



Article

TikTok Practices among Teenagers in Portugal: A Uses & Gratifications Approach

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Abstract: TikTok is consolidating its place in the social media landscape. During the first three months of the COVID-19, it was the most downloaded app worldwide, and it gained 500,000 new users in Portugal. Our study sets out to map the practices of Portuguese teenagers (10–16) on TikTok. Using a Uses and Gratifications approach (U&G), we conducted an online survey with a non-probabilistic sample of 347 TikTok users. Our findings show relevant differences between younger (10–12) and older (13–16) teenagers. The youngest are more careful about privacy and enjoy more experimentation as content creators, while the oldest are more focused on building an audience. Entertainment and self-expression are the main motivations for using the platform. About 50% of our sample admits at least one behavior that is indicative of addiction.

Keywords: TikTok; teenagers; mobile video apps; user-generated content (UGC); user-generated media (UGM); Uses and Gratifications; U&G



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1. Introduction

With the increasing prevalence of high-speed internet, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the trend of self-publishing among consumers, short video apps—such as TikTok—have become a popular phenomenon.

Since the rise of social media, various theoretical approaches have tried to explain why people create, share, or engage with photos and videos on these platforms (Klug 2020). Using the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory, this study aims to understand how Portuguese young people (between 10 and 16 years old) are using this specific user-generated media (UGM) app, and to investigate the motivations behind it.

Short-form videos are gaining increasing popularity through social media (Wang 2020). Studies of mobile video prototypes already suggest that short videos grab and retain the attention of an ever-increasing dispersed audience, who are each day becoming more selective and interactive in this hyper-technological universe (O'Hara et al. 2007; Laermer and Simmons 2008). As Bresnick (2019) suggests, the duration of play was shortened to 15 s to thrill and to serve a fast-paced target demographic, who are mostly younger people that use this platform to portray their talents through videos (Patel and Binjola 2020), and this can create a sense of dependence, as stated by Yang et al. (2019). Despite the length, short-form videos can be substantial in content (Wang 2020). According to Feng et al. (2019, p. 1), short video apps can be described as “a new type of social software featuring easy shooting, playing, editing and sharing based on mobile intelligent terminals”. As Yang et al. (2019) argued, short videos are simple to make and spread fast. In recent years, the complex operation processes of video production have been simplified, and some practical and instrumental functions have been added so users can fully exert their creativity (Wang 2020).

TikTok definitely understood these trends, even if it was not the first app to exploit them (e.g., Snapchat, Vine and Musical.ly). Probably due to its newness, little research

can be found on the specifics of TikTok (Klug 2020). As Bresnick (2019) posits, TikTok liberates younger people to use it without adhering to the visual styles, narratives, and online cultures of the past, one of its fundamental features being the suggestion of new aesthetics in youth entertainment media.

User-generated content (UGC) commonly refers to an integrated form of communication that allows its users to create and share content and establish their own network (Omar and Dequan 2020). This popular way of expression, along with the expanding number of users, the highest speed of internet connections, the rise of mobile technology and the increasing value of short videos, has given birth to the “web celebrity” economy (Tang 2019), or the “economy of visibility” (Banet-Weiser 2018). Patel and Binjola (2020) also reinforces this idea by showing how TikTok enables young people to establish themselves as global celebrities.

Many previous studies have researched how young users select self-created media artefacts to manage social media representations of themselves, but few looked at the motivations, practices and strategies of users producing media artefacts that are intended to be shared in social media communities (Klug 2020). In line with this, Van Dijck (2013) refers to how users of online platforms have adapted their strategies over the years, as they became savvier with these new “technologies of self”. The goal of this study is to examine how young teenagers are using TikTok, and why.

2. Theoretical Background and Hypothesis Development

2.1. User-Generated Media (UGM)

UGM “refers to the new media whose content is made publicly available over the internet, reflects a certain amount of creative effort, and is created outside of professional routines and practices” (Wunsch-Vincent and Vichery 2006, cited in Shao 2009, p. 8). According to Omar and Dequan (2020), the use of UGM involves two important activities: creating the content and sharing it online. For Shao (2009), the way people use UGM can be summarized in these three actions: consuming, participating and producing, where consuming refers to those who watch or read but never participate; participating concerns those who interact with content or with other users, but do not create any content; and producing includes those who create and post images, text, audio, or videos. Note that although these three UGM uses are theoretically separated, they are, in fact, interdependent. When we cross this idea with the four common reasons summarized by McQuail (2003) for media use (information, personal identity, integration and social interaction, and entertainment), Shao (2009, p. 9) posits that different uses are driven by different motivations, in the following way: “people consume the content for information and entertainment; participate for social interaction and community development; and produce content for self-expression and self-actualization”.

The emergence of UGM, in which TikTok is the new rising star, has reshaped the world of video sharing, whereby content is now being created by millions of users instead of a small and controlled number of media producers (Omar and Dequan 2020). As Shao (2009) stated, UGM are fundamentally changing the world of entertainment, communication, and information, especially because of the self-sustaining nature of this technology and the ever-growing audience size. Among these, mobile short video apps are popular among users for their qualities of easy shooting, simple editing, convenient sharing, and low requirements for professional skills (Feng et al. 2019; Wang 2020). Compared with traditional video apps, videos created by these new short video apps tend to be shorter, thus better filling user’s fragmented time (Feng et al. 2019). In fact, the fragmented video time is perfect for the accelerated times that we are living, since they can be watched during leisure time in life and work, which is also a decisive factor in the acceptance and dissemination of information (Yang et al. 2019). On TikTok, videos are presented in a loop, one at a time, until the user pauses it or swipes to the next one. The order of appearance is apparently random (it is in fact algorithmized), so the users never know what is going to be shown, besides its profile definition (Anderson 2020). In fact, the real power that makes TikTok

outstanding is its application of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology, as users navigate through videos by scrolling down, in a manner similar to news feed, and not by tapping through (Zhang 2020).

As stated by Anderson (2017), a growing trend in social media has been the popularity of video creation and sharing, from short looping videos to live-streaming, with Bresnick (2019) calling it a “virtual playground”. For Klug (2020), TikTok is more playful than social since it seems more like an experimental audiovisual playground than a social network to connect through.

2.2. TikTok

TikTok is a short video creation and sharing app, owned by the Chinese company ByteDance, launched in September of 2016. TikTok, known as Douyin in China, was fully promoted in the second quarter of 2017. Since this moment, TikTok has become one of the fastest-growing apps worldwide and a global phenomenon, becoming the most downloaded app in the App Store. In August 2018, TikTok merged with music.ly, an app with almost the same functions, and, since then, the number of users has not stopped growing. TikTok is now available in 154 countries worldwide (and 75 different languages), has been downloaded over 2.6 billion times worldwide, and has about 1 billion monthly active users¹, who spend an average of 80 min per day on the app. In fact, TikTok is the “new obsession” among young people, giving them a platform to express themselves innovatively and ingeniously, since its mission is to capture the world’s creativity, innovation, knowledge, and precious life moments digitally, and to present all these moments directly through mobile devices (Patel and Binjola 2020). Despite its popularity, short video apps, and especially the highly popular TikTok, have not been sufficiently studied yet (Klug 2020).

TikTok is predominantly an SNS of youth culture, where users can create and share with the community short videos between 3 and 60 s with accompanying music and audiovisual effects (Bresnick 2019; Yang et al. 2019; Zhang 2020). Youth iconography, rituals, spaces, and lifestyles can be seen in its trends, dances, and challenges (Kennedy 2020). TikTok is an escape from reality, offering a conversation where users imitate rising trends and collaborate through a practice of repurposing and remixing peer content. According to Patel and Binjola (2020), TikTok represents “the new wave of social media which has introduced a new subculture for the present generation and has brought a revolution in the social media for youngsters”. TikTok is based on the life and personality traits of young people, highlighting their desire to express themselves, and helping them to achieve their personal values and enhance their creativity (Yang et al. 2019). The videos are commonly filmed on smartphones, in “mundane” locations such as the bedroom (Kennedy 2020).

The notion that TikTok is “free of charge” is debatable, as the platform uses the data and attention—both voluntary and involuntary—of the users as its trading value (Paasonen 2018) since these are normally converted into traffic for advertising and product promotion.

During the COVID-19 global lockdown, TikTok saw an extraordinary rise in users and cultural visibility (da Silva Monteiro 2020) and allowed some teenagers to become global celebrities.

TikTok users are mostly under the age of 20, with children between 4 and 15 spending as much time on TikTok as they do watch YouTube videos (Kennedy 2020). In their study, Bossen and Kottasz (2020) confirmed that pre-adolescent girls were the heaviest users of TikTok, participating in consumption, participation, and contributory behaviours, with passive consumption the most likely behavior in both pre- and adolescent groups, especially as related to entertainment and fun. Many authors state that we live in an era where girls now rule the internet (Kennedy 2020). TikTok cultural visibility can be seen as a huge contribution to the transformation of girls’ “bedroom culture”, from a space previously private and safe from judgement, to one of public visibility, surveillance, and evaluation. Since TikTok exists within a private smartphone rather than in a public space, parents cannot control or protect their children all the time (Bresnick 2019). With the worldwide

popularity of the app, one needs to be aware of both the potentials and the concerns (Anderson 2020).

TikTok covers numerous aspects of life, such as beauty, cooking, cinema, education, and health and technology, among many others (Wang 2020), and users follow and interact with each other by viewing, liking, commenting, and sharing content, targeting youth with imagination and curiosity (Xu et al. 2019), and often it significantly involves users performing short sketches, memes, dances, musical performances, or other things (Klug 2020). Creating TikTok videos often involves using filters and features offered by the software, such as, for example, the speed manipulation, which allows users to slow down or speed up the music track in order to better sync with dances or movements or perform lip syncing (Bresnick 2019). Dance challenges are one of the most popular forms of content.

Additionally, its rapid growth is closely related to its sophisticated production level, stylish content, full star power and interesting advertising ideas. As Bresnick (2019) explains, TikTok videos are thrilling, with a beginning and a surprise ending, a rise and a fall. Another way to look to the success of TikTok, according to Yang et al. (2019), is based on its algorithm, which is permanently pushing content according users' preferences and needs.

2.3. Uses and Gratifications Theory

Wherever one looks, one sees lots of people with their attention occupied by their mobile screens. These devices "enable users to immerse themselves into a mediated world, one that psychologically removes them from where they are physically situated" by giving them instances of temporary mental getaways (Wang 2020, p. 1), which, as stated by Patel and Binjola (2020), offer high levels of satisfaction. U&G studies treat audiences as individuals with specific needs and see their media engagement activities as using media based on specific demand motives, thereby satisfying their needs (Xu et al. 2019).

Several scholars have used the U&G framework to investigate the social and psychological motives behind traditional media usage and, more recently, SNS attitudes and behaviors. This theory has proven to be particularly relevant in the analysis of media where users play an active role, such as UGC (Shao 2009). To some authors, the emergence of new media formats has revived and rejuvenated U&G theory, and it is even suggested that emerging media formats that have unique defining characteristics, such as TikTok, are ripe for examination under this theoretical lens (Bossen and Kottasz 2020).

One of the greatest strengths of this theory lays in its wide application in research in countless contexts. As Elliott and Rosenberg (1987, cited in Shao 2009) wrote, "whenever a new technology enters the stage of mass communication, people's motivations to use this technology have been examined through this perspective". Therefore, the application of U&G theory in understanding the use of TikTok as an emerging UGM is especially timely (Omar and Dequan 2020), since digital platforms have not only emerged as the new power shaping online behaviours and activities, but also brought digital disruption to the whole of society (Zhang 2020).

According to Van Dijk (2013), users deploy SNS for many different purposes, and over the years, they have adapted their strategies of online presentation as platforms have changed their functionalities from self-expression spaces (where users make connections between friends) to self-promotion tools (where users use them as self-presentations platforms).

Omar and Dequan (2020) state that the U&G theory underlines the role of individual differences, such as personality traits, in selecting media to gratify needs, since personality is an influential factor that predicts human behaviour. In their research, they used the Big-Five Model personality measure tool, which suggests personality traits as a combination of five factors—neuroticism, extroversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness—to understand the correlation between these individual traits and the UGM consumption and production, but they did not find any significant relation between them.

Previous research and interviews with TikTok users show that people, especially younger people, are motivated to participate in challenges if they can express individual skills or if they can learn new skills, for example, dance moves (Klug 2020). By following celebrities' self-promotion, many teenagers and young adults shape their online identities in order to obtain high levels of popularity, recognition and connectedness (Van Dijck 2013). Klug (2020) found that the open, performative, and mostly unstructured form of entertainment and pastime centred on TikTok presents a lower social capital barrier for users to participate in TikTok challenges, but also narcissism, attention-seeking and wanting to create a positive appearance online likely affect participation as well. Though still understudied, mobile videos seem comparable to older form of media such as television and cinema, differentiating from them in mobility (Wang 2020). In fact, teenagers have always modeled their self-images after celebrities' exposure through mass media, such as television and movies, much before the advent of social media (Van Dijck 2013). Short video, because of their rich content, personalized expression, and interactive form, can meet the social needs of users, and promote socialization (Xu et al. 2019). A study by Courtois et al. (2009) found that adolescents reported being interested in what their peers are doing, but also in following celebrities (especially the early adolescents (aged 12–14)).

Although scarce, there are a few studies applying the U&G approach to TikTok. Chung and Wei (2020) investigated what leads to a continued use of the platform, concluding that satisfaction has a direct impact. This satisfaction is obtained through the perceived quality of the platform, the service provided, and the content. Shao and Lee (2020) studied the motivations for use, and their correspondence to satisfaction. They concluded that seeking information and communication were the main motivations that led directly to satisfaction, while self-expression was an important motivation but did not impact satisfaction directly. Considering Shao's (2009) framework, self-expression requires contributing, which is less common than consuming and participating. According to Bossen and Kottasz (2020), regardless of age, passive consumption needs, such as surveillance, relaxation, information, and entertainment-seeking, are, by far, the most important gratifications sought when it comes to SNS usage. On the contrary, Omar and Dequan (2020) concluded that escapism and social interaction are the main uses assigned to TikTok, and that self-expression is the most important gratification obtained by those actively producing original content.

Given these diversified findings, our study aims to shed more light on the practices of Portuguese teenage TikTokers, and the gratifications they obtain.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Questions

Our study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1—What are the practices of the Portuguese teenagers (10–16-year-olds) on TikTok?

RQ2—What are their main motivations for using this platform?

RQ3—Which gratifications do they obtain by using this platform?

3.2. Research Design and Data Collection Techniques

This is an exploratory study, focusing on the Portuguese context. The research design is simple, with just one moment of data collection (Creswell 2003). As a data collection technique, we used an online survey built on Google Forms. This data collection technique has been adapted to our domain, teenagers between 10 and 16 years old who use TikTok, as they are familiar with the digital environment and have access to the internet. Table 1 presents the organization of our survey and its theoretical grounding (de Vaus 2013).

Table 1. Structure of the survey.

| Parts | Questions | Theoretical Grounding |
|-------------------------------|--|---|
| Informed consent (eliminary) | Informed consent | General Regulation of Data Protection—Law n° 58/2019 |
| Part 1— Sociodemographic data | Q1: Age (eliminary, only those aged between 10 and 16 proceed) | Bossen and Kottasz (2020) |
| | Q2: Gender | Kennedy (2020) |
| | Q3: School year | - |
| | Q4: District of residence | - |
| Part 2—Tik Tok use practices | Q5: Use of TikTok (eliminary, only users proceed) | - |
| | Q6: Time of usage | Klug (2020) |
| | Q7: Frequency of use | Klug (2020) |
| | Q8: Type of profile | Anderson (2020) |
| | Q9: Number of followers | Wang (2020) |
| | Q10: Number of followers | Wang (2020) |
| | Q11: Preferred types of videos | Bresnick (2019); Klug (2020) |
| | Q12: Use of private messages | Anderson (2020) |
| | Q13: Motivations and gratifications related to using TikTok | Shao and Lee (2020); Chung and Wei (2020); Omar and Dequan (2020) |
| | Q14: Perception of risks and opportunities | Anderson (2020) |
| | Q15: Perception about excessive use | Yang et al. (2019) |
| | Q16: Content creation (eliminary, only creators proceed) | - |
| | Q17: Type of content created | Shao (2009); Bresnick (2019); Klug (2020) |
| | Q18: Reference to brands | Xu et al. (2019) |
| | Q19: Frequency of content creation | Shao (2009); Bresnick (2019); Klug (2020) |
| | Q20: Gratifications afforded by creating content | Bresnick (2019); Klug (2020) |

Within U&G theory, the concepts of use and gratification are deeply intertwined and often overlap. When building our questionnaire, it was necessary to adopt operational definitions of such concepts to work with, and additionally make it accessible to respondents who are not familiar with the technical terms of U&G theory, so that the results would not be biased. Thus, we used the term “practice” to refer to the way users use TikTok. Additionally, we used the term “motivation” to ask users about why they engage in specific practices on TikTok, as regards their expectations, that is, their sought gratifications. Finally, we used “gratifications” to ask them about how their activity on TikTok makes them feel, that is, about “actual gratifications”. This distinction was important to explore whether TikTok is meeting the expectations of its users, and if new and unexpected gratifications are emerging from this platform.

A report from Azerion (2020), the country representative for TikTok, states that the platform had 1.8 million Portuguese users in May 2020, and this number had grown 36% since March, integrating 500,000 new users in two months. Our survey was carried out online during November and December 2020.

3.3. Data Analysis Techniques

To analyze our data, we used descriptive statistics using Excel and SPSS (de Vaus 2013).

3.4. Sampling and Sample

In order to reach a sample of TikTok users, we started by recruiting volunteers on the platform, thus using a convenience sample (Kalton 2020). We identified a few secondary school students who are influencers on Tik Tok and asked them to make a post about our project and share the link to our online survey. In addition, to reach a wider and more diversified sample, we contacted several activities centers, such as dance academies and sports clubs, and asked them to disseminate the link among their members.

We obtained a total of 505 answers to our online survey. However, in the first eliminatory question (Q1), 94 answers were eliminated because the respondents did not fit in the age range of between 10 and 16 years old. Later on, in the second eliminatory question (Q5), we excluded another 64 respondents who were not TikTok users. In Table 2, we present a brief characterization of our sample (n = 347).

Table 2. Brief characterization of the sample.

| Parts | Questions |
|-------------|--|
| Age (Q1) | 10–12 years old: 24.5% 13–16 years old: 75.5% |
| Gender (Q2) | Female: 81% Male: 19% |

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Practices of Portuguese TikTok Users

Azerion (2020) states that, on average, the TikTok app is opened around seven times a day, and users dedicate a total of 50 min to it daily. Our survey provides more insight into what Portuguese users do on this platform (RQ1).

Concerning the time of usage (Q6), displayed in Figure 1, teenagers (13–16) have been using TikTok for quite some time, 40.1% of them for over two years now. The youngest (10–12) joined more recently, but most of them have also been using TikTok for over a year. Despite the rapid growth of the platform in Portugal since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (Azerion 2020), only 14.1% of our sample had joined the platform in the previous 6 months.

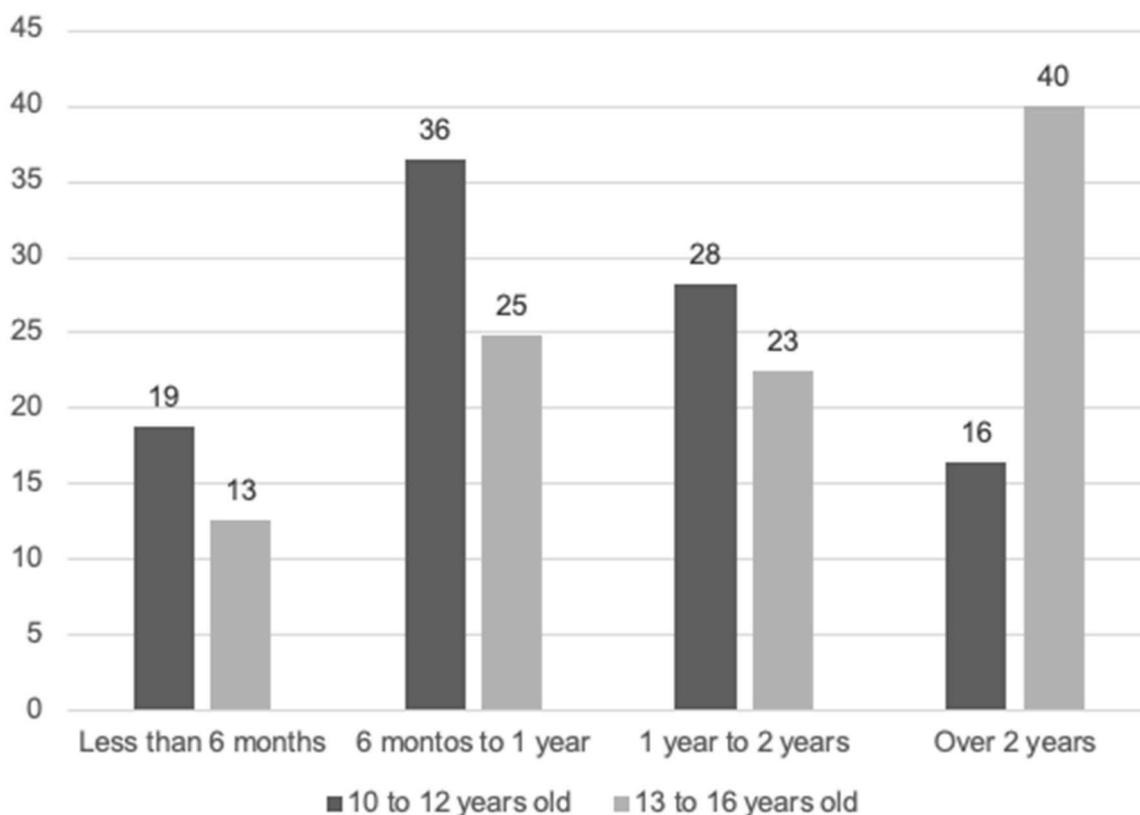


Figure 1. For how long respondents have been using TikTok (in percentage).

Concerning frequency of use (Q7), displayed in Figure 2, most users open the app frequently, which is consistent with Azerion’s (2020) report—30.3% of our sample open it between 5 and 10 times a day. Younger respondents (10–12) use it slightly more frequently, consistently with Bossen and Kottasz (2020).

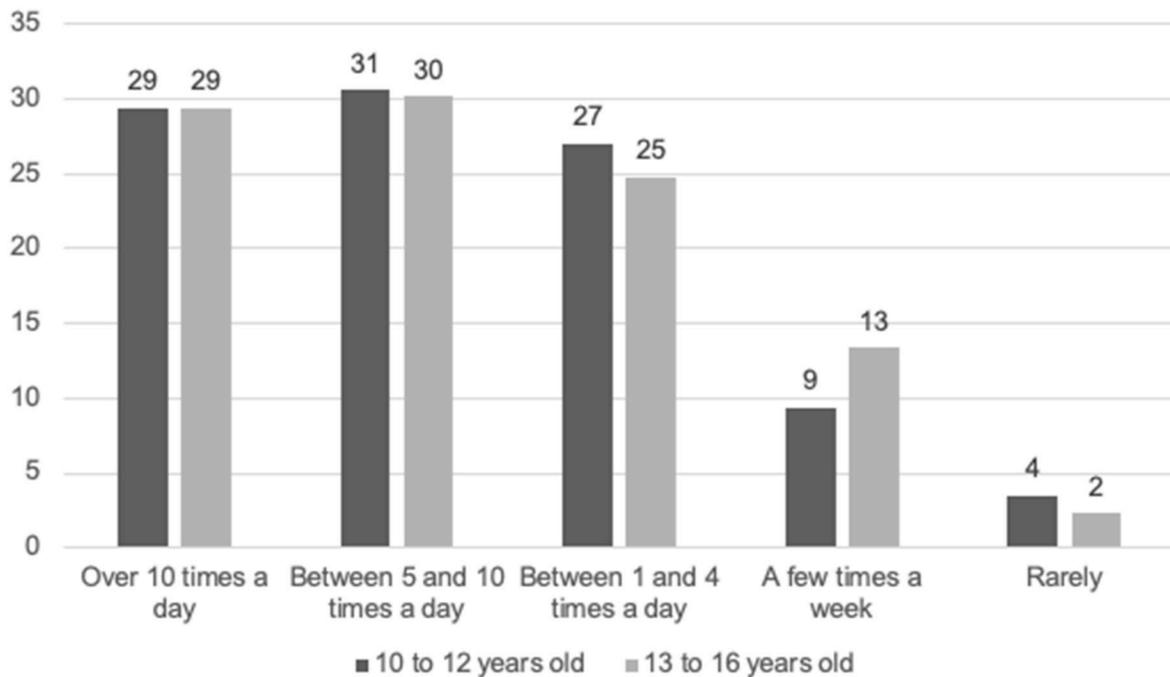


Figure 2. How frequently users open the TikTok app (in percentage).

Concerning safety and privacy (Q8), 60.3% of the 10–12-year-olds have private profiles, as Figure 3 shows—research shows that this is often a condition imposed by parents when they allow children to first enter social media, and that parental monitoring is more common (Ponte et al. 2017; Dias and Brito 2020), while 58.8% of the 13–16 year-olds have public profiles—research also shows that media literacy tends to grow along with age, and that older teenagers find it increasingly important to have more followers, and seek them actively (Ponte and Batista 2019).

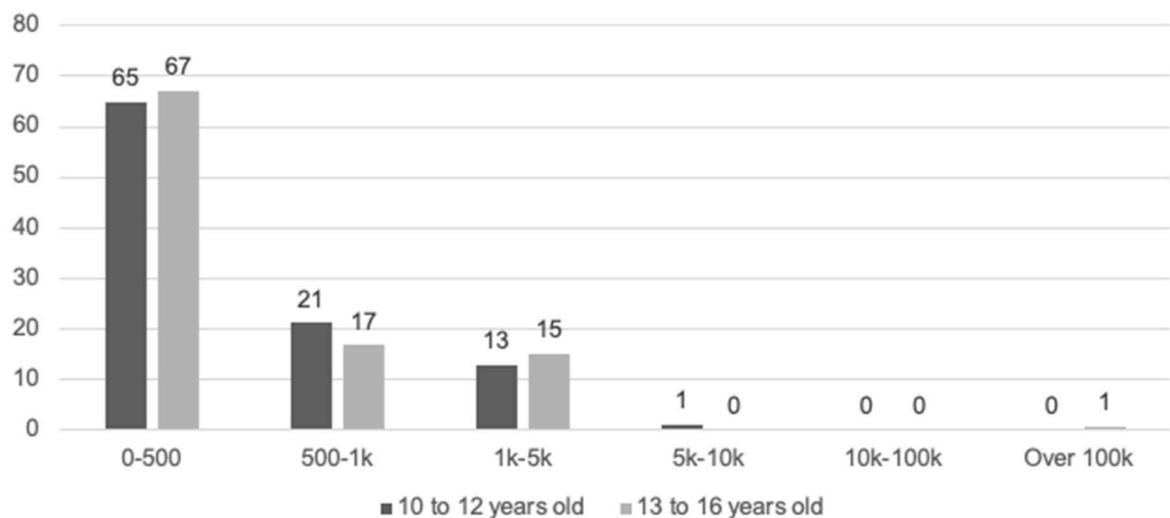


Figure 3. Number of profiles that users follow on TikTok (in percentage).

Concerning the number of profiles that each user follows (Q9), displayed in Figure 4, and the number of followers (Q10), there is a general tendency for users to follow a higher number of profiles than the number of followers they have. In addition, 66.6% of the users follow up to 500 profiles, and 74.4% have up to 500 followers. Thus, most Portuguese TikTokers are nano-users, while mega-influencers constitute 1.7% of our sample (Xu et al. 2019). Older respondents have a slightly higher number of followers.

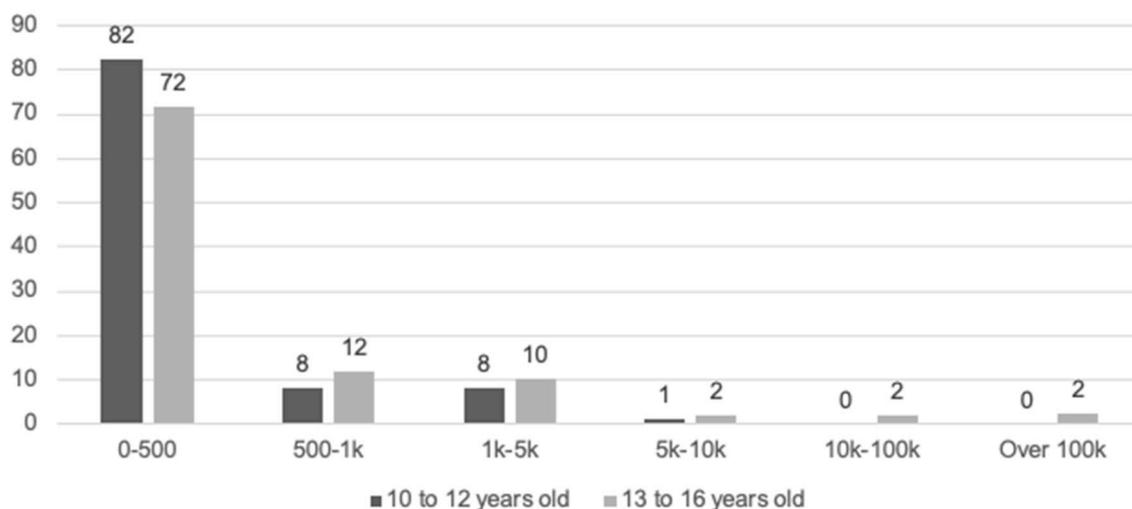


Figure 4. Number of followers on TikTok (in percentage).

We asked our respondents about their preferences regarding TikTok content (Q11), observable in Figure 5. The favorites are choreography videos (enjoyed by 80.4% of our sample), funny videos (liked by 79.8%) and songs (enjoyed by 72.6%), consistently with previous research (Bresnick 2019). Native TikTok formats, such as POV's (short dramatic representations entitled "Points of View"), are enjoyed by 72.3%. TikTokers enjoy fashion (55.3%) and make-up tutorials (44.1%), but not so much gaming (26.2%), which can be explained by our sample being predominantly female, while gamers are predominantly boys (Chaudron et al. 2018; Ponte and Batista 2019). Looking at the presence of brands on this platform, 36.9% of our sample like product reviews.

Higher percentages of the youngest group (10–12) enjoy challenges, transitions, and game tutorials, while more of the oldest (13–16) like choreography videos, songs, POVs and fashion tutorials.

Most of our sample—54.8%—claim not to use TikTok's private messages (Q12), suggesting that this platform is more for entertainment than for communication, contrary to the findings of Shao and Lee (2020). Despite this, the oldest (13–16) use TikTok's private messages a bit more. Again, parental mediation of digital media focuses a lot on safety, particularly for younger children, and many parents fear social media and advise children against communication with strangers on those platforms (Livingstone et al. 2017).

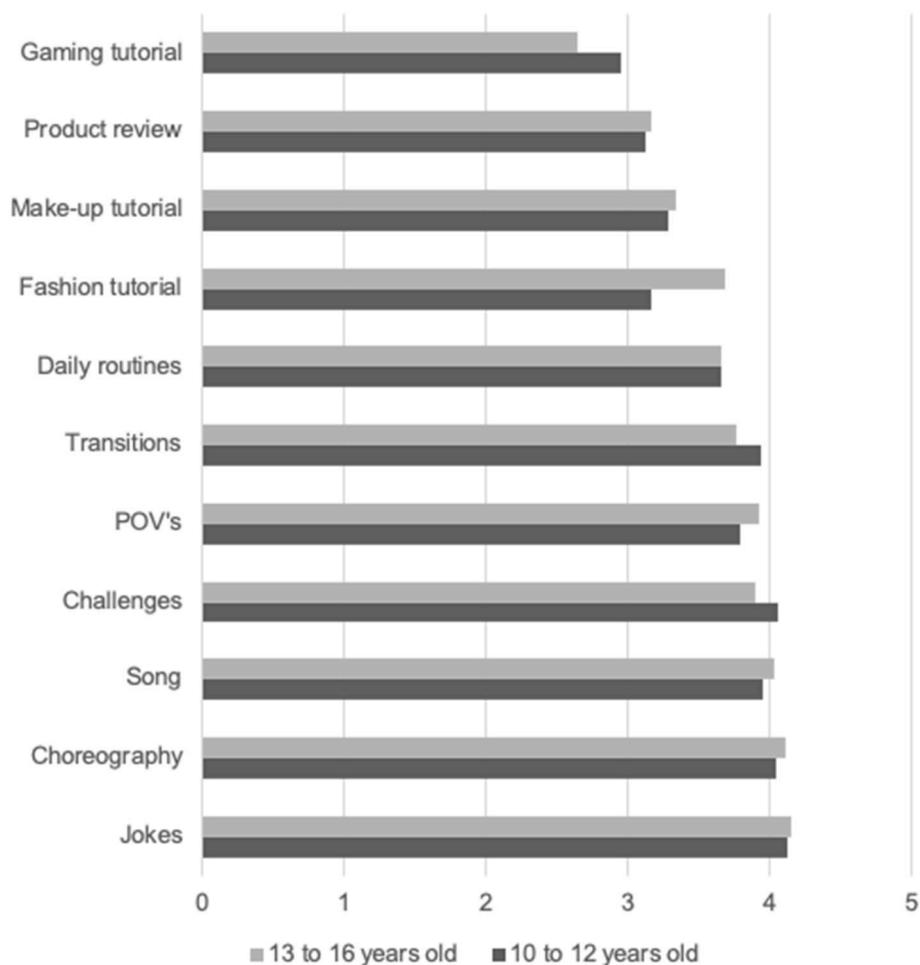


Figure 5. Respondents who enjoy different types of TikTok content (in percentage).

Concerning content production (Q16), displayed in Figure 6, 51.9% of our sample are active TikTokers ($n = 179$). However, there is a difference between the 10–12-year-olds and the 13–16-year-olds: 74.1% of the youngest like to experiment with the platform, and the success of such content is not very important for them, as they also express their creativity, experimenting with their identity and developing digital skills, while only 44.7% of the latter publish their own original content on TikTok, as they are more aware and concerned about the reception of their peers, as well as their self-promotion, consistently with research by Klug (2020).

As regards the type of content that our respondents create (Q17), displayed in Figure 7, choreography videos stand out, as they are created by 95.2% of the 10–12-year-olds and by 81% of the 13–16-year-olds. Next, the youngest create jokes (31.7%) and challenges (31.7%), while the oldest prefer POVs (41.4%) and transitions (31.9%). It is also the oldest who create fashion (12.1%) and make-up tutorials (11.2%), and also review products (6.9%), while the youngest rarely create these types of content.

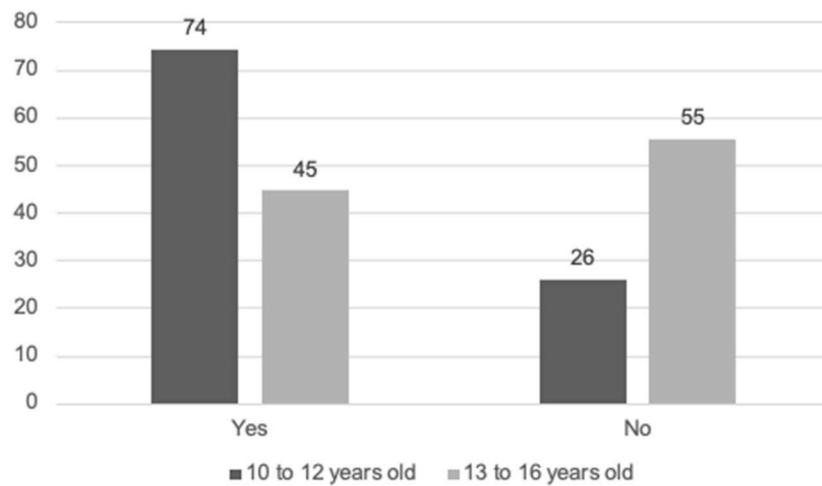


Figure 6. Content creation on TikTok (in percentage).

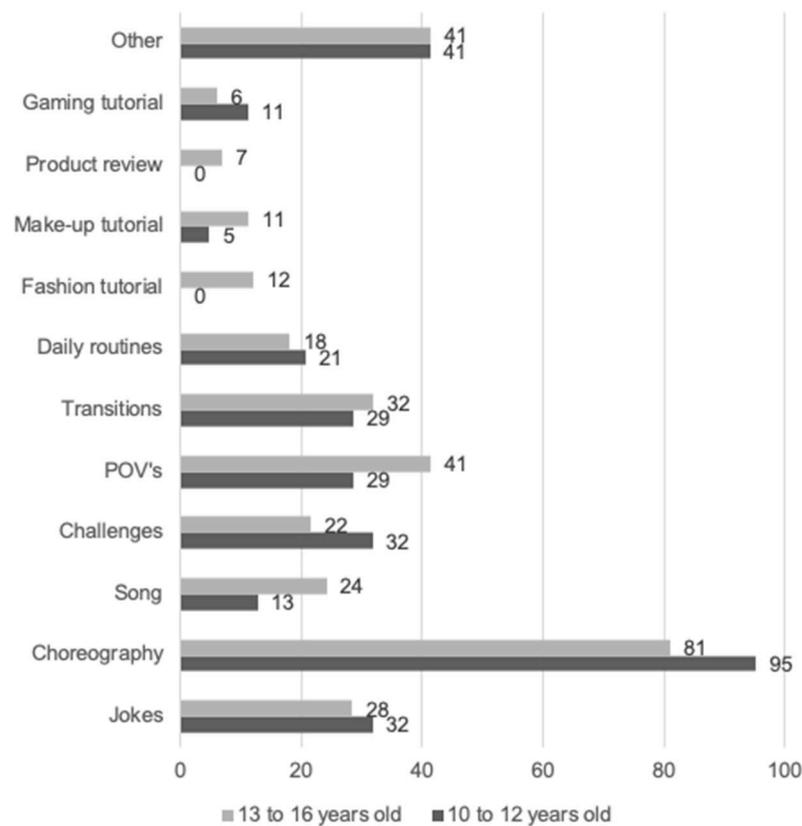


Figure 7. Types of content created on TikTok (in percentage).

Although many TikTokkers seek more followers and have the ambition of getting the attention of brands so that they can monetize this activity (Klug 2020; Patel and Binjola 2020), the majority of our sample do not make intentional references to brands on the content that they create (Q18)—96.8% of 10–12-year-olds and 91.4% of 13–16-year-olds.

Figure 8 shows that, although this group of respondents considers themselves TikTokkers, most of them do not publish original content frequently (Q19) (Shao 2009). Among those who do, 10–12-year-olds are slightly more active.

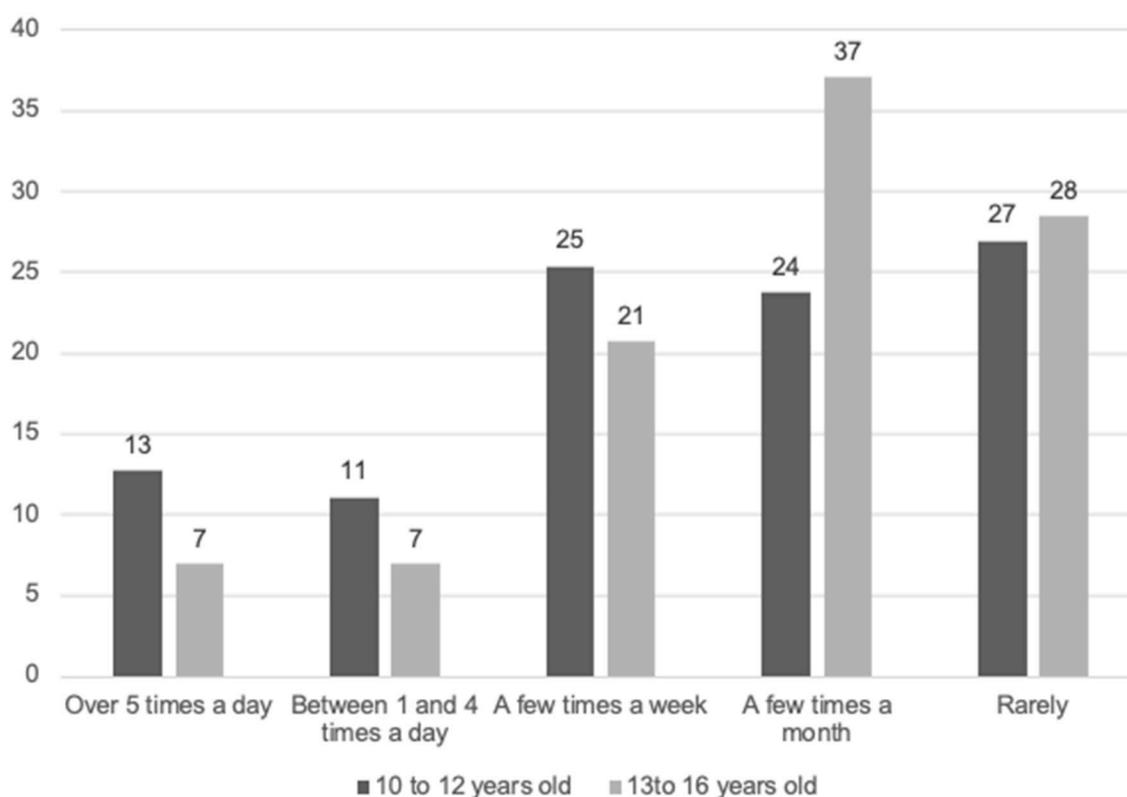


Figure 8. Frequency of content creation on TikTok (in percentage).

4.2. Motivations for Using TikTok and Resulting Gratifications

One common criticism of U&G is that uses and gratifications are often difficult to tell apart, as users select certain media and content according to the needs that they wish to satisfy, and commonly obtain the sought gratifications (Shao 2009).

The types of videos that users prefer (Q11) as well as the use of private messages on the platform (Q12) provide some insight into the motivations to use this platform (RQ2). The preferred videos—choreographies, jokes, and songs—are artistic and funny, which addresses a need or desire for entertainment and self-expression. In addition, as most users do not use private messages on the platform, communication is not a main motivation. This is a different scenario to the one described by Shao and Lee (2020) in China, in which most TikTok users sought mostly information and communication, and did not create original content; it is, however, more consistent with Omar and Dequan’s (2020) depiction of escapism and social interaction as important uses of the platform, and self-expression as the main gratification obtained by TikTokers.

When asking about our participants’ level of agreement with several statements regarding motivations to use TikTok, using a scale between 1—“totally disagree” and 5—“totally agree” (Q13), entertainment stood out—86.2% agree with the claim “TikTok entertains me” and 83.9% with the claim “TikTok is fun”. Different dimensions of self-expression and information are valued differently by our sample. Concerning self-expression, 75.8% agree with “TikTok supports my creativity”, but other dimensions such as expressing one’s opinion (55%) and identity (41.8%) are not such strong motivations. Concerning information, 67.7% are motivated to explore and be updated about their interests, but not so much motivated to be informed about products and trends (57.3%) or news and current events (51.9%). Hedonism also stands out, with 65.7% of our sample agreeing with “I like TikTok’s aesthetics”, consistent with Chung and Wei’s (2020) study. Social interaction and a sense of belonging are the motivations that received less agreement from our sample.

When analyzing agreement in Figures 9–12, we considered the options 4—“agree” and 5—“totally agree”.

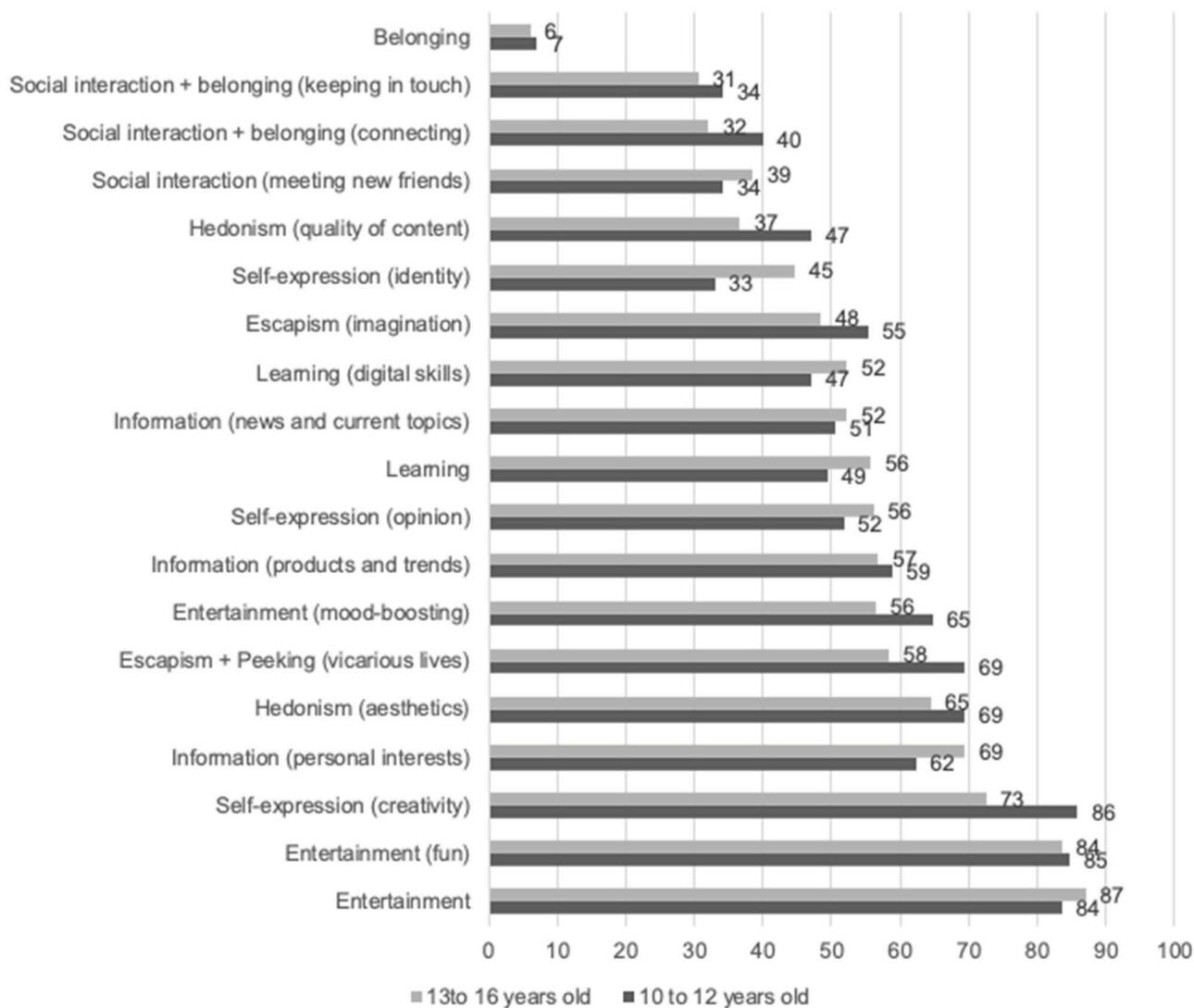


Figure 9. TikTok users who agree with expressions concerning motivations to use the platform and gratifications obtained (in percentage).

The discussion about the gratifications obtained from media usually focuses on the positive aspects. We questioned our respondents about their perceptions of the risks and opportunities inherent to the platform (Q14), and also excessive use (Q15). Figure 10 shows that the levels of agreement are higher for expressions about opportunities, except for the one about media literacy, which was phrased in the negative. This is even stronger for the youngest, as 76.5% agree with the claim “I have learned how to use TikTok safely” and 71.8% with “I have learned a lot about making videos”, and Klug (2020) mentions learning as an important motivation for using TikTok. Concerning media literacy, 54.1% of the 10–12-years-olds disagree with the claim “I have trouble identifying false information on TikTok”, and 40.8% of the 13–16-year-olds also disagree. However, the awareness about online risks increases with age (Ponte and Batista 2019), so the younger respondents may be stating that they do not experience difficulties because they are not recognizing the risks.

The youngest are also more fearful of risks such as hacking (60%) and privacy invasion (54.1%). However, the oldest exhibit a higher level of agreement with the claim “I am exposed to bullying on TikTok” (22.5%), which may also be related to the fact that they tend to have public profiles and use the platform’s private messages.

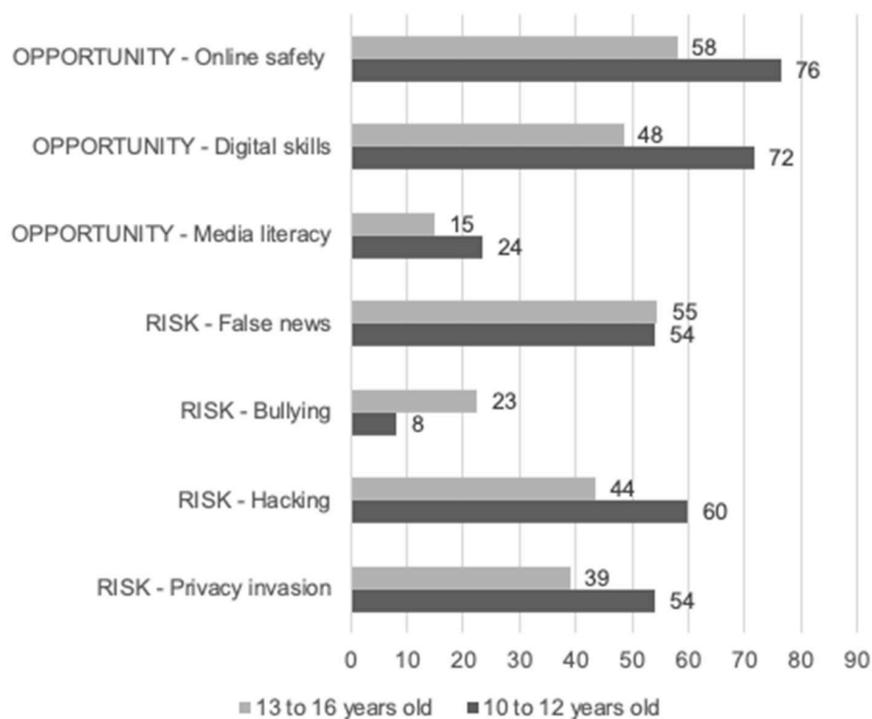


Figure 10. TikTok users who agree with expressions concerning the risks and opportunities of the platform, by age (in percentage).

Concerning excessive use, the younger group expresses higher levels of agreement with affirmative claims about signs of addiction (Yang et al. 2019). One of the distinctive features of TikTok are the choreography videos, as their unique aesthetics and type of movement has been influencing posture and also the music and dance industry (Bereznak 2019). Thus, 50.6% of 10–12 years-olds agree with the claim “When a choreography is a trend, I can’t stop using it”. This is the stronger sign of addiction, as 43.1% of the 13–16 years-old also agree. In addition, 40% of the youngest admit using TikTok excessively and 36.5% consider themselves addicted.

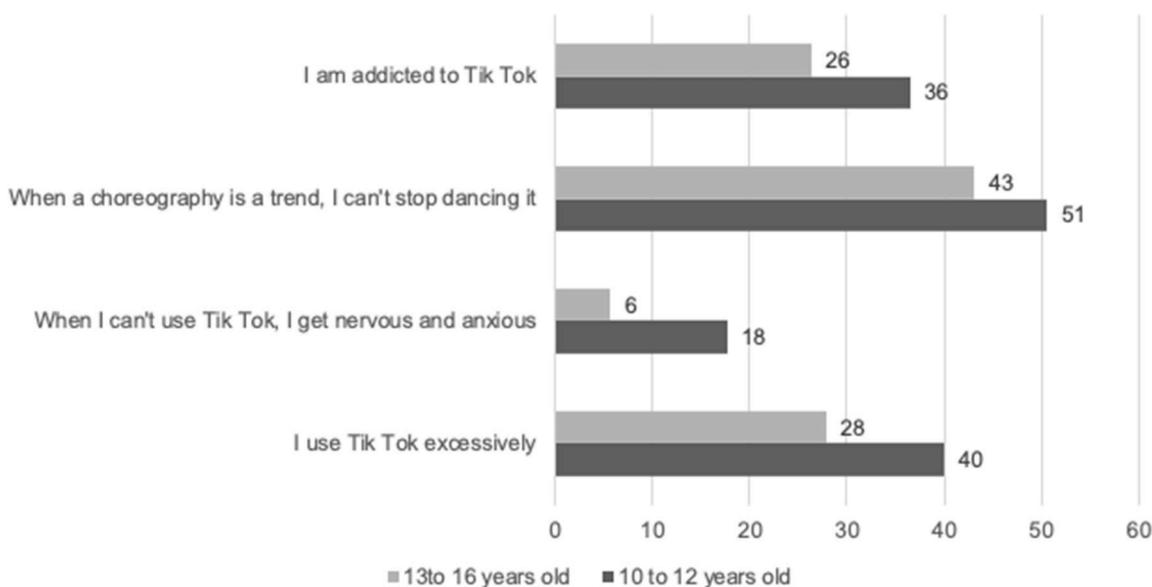


Figure 11. TikTok users who agree with expressions concerning excessive use of the platform, by age (in percentage).

Content creation also affords some insights (Q16) about gratifications. Active TikTok users comprise 51.9% of our sample, and content creation is more common among the younger users (10–12). Thus, creativity and identity expression are gratifications obtained by the younger, while group belonging and validation from peers are gratifications obtained by the older ones (Bossen and Kottasz 2020; Omar and Dequan 2020). Consistently, the younger group is more active on TikTok—74.1% post their own original content, thus expressing their creativity and developing their digital skills, while only 44.7% of the 13–16-year-olds are active TikTokers. Additionally, when considering the option “other” among the types of content created, about 40% answered with this, indicating that the TikTokers in our sample are experimenting with new types of content and new ideas for self-expression and self-promotion (Klug 2020).

It is the younger group that receives more gratification from creating original TikTok content (Q20). The gratifications acknowledged by more respondents are apparently related to social interaction and a sense of belonging, as 62% of respondents agree with the claim “I always answer my followers” and 52.5% with “I ask questions and try to interact with my followers”. This might be contradictory with the motivations to use the platform previously expressed or might mean that this is not a motivation for most of our respondents, but it is an additional gratification obtained. However, particularly among the oldest (13–16), these actions do not suggest seeking social interaction or a sense of belonging in itself, but rather the desire to increase the reach of the TikTokers’ profiles and reinforce their fandom, thus pointing to self-promotion as the true gratification obtained (Klug 2020). This is consistent with the fact that 52% of our respondents agree with the claim “I dream of being a professional TikToker”.

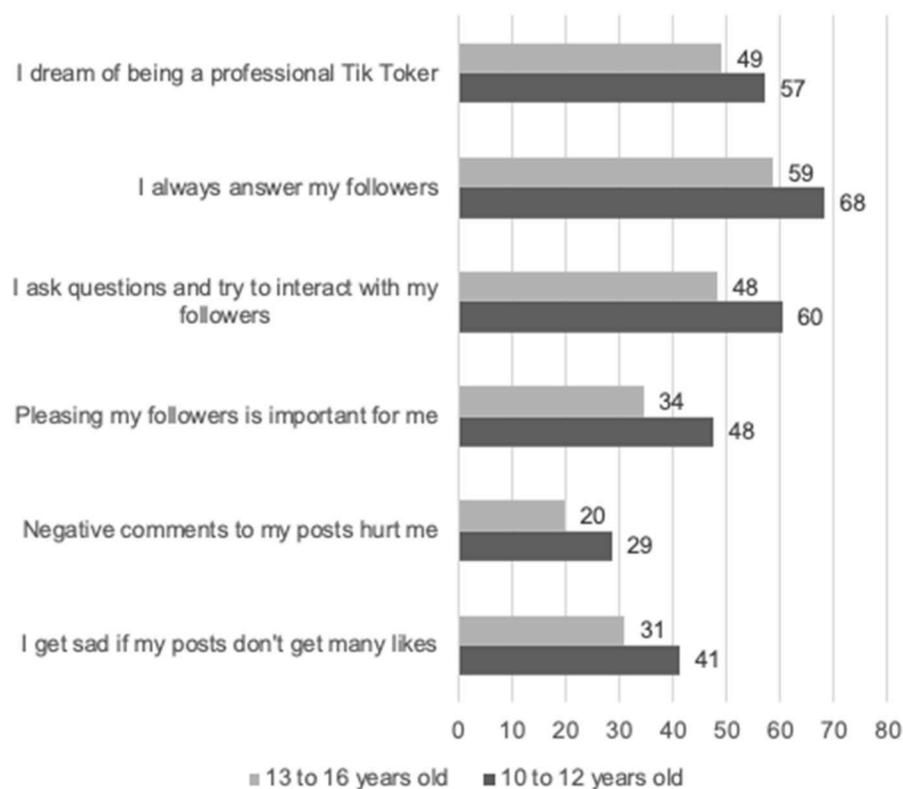


Figure 12. TikTok users who agree with expressions concerning gratifications afforded by publishing original content on the platform, by age (in percentage).

5. Conclusions

This exploratory study portrays a snapshot of the TikTok practices of Portuguese teenagers (10–16 years old). Consistently with previous research, most TikTok users tend

to be passive or participating, instead of contributing (Shao 2009). Active contribution with original content is more common among younger users (10–12-year-olds) (Bossen and Kottasz 2020), as they enjoy learning and experimenting on the platform. Older teenagers (13–16-year-olds) are more concerned with building a social image and an audience, thus transitioning from self-expression to self-promotion (Klug 2020), and are more strategic about their contributions, and also their privacy settings. Our study has identified the emergence of new types of short video content, such as POVs, transitions and daily routines, which can be considered native to TikTok. Another particularity of the Portuguese TikTok landscape is the greater diversity of profiles than the “white healthy teenager girl” (Kennedy 2020), as the top 10 profiles include 5 boys, 4 girls, and 1 funny profile entirely dedicated to memes (Azerion 2020).

U&G is a useful framework for exploring the motivations for using this platform, as well as its outcomes. Previous findings have been pointing in different directions, and our own suggest that being a passive or active user makes a difference. Portuguese passive users look for, and obtain, mainly, entertainment—not information or social interaction, as Shao and Lee (2020) found. Active users are motivated by self-expression and gratified with learning, particularly the younger ones (10–12), as Bossen and Kottasz (2020) also found. Among the oldest (13–16), social interaction seems to be a gratification obtained, although not initially sought. Consistently with the arguments of Patel and Binjola (2020) and Klug (2020), these older teenagers use TikTok to self-promote, and social interaction is a means to foster and nurture the gratification that they truly seek, as well as social recognition and admiration, and even celebrity.

Our study demonstrates that U&G theory remains a useful framework for understanding the adoption and the emergence of use practices of new communication media, as users tend to seek gratifications that have been identified in the foundational studies of the theory: information, socialization, entertainment, and escapism. In addition, our findings imply that users appropriate each new media platform to make the most of its specific features, and thus to satisfy specific needs or seek distinctive gratifications. Within this scope, our study highlights specific needs that users are turning to TikTok to satisfy, and they may be characteristic of our contemporary society, namely, constant entertainment or fighting boredom, which is connected to constantly seeking immediate satisfaction. These needs have been mentioned by previous authors as intertwined with the nature of digital media in general (e.g., Castells 1996; Van Dijck et al. 2018), and cause concern as predictors of addiction (Zhou and Lee 2021). In addition, besides personality traits as factors that influence media practices, our study also points to other aspects, such as age, and active versus passive media use, which need further exploring in subsequent studies.

Being exploratory, our study points to several paths that future research could pursue. Validating these results with a wider and more probabilistic sample would be important in order to better sketch the Portuguese TikTok panorama among teenagers. Additionally, qualitative research could shed more light on the motivations for using TikTok and the gratifications obtained, particularly by creating content, and also on the profiles of active TikTokers and their contribution to this emergent contemporary youth digital culture (Klug 2020). Exploring the emergence of new short video formats and aesthetics is also an interesting option. Finally, considering Van Dijck’s (2013) concerns about the algorithmic and commercial nature of these apparently “free” platforms, further exploring the role played by influencers and brands on TikTok is key.

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Notes

¹ <https://bit.ly/3uz95oC>, retrieved on 9 January 2021.

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