

## COMMUNICATION AND THE USE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ADOLESCENTS

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**ABSTRACT:** The present study aimed to analyze the relationship between the activity “communication” and the use of social networks from the perspective of teenage students. Descriptive study conducted in the months of August and September 2013 with 35 students of Primary Education II, of a public school in the city of Fortaleza, Ceará, based on an interview guide. According to the results, LAN houses or cyber cafés were the most frequently reported locations for internet access, and Facebook was the most widely used social media. According to the respondents, internet use was relevant to establish relationships. Most claimed they used the internet in a proper and safe way. They believe that social networks can also be used to access educational information, which is permanently updated. Nursing professionals play a key role in advising these youngsters and their families on the importance of the safe use of the internet.

**DESCRIPTORS:** Adolescent health; Internet; Health promotion.

### ATIVIDADE DE VIDA “COMUNICAR” E USO DE REDES SOCIAIS SOB A PERSPECTIVA DE ADOLESCENTES

**RESUMO:** Este estudo teve como objetivo analisar a relação entre a atividade de vida “comunicar” e o uso de redes sociais sob a perspectiva de adolescentes escolares. Estudo descritivo, realizado nos meses de agosto e setembro de 2013. Desenvolvido com 35 estudantes do Ensino Fundamental II de uma escola pública do município de Fortaleza, estado do Ceará, com um roteiro de entrevista. Os resultados demonstraram que as Lan Houses foram os locais mais utilizados para acesso à internet, sendo a mídia social Facebook a mais utilizada. Os entrevistados julgaram relevante o uso da internet para o estabelecimento de relacionamentos. A maioria afirmou utilizar de forma correta e segura a internet. Segundo os adolescentes, as redes sociais também servem para adquirir e acompanhar informações educativas. O enfermeiro desempenha papel primordial na abordagem desses jovens e seus familiares para que a internet seja utilizada com segurança e em prol da saúde do adolescente.

**DESCRIPTORES:** Saúde do adolescente; Internet; Promoção da saúde.

### ACTIVIDAD DE VIDA “COMUNICAR”: USO DE REDES SOCIALES BAJO LA PERSPECTIVA DE ADOLESCENTES

**RESUMEN:** Este estudio tiene la finalidad de analizar la relación entre la actividad de vida “comunicar” y el uso de redes sociales bajo la perspectiva de adolescentes escolares. Es un estudio descriptivo, realizado en los meses de agosto y septiembre de 2013. Fue desarrollado con 35 estudiantes de Enseñanza Fundamental II de una escuela pública del municipio de Fortaleza, estado de Ceará, con unguión de entrevista. Los resultados muestran que los locales más utilizados para acceder a la internet son las Lan Houses, siendo el medio más usado la red social Facebook. Los entrevistados piensan que la internet es relevante para el establecimiento de relaciones. La mayoría afirmó utilizarla de forma correcta y segura. De acuerdo con los adolescentes, las redes sociales también son importantes para lograr y acompañar informaciones educativas. El enfermero tiene papel primordial en el abordaje de esos jóvenes y sus familiares para que la internet sea utilizada con seguridad y en beneficio de la salud del adolescente..

**DESCRIPTORES:** Salud del adolescente; Internet; Promoción de la salud.

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## ● INTRODUCTION

The use of information technologies is undoubtedly integrated to the society, which makes the individuals directly or indirectly dependent on these resources. Within the context of globalization, the internet is a tool that aims to connect the world quickly, reducing the geographical distance, facilitating, accelerating and making the communication process less expensive<sup>(1-2)</sup>.

Adolescence is a period of life characterized by physiological, psychological, behavioral and social changes, permeated by discoveries, search for identity, questioning, with improvement of thinking and acting and more intensive use of social interaction media. Thus, given the wide variety of modern communication media, it is clear that there has been a revolution in the forms of interaction among teenagers in the last decades. The introduction of new information technologies such as the internet and mobile phones has changed the daily lives of youngsters.

An interesting phenomenon observed today among teenagers is the wide use of the so-called social networks or social media, or perhaps "virtual communities". This medium is seen as the most accessible and responsive tool in the relationship between friends, acquaintances, classmates and family members. Among the countless social media sites and platforms available, the social network Facebook, for example, has a prominent position. One key feature of this platform is the possibility of exchange of information, news, images, videos and instant messaging. Therefore, the importance of connectivity during this stage of development is understandable, as adolescents are establishing their identities and expanding their social environment<sup>(3)</sup>.

The vulnerability of adolescents that use the internet is a matter of concern for parents/caretakers and the society, since many of them expose their lives by making comments, sharing pictures, events, intimacy, etc. One risk associated to the improper use of the internet, especially social media, is cyber harassment or cyberbullying. Hence, the daily risks posed to youngsters are higher because of the great diversity of media available for their interaction provided by new technologies, giving rise to discussions between adolescents, the society and the school environment.

In view of the aforementioned, health professionals should implement actions to promote adolescent health, as well as prevention and education, providing a space for the debate about the safer use of the internet. To strengthen and assist interventions in adolescent health, the Ministry of Health recommends the Programa Saúde na Escola (PSE), in partnership with the Ministry of Health, established by Decree no 6.286, of December 5, 2007, which, among other objectives, is aimed to promote health and culture of peace, with emphasis on the prevention of health hazards; coordinate actions between the health network and the school network, using the available space and resources; strengthen the coping of vulnerabilities and encourage community participation to ensure comprehensive education to students<sup>(4-5)</sup>.

Thus, PSE professionals, especially nurses, should be involved in the guidance of adolescents on safe use of the internet and social media, since the health promotion should go beyond health centers and use the school as a social space for the transmission of information, exchange of experiences and knowledge, for the maximization of health promotion and prevention practices. Thus, the justification for this study is that it aimed to analyze the relationship between communication and the use of social networks from the perspective of adolescents.

## ● METHODOLOGY

It is a descriptive study. Descriptive research studies, analyzes and interprets facts of the physical world without interference or intervention by the researcher; an exploratory research seeks to explore the dimensions of a specific problem, its manifestations and related factors<sup>(6)</sup>.

The research site was a public elementary and secondary school of Fortaleza, state of Ceará, Brazil, located in the outskirts of the city.

The inclusion criteria for adolescents were: be enrolled in the 6th year of Primary Education II, in

the afternoon shift, aged between 12 and 18 years, according to the definition of the ECA II, – according to the definition of adolescent of the ECA – the Brazilian Child and Adolescent Rights act<sup>(5)</sup> – and who have recently registered accounts in social networks. In total, 54 students were invited to participate in the research, but only 35 met all the inclusion criteria. Of these, eighteen were female and seventeen were male. Prior to data collection, the participants signed the Assent Form and their parents signed the Informed Consent Form (TCLE). Data was collected in August and September 2013.

Interview technique was used for data collection; this technique is defined as a conversation with a specific purpose, which is obtaining information relevant to the research, using a research tool or another material<sup>(7)</sup>. The tools used were an interview guide and field notes.

The interview guide contained socio-demographic information on the use of social networks. Quantitative data is shown in tables created with Microsoft Office Excel 2007, using absolute numbers and percentages. The qualitative component was analyzed in the light of content analysis technique, with statements transcribed verbatim and anonymity ensured to the participants. At the end of each excerpt, the abbreviation “A” was used followed by a cardinal number indicating the order of the interview.

The study was submitted to appreciation by the Research Ethics Committee of Universidade Federal do Ceará and approved under protocol no 038/11, according to ethical and legal criteria.

## ● RESULTS

For a better understanding of the statements, in the beginning, the conversation with the adolescents was focused on communication with family members, friends and school, through social networks. The respondents were aged 11-16 years old and most lived with their parents or with one parent; some lived with grandmothers and/or aunts. Regarding access to the internet, thirteen adolescents reported using the computer in their households; thirteen in cybercafés and nine in the houses of neighbors and relatives (Table 1).

*[...] I prefer to use my neighbor's Wi-Fi network to access websites: It's for free and I can do it at home. (A3)*

*[...] I enjoy a lot accessing my Facebook account at the lan-house, as I can meet friends there. (A7)*

Facebook is the most widely accessed social network followed by game sites and the Youtube. According to the adolescents, their parents/guardians were aware of their access to the internet and sometimes encouraged the youngsters to use the tool (Table 1).

*[...] my mother knows that I use my Facebook account to talk with my friends from school. She never forbade me to use it. (A5)*

This description shows the importance for parents/guardians to monitor the access of adolescents to social networks, and guide them, with the collaboration of the school, regarding the safe use of the internet.

In the interviews, it has been noticed that despite fearing the use of this new technology, parents/guardians tended to encourage their children to use it. For security purposes, the parents often did not allow their children to access some sites, usually related to relationships, adult sites, videos and music. Some respondents (11) reported that their parents/guardians allowed them to freely access the internet.

*[...] my father keeps telling me that I must not access funk music sites. (A4)*

*[...] I can access all website without restriction. I have never been forbidden to access any site in the internet. (A8)*

Adolescents are constantly accessing websites with the following purposes: playing games (40%), talk to friends and/or relatives (83%) (Table 2). The benefits of using social media for communication

were mentioned by the adolescents:

*[...] I have a cousin, whom I like a lot and lives far away, in another city, but we always talk on Saturdays on Facebook chat. (A3)*

*[...] when I get home from school, I have nothing to do, so I access the internet to see what's going on and listen to the songs that I like. (A16)*

As shown in Table 2, the amount of time spent in front of computer screens was very significant: 54% of the respondents accessed internet daily, (31% on alternate days and 26% rarely.

*[...] I access websites everyday. Most of time online is spent on Facebook because there are many interesting things to see there. (A23)*

*[...] I post my pictures and pictures of my family on Facebook and Instagram. No one ever told me that it could be dangerous. (A18)*

Also, 25 participants reported making safe use of the internet thanks to guidance and monitoring of their parents, while 10 were not concerned with safe use of the internet, as they talked to strangers and had free access to all websites.

Many participants said they agreed on the importance of safe use of social media, since it is a way to get close to people and also move away from them. Some adolescents reported using social media to contact classmates; and 25 participants said the use of social media allowed them to interact with relatives and friends, while 10 minimized the importance of social media, because they prefer real coexistence. Several adolescents did not like to add family members as Facebook friends and 24 said

Table 1 – Characterization of adolescents regarding the use of social networks. Fortaleza, CE, Brazil, 2013

Characterization	n	%
Age range		
11 – 13	28	80
14 – 16	7	20
Gender		
Male	18	52
Female	17	48
Locations of access		
Cybercafés (Lan Houses)	13	37
At home	13	37
In the homes of neighbors/relatives	9	26
Most accessed sites		
Facebook	26	74
Chat rooms	1	3
Music sites	4	11
Game sites	20	57
School search sites	1	3
Youtube	9	26
Other social networks	2	6
Parents' awareness of the sites accessed		
Yes	34	97
No	1	3
Parents encourage internet access		
Yes	24	69
No	11	31

Table 2 – Characterization of adolescents regarding access to social networks and parental monitoring on the correct use of this tool. Fortaleza, CE, Brazil, 2013

Characterization	n	%
Sites with unauthorized access		
Yes	24	69
No	11	31
Purposes of the use		
Games	14	40
Talk to friends and relatives	29	83
Make new friends	2	6
Do something during idle time	4	11
Frequency of use		
Daily	19	54
On alternate days	11	31
Rarely	9	26
Often posts/shares content on social networks		
Yes	24	69
No	11	31

they felt comfortable to make contacts in the real world, while eleven considered it as an invasion of privacy (Table 3).

*[...] it is great to see and chat with people that we like and live far away [...] my father lives in another state. So we always talk through the internet. (A7)*

Most reported making safe use of the internet thanks to guidance and assistance from parents regarding talking to strangers and other situations, and many times, because some websites were blocked.

*[...] my grandmother is always asking me who am I am talking with on the internet. She even asks me to see the photos of the person. (A18)*

Table 4 shows educational information regarding access to adolescents through social networks, types of relationships, personal matters, types of meetings they reported having experienced on chat rooms available in social networks, as well as meetings with people they met through social networks.

Of the 35 adolescents who participated in the interview, twelve reported preferring virtual relationships, as they feel more comfortable to express their feelings and make decisions.

*[...] I like talking to people on the internet because I feel embarrassed to talk to them in person. (A33)*

*[...] some girls from my classroom only talk to me on Facebook; they don't talk to me at school. (A8)*

Since anyone can access and view the content of social networks pages, adolescents who use this tool are vulnerable to various types of privacy concerns. Eight respondents reported problems in this regard, while 27 had no problem with disclosing personal affairs, such as photos and videos. Regarding relationships, twelve said they liked virtual relationships, such as flirts or serious relationships, while 23 reported disliking and disapproving of this type of relationship, because they think it is dangerous (Table 4).

*[...] once I posted one picture on Facebook and a girl said I was ugly. My mother went to the school to talk to this girl (A19).*

*[...] I approached a classmate on Facebook, and a few days later we started dating (A31).*

Table 3 – Characterization of adolescents regarding the importance of the use of social media and virtual relationships. Fortaleza, CE, Brazil, 2013

Characterization	n	%
The use of social networks is important for chatting with relatives and friends		
Yes	25	71
No	10	29
Most interesting type of relationship		
Virtual	23	66
Personal/real	12	34
Personal matters x invasion of privacy		
Feels comfortable	24	69
Considers invasion of privacy	11	31
Makes safe use of the internet		
Yes	25	71
No	10	29
Believes the frequent use of the internet is addictive and dangerous		
Yes	24	69
No	11	31

Table 4 – Characterization of adolescents regarding information posted on social networks and the vulnerability in meetings with strange people. Fortaleza, CE, Brazil, 2013

Characterization	n	%
Information obtained		
News	14	40
Information related to school	4	11
None	17	49
Discloses personal matters		
Yes	8	23
No	27	77
Enjoys virtual relationships		
Yes	12	34
No	23	66
Has already met in person someone with whom he/she only chatted on social networks		
Yes	5	14
No	30	86

Concerning the several issues posed by the real world, five adolescents who were interviewed attended a meeting in the real world that was arranged online and said they were not afraid of it, as they inquired about the life of the person to be met by searching the social networks to find out whether she/he was telling the truth. In turn, 30 adolescents said they never attended such meeting because they thought this could be dangerous.

*[...] I don't have the courage to arrange a meeting in the real world with someone I've only chatted on internet sites. My mother said it could be dangerous (A23).*

According to the adolescents, social networks can provide educational information. Fourteen respondents said they obtained school-related information on social networks, and seventeen said they never accessed such information on the pages of their social networks (Table 4).

*[...] I access the internet to find out whether there will be class in my school (A6).*

The perceptions of the adolescents on the use of social networks, their vulnerabilities and main purposes of use of social media were identified, as well as the increased acceptance of the use of this tool by parents and guardians. Based on these findings, we intend to encourage nursing professional to become more involved in the promotion of adolescent health, through the understanding of the particularities of this age group who makes massive use of social networks, as well as the use of nursing models such as research testing mediation models.

## ● DISCUSSION

To communicate is to promote interpersonal interaction and human relationships that are essential to life<sup>(8)</sup>. Adolescence is a period marked by tremendous emotional challenges; adolescents are constantly attempting to build their own identity. So they must share their feelings and emotions through different languages.

The results corroborate that the using the internet at home is one of the daily activities of adolescents<sup>(9)</sup>. The internet is mostly used by them for leisure purposes. An example is the growing success of Youtube, which was awarded "The Best Invention of 2006" by Time magazine. Within a year, Youtube has achieved tremendous popularity. Television programs, interviews, reviews, reports, political speeches, home videos, trivia, everything can be viewed and shared anytime and anywhere<sup>(10)</sup>.

Digital media, including videogames, impacted the lives of children and youngsters, turning them into a generation that is used to live in a fast and active world and capable of performing multiple activities at the same time. The videogames can also teach reasoning and memorization strategies, which is positive<sup>(11)</sup>. For introverted and shy adolescents, the internet helps to establish communication. Interpersonal communication can be characterized as an exchange of messages between two or more people, who alternate with each other the functions of message emitter and receiver, thereby facilitating the relationship and understanding of the other<sup>(12)</sup>. Analysis of the data collected from the 35 adolescents showed that social media are widely used to bring people together and to help relatives and friends to keep in touch. They are also used for leisure purposes (games and chat rooms), facilitating communication.

The problem of excessive internet use is relatively recent, but is gaining attention because of the implications in children, adolescents and families<sup>(3,13)</sup>. Parental guidance on non-disclosure of personal of family data in social networks can contribute to reduce the vulnerability and exposure of these young people. Advice from parents to their children regarding the safe use of social networks is a good practice to prevent possible problems. But it is necessary to penetrate in the universe of adolescents to become aware of their movements in these virtual environments<sup>(1,3)</sup>. The data obtained showed that parents and other relatives are attentive to the safe use of websites and social networks by adolescents.

Due to the frequent and not very restricted use of the internet, lack of creativity to find other ways to spend time, limitations of the guardians, idle time, etc. the adolescents make an inappropriate use of this tool and are more and more dependent on it, which can be harmful to them. So far there is no consensus on the appropriate term to define an excessive use of the internet. Possibly, the most

common expressions are “compulsive internet behavior” or ‘digital media compulsion”, since many behaviors previously associated only to the internet were then added to many of the latest digital devices, such as personal digital assistants (PDAs), iPhones, MP3 Players, portables and smartphones connected to the internet, as well as desktops, laptops and netbooks<sup>(14)</sup>. Many respondents are very active in social networks, especially Facebook, which has become very common among adolescents because of its easy access.

Communication via social networks has great impact on the lives of these adolescents; the development of new technologies has improved the social life of the individuals, allowing greater agility in communications<sup>(15)</sup>. The internet provides very easy access to all kinds of information produced and made available in the virtual environment.

Thus, nursing professionals, as well as the school and the families of these adolescents, who are active in social network sites, play a key role in providing advice on the safe use of this social media.

It is essential to reflect on the use of the school as a space to promote the health of adolescents, in various aspects, concerning the use of social media, in order to help them use it in a safe and healthy way<sup>(16)</sup>.

Therefore, nursing professionals seek strategies to effectively promote the safety and health of adolescents, reducing the risks and vulnerability of the virtual environment. Finally, muitos jovens usam de forma aleatória e livre as mídias por sua facilidade de acesso. Nurses can discuss the importance of safe use of the internet with parents, teachers and the school.

By promoting health at the schools, nurses contribute to the process of forming empowered, active and critical citizens who can benefit from the safe use of the internet a tool with many positive aspects<sup>(17)</sup>. The findings of this study suggest that nursing should be integrated to school in its efforts to promote the health of adolescents in their dynamic environment, which includes the safe use of social media.

## ● CONCLUSION

The research allowed a closer look on the way in which adolescents use the internet. Data collection showed the perceptions of these young people about communication in social networks. During the entire course of the research, it has been found that the use of internet, especially Facebook, is important to their lives.

The social networks are the most widely accessed sites by youngsters, particularly because of the easy access, low cost and attractive forms of communication, e.g. chats, interaction among groups, viewing and sharing of videos and photos.

Nursing plays a key role in the promotion of the health of these young internet users. The duties of nurses, especially those under the School Health Program, include guiding adolescents on the risks posed by improper use of the network. The importance attached to the internet by adolescents arouses reflections about the dissemination and influence of this means of communication on this age group.

The limitations of this study concern its duration and location. Thus, further studies are needed to provide a better understanding of the experiences of young internet users, with focus on health promotion.

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