



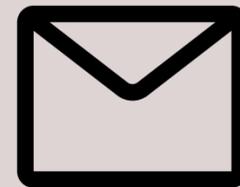
Federated social media in the age of social distancing

Ángel García Menéndez



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About myself



flecktarn121@pm.me



flecktarn121.gitlab.io



@flecktarn121@masto.nobigtech.es



Historical and technological retrospective

Social media before "social media"

Before 2000

- Based on public protocols and standards.
- Not owned by anybody.
- Anyone could host the service.

BBS, UseNet, IRC

Centralized social media

Early 2000's

- Similar affordances.
- Lower entry barrier
- Private and closed technologies.
- Ecosystem of walled gardens.

MySpace, Facebook and Twitter

Federated social media

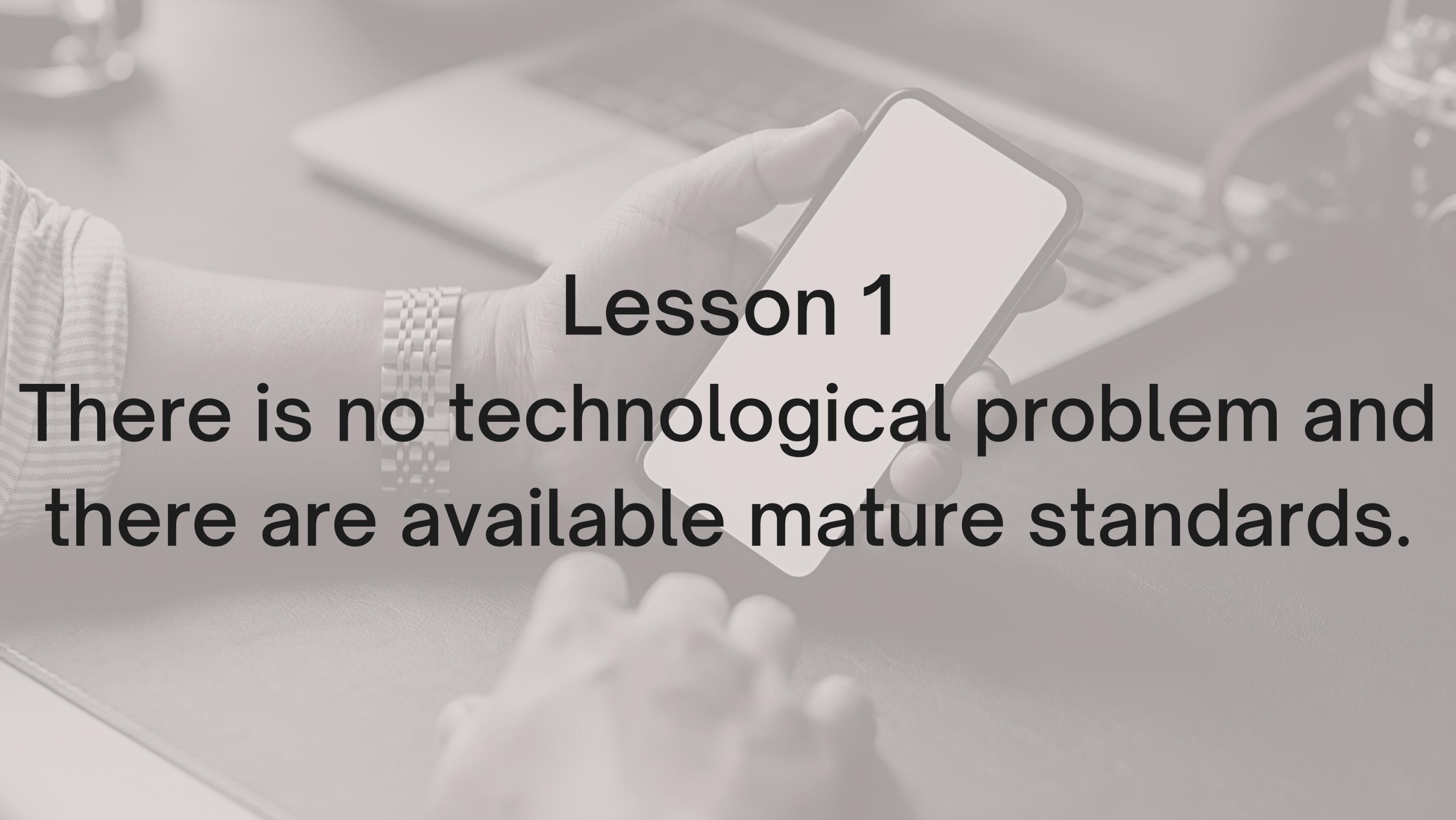
2007 onwards

- Similar affordances.
- Standardized and free technology.
- Anyone can host the service.
- Based on the principle of federation.

GNU Social, Diaspora, Mastodon



ActivityPub
standardized in
2018

A grayscale photograph of a person's hand holding a smartphone over a laptop keyboard. The person is wearing a watch and a striped shirt. The background is slightly blurred, showing the laptop and a pair of glasses on a desk.

Lesson 1

There is no technological problem and there are available mature standards.



Continuance Intention

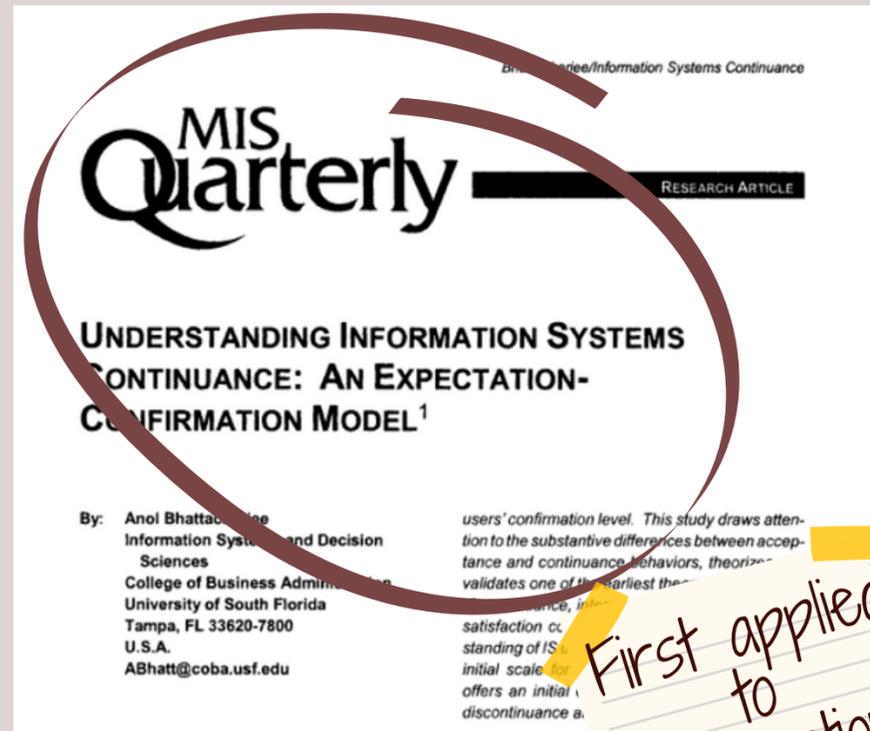
Two main factors are identified:

- Perceived usefulness
- Perceived value



Value is strongly influenced by interactions with other users, which in turns leads to a necessity of an ever expanding userbase.

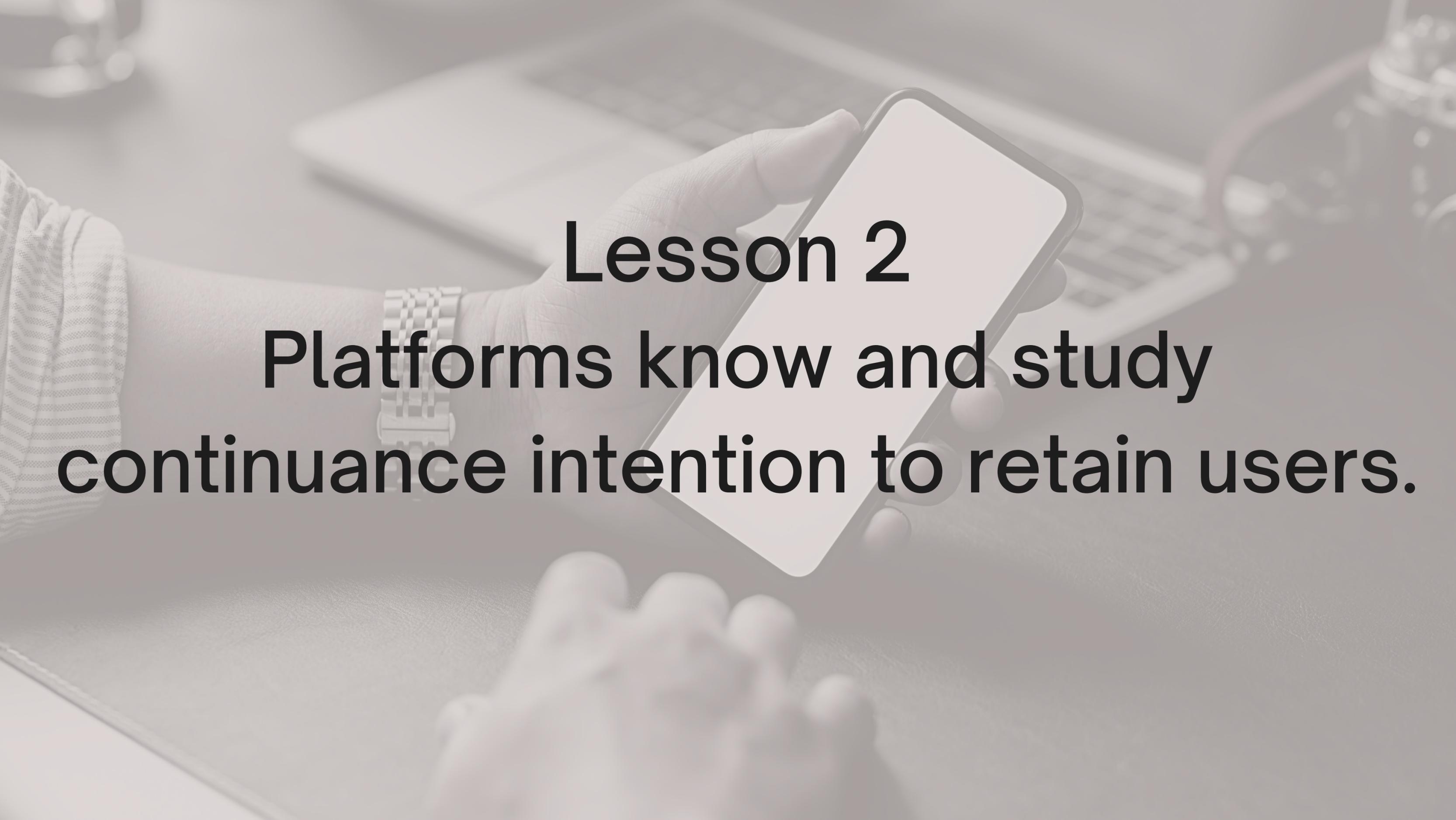
Privacy concerns, although present, do not seem to affect continuance intention.



First applied to information systems

Terms' origin: marketing literature

Social media as a product to be sold

A grayscale photograph of a person's hands holding a smartphone. The person is wearing a watch on their left wrist. In the background, a laptop keyboard is visible. The text is overlaid on the image.

Lesson 2

**Platforms know and study
continuance intention to retain users.**

Critical literature



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Jodi Dean

Communicative capitalism

"The message is simply part of a circulating data stream. Its particular content is irrelevant. Who sent it is irrelevant. Who receives it is irrelevant. That it need be responded to is irrelevant. The only thing that is relevant is circulation."

"A new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales"

Shoshanna Zuboff

Surveillance capitalism



A grayscale background image showing a person's hand holding a smartphone in front of a laptop keyboard. The person is wearing a watch and a striped shirt. The text is overlaid on the image.

Lesson 3

The monetization of social media has deep economic, social and political implications.



PARTICIPATION IN THE PLATFORMS

That participation is already a reality, due to my present activity in social media and my interests in federated alternatives. This provides both an *emic* and *etic* perspective; i.e., point of view of a member of the participant, and point of view of the observer.

INTERVIEWS

They provide a direct contact with participants, allowing them to elaborate on their perception on the problem, and the researcher to discover new insights that may have not been even considered previously.

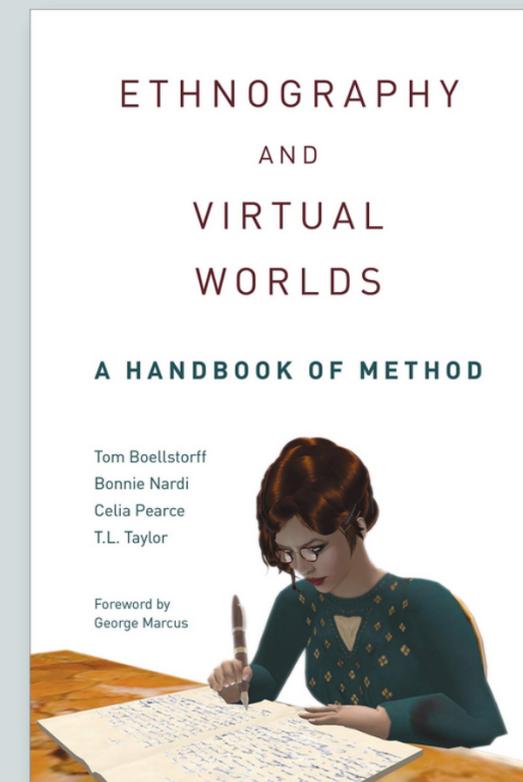
DATA GATHERING

An online questionnaire was elaborated, after making sure that it was a valid data gathering method, and examining possible defense mechanisms against fraudulent responses

Digital ethnography

[...] examining the behaviour of the participants in a certain specific social situation and also understanding their interpretation of such behaviour.

(Dewan 2018)





Interviews

They followed a semi-structured style, that is, a preliminary set of questions was prepared in advance, but the interview was not bounded to them.

The questions were open enough for participants to elaborate on their answers and, should an interesting topic arise during the interview, further questions were devised by the interviewer to deepen in it.

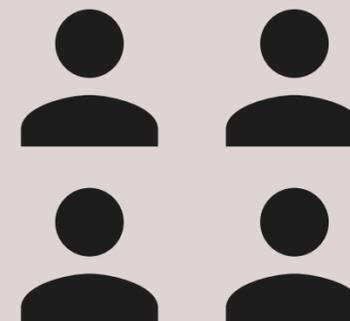
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PARTICIPANTS

DIFFERENT SET
OF INITIAL
QUESTIONS PER
GROUP

USERS OF "OLD"
SOCIAL MEDIA



USERS OF
CENTRALIZED
SOCIAL MEDIA



USERS OF
FEDERATED
SOCIAL MEDIA



INSTANCE
ADMINISTRATORS





Online survey



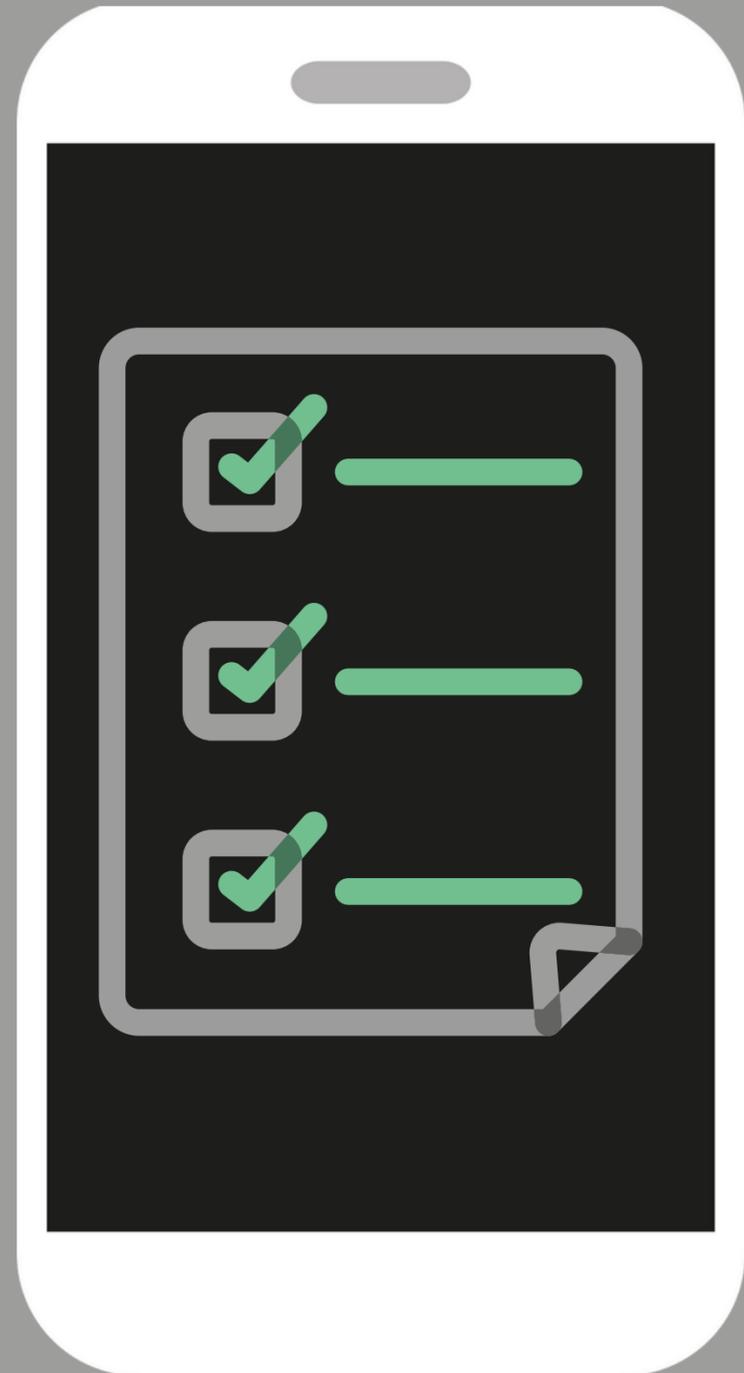
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Online surveys are at least as good as traditional ones, and both systems have issues with general population representation.

Defense mechanisms against fraud presented one or more of these problems:

- Complex statistical techniques
- Technical features of professional platforms
- They are addressed payed surveys

The final questionnaire tried to clarify the possible distinctive characteristics of people that do (not) use federated social media.



Interviews



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All participants were explained the objective of the study, to be able to give an informed consent.

Interviews were performed using the Jitsi videoconferencing service



Rafael



Gerardo

Users of "old" social media

Users of federated social media



Josefina



Jorge



María



Dámaso



Concha



León

Users of centralized social media

Instance administrators



Vicente

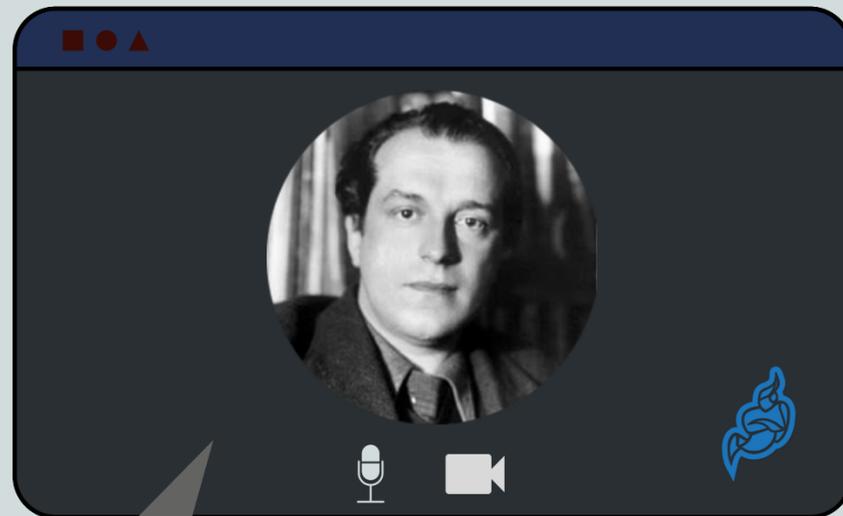


Ernestina



Interviews

They pointed out two key aspects: people used those platforms for a purpose (not just as a pastime) and their asynchronicity (i.e., instant responses were not available much less expected by users).



"Nowadays being waiting for the bus and texting a friend saying 'I'm on my way' is an absolutely mundane situation.

With IRC, you had to sit down, turn on a computer, and reserve the telephone line to connect and talk. You had to plan in advance when you were going to be online in order to have a meeting."

Concept of
netiquette

"The barrier, the thin line separating user and machine was very thin.

There were no beautiful GUIs, the tools were clunky, and you had to be careful when using them.

Things like answer below the email, not above or respond inline to allow others to understand the conversation were unavoidable because of technological limitations."



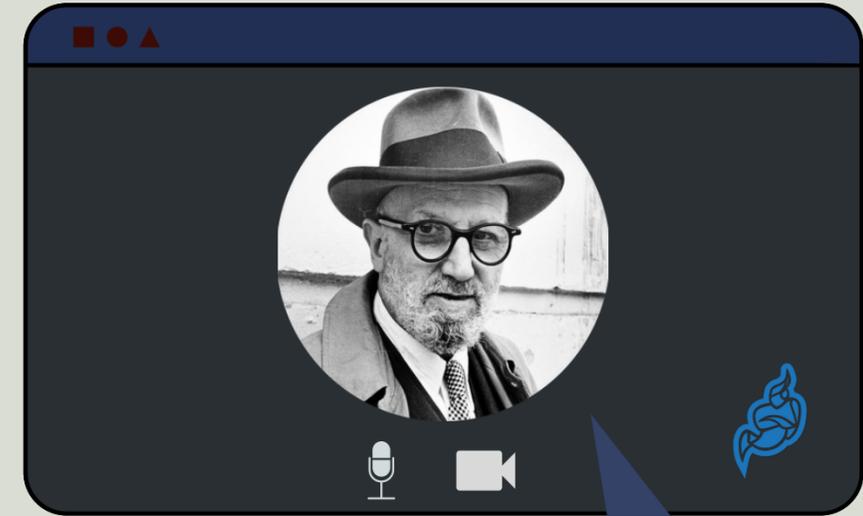


Interviews

Concha left social media, as she felt it was damaging her mental health. She was incapable of clearing her mind.

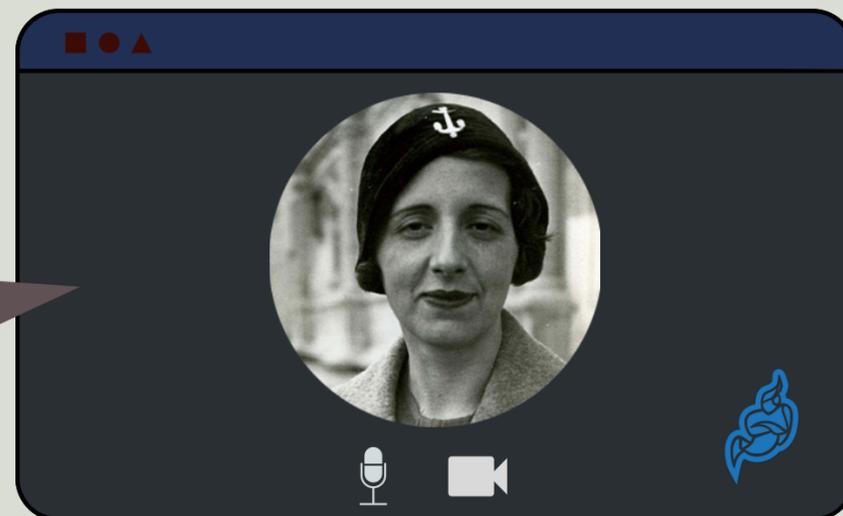
León and Dámaso were aware of the practices of centralized social media, but they did not consider migrating.

To the question "would you feel uncomfortable if you could not access social media?", Maria's answer was "no".



*"There is no special difference between data that can be gathered from my Twitter or Instagram account and my purchases at the grocery store. [...]
If I have to worry about that in social media, I would have to do so in the supermarket or when I attend football matches.."*

"When I attend summer camps, I have my mobile phone taken away. If I was the only one without it, I might feel left out, wanting to know what is everyone up to. But, as all of us have it taken away, I don't mind, since you eventually find other ways to keep up with people."





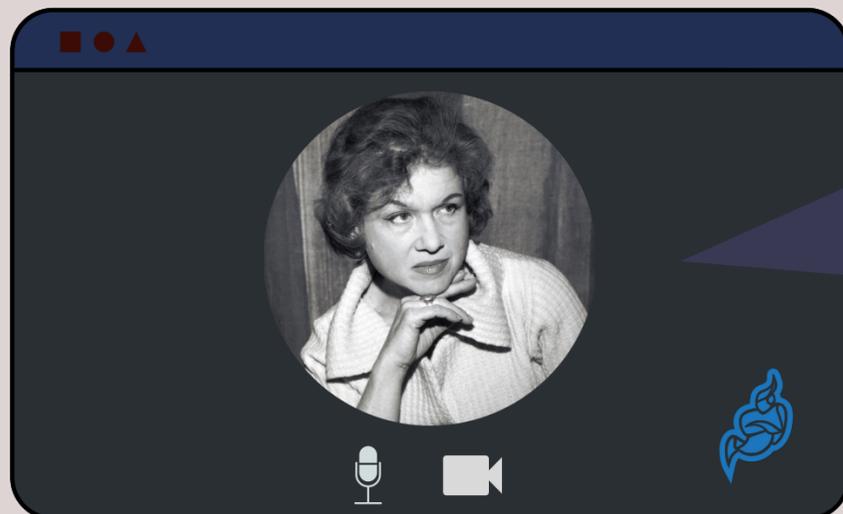
Interviews



Both Josefina and Jorge argued that there was an active push for the creation of dedicated communities in federated social media.

"It is [following people in social media] a quite weird form of relation. It is not really a relation, you just see what they post [...] If you really want to know someone, you need to reach out to them, regardless of the platform."

Jorge thinks that, in the long term, the adoption of these technologies would follow the same trend as recycling or smoking awareness.



"I think the prevalent user model is that of a man, with a technical background, between 20 and 40 years old, with a particular interest on avoiding possible censorship from the corporate owners of centralized social media platforms."

Josefina has the impression that both centralized and federated platforms have the potential to create addiction.



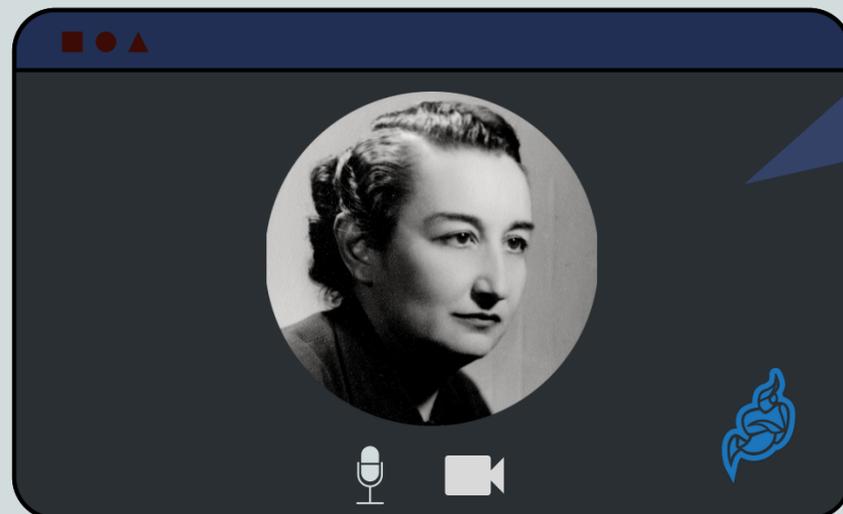
Interviews

Ernestina and Vicente share a similar routine as administrators, and are able to deal effectively with legal issues, like copyright.

Ernestina has a team of moderators that help her maintain order in her instance, with a "professionalized" procedure.

"We are a university association, and thus we are given both an office in campus and some retired equipment from laboratory classrooms. The instances of the services we offer are running on those computers, which are connected to the institutional network in the office. Technically, the university is paying for everything, although indirectly."

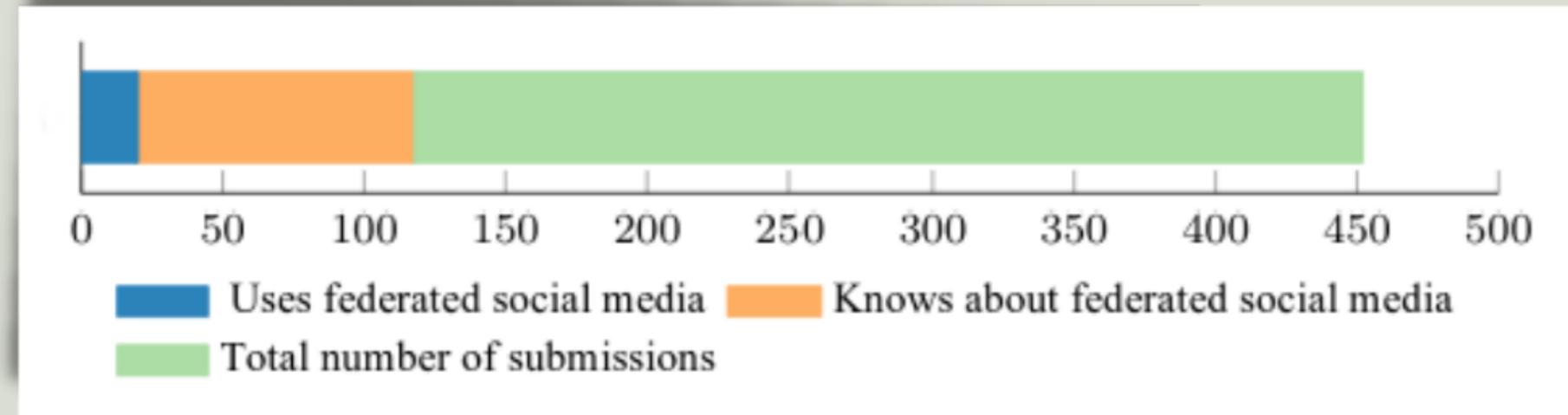
"A person named X began to harass our users. Instead of reporting him to us, they reported him to his own instance [...]. X tried to portray us as the harassers, and even a photo of myself began to circulate. [...] my instance might have gotten blocked by everybody else."

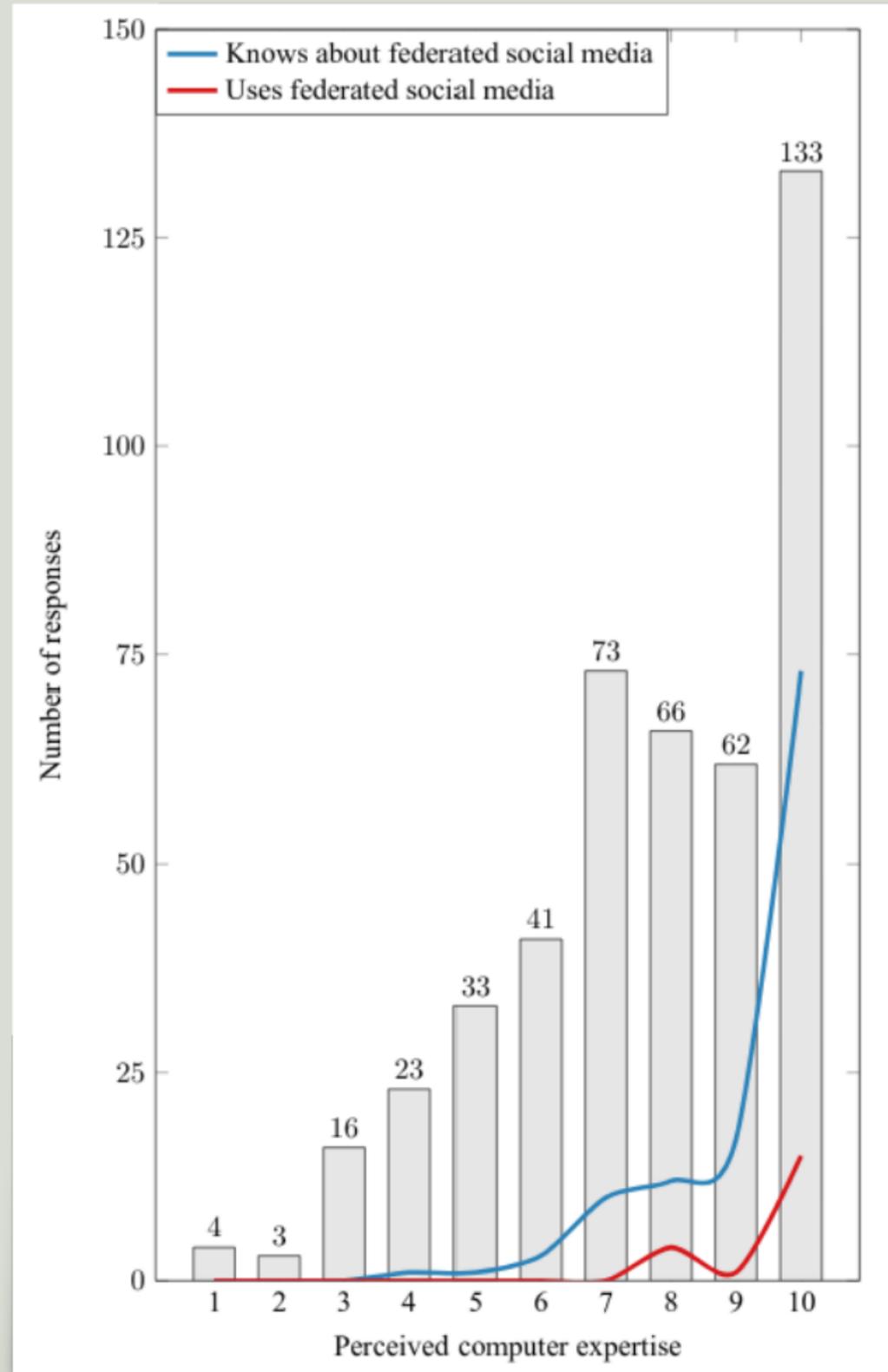




Questionnaire results

Users that know and
use federated social
media





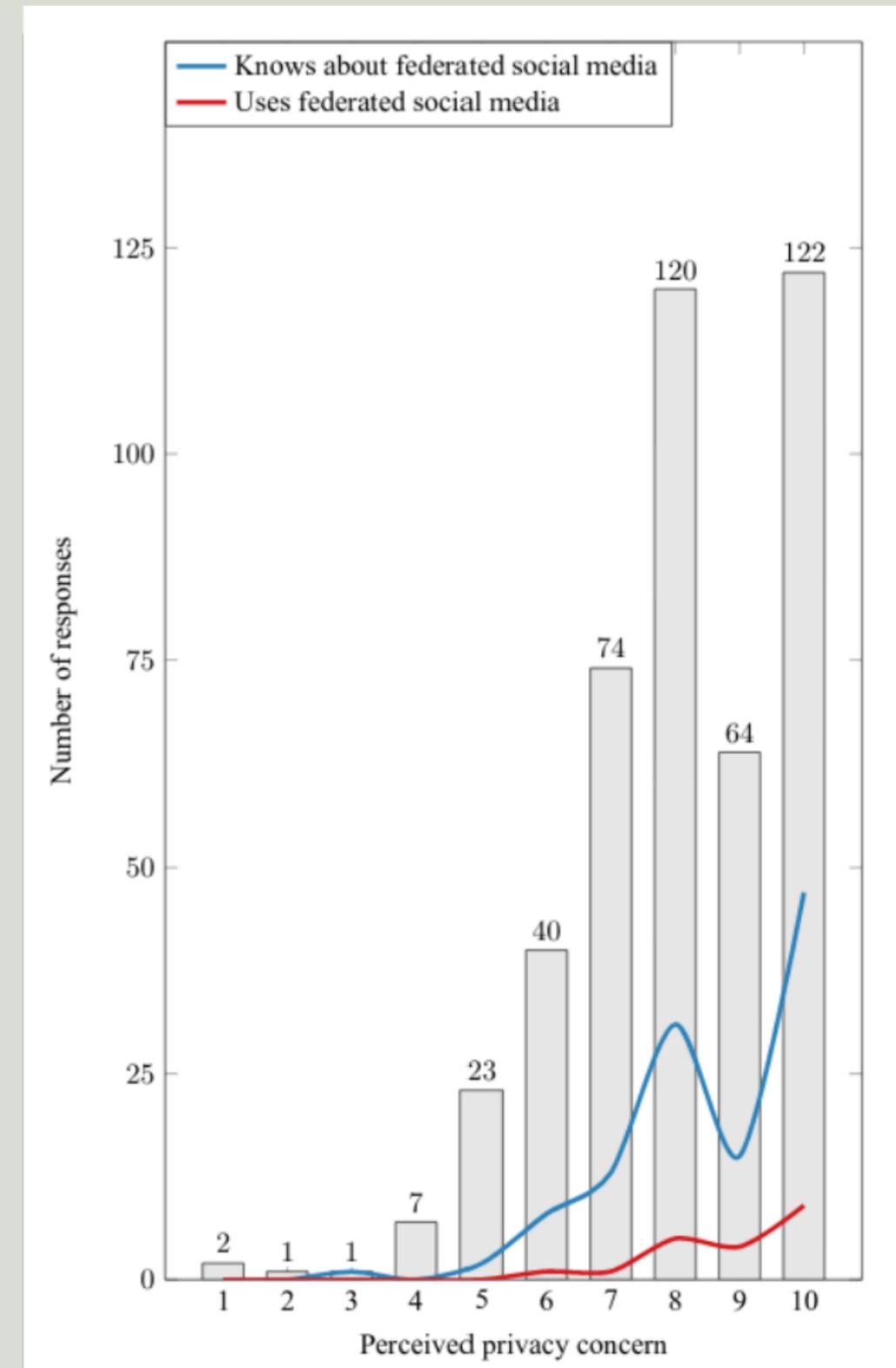
Questionnaire results

Knowledge and use of federated social media, compared to perceived computer expertise



Questionnaire results

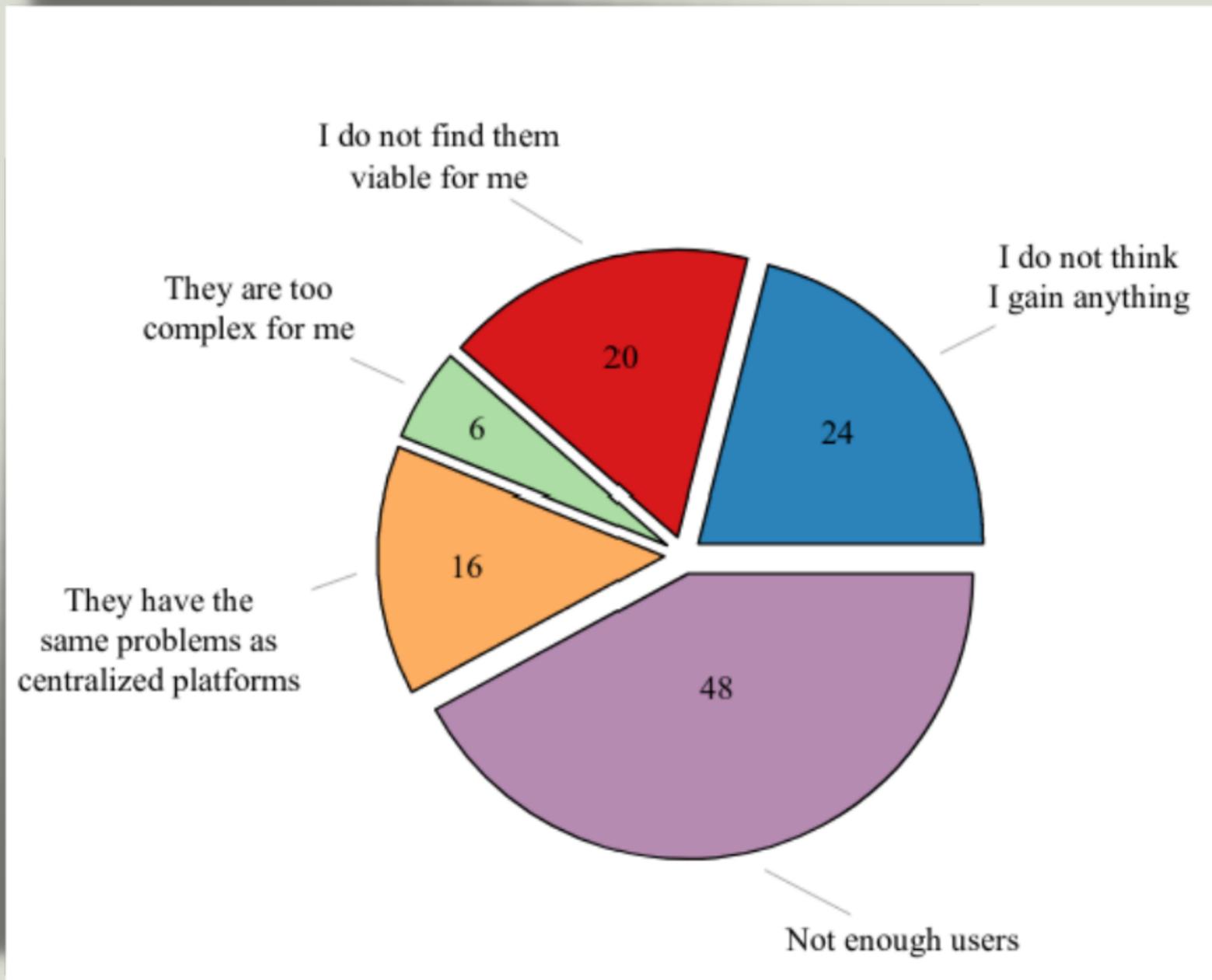
Knowledge and use of federated social media, compared to perceived privacy concern





Questionnaire results

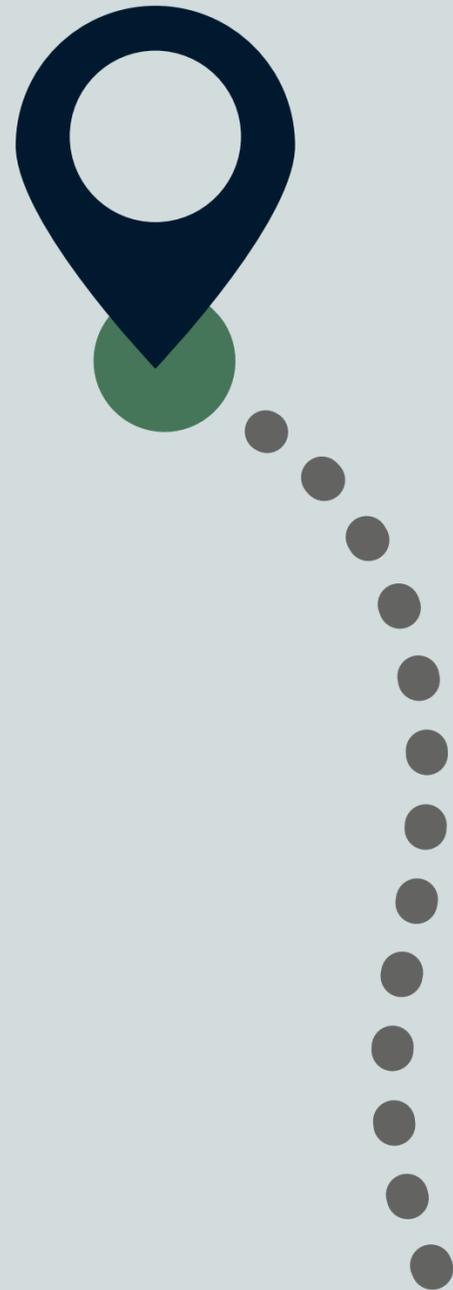
Reasons given for not endorsing federated social media



Conclusions



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IGNORANCE OF FEDERATED SOCIAL MEDIA EXISTANCE

Currently, federated social media awareness is highly restricted to technical users. The general public does not know that it even exists.

FEAR OF MISSING OUT

Among those who know about federated social media, but have chosen not to transition, the main reason is the small userbase, which is a direct consequence of FoMO, even though it may be an artificial feeling.

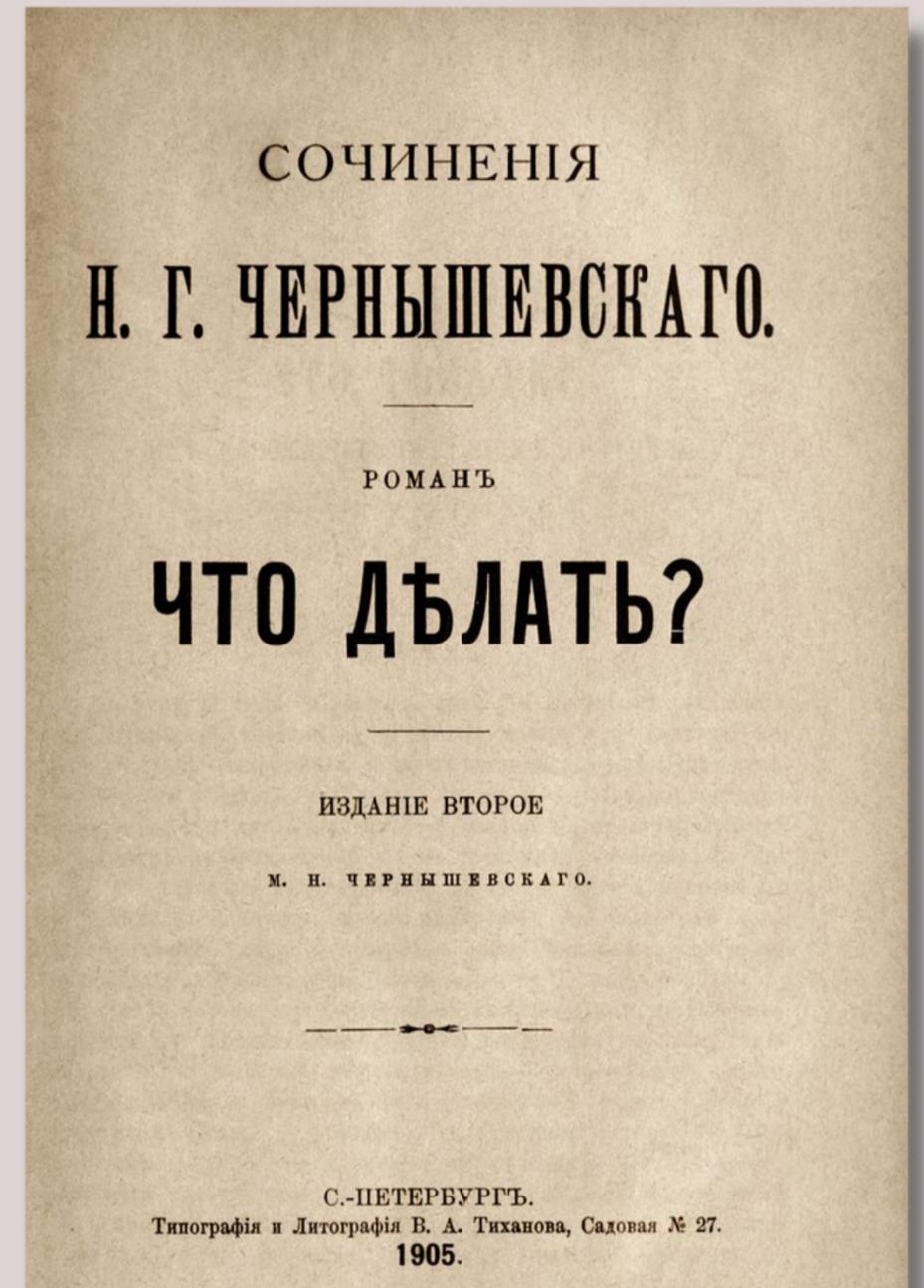
THE FUTURE

There are two possible scenarios. In the first one, the transition is a slow and progressive process, caused by increased awareness of the problems of centralized social media. On the other one, a tipping point is reached, which causes a mass migration virtually overnight.



What is to be done?

- Make federated social media known to the common user.
- Spread awareness, both of the techniques used to retain users, and the impact of the economic model of centralized social media.
- Explain the advantages, goals and history of federated technologies, and how it might be a solution to the problem.





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*You have built it,
now you have to make them come.*