and Safari)	68%	62%	−8.8%

Giving an answer to the second research question, it is also relevant to identify the percentage of screen time users spend on each social media app or entertainment platform. As the number of social media apps per individual increases (from an average of 5.3 in 2019 to 5.8 in 2021), the percentage dedicated to the dominant apps, such as Instagram and WhatsApp, is slightly reduced compared to the previous year, with the logical consequence of growth in consumption of new apps such as TikTok and Twitch (see Table 3).

Despite the decline with respect to total usage time among users, as seen in Table 3, the percentage of total screen time that observed students spend on apps such as Instagram and WhatsApp is very high and accounts for close to 50% of screen time in 2021. In fact, Facebook Inc, with its two main apps (Instagram and WhatsApp joined by some users of Facebook) reaped 51% of total mobile phone usage time in 2019, a percentage that dropped to 45% in 2021, as detailed in Table 3. In the same vein, Google (with YouTube) reaped 16.8% and 16.4% of screen time in 2019 and 2021, respectively, while Twitch and TikTok benefit from spikes of new consumption reaching 10% and 16.4% of screen time in just one year of consolidation.

Thus, the percentage of screen time allocated to major technology platforms (YouTube, Twitch, Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter, Twitch, and TikTok) also shows an increase of two points, rising from 70% in 2019 to 72% in 2021. Similarly, if video games are added, screen

time increases 10 points in each measurement, meaning it reaches 80% (2019) and 82% (2021). The remaining percentage of consumption is mainly supplemented by the use of browsers (Chrome and Safari), which represent 8% in 2019 and 9% of screen consumption on mobile phones in 2021.

**Table 3.** Biannual difference in the percentage of users who use the main streaming and social networking applications on the mobile phone.

Application	Year 2019	Year 2021	Difference	Platform Users 2019/2020 <sup>1</sup>
Instagram	31.3%	24.4%	−8.6%	84%/96%
WhatsApp	24.3%	21%	−3.3%	92%/98%
Twitter	10.7%	12.8%	1.9%	52%/54%
YouTube	16.8%	16.4%	−0.4%	80%/76%
Twitch	1.7%	10%	8.3%	4%/16%
Tik–Tok	0%	16.4%	16.4%	0%/40%
Gaming Apps	9.7%	10.3%	0.7%	20%/44%
Browsers	8%	9%	1%	68%/62%

<sup>1</sup> Average usage is calculated from study users using the platforms.

The qualitative results obtained in the focus groups show a similar trend in the perception of the time spent on social media among the young people participating in the study. In both 2019 and 2021, students are unaware of the large amount of time they spend on social networks in their daily lives and generally think that it is less time than revealed by the monitoring application. Even though they know that the amount of time spent on screens is very high, the surprise is still evident when they are confronted with the actual number of hours consumed:

- “We knew there would be quite a few, but we didn’t imagine there would be so many. In some cases, the surprise was greater than in others. Our first reaction was to reflect on how it could be that so many hours a day are spent on social networks” (Group 1, 2021);
- “I do 6 h on social media a day, and half an hour on productivity apps, it’s very strong! It scares me, how strong...” (Group 4, 2019);
- “I thought it was a lot less... Oh my God!” (Group 2, 2019).

Even so, a difference between the groups studied in each year is beginning to be noticed. In 2019 all groups were concerned about the difference in self-perception and actual consumption, and their surprise was evident. However, in some of the 2021 groups the actual consumption results were not met with surprise or concern. They are aware of the large number of hours they spend hooked on social media:

- “They have not surprised us too much as we are all more or less aware of the number of hours we spend on our mobile phones” (Group 4, 2021);
- “No, we have not been surprised as we are fully aware of the time we spend on social media” (Group 6, 2021).

In fact, for some of the 2021 groups, despite being aware of the high consumption (more than 40 h a week), the results are not entirely surprising because they thought that even more hours could be spent on social media:

- “We’ve been surprised because we thought it would be more, I mean we’re surprised that it’s less than we thought” (Group 5, 2021);
- “It hasn’t surprised us at all. We are aware of the time we spend in front of a screen and using social networks in general. Although, if we are honest, we have been surprised because we thought that the result of the time spent using the networks would be even greater” (Group 9, 2021).

The change of the trend seen in the self-perception of consumption, which has become more conscious in the year 2021, becomes even more palpable when young students are asked about the motivations for use, the justifications given for the large amount of time



spent on the networks, and their view of the dominance of the major platforms of their own time.

Firstly, the motivations identified in 2019 were linked to social objectives, such as “talking to people who are far away or who you haven’t seen for a long time” (Group 2, 2019), “contacting people you haven’t seen for years” (Group 1, 2019), or “facilitating communication between groups of people because it is easier to do it from there” (Group 2, 2019). In 2021, even though the socialization section is still present in some of the answers given, there has been a qualitative leap towards new values linked to the very psychological logic promoted by the social network’s platforms. Some students, for example, mention among their motivations the “ability to have a lot of publicity” (Group 12, 2021), “following trends” (Group 14, 2021), “the possibility of following the career of an artist” (Group 8, 2021), “seeing what influential people we follow are doing” (Group 11, 2021), “showing scenes from our life and being aware of new trends” (Group 3, 2021), or “obtaining personal recognition” (Group 1, 2021).

Secondly, the participants in the focus groups pointed to social networks as the scene of many problems. For example: addiction, obsessions to try to fit in with social canons, abandonment of daily obligations due to the loss of the notion of time, the absence of real sociability, health problems, loss of time, misinformation, or the reflection of an idyllic and often untruthful reality. They also identify negative feelings with their use, such as tiredness, indifference, boredom, sadness, frustration, overwhelm, anger, hatred, anguish, envy, impotence, or even anxiety. Despite all of this, the participants state that they are not willing to stop using social media (not even if they are offered money in exchange) for reasons that have become more worrying between the two years studied.

While in 2019 some responses were already seen as alarming, for example: “the other day I had to leave my mobile phone at home because it was out of battery and when I went outside, I was afraid... something might happen to me” (Group 2, 2019) or “they have created a certain fear in us. We feel lonely if we are out of the networks. I think everyone is afraid of being nobody” (Group 1, 2019); and denoted a vital involvement with social media, in 2021, that relationship of inevitability has become not only more frequent, but also deeper. Some of the answers given by the students studied to the question of why they cannot stop using or at least decrease their use of social networks were as follows:

- “Because we were born into this system, and we think it is already part of our life” (Group 12, 2021);
- “Because we live in a connected world and at the moment the use of networks does not bring very serious consequences” (Group 13, 2021);
- “In our society being outside the networks means being away from many things. Away from friends, family, away from current affairs. In short, away from life. It would be to be out of place in today’s society” (Group 5, 2021);
- “Because we are addicted. And even though we say we use them too much or we want to stop, deep down we don’t want to. The fear of disinformation or disconnection is greater than the will to detox” (Group 1, 2021);
- “We wouldn’t put a price on it, because we have no intention of giving them up” (Group 9, 2021).

Finally, in the answers related to the monopoly of attention controlled by large technological companies, the most relevant qualitative change between the two compared groups of students (2019 and 2021) is evident. While addiction to social media was identified in 2019, as well as a first impossibility to give them up (although the amounts of money required for this were considerably lower than in 2021), there was a minimal critical awareness of the importance of time spent on leisure and concentrated on social network entertainment. In one of the 2019 focus groups it was noted, for example, that:

“It is very important the time we spend on networks, because, in addition, it is time linked to entertainment. We spend a lot of time on entertainment when we could be doing things that are much more productive or that lead to something real” (Group 1, 2019).

Similarly, none of the focus groups in 2019 expressed justifications in defence of the large platforms and their policies of extraction, administration, management, and control of data and user attention. On the contrary, even though all the groups in 2021 explicitly stated that they knew that the companies that own the social media networks generate additional income from the management and sale of data, that users are not the ones who control what happens on the networks, and that social networks act as sounding boards for users' beliefs and interests, several of the groups justified the actions of the technological platforms:

- "We do not give information without receiving anything in return, it is a transaction of goods for services, a quid pro quo relationship. A symbiosis between consumer and seller, where one cannot live without the other and vice versa" (Group 1, 2021);
- "It depends on the person and social network in which you act, since you have to take into account the popularity of your content and the social network in which you create it. In some, you might be able to charge some money for creating content" (Group 2, 2021);
- "Users are free workers on the platforms and in many cases, users are not aware of this. But it is a retroactive issue, as we can also access this for 'free' and we are provided with a tool that allows us to do everything we do" (Group 5, 2021);
- "We have to think that the development companies, and therefore their employees, should be paid for it. If we don't want to pay for using them, they should be financed in other ways: in the case of networks, with our own data" (Group 9, 2021).

The responses found in the focus groups in 2021, when compared to similar groups of users in 2019, reflect a noticeable and alarming trend change in the role social media plays in young people's lives and, above all, in the uncritical way through which university students take on their relationship with the dominant platforms of digital attention.

#### 4. Discussion

Most studies conducted on young people's screen time in recent years denote a progressive increase in the consumption of digital interfaces, such as social networks and streaming platforms, through their mobile phones [1,10,12,13]. The results of the observations developed in this study confirm that the consumption of the young university students analysed continues to rise and is very high. The study data reveal that in 2021, and influenced by global pandemic conditions, the young people studied exceeded 40 h per week of mobile phone use, which is equivalent to a full-time work week [12].

The 36% increase in mobile phone usage that emerges from the comparative analysis of the 2019 and 2021 results has been driven by the take-off of two main platforms—Twitch and TikTok. This is indicated by the monitoring data conducted, which shows that these two platforms emerged with power during the pandemic period [4] and managed to capture the attention of at least 16% and 40% of the students analysed.

In Spain, COVID-19 containment measures included the declaration of a state of alarm, which involved home confinement (with some exceptions) and the temporary closure of non-essential businesses. Although there were some permitted activities, Spaniards had varying degrees of confinement between 15 March 2020 and 21 June 2020; and between 25 October 2020 and 9 May 2021. This meant that many everyday activities, including education, work, leisure, and shopping, were carried out online. Under these circumstances, the growth in the use of social media among young people as one of their main forms of entertainment can be understood.

The boost given to the consumption of the two new platforms, Twitch and TikTok, did not mean, however, a reduction in the use of other platforms that were already hegemonic in 2019. Instagram and WhatsApp, YouTube, or Twitter also recorded an increase between 2019 and 2021 in the attention time that users pay to them. Thus, the increase in consumption with the new platforms has not made the previous consumption spread among all players (new and old) but has raised the total time of consumption. From 31.1 h in 2019 it went to 42.3 h in 2021, which also displaces time spent on other activities such as sleep-

ing [42], studying [43], socializing [44], or engaging in non-digital leisure activities. The concentration of attention time on social networks has also been associated with significant psychological problems such as anxiety [40], or fear of missing out (FOMO) [41].

Although there is a slight increase in the use of platforms (from 5.3 in 2019 to 5.8 in 2021), it is confirmed that most of the time that the users studied spend on mobile phones (more than 70%) is concentrated in six platforms that can be defined as an oligopoly [30,52]. Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, Twitter, Twitch, and TikTok account for most of the users' screen time, register significant increases in consumption time, and have an expanding number of users who utilize their platforms through specific applications.

The study data show a homogeneous and increasingly massive behaviour in the consumption of young people. There is a smaller gap in the differences in the use of the platforms and, at the same time, more and more users go to the platforms that concentrate users' attention. This theoretical proposal, set out within the principles of the economy of attention [33,34,52] is now beginning to be empirically verified.

On the other hand, the qualitative results of the research show some very relevant trends of change among the perceptions and self-awareness of screen time consumption, but also in the objectives and justifications of social network use [12]. The 2021 groups are more aware of the time spent using social media and tend to be less surprised than 2019 users, even though the time of use is much higher than in 2019. This trend of change between the two years of study introduces a significant qualitative transformation among young university students that is denoted both in the justification given to screen time [31], and in the uncritical discursive acceptance of the capitalist logic of the attention economy [29,52].

Likewise, the shift in the motivations for the use of social media platforms, as well as the justifications for their excessive use, invite us to think about the penetration of the values promoted by the platforms [18] in the daily lives of young people. Given the massive impact and addictive use of social media networks, the participants have ended up internalizing and projecting them as their own. In this way, values such as narcissism [36] and personal fame [37], the promotion of aesthetic surgeries as a cause of social pressures or beauty canons [39], or the need to receive likes and emotional rewards as a symbol of publicity or personal notoriety [52] have ended up being subtly but effectively located in the discourse of the university students studied.

Ultimately it is also problematic to identify responses that assimilate a marked capitalist justification ("it is the payment for their services" or "they are companies that have invested and should get a return on their investment") to the non-transparent, undemocratic, and openly exploitative practices [20,29,30] that these technological platforms currently carry out. This behaviour denotes, on the one hand, a supremely effective exercise of power over users who justify as beneficial domination and, in the same sense, exercise systemic self-control [32]. On the other, it establishes the consolidation of the model of cognitive capitalism [14,15] or platform capitalism [16] that develops a loss of meaning and that produces, consequently, the automation of common sense [21].

The description made by the users of the platforms as connatural to their context, but at the same time external and incomprehensible to them, maintains a basic contradiction since they themselves wrap the instrument (and justify it), while they venerate it (without understanding it). The rite of the worker-consumer, in this exaltation of the apparatus driven by the hyper-massive production of content and by advertising, consists in the acceptance of the aesthetics of the masses (the values of the platforms, such as fame), in which the movement of the market is structured by the caducity and permanent updating of the design and functionality of the apparatuses themselves. People maintain a naive trust in the screen, that makes criticism irrelevant and turns the human being into a user of the technique proposed by the technology. The individual is not able to intervene in the process of elaboration of the technique that dominates the technology, becoming an irrational slave of it.

In the 21st century, and with the greatest possibility of access to information in history, common sense is hijacked and controlled by six or seven platforms that concentrate the digital attention of young university students.

## 5. Conclusions

The study reveals a quantitative and qualitative problem that attempts to put the emphasis on denouncing and discussing the power of social media and their platforms as absolute concentrators of the digital attention of young users. Furthermore, although the article focuses on the Spanish case, the information available at a global level points to high consumption data for social media in practically the whole world. The article, on the one hand, confirms that five technological companies (Facebook Inc, Alphabet, Amazon, Twitter, and TikTok) have clearly increased the amount of time that university users pay attention to them. These platforms have also increased the number of young users who join in the consumption of concentrator platforms. This behaviour allows us to propose a first approximation of the principles applicable to the attention economy, based on the quantitative evidence demonstrated.

In the first principle, it is established that the attention concentrating elements (the technological platforms), once positioned, attract more and more attention time from already registered users. On the other hand, the positioning as a dominant platform leads to new users coming to the platform to increase its attention concentrating power. Under the application of this first principle, the study shows, as mentioned in other research and reports, that there has been a very significant increase in digital consumption among young university students between 2019 and 2021. This consumption has been concentrated in few platforms that act as oligopolistic entities of the attention.

At the same time, the study yields relevant qualitative evidence that indicates an increased enlightenment or control of young people's critical stance towards their excessive (self-reported addictive) use of social media. The young participants in the study have assumed and internalized the discourse and values of cognitive or platform capitalism and have justified the indiscriminate and non-transparent use of people's data by platforms. These companies have also been identified as dangerous for democracy, for privacy, and for the individual and social health of users.

The economy of attention has successfully and steadily spread the values of its own functioning in a sophisticated way. The consolidation of consumption, increasingly high among young people, is a consequence of this. The only space that remains to be captured within the sphere of digital time is that of video games, but all the large companies mentioned above are working continuously to capture that part of digital consumption that remains captive.

The absence of a qualitative critical framework on the domination exercised by the platforms, which are assumed as connatural to life, as an insurmountable situation, only leaves a minimum space for the search, from communication, of an alternative scenario that traditionally has been linked to universities and the younger population. Discovering where this alternative way of communication can take place is a necessary task for communication science studies and for its students, since it determines the creation and construction of possible options for the exercise of the rights of access to information, of freedom of expression and, of course, of the exercise of citizenship in democracy.

The study, however, is constrained by the size of the study sample and its limited scope to communication students. Likewise, it also has the limitation of the period of analysis. For a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study, in future research, it would be convenient to extend the research samples (with more students from different degrees or young people). It would also be very useful to continue the investigation in the coming years to begin to observe trends and also to extend the research to different countries, as the methodology can be replicated. On the other hand, while quantifying actual usage time is important for the research, it is also vital for future lines of investigation to be able to extend the qualitative part of the study. In this way, the explanations and

motivations for social media behaviour given by the subjects themselves could be explored in more detail. This would provide a deeper understanding of the problem, which has undoubted social implications.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, C.F.-R. and S.G.-L.; methodology, C.F.-R. and S.G.-L.; software, C.F.-R. and S.G.-L.; validation, C.F.-R. and S.G.-L.; formal analysis, C.F.-R. and S.G.-L.; investigation, C.F.-R. and S.G.-L.; resources, C.F.-R. and S.G.-L.; data curation, C.F.-R. and S.G.-L.; writing—original draft preparation C.F.-R. and S.G.-L.; writing—review and editing, C.F.-R. and S.G.-L.; visualization, C.F.-R. and S.G.-L.; supervision, C.F.-R. and S.G.-L.; project administration, C.F.-R. and S.G.-L.; funding acquisition, C.F.-R. and S.G.-L. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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