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Beyond Words: Tapping the Potential of Digital Diaries While Exploring Young Adults' Experiences on Apps

Rita Alcaire [1] , Ana Marta M. Flores [2,3] and Eduardo Antunes [3,*]

1   Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, 3000-995 Coimbra, Portugal; ritaalcaire@ces.uc.pt
2   NOVA Institute of Communication, NOVA University Lisbon, 1069-061 Lisbon, Portugal; amflores@fcsh.unl.pt
3   Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Coimbra, 3004-530 Coimbra, Portugal
*   Correspondence: eduardo.antunes@fl.uc.pt

Abstract: In the dynamic landscape of online interactions, this article explores the use of digital diaries to unravel the intricacy of Portugal young adults' experiences within the realm of apps and their connection to gender dynamics. By designing a digital participatory research method, we were able to reflect on the participants' experiences in maintaining the requested diaries, scrutinize the major themes in the narratives generated through this approach, and examine how participants interacted with the prompts sent to them. Therefore, we delved into how participants both challenged and (re)negotiated these solicitations and how their agency led to an untapped reservoir of insights for the project in ways that went beyond words. There were visual and non-verbal elements that brought insights into young adults' interactions with mobile applications, offering a comprehensive exploration of four key themes: mobile apps as part of young adults' routines, between performance and authenticity, making the diaries their own, and elaborating on feelings. We also explored diary methods at the convergence of various disciplines and their high potential for contributing to topics related to gender, mental health, productivity, relationships, online identity management, apps in everyday life, intimacy, and more in creative ways.

Keywords: gender; apps; diaries methods; participatory research; practice-based research; digital diaries; visual research methodologies; visual anthropology; reflexivity

1. Introduction

In the realm of research methodologies, diary methods stand out as a powerful tool for unraveling the intricacies of daily life. This approach goes beyond traditional survey-based and retrospective methods, providing a real-time, participant-driven lens into the nuances of human experiences. This article reflects on solicited diaries as a research method within the scope of the MyGender project. This methodology allowed us to gain access to how young adults in Portugal were made aware of their gender negotiations through the regular prompts sent to them and, at the same time, revealed new insights about these dynamics to the research team.

Using diary methods in research involves encouraging participants to record information about themselves and their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in a particular format, usually either spoken or written, which can be subjected to various forms of analysis. The value of diary methods in academic and scientific research is that they intend to capture life as it is lived [1] and provide researchers with inside accounts [2] recorded in natural settings [3]. Therefore, we chose research diaries as part of our mixed methodology due to their ability to have a subjective and broad reach into everyday experiences [4]. This is particularly pertinent when exploring private or sensitive subjects, making research diaries a valuable tool for investigating intimate aspects of individuals' lives, as [5] emphasizes.

In communication sciences, diary methods have been relatively under-utilized as methodological tools for data collection, especially when compared to their widespread

use in domains such as psychology [4] and anthropology [6]. The project's methodological design choices are also based on our academic experience in gender studies research and our professional and empirical experience of conducting research at the intersection of visual anthropology, activism, communication sciences, and the arts. This experience has demonstrated that personal stories and listening to first-hand lived experiences contribute to intimately transmitting knowledge and creating engagement between different communities and audiences. Therefore, this methodological decision stems from the conviction that, to fully engage people with socially relevant topics, research design and communication strategies must build rapport.

In the next section, we address the importance and potential of this method in the social sciences. Following that theoretical framing, we describe the project and the research on which this article is based in greater detail, as well as the reasoning behind using diaries in this research. Subsequently, we reflect on the participants' experiences with maintaining the requested diaries, scrutinize the major themes in the narratives generated through this approach, and examine how participants responded to the prompts provided by the research team. Drawing on this analysis, we delve into how participants both challenged and (re)negotiated these solicitations and how their agency led to an untapped reservoir of insights for the project.

2. The Use of Diaries in Social Research

The solicitation of diaries as a methodological tool is not new. Diary methods have been a traditional research tool in anthropology and sociology over the last decades, and the social and health sciences have developed solicited diaries as a reliable qualitative technique for longitudinal data collection [7]. Diary methods are also part of the qualitative methods of reception and audience studies [8], which are crucial for conducting in-depth critical examinations of practices, emotions, and beliefs.

Although the potential of this methodological tool has been validated, other research methods have been considered more effective and put center-stage, such as interviews [9]. Nevertheless, diaries have been defended for their ability to capture rich data regarding individual feelings, beliefs, and experiences over time without much disturbance from their researcher, since subjects control the process of diary-making themselves. Therefore, participants have increased agency in determining how and when they disclose information [10], the capacity to log everyday routines [5] and processes, and to reducing recall and memory errors [11]. Ref. [12] also argues that diaries allow for variation, creativity, and flexibility.

Diary methods encompass a broad spectrum of designs that aim to collect both quantitative and qualitative data cross-sectionally and longitudinally [13]. They can include journal-type instruments that require narrative-style entries in response to broad questions or prompts [14]. In contrast, log-type diary formats aim to collect data from many participants at numerous data collection points via short-answer items, which are mostly used to track dynamic constructs, such as motivation or anxiety, for example, longitudinally, using data collected at multiple time points to obtain aggregate measures and to pinpoint moments of change [15].

Other choices of diary types center on the temporal aspects of when data of the phenomena being investigated are best collected. These decisions depend on whether the researcher is interested in investigating the phenomena as they unfold over time or focusing on specific phenomena that only occur at particular points in time [1]. Regarding the former, these types of diaries aim to collect data on an ongoing phenomenon at predetermined points in time [1]. Regarding the former, these types of diaries aim to collect data on an ongoing phenomenon at predetermined time points, such as interval contingent diaries at randomized time points [16].

In terms of organization, diaries can be more or less structured [17], particularly being used in qualitative research, and can be a broader term for several methodologies such as "experience sampling, daily diaries, interaction records, momentary sampling, and

real-time data capture" [18] (p. 86). Some diary methods may be designed to allow several daily entries, while others only intend one daily entry.

Digital technologies have allowed diaries to expand regarding the tools used, as the new time–space configurations have established a myriad of direct communication channels. Those tools are at the researcher's disposal and greatly diversify their media formats for recording subjective thoughts, broadening the possibility of inclusion of textual, visual, and oral elements. There are numerous issues researchers must consider when deciding on the most appropriate design for their study. These decisions often require a good amount of reflection by the researcher to consider the contextual demands of the research participants and the research site in terms of the requirements of the investigations. Therefore, researchers must weigh several possibilities and limitations of the method before designing their research. That will be the focus of our following subsections.

2.1. The Potential of Diary Methods

One of the distinctive features of diary methods is their ability to capture experiences as they unfold, and they have been used to explore different subjects, such as emotions and interactions within family life [5,18], sexual acts and their contexts [7], or the personal lives of asexual people [19]. Diary methods foster active participant involvement, transforming them into co-creators of knowledge [20]. Therefore, in promoting more participation and empowering environments [21], participants, acting as both researchers and subjects, document their thoughts, emotions, and activities in real time and in a personal and private space [22]. This engagement often leads to more candid and comprehensive reflections, providing researchers with a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of their subjects. This immediacy in content production minimizes memory biases, offering a more accurate and authentic portrayal of daily life [23]. Researchers can delve into the ebb and flow of individuals' experiences, capturing the subtleties that may be lost in retrospective accounts. Diary methods permit the examination of reported events and experiences in their natural, spontaneous context, providing information complementary to that obtainable by more traditional designs [24]. At the same time, and even though researchers will analyze those diaries, diaries may minimize the inhibitory effects of having physically present observers of participants [25]. Therefore, they excel in providing ecological validity [26] by placing participants in their natural environments. Traditional research settings often lack the authenticity of everyday life, but diaries bridge this gap. Whether exploring workplace dynamics, family interactions, or health-related behaviors, diary methods allow researchers to observe participants in context, providing a holistic understanding of their lives and generating a multidimensional view of research topics.

The longitudinal nature of diary studies allows researchers to investigate changes and patterns over time. By collecting data consistently over an extended period, researchers gain insights into the dynamics of personal experiences, uncovering trends and fluctuations. This temporal perspective is particularly valuable when studying developmental processes, habit formation, or the impact of interventions [27]. In addition to capturing daily experiences, diary methods offer a rich context for understanding the factors that influence individuals' lives. Researchers can explore the impact of specific events, environments, or social interactions on participants' well-being. This contextual understanding adds depth to research findings, enabling a nuanced exploration of the complex interplay between various aspects of daily life. Diary studies are not limited to text-based entries. Participants can incorporate drawings, photos, or other multimedia elements, enriching the data with additional layers of expression. This multimodal approach accommodates diverse communication styles and ensures a more comprehensive representation of individuals' experiences. Diary methods are adaptable to a wide range of research questions and populations. Whether investigating mental health, workplace dynamics, or lifestyle choices, researchers can tailor diary studies to suit their specific interests. This flexibility enhances the applicability of diary methods across various disciplines and research domains.

As mentioned before, this article is informed by many disciplines, with a strong emphasis on anthropology. From the point of view of the author, narrator, or anthropologist writer, reflexivity refers to what is otherwise known as the author's or discipline's self-consciousness. The term also permeates critical literary discourse and social science research, as well as aspects of the autobiographical lives of regular people, and refers to the process of taking oneself as the object. In the most basic sense, and in the sense we address in this article, it refers to reflecting on oneself as the object of provocative thought and contemplation. Therefore, reflexivity claims self-reference, self-examination, and self-discovery. In the words of [28] (p. 1), reflexivity generates "heightened awareness and vertigo, the creative intensity of a possibility that loosens us from habit and custom and turns back to contemplate ourselves". In our research, this process was valid for both the researchers and the diarists.

For all the reasons mentioned above, diaries can also provide access to private spheres, which may be difficult to observe or record, sometimes because of their sensitive nature. While diary methods have many advantages, it is crucial to acknowledge potential limitations, such as issues related to compliance, reactivity, and the accuracy of self-reports. Nevertheless, when used thoughtfully, diary methods can offer valuable insights into the complexities of human experiences.

2.2. Limitations of Diary Methods

One of the largest challenges of diary methods centers on the reliability and validity of the data collected, as they require a high level of commitment from participants [1]. If participants are not invested in the study, they are unlikely to complete their diary entries with the required frequency or accuracy. Literature on the use of diary methods draws attention to the various kinds of burdens that this type of personal record can put on both participants and researchers. One of them is the necessity of a training session that is often detailed and time-consuming to ensure that the participants know how to address and complete the task in a way that will guarantee useful data for the researchers [29]. Also, diaries may become demanding to complete for participants if they are asked to do them many times throughout a study or over a long period. In these cases, structuring the diary process should consider the participants' daily activities to help alleviate some of the concern and anxiety they might have to complete the task compared to allowing them a random schedule, as this type of arrangement may lead to postponing and procrastinating [1].

When a researcher has an outsider positionality, it can be more difficult to control the fidelity of diary keeping. Research fidelity assures that data collection is accurate and consistent and conforms to the intended research design [30]. That is, fidelity refers to whether data are being collected as planned. To encourage regular diary keeping, researchers can reduce the time commitments for participants via the use of targeted questions for data entry, which can include a mixture of short, multiple-choice answers or scale items. These items are also advantageous for data analysis or deductive coding and themes [31]. Where longer responses are required, templates to record answers that can fit on a single page can be useful so as not to overwhelm participants [32].

Another burden put on participants is to recount things that may have already happened in the past and create aggregate responses, meaning diarists must bring up a lot of information at once based on peaks of the experience that they can remember while skipping over a great number of details about what may have occurred and that is interesting in analytical terms. These aggregate responses may "reflect faulty reconstruction of the phenomenon of interest" [1] (p. 581).

Ethical issues also arise regarding mental intrusion, for example, regularly bringing attention to potentially sensitive issues within participants' sense of self or relational life. Accordingly, this sense of intrusion might increase the chances of non-responses. Therefore, several privacy issues must also be confronted and transparently addressed with the participants.

Diary methods usually require contextualization of participants' lives for their entries and contributions to gain sense when analyzed [33]. Compared to a private diary, if participants are aware that context is needed for researchers to make sense of their entries, the authenticity of the content can be questioned to some extent. The stories that are recounted in a diary may also be highly susceptible to the current mental state the diarist is in, which will shape the way that they make sense of their memory of the past event, meaning that they report it differently than they would if it were happening currently [34].

3. Materials and Methods

This research was conducted within the scope of the MyGender project. MyGender is the first-ever project in Portugal aiming to investigate how young adults (18–30 years old) engage with the technicity and imaginaries of mobile applications, incorporating them into their daily lives, embodying them in their everyday practices, and using them to (re)negotiate their gender and sexual identities. Challenging research focused either on the risks and opportunities or on the uses and gratifications of digital practices; MyGender project assumes an understanding of technology as producing meaning, subjectivity, and agency shaped by power relations. Adopting a critical perspective of contemporary digital media, the MyGender project is analyzing mobile app affordances; grammar; platform politics; content; and their uses, appropriations, and embodiment to understand how they are shaping hegemonic normativity and changing young adults' lives.

In the specific case of this paper, a qualitative methodology was preferred, as it allows researchers to see social phenomena through the eyes of participants in the research. The choice of diary methods and the design of the diary format were heavily informed by the contextual demands and needs of the research itself and an intention not to burden the research participants. Thus, this choice aligns with the theoretical framework of diary methods integrated into diverse contexts of reception and audience studies [8] within the realm of qualitative methods. We intended to follow the academic tradition of using qualitative research methods to understand the everyday negotiations, experiences, and thought processes of young adults and other youth age groups [35].

The main goal of using diary methods was to get a rich insight into the individuals' daily practices, emotions, and beliefs regarding the use of mobile apps. Contrary to the retrospective nature of the interviews or focus groups, solicited diary records allowed for more immediate responses that eliminated memory faults. We worked towards making the use of the diary as meaningful and as comprehensible as possible for the participants, so the diaries would be easier for them to complete and more likely to guarantee rich data. Digital diaries were selected due to their potential to afford greater flexibility in responses and elaboration of participants' perspectives, allowing textual and visual elements of further agency and self-expression. Not only do digital diaries allow for the feeling of a more private and comfortable space than most interviews [20], the experiences are also registered almost in situ [36]. With this methodology, we intended to collect qualitative data regarding the participants' thoughts and beliefs on their forms of interaction with mobile apps, specifically regarding the (re)negotiation of gender and sexual identities, but also their experiences and thoughts relating to the intrusion of technology and its presence in everyday life. Namely, we intended to identify daily digital practices and accounts of casual occurrences that go hand in hand with the use of mobile applications and digital platforms of young adults in [country], as mobile phones and digital platforms have proved to play a central role in those young adults' lives [37], where their gender and sexual identities have been performed and expressed [38] although restricted and constrained to platforms' affordances [39].

During the planning process, we designed this methodology to make it as user-friendly as possible. To achieve this, we employed informal language to reduce the burden of participation and lighten the symbolic weight that the University carries as an institution, as observed by [25]. As we argued in the section on the potential of diary methods, having the possibility of making entries in as many different formats as possible was critical to

ensuring inclusive and varied expression from young people. We aimed at enabling young adults to be the authors of their narratives and not feel conditioned in their responses, especially regarding the honesty with which they filled in the diaries.

We tested several digital platforms to which participants could add different formats, such as written text, photographs/drawings/screenshots/memes/illustrations, and audio and video files, while facing different challenges: for instance, the increase in the need for training. After careful consideration, we decided to use two digital platforms with which the young adults were already familiar: the latest available versions of March/April 2023 of Google Docs and WhatsApp. Thus, there were Google Docs files, each accessible only to the participant and the MyGender project team. In that file, participants could add text and other information formats, edit colors, fonts, and font sizes, and the document layout. Each Google Doc had general instructions for the participants and contact information to report any issues or important feedback.

To be able to collect audio and video files, we used WhatsApp as a parallel channel for the digital diaries. Through it, we sent frequent prompts that encouraged participants' reflections, and we chose to program the prompts regarding the diarists' routines (e.g., sleep, classes, work, activism) in a minimally intrusive way by varying the time and frequency at which the messages were sent. The digital diaries were thought of as a method whereby the participants could add all the information they wanted to about their day and/or expand on prompts that were sent to them via WhatsApp. The callout for participants was issued through several avenues, either through MyGender's digital channels, like social media platforms and the monthly newsletter, or through other institutional channels of the host university of the project.

The final group was composed of 16 participants aged 19 to 30 years old. Our sample was largely cisgender and white, with some diversity in terms of sexual orientation. We made individual online appointments with each volunteer diarist. Each participant was verbally briefed regarding the goals and characteristics of the task. They received a document with instructions and contact information, and participants had the chance to ask any questions about the process.

In our study, we collected data over three weeks and evoked short-term reflections on the day that had just passed. We asked regular questions via WhatsApp about everyday experiences and interactions, their perspectives on digital practices and actions, how they manage their online presence, and even their opinions regarding potentially polarizing personalities of social and civic activism movements. For example: "Have you ever had doubts about using your real name on a social network? Why?", "Do you ever plan what you will publish on social media, or do you publish without much thought? This can include any format, from stories/reels to timeline posts." or "How do you think you would feel if you spent a week without your smartphone? Try to reflect on your feelings and how (and if) your daily routine would change." Data from the diaries were then systematized and analyzed using MaxQDA software, version 2023.

4. Results

Respondents who agreed to participate in this activity's production accepted, resisted, and transformed the roles offered to them by the design which the team established for the project. In particular, it became evident that the emotions they experienced during the production process impacted the outcomes and were often documented. In other cases, the chosen approach of sending prompts led participants to respond directly to that question and not record their day, which therefore told the research team what respondents believed they wanted to hear. The collected data also included moments of reflexivity about the research process, and in several cases, participants addressed the research team directly, as if they were talking to them. Nevertheless, the use of diary methods was successful, with numerous themes emerging in the data set that had not appeared in previous research tasks or had appeared more subtly before (in interviews and focus groups).

Some participants went beyond responding to the prompts and created user-generated content through visual narratives of their experiences, even though sharing these experiences (on social media platforms or other media) was not the goal and this format was very personal and private and not supposed to leave a digital footprint. They added visual and non-verbal content and elements that were used in different ways to support their storytelling. In our verbal and visual narrative analysis, we identified four predominant ways in which the study participants had constructed their visual narratives by incorporating emotions, text, and visual effects into the narratives to communicate an event, to enrich their visual narratives, to directly address the readers/viewers, and also to represent a way to later reminisce about the event. Altogether, their agency and self-expression became clear.

For clarity purposes, the major themes that appeared in the digital diaries, as well as a short description of them, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Main themes from diary analysis, with short descriptions and color codes.

Theme	Short Description
Mental Health	Management and identification of various feelings (positive and negative): anxiety, fear, anger, somatization, relief, lightness.
Productivity	Realizing or mentioning the value of what they do daily.
e-Relationships	Reporting and management of various digitally mediated relationships.
Empathy vs. Incivility	Identification, recognition, and judgement of the duality of the appropriations made by other users in digital formats.
Online identity management(s)	Behavior and accounts of the uses made of their online accounts, including social platforms, "netiquette". "Real" or "alter-ego" profiles.
Apps in everyday life	Reports on how apps permeate different sectors of life, whether at work, in relationships, or in free time.
Household chores	Comments on the organization (or lack thereof) in carrying out household chores in conjunction with digital.
Intimacy	Family issues, relationships in general, elaborations and reflections on events, and descriptions of feelings with an effort to be authentic.

Source: [37].

After carefully considering these major themes and the ways they came up in the digital diaries of our participants, we noticed four aspects, i.e., (a) mobile apps as part of young adults' routines, (b) between performance and authenticity, (c) making the diaries their own, and (d) elaborating on feelings. We will focus our attention on these themes next, and we deem it appropriate to explicitly state that the translation of diary excerpts from the original language to English falls within the purview of the research team. This process has been executed with due regard for the grammatical structure, stylistic conventions, capitalization norms, expressions, slang, and colloquialisms used by diarists, all in an earnest effort to uphold the utmost fidelity.

4.1. Mobile Apps as Part of Young Adults' Routines

Considering that one of the main interests of the diary entries in this research was to understand how young adults interact with, appropriate, and incorporate mobile applications into their daily lives, it comes as no surprise that the most frequent topic in their diaries was "Apps in everyday life". Mobile apps have seamlessly integrated into the daily routines ofPortugal's young adults, becoming indispensable tools that shape various aspects of their lives, as other studies, like [37], have suggested. This integration is not merely functional, but influences several aspects of their identity, namely, how they

communicate and how they go about their everyday routines. Here is a closer look at some excerpts from the diaries that illustrate that:

> "In the evening I watched a film with friends on Discord (...) while I was waiting for the bus I watched Tiktoks (I hate the fact that I like watching Tiktoks so much, it's addictive). Then I fell asleep watching videos on YouTube."
>
> (Diary #3)

> "I only scroll before I go to bed. I spent some time messaging while I was watching a film and now before I go to sleep I always go to Tik Tok for a bit. I only spent time on social media before going to bed. I stayed up working and talking to my boyfriend on Discord. It was a day to rest my head from the outside. I did the normal daily scroll."
>
> (Diary #9)

> "The people I most interact with on social media are my parents because I live far away from them. So with the ease of communication nowadays, it softens the longing. And I also keep in touch with my childhood friends who live in the town where my parents live. It's a way of still being present, even though I'm physically far away."
>
> (Diary #11)

We observed that actions tied to the use of mobile applications appeared as activities embedded in the daily lives of these young people. We highlight the expression "normal daily scroll", written in diary #9. This record shows that spending some time scrolling through the timeline of different social media, in particular, is a regular activity. It is also noticeable that everyday activities such as working, waiting for public transport, or lying down to go to sleep are constantly accompanied by some use of mobile applications. Watching videos on TikTok or YouTube or chatting on Discord are second-nature behaviors in the group's daily life.

4.2. Between Performance and Authenticity

We identified ways of conveying information in the diaries that suggest that diarists were alternating between performativity and authenticity. Diary methods tend to offer portrayals with a higher sense of authenticity regarding participants' daily life experiences [23]. Nevertheless, like other qualitative methods, diaries can contribute to a mix of performative and authentic behaviors observed by researchers [25]. We understand performative content as referring to the idea that people consciously or unconsciously enact certain behaviors, language, roles, and identities as a form of social performance, despite critically understanding that the total authenticity of identity can never be registered or seen [40]. These performances are not simply an expression of an innate and fixed self, but are molded and shaped by social norms, expectations, and cultural contexts. We understand the idea of performance as a less natural form of writing, less focused on the private self-consumption of the diary, but instead based on a set of cultural and identity belongings, as if writing a literary work for someone else. Consider, for instance, the following example, where a mundane event in life takes on an almost poetic and staged appearance and purpose:

> "I have been feeling a certain amount of concern and agitation. Some anxiety as well. Yesterday, as I lay in bed, not even the music helped. Not even the glass of wine or the cigarette on the terrace helped, as Apple Music played 'Mainstream' by Lloyd Cole and The Commotions. I particularly enjoy 'Jennifer She Said'. The most well-known indeed, but the one I like the most. I always say it out loud: "What a great song!""
>
> (Diary #17)

For example, if a participant typically uses formal language in their diary entries but switches to a more casual and slang-infused style when discussing certain social

events, the shift in linguistic expression could indicate navigating cultural expectations (performativity) versus expressing genuine thoughts and emotions (authenticity). The cultural context, in this case, is reflected in the language choices influenced by societal norms and expectations related to communication within a specific cultural group. The following example of authenticity was selected on the basis that it was perceived as the participant venting with the diary as a genuine coping mechanism:

> "Today was a shitty day. Really. I bailed out of my internship because I woke up really tired, with the bright idea of working on my thesis. I didn't do shit. Oh well. . .
>
> I wonder why I keep doing this to myself, repeating the same behaviours expecting different results. . . The fact is that I'm suffering from procrastination. . . And suffering a lot. The only thing that saves the day is the university choir rehearsal. Joining those folks is really the best thing I've done.
>
> Ah, in the middle of all this [name] told me that he probably doesn't want our relationship to go beyond friendship. I wasn't expecting that, but I felt relieved (?) I'll have to reflect on this."
>
> (Diary #12)

Moments of authenticity, as we perceive them, might manifest when individuals use language that reflects their thoughts and emotions without conforming to cultural norms or expectations. In these instances, individuals might express themselves in a way that resonates with their true feelings, bypassing the influence of external cultural factors.

4.3. Making the Diaries Their Own

In addition to the varying responses, ranging in tone and textual content included by the diarists, the visual tailoring of some diaries was also observed. The background color, typefaces, emojis, and the incorporation of images such as print screens, selfies, or drawings were also identified. There was a noticeable effort to illustrate certain details of what they were writing as a way of fully expressing their message—as if they were writing so that someone else could read it. Furthermore, some uses of images and personalization suggest that the diaries function as a record for a future "me" to read and remember the context in which they lived.

The editing and customization of the diary file indicate an expressive intent on the part of the contributors. As Figure 1 shows, the beyond-words personalization of diaries appeared in different formats—drawings, photographs, emojis, the use of particular fonts and background colors—which we identified with specific communication intentions and/or traditional gender roles. Particularly, let us consider the case of entirely "painting" a diary pink. That choice may refer to characteristics stereotypically attributed to women and to what is socially and culturally considered to be feminine. That particular diary had the most elements of personalization, including changing the background color and font and using images and emojis. Thus, it can be assumed that it was the diary fulfilled with the most care and detail. This aesthetic care also had typically and stereotypically feminine readings. There is a strong link between female care for aesthetics and beauty and self-care in terms of health and well-being [41], expressed in the idea of the "self-care imperative" [42]. Other studies have reinforced the idea that "quality of care" is a woman's task, including that of young adults [43,44].

Beyond mere text, participants utilized visual elements to enhance communication and convey a more nuanced representation of their experiences. This suggests a desire to go beyond the limitations of written language, using additional forms of expression to enrich their narratives. Figure 2 depicts details of beyond-words personalization by the participants, namely, an illustration, an array of photographs of an attended event, and several emojis. The use of emojis and visual elements serves to emphasize emotions and enhance the tone of the entries. Emojis, in particular, are often employed to convey specific emotional nuances that might be challenging to express solely through text. Adding

visual cues contributes to a more vivid and emotionally resonant portrayal of the diarists' experiences. The visual tailoring, background color choices, and typefaces reflect a sense of personalization and individuality. Participants were not only recording their experiences, but also creating a unique representation of their thoughts and emotions. This personal touch may signify a desire for the diary to reflect their identity, allowing them to stand out or distinguish their entries from standard text. Incorporating images, such as print screens, selfies, or drawings, suggests that diarists viewed their entries as more than just brief records. By adding visual elements, they created multimedia narratives that serve as a record for their future selves. This implies a sense of reflection and an understanding that the diary will be revisited to remember the context in which they lived, providing a form of self-documentation.
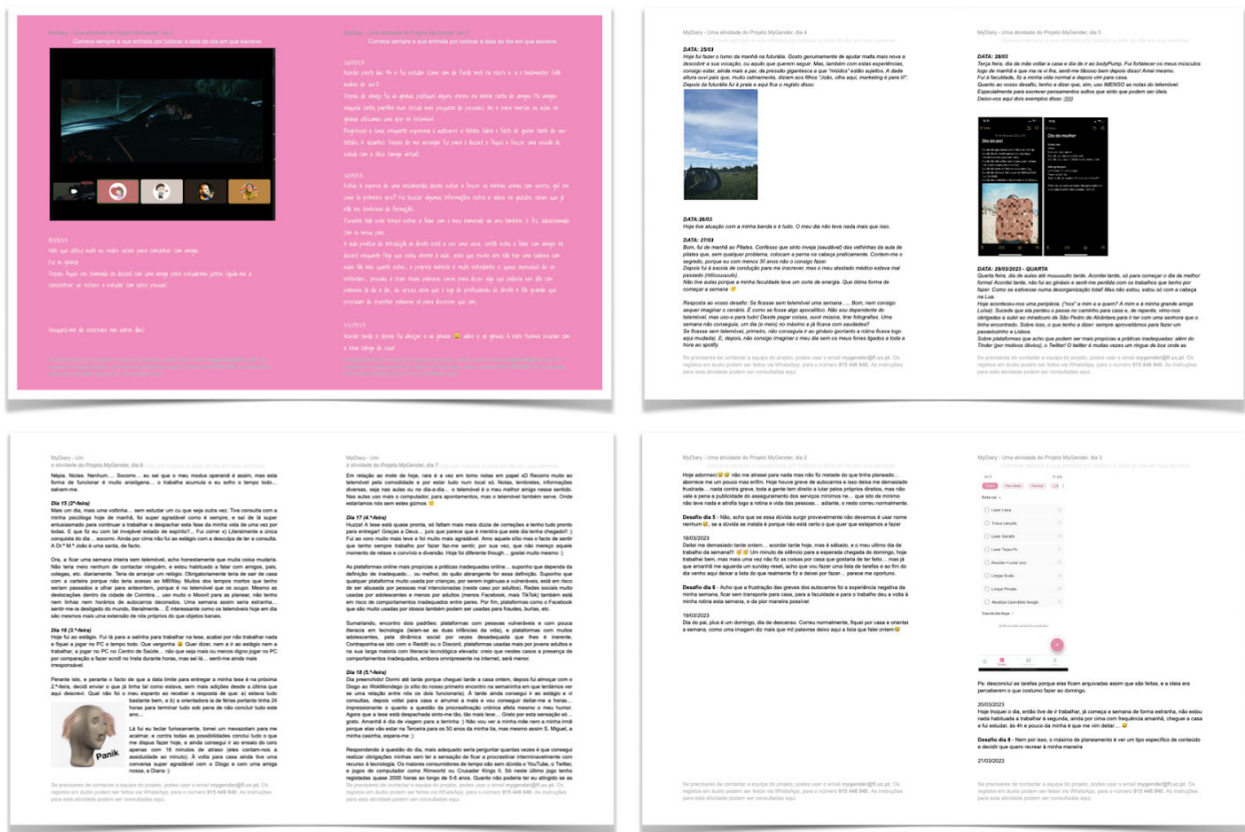
Figure 1. Visual customization of the diaries. Reproduction of diaries #01, #03, #12, and #14. Source: [37].

The act of editing files and incorporating images and photographs may also serve as a cognitive strategy for enhancing memory recall. By associating visual elements with textual content, diarists are potentially strengthening their ability to remember and recall specific details of their experiences. This aligns with the idea that the diaries not only document, but also actively contribute to, memory processes. The notion that young adults write "as if someone else could read it" suggests a consideration of an audience beyond the immediate self. Including visual elements and the effort to fully express their message may be influenced by recognizing that the diaries could be shared or read by others. This introduces a social dimension to the act of diary-keeping, potentially shaping the content and presentation. It reflects a desire for expressive richness, emotional emphasis, personalization, and the creation of a lasting record.

Figure 2. A selection of illustration, photographs, and emoji uses in diaries. Source: [37].

4.4. Elaborating on Feelings

Another aspect observed in the diaries is that some of the participants would build on an occurrence in their lives, even something as trivial as being tired at the end of the day, and elaborate on it with a deeper perspective. We understand this elaboration as a cognitive strategy that can lead to better discernment and retention of information, particularly in the memory aspect, while also helping individuals process and make sense of their life experiences.

"At the end of a quiet day, resting and scrolling through social media to distract myself a little. Anxiety at seeing my whatsapp inbox full and no time to reply. Main emotion: frustration, due to unforeseen events and lack of control over things."

(Diary #04)

"Today I liked a post by a girl I've dated, it was a story on Instagram, the post was about her mother, who is a big businesswoman, and inspirations of women in Portugal. I wrote this context to help understand the feeling that made me think about liking that post. Me and this girl already had a brief relationship, like we met once and talked for a few weeks, and she came to the conclusion that we should just be friends, after that speech I wondered what I did wrong in our relationship because when we were together I treated her like a princess like every woman deserves, she even said that I'm a man to marry, in a phone call with a friend she called me "my man". We haven't spoken until now, but when she posted this today, I decided to like it, because I think it's inspiring to see more women in important positions in society because every human being is born from a woman. I didn't like the post just because I was trying to get closer to the girl but to show her that I like inspiring and 'boss-ass' women. Social networks can also be a source of inspiration for your day. I'm rooting for all of them, because in a society created by paternalism, it's already very worn out and confused."

(Diary #11)

The detailed elaboration on feelings offers a nuanced exploration that intersects with various disciplines. Participants engage in a form of emotional regulation by reflecting on their feelings and the associated events. This process contributes to emotional awareness and understanding, fostering adaptive coping strategies. Moreover, the act of elaboration serves as a cognitive strategy linked to memory consolidation, enhancing the encoding and retention of experiences in long-term memory. This introspective approach suggests a form

of self-reflection, enabling participants to gain insights into their motivations, interpersonal dynamics, and personal values. The narratives also touch upon cultural elements influencing relationships and societal expectations. In particular, Diary #11 reflects on societal norms, gender roles, and the dynamics of social media, providing insights into how social and cultural factors shape personal experiences. Additionally, the frequent mention of social media and mobile apps highlights the integration of technology into participants' daily lives, aligning with anthropological studies that examine the role of technology in shaping social interactions and personal narratives. Diary #11 also illustrates how the participant uses the act of liking a post to communicate support for women in leadership roles, emphasizing the role of social media as a reflector of societal values. Furthermore, the participants' reflections offer glimpses of individual agency within broader social constructs, demonstrating how individuals navigate societal expectations and exercise agency in expressing their thoughts and emotions.

Within the realm of narrative studies, the narratives contribute to identity construction. Participants weave stories around their experiences, emotions, and relationships, creating a narrative that shapes their sense of self and how they are perceived within their social and cultural contexts. The temporal aspect of the diary entries, spanning from past relationship experiences to present reflections, adds depth to the understanding of how individuals construct meaning over time. In this sense, participants' exploration of feelings and everyday activities provides a rich mosaic for interdisciplinary examination. Diary methods serve as a convergence point for psychological processes, cultural influences, and social dynamics that are multi-medially expressed beyond words and the construction of personal narratives within the context of contemporary life.

5. Discussion

The decision to incorporate diary methods in the scope of the MyGender project proved to be a strategic move that offered unique and valuable insights into young adults' experiences on mobile apps and gender.

As a participatory research method, digital diaries imply that the engagement of the participants is a key aspect of interaction and (re)appropriation of the platform as designed by the research team, as well as how each diary will look at the end of the process. This collaborative process that emerges from people's agency was essential in order to add new layers and nuances to the [project] research and to build a more comprehensive understanding of the subject at hand. Even though most of the diaries were visually similar, they were all different, demonstrating the variation in and flexibility of the contributions it allows [12] on an everyday basis [5], marked by mobile apps' seamless integration.

The largest issues faced with implementing diary methods in this study were at the design stage, when we had to ensure that participants would fill in the diaries consistently and authentically. Thus, the core issues that required research reflexivity centered on the validity, reliability, and fidelity of participants' diary entries. For example, we noted that some participants did not engage with their diaries in depth. This raises the need for further analysis of the prompt format as a conversation starter that could also limit answers. We should further reflect on whether having several entries that were not expanded, but rather seemed to only answer the question raised by the prompt, was due to a lack of involvement in the research or any difficulty in understanding the task at hand.

Among participants, the diaries seemed to take different priorities during the three weeks, reinforcing the idea that participants' commitment is essential to the success of the diary methods [1]. For some, every entry resulted in a rich input, while for others, there were days without registering entries. For this last case, the methodological option of using prompts seemed to aid participants in maintaining some level of continuity. Yet, especially for the seemingly least engaged diarists, those regular prompts could have suggested they stick to answering, most of the times with entries that appeared to tell the research team what the participants believed the research team wanted to know. This real-time in situ [36] aspect is crucial, as it minimizes memory biases and ensures that the content is a more

accurate reflection of their daily lives. Participants, therefore, contribute to the ongoing narrative of the study, providing researchers with a dynamic and evolving dataset. The co-creation with participants in diary methods is evident through their active role in documenting experiences, contributing to real-time narratives, shaping the content in a private space, expressing themselves in diverse ways, engaging longitudinally, and enhancing the study's validity. Participants, in essence, become collaborators in the research endeavor, actively shaping the narrative and providing valuable insights into the complexities of their lived experiences. Also worth mentioning is that as researchers, we learned about the context in which participants live, work, and interact, gaining a contextualized understanding that goes beyond a controlled research setting. This knowledge contributed to more comprehensive interpretations of the collected data. The same happened when interpreting diverse forms of expression, gaining a deeper understanding of how individuals chose to convey their experiences.

As in any methodological approach, it is assumed that designing a digital diary methodology whose participants know that an academic research team will analyze them could pose concerns about the legitimacy of these results. However, this matter goes beyond digital diary methodologies, just as it goes beyond non-digital diaries and even beyond most qualitative methods regarding people's emotional lives, beliefs, and feelings. Therefore, a struggle arises between authenticity and performance. Contributions about problems in their intimate relationships, family unrest, and peer pressure in contexts such as the workplace and university were identified in different parts of the diaries. And those sections sound honest. However, we understand that even with this type of methodology, which may appear to be less observant of those taking part (compared to interviews or focus groups), there are always elements that we miss to fully understand the context of that diary entry. In other words, doubts about the degree of performance and authenticity are not restricted to diaries; rather, they encompass the entirety of participatory-based methods, which may be reinforced due to the institutional burden of the university or research center that is always behind a research project. Discussing performance connects to the very idea of identity as something that can never be seen as entirely performed freely or authentically [40]. At the same time, in the particular case of our objectives with the digital diaries, the idea of performance against authenticity extends to participants' digital presence, which should be critically understood as part of a nearly inescapable commodification of lives and selves [45].

Sharing and reflecting on experiences of mental health and well-being took a noteworthy space in the contributions, which can be understood as a capability of participants to build on occurrences in their lives, delving into and elaborating upon feelings therapeutically. We identified such participants' sharing capabilities, despite always analyzing such contributions while dealing with the idea of performance against authenticity.

6. Conclusions

In the ever-evolving landscape of technology, how we express ourselves and navigate our identities has taken a digital turn. For young adults, social apps serve as both playgrounds and battlegrounds for self-expression, social interaction, and identity construction. Amidst this digital tapestry, the unexplored realm of digital diaries emerges as a potent tool for delving into the intricate interplay of apps and gender dynamics.

Diary methods emerge as a dynamic and insightful approach, reinforcing the transdisciplinary perspective. Their ability to capture real-time experiences, provide ecological validity, offer a longitudinal perspective, engage participants actively, provide contextual understanding, incorporate multimodal data, and demonstrate flexibility positions diary methods as valuable tools for researchers seeking a deeper understanding of the complexities of human lives. As scholars continue to explore innovative ways to unravel the intricacies of daily existence, the untapped potential of diary methods shines brightly, offering a unique and authentic window into the richness of the human experience.

Our participatory research on digital diaries delves into the intricate dynamics of young adults' interactions with mobile applications, offering a comprehensive exploration of four key themes. These themes emerged from using the digital diary method, which is both the methodology and the object of study in this paper. Following the MyGender project, the naturalized integration of mobile applications into daily routines is a remarkable finding, thus reinforcing the results of studies developed within the project [37–39,43] that established the central role of digital technologies, particularly smartphones and social media platforms, in Portugal young adults' lives. The diaries capture routine activities interconnected with the use of apps. This generalized connectivity, as documented, transcends physical spaces, reshaping how relationships are built and maintained in the digital age.

The study also detects a dual nature in online expression, oscillating between performative content and authentic moments. Although that oscillation is featured in other qualitative methods [25], and true authenticity is almost utopic [40], diary methods such as the digital one applied in this study embrace a more authentic tone in general, as previously pointed out [23]. Participants consciously or unconsciously adopt behaviors that reflect social norms while simultaneously revealing genuine thoughts and feelings. This interaction emphasizes the complexity of self-presentation in the online world for our sample of participants. In addition to textual content, young adults adapt their digital diaries visually, incorporating colors, emojis, and photographs and drawings. This personalized expression goes beyond mere documentation, serving as a means of self-expression and reflection. Figure 1; Figure 2 reveal some examples of personalization that can be analyzed in terms of their specific communication intentions, as well as extensions and expressions of their identities that other participatory methods allow [6]. In the case of this study, regarding gender, the traditional and stereotypical case of the pink "painted" diary stands out.

The diaries appear as more than records of everyday life; they become artefacts of personal narratives. Participants tend to elaborate on their feelings [25], even regarding seemingly mundane occurrences. This cognitive strategy improves the comprehension and retention of information, providing nuanced perspectives on emotions such as frustration and anxiety and reflections on social interactions. We also acknowledge the challenges of the diary method, including variations in participant engagement and the need for research reflexivity [28]. A crucial finding is the importance of participant engagement for successfully applying personal diary methods, although other recent diary studies have evidenced that engagement tends to be a challenge with diary methods [20,36]. The different levels of engagement emphasize the delicate balance between participant involvement and potential research expectations.

Grounded in the academic and empirical landscape of gender studies, visual anthropology, communication sciences, and the arts, the methodological design reflects a nuanced understanding of the power of personal narratives and first-hand experiences in fostering engagement and transmitting knowledge. This comprehensive approach, rooted in both theoretical considerations and practical insights, contributes to the broader conversation on effective research design and communication strategies, emphasizing the importance of building rapport to meaningfully address socially relevant topics.

Based on these findings, we suggest that future diary designs narrow the gap between textual and visual narratives to facilitate the comprehensive expression of people's personal stories. The untapped potential of digital diaries provides a novel approach to unraveling the intricacies of young adults' experiences on apps and the evolving dynamics of gender. By embracing this methodology, researchers can uncover the unspoken stories that shape our digital identities, fostering a deeper understanding of the intersection between technology, gender self-expression, and the pressures of gender norms in the lives of the next generation.

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