



# A PLACE TO BE THE PLAY/ACT PLACEMAKING HANDBOOK

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# **This handbook is the result of the work carried out by the students of the PLAY/ACT project**

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# WALKING AND FEARING THE CITY. EXPLORING FEELINGS OF (IN)SECURITY USING A WORKOUT APP

**Keywords:** research; mobility; methodologies; safety

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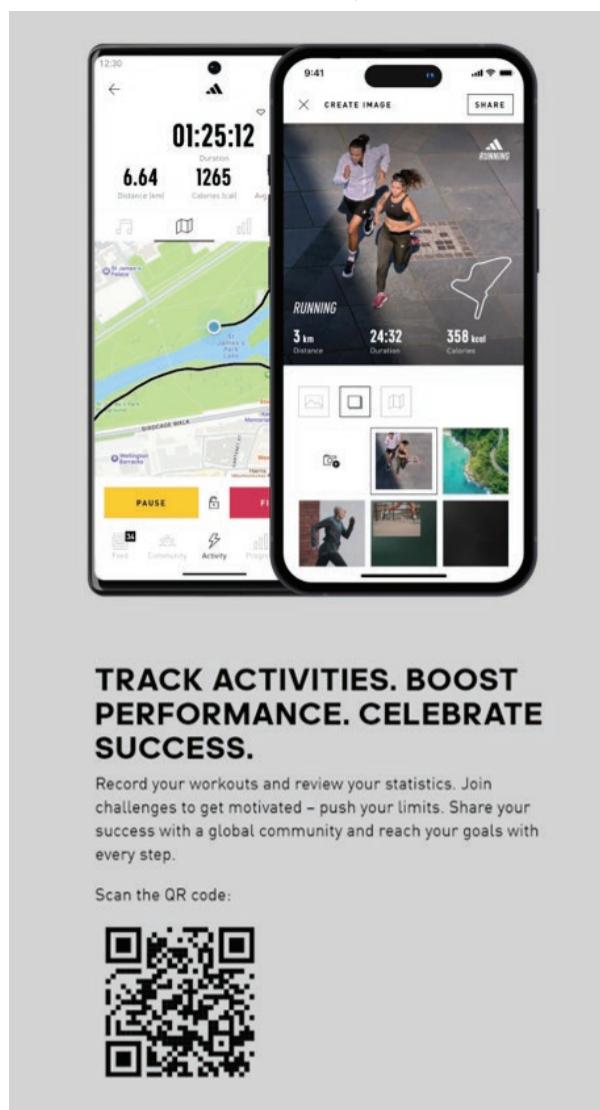
## READY

The smartphone is commonly used by many people around the world in their daily lives, and especially by the current generation of higher education students. Having grown up with digital technology and have spent their entire lives surrounded by it, nowadays students extend and complexify the label of "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001) beyond those born in the final decades of the twentieth century.

The use of social mobile devices (SMD), especially smartphones and related apps, intersects with various aspects of students' everyday life, including education and learning activities, consumption and leisure activities, health, and wellbeing. At the same time, SMD have been gradually introduced into activities related to teaching and research for social scientists (Raento, Oulasvirta, & Eagle, 2009). Over recent years, diverse experiences have shown the use of SMD as emerging tools for qualitative research in education, in the field of ethnography, interviewing, and design-based research (Beddall-Hill, Jabbar & Al Shehri, 2011). These experiences have helped to throw light on several angles and perspectives on the issue, including "the good, the bad, and the ugly" (Garcia, Welford, & Smith, 2016).

This paper showcases the findings of an exploratory study involving the use of smartphones and apps to creatively investigate feelings of (in)security in the urban environment in which students live and study. The exercise was conducted within the scope of the course entitled 'Laboratory of Qualitative Analysis' (LabQual) [SOC2413L] taken by undergraduate sociology students at the University of Évora (Portugal) in the spring semester of the 2020/21 academic year. It follows on from broader developments towards a sociology of the mobile phone (Geser, 2004) and comes in the wake of previous initiatives in which the first author of this paper, in her work as a teacher, invited students to make use of the smartphone and "to take this object into fieldwork (instead of avoiding it)" (Costa, 2019, 154).

Deeply affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, LabQual students were challenged to use a sociological lens through which to undertake a qualitative study aimed at gaining an understanding of the everyday experience of people affected by fear and related feelings. The study of fear from a sociological perspective is not new, having already been extensively explored. Among others, Zygmunt Bauman's work is particularly well known, even among non-sociologists: interestingly, the author examines experiences of fear associated with the risk society, individualism and the consumption of spaces and emotions (Bauman, 2006).



Students were encouraged to use sociological imagination (Mills, 1959) and creative research methods (Kara, 2015; Holmes, 2020), including the mobility and sensory dimensions in the design and creation of the exercises. Accordingly, Group A1, consisting of Ana, David, Marco and Maria, asked participants to use Runtastic, a free app produced by Adidas©. The adidas running app includes the following features: voice coaches, GPS tracking, a leaderboard, running stats, challenges, and training plans, enabling people to easily keep track of their workouts and examine statistics on running, walking, hiking and cycling (Figure 1).

## STEADY

A qualitative exploratory study was conducted to gauge the feelings of (in)security among undergraduate students as they conducted their daily walking routes between the António Gedeão Hall of Residence and the University of Évora main city campus. This route is approximately 2.1 km long and takes about half an hour to walk (Figure 2).

Data were collected using diverse applications installed on students' smartphones enabling them to take text notes and make audio, photo, and video recordings. Participants in the study were invited to use Runtastic to record their daily journeys between the António Gedeão Hall of Residence and the University of Évora, either during the day or at night, alone or accompanied. They were asked to stop at certain places along the route at which they experienced feelings of insecurity and take photos of them. Subsequently, the data was shared with the researchers and later analyzed using the following qualitative data analysis procedures: intra- and inter-case qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2019; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2019).

When asked to describe their daily routes, students' voices enabled manifest and latent perceptions of fear to be detected. These voices were illustrated in photos and the routes followed were recorded by the app (Figure 3).

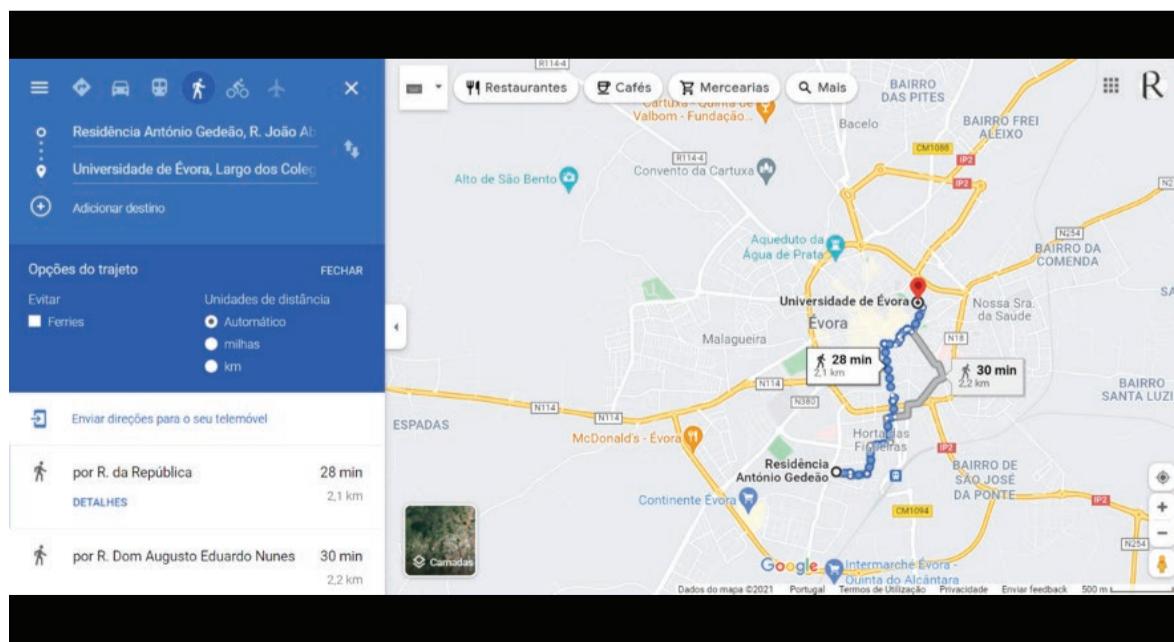


Figure 2. Walking route between the António Gedeão Hall of Residence and the University of Évora.  
Source: Own elaboration using Google Maps website.

The narratives collected indicate the different contexts which were perceived by participants as being more or less safe. For instance, one of the students stated that "[...] if it had been night-time, we wouldn't have gone there [Rossio de S. Brás]" when referring to a particular area of the

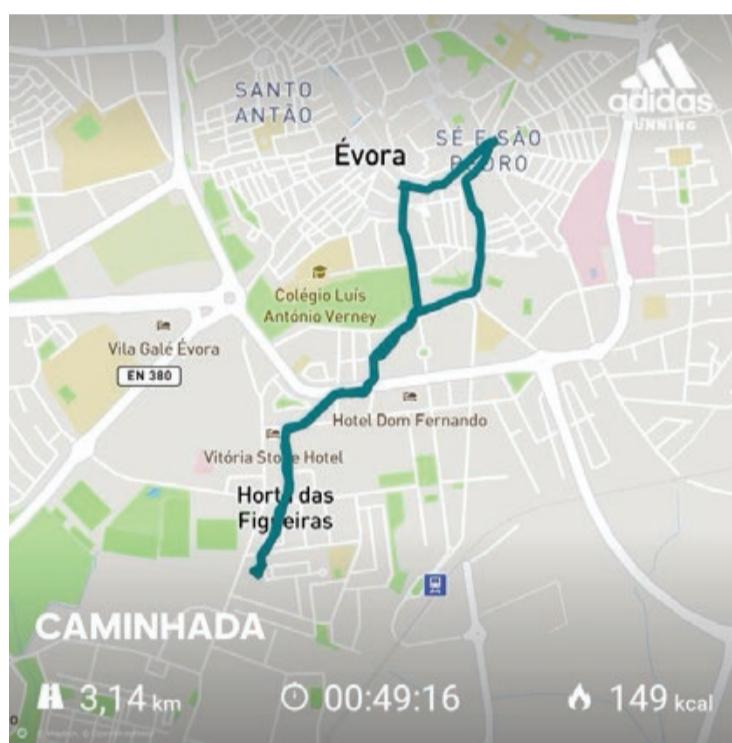
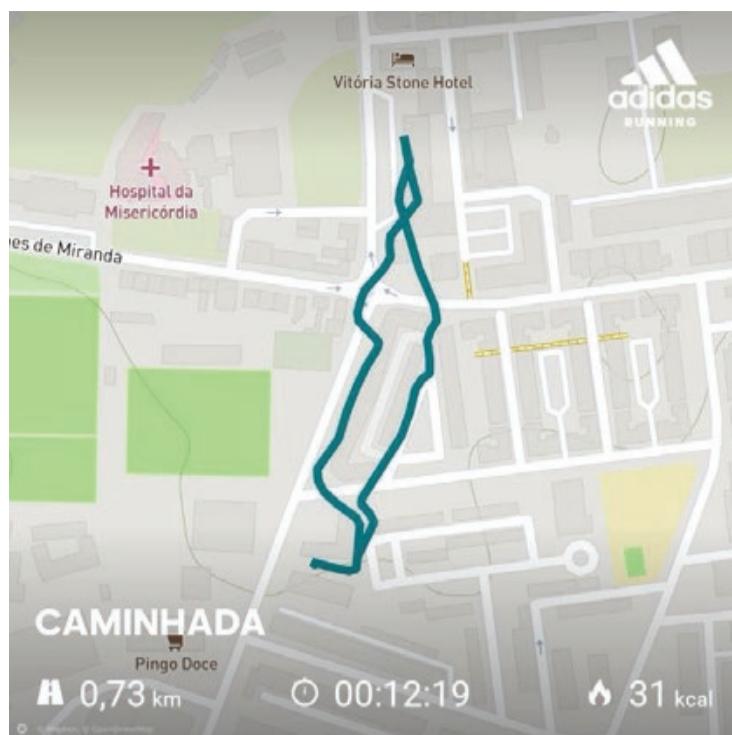


Figure 3. Runtastic snapshots of the round-trip walking routes between the António Gedeão Hall of Residence and the University of Évora. Source: Captions by GA1 participants (June/2021).

city. Another student stated that "If I hadn't been accompanied, I very likely wouldn't have taken this route on foot at night."

Figure 3 visually depicts noteworthy differences between round-trip routes. On Route 1 (left), as she was walking alone, the student chose to walk along a "busier avenue", while on the way back, as she was with a friend, she took a different route to the hall of residence taking a "side street which was not so busy" in order to see her friend home. Overall, this route was rated as "unsafe", despite the fact that the student was with a friend. As she said: "despite there being two of us, we are both young women, and [...] groups of women or mixed groups are harassed more often than groups of men." On Route 2 (right), the round trip is different, taking in quite a busy road, the first picture showing a journey alone and the second one showing a journey made by two people.

## GO!

Using a workout app was assessed as being particularly heuristic in the process of studying the feelings of (in)security in the city experienced by undergraduate students. The facility for recording the route, making notes about and taking photos of certain sensitive points, and the opportunity for dialogue between researchers and participants regarding the routes recorded was a key feature of support for the interpretation of the results.

Several conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, an analysis of the apparently insignificant daily walking routes followed by young undergraduate students reveals diverse experiences of fear, insecurity and danger perceived as "stress", "anxiety", "nervousness", "discomfort", "impatience", "concern", etc. Secondly, perceptions of (in)security, which are socially constructed from classic oppositions such as night–day; dark–light; silence–noise; large–small; open–closed; wide–narrow; closing–opening spaces; static–movement of both people and traffic are (de)constructed in the face of social contexts and variables (for example, being alone/accompanied; being a man/woman). Third, perceived (in)security is inseparable from the experience of (in)security outlined, described using words such as "avoid", "choose", "change", "speed up", "run" and "trust". Finally, understanding the perception of urban (in) security requires creative observation in order to reveal the multilayered experiences of the relations between the self and the city, that is, with others and the surrounding space.

While the use of SMD cannot be done without observing ethical considerations (ISA, 2001), using SMD is as important as it is inspirational for teaching, learning and research activities. There is definitely no other limit than creativity. Ready? Steady? Go!

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