

Use of social networking websites as a care instrument for hospitalized adolescents

O uso das redes sociais virtuais como um instrumento de cuidado para adolescentes hospitalizados

El uso de las redes sociales virtuales como un instrumento de atención a los adolescentes hospitalizados

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to understand how social networking websites are used by adolescents and their importance during the hospitalization process. **Method:** A descriptive and qualitative study was supported by the virtual ethnographic method and resorted to the symbolic interactionism as theoretical framework. Eleven hospitalized adolescents were interviewed. **Results:** Three categories were identified based on the analysis of interviews and posts: Being able to use social networking websites during hospitalization; Using the Facebook® chat to keep connected to friends; Seeking support from friends through social networking websites. **Final considerations:** Facebook® was the social networking website that adolescents used the most, standing out as an important form of entertainment during hospitalization that facilitates communication and social support. Healthcare professionals should value the use of social networking websites by hospitalized adolescents and encourage access to these tools, providing hospital resources to expand and facilitate this access.

Keywords: Adolescent; Hospitalization; Nursing; Social Networking.

RESUMO

Objetivo: Este estudo buscou compreender como as redes sociais virtuais são utilizadas por adolescentes e sua importância durante o processo de hospitalização. **Método:** Estudo qualitativo descritivo apoiado no método de etnografia virtual, utilizando o interacionismo simbólico como referencial teórico. Foram realizadas 11 entrevistas com adolescentes hospitalizados. **Resultados:** A partir da análise das entrevistas e das postagens, foram identificadas três categorias: Podendo utilizar as redes sociais virtuais durante a hospitalização; Utilizando o chat do Facebook® para manter-se conectado aos amigos; e Buscando apoio dos amigos por meio das redes sociais virtuais. **Considerações finais:** O Facebook® foi a rede social mais utilizada pelos adolescentes, configurando-se como uma importante forma de entretenimento durante a hospitalização e facilitando a comunicação e o suporte social para os adolescentes. Os profissionais de saúde devem valorizar o uso das redes sociais online pelos adolescentes hospitalizados, estimular o acesso e providenciar recursos que ampliem e facilitem esse acesso.

Palavras-chave: Adolescente; Hospitalização; Enfermagem; Rede Social.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: Este estudio buscó comprender cómo las redes sociales virtuales son utilizadas por adolescentes y su importancia durante el proceso de hospitalización. **Método:** Estudio cualitativo y descriptivo apoyado en el método de etnografía virtual, utilizando el interacionismo simbólico como referencial teórico. Se realizaron entrevistas con 11 adolescentes hospitalizados. **Resultados:** A partir del análisis de las entrevistas y de las entradas, identificamos tres categorías: Pudiendo utilizar Facebook® durante la hospitalización; Utilizando el chat de Facebook® para mantenerse conectado con los amigos y Buscando el apoyo de los amigos a través de de las redes sociales virtuales. **Consideraciones finales:** Facebook® fue la red social más utilizada por los adolescentes, configurándose como una importante forma de entretenimiento durante la hospitalización, facilitando la comunicación y soporte social para los adolescentes. Los profesionales de la salud deben considerar como importante el uso de las redes sociales en línea por los adolescentes hospitalizados, estimulando el acceso y buscando proporcionar recursos para ampliar y facilitar el acceso.

Palabras clave: Adolescente; Hospitalización; Enfermería; Red Social.

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INTRODUCTION

Technological evolution has changed the way adolescents communicate. In the present days teenagers use social networking and instant message platforms to keep in touch with their friends continuously, regardless of where they are or what they are doing.^{1,2}

Social networking websites and instant message platforms promote a sense of belonging to a group, given the easiness of communication they provide.² When these networks, such as Facebook®, are used publicly, they boost adolescents' self-promotion, by registering and exhibiting likes and comments in their posts, in addition to revealing the places they visited, their favorite songs and personal interests.²

Facebook® is currently the largest online social networking website, with approximately 1.5 billion (1,440,000,000) users worldwide.³ It is used as a space to meet people, interact with them and discuss ideas and topics of common interest. Its users can create online profiles with personal information, share pictures and videos, join groups about themes related to personal interests, post comments and communicate with friends through instant messages.³

Adolescence is characterized by deep physical, psychological and social changes, which impact on people's behavior. These characteristics are enhanced when teenagers get sick and are admitted to a hospital. Hospitalization is an unpleasant and stressful experience, which makes adolescents feel anguish, fear, and anxiety.⁴ Manifestations of these emotions can be attributed to the difficulties faced by the patients, resulting from an abrupt separation from their families and social lives, changes in their routine and a temporary loss of control over their lives.⁴

Social networking websites are an important tool to promote care to these hospitalized adolescents because they facilitate communication between these patients and their relatives and friends and constitute a space in which teenagers have the opportunity to share the hospitalization experience and learn with others who went through a similar situation.⁵

A study carried out with hospitalized teenagers with chronic conditions showed that they use the internet frequently. In their opinion, Facebook® is the most accessed social networking website, because it allows them to be "normal" and keep informed about their social life, similarly to other adolescents. Another investigation found that adolescents with chronic diseases are selective in sharing their feelings and thoughts about their diagnosis, medication and treatment and avoid to discuss these themes in social networking websites.^{6,7}

There is a growing number of virtual communities and blogs about people affected by some kind of illness. These

environments are becoming increasingly important for people to share their disease experience and exchange information about the treatment.⁸

Taking into consideration that the use of social networking websites is a relevant aspect in adolescents' daily life and recognizing the virtual environment as a means of communication that stimulates elements important to the elaboration of feelings and perceptions, this study was proposed to unravel how social networking websites are used by adolescents and their importance during hospitalization.

METHODS

Because the authors focused on the experience of hospitalized adolescents and the use of social networking websites, they opted for designing a qualitative-descriptive study supported by the ethnographic method, mainly virtual ethnography.⁹ From the theoretical perspective of human experience analysis, symbolic interactionism, whose study object is the nature of social interactions, was chosen as the theoretical framework.¹⁰

Ethnographic investigation occurs through immersion of researchers in the studied environment, which characterizes it as a type of research that not only describes phenomena, but also places them culturally, allowing their interpretation.⁹ Virtual ethnography aims to study social practices on the internet and what they mean to the participants of the research, facilitating the understanding of the users' behavior and culture in a virtual environment.⁹

The proposal of the present study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee, in accordance with resolution 466, from 12/12/2012, referring to human research, with the report 544,059. The adolescents and their legal representatives were informed about the procedures and the guarantee of anonymity before joining the study.

Eleven teenagers accepted to participate in the research. Their legal representatives were communicated and the investigation was explained. After authorization, the legal representatives and the adolescents signed a free and informed consent and assent forms, respectively. Both documents explained the research conduct and the guarantee of anonymity of the participants.

During data collection and analysis, some procedures were adopted to assure anonymity and keep information confidential, such as requesting the adolescents' permission to be their friends in their social networking websites to have access to all the posted content, and guaranteeing the confidentiality of names and personal information available in the profiles of the participants.¹¹

Virtual insertion did not reveal much about the studied population. Consequently, it was necessary to meet these patients and identify when the hospital admission took place, which allowed to understand their thoughts, feelings, memories and strategies to face different situations. Because of that, individual and face-to-face interviews intercalated the virtual observations.

The study was carried out with adolescents aged 13 to 17 years old, admitted for at least 48 hours to pediatric, medical and surgery units of a public teaching hospital, oriented to tertiary care, in the city of São Paulo. To join the survey, the teenagers had to have an active account in a social networking website and have access to it during the hospital stay. It is important to make it clear that there were two computers available in the pediatric unit; in other sectors, there was free internet signal, which patients could use through their own devices, such as smartphones, tablets, and notebooks.

Researchers attended the hospital units to be recognized by and mix with the institution's employees and patients over six months, from June to November 2015. During this period, 23 adolescents were invited to join the study, but two did not show interest to participate, four did not match the intended profile for not using online social networking websites and six did not belong to the age group established for inclusion.

After authorization from legal guardians, the researchers added the participants as virtual friends to their social networking websites, which gave them access to the posts of the studied patients. On the next day, a face-to-face interview was conducted, and the guardians were invited to listen to the adolescents' reports. The initial question was: "Did you use any social networking website during the hospital stay?". Other questions followed, regarding the importance, purpose and frequency of use of Facebook® during the hospital stay.

Data collection and analysis were adapted from the ethnographic method to manage online contents in virtual communities.¹² It consisted of the following steps:

- recording and analysis of the content posted by the adolescents on the online social networking website during their hospital stay and throughout one week after discharge;
- field reports obtained in face-to-face meetings, during which the researchers led a semi-structured interview with the patients.

It is worth emphasizing that the analysis of the adolescents' profiles was restricted to the period of hospital stay and the week after discharge and was in accordance with the principles of active observation, focused on the search of posts and comments related to the hospitalization process. The interviews were recorded by a digital recorder and transcribed for data analysis.

The organization and interpretation of the collected data were carried out by analyzing the content of the material, which included verbal records from the interviews and written and visual information from the posts. This process consisted of preparing, organizing and reporting the results.¹³ In the first steps of the analysis, dedicated to the preparation phase, data collection, material transcription and reading took place.

The statements of the teenagers were presented with an identification code consisting of the word "adolescent" followed by a number from 1 to 11, age and cause of admittance, to guarantee patients' anonymity.

The 11 participants were 13 to 17 years old. Six were males and five, females. They were hospitalized for different reasons, such as dengue fever, fracture, asthma attack, pneumonia, surgery and diabetes mellitus. All the participants used Facebook® as the main social networking website during their hospital stay.

RESULTS

The present study found three categories: use of social networking websites during hospitalization, use of the Facebook® chat to keep connected to friends, and seeking support from friends through social networking websites.

Being able to use social networking websites during hospitalization

The hospitalized adolescents posted texts that addressed their daily lives, feelings, descriptions of their routine and what they were doing at that moment, making their activities public. To achieve that, they used the tools to post pictures, videos, songs, and texts. They also resorted to chats to interact with relatives and friends.

I use the internet every day. I prefer to use my smartphone, I don't like the computer from the hospital... every day I check my Facebook® account and post someone else's sentences that I liked... I posted a sentence: "Difficulties exist to make you stronger, not to make you give up.". (Adolescent 1, 13, appendicitis)

In the hospital, I can use Facebook® better than at home to talk to my friends and post how I feel... my smartphone was stolen, so I use the hospital's computer. (Adolescent 3, 14, reflux correction)

The hospital has been a bit good, because I can access Facebook® and talk to my friends, and a bit bad because I can't see them; I should be on the streets right now. (Adolescent 2, 14, diabetes mellitus)

Using the Facebook® chat to keep connected to friends

Accessing the Facebook® chat became a recurrent activity for the adolescents during the hospital stay. They used the tool to talk to their relatives and friends in real time.

Here (in the hospital) I used Facebook® to see pictures and talk to some friends through the messenger tool... I posted nothing... but I used the chat to talk about the hospital and some school works that we had to finish. (Adolescent 7, 16, pneumonia)

I didn't post that I was in the hospital... I talked to my friends on the chat, said that I was in the hospital, then they said "ok". (Adolescent 1, 13, appendicitis)

A social and entertainment nature can be noted in the statements. The adolescents used the social networking website to have fun, keep themselves busy in the hospital environment and talk to their friends. They discussed several topics, not always related to the hospitalization, in an attempt to distance themselves from the strange context of the hospital and follow daily events outside the institution. Consequently, the social networking websites contributed to the continuity of the adolescents' social relationships.

I'd like to spend more time on Facebook®; I use it during the night, but I talk to people. I talk a lot. Talking is what I do the most, so there is no time to post things... The chat is the tool I use the most. I talk to my friends, my aunts, uncles, cousins, all like that, I also talk to my brother. (Adolescent 10, 17, asthma attack)

My friends that came here last Saturday posted I was here (in the hospital) [...] I told them by the chat. (Adolescent 2, 13, diabetes mellitus)

I use Facebook® to talk... I use the chat tool... I talked about what happened to around five people... they said I was going to get better, I was going to get well soon, I was going to leave the hospital soon. (Adolescent 4, 15, fracture in right lower limb)

Seeking support from friends through social networking websites

Social networking websites were used as a platform to show support by friends and relatives. Messages and posts were sent through the different tools available in these websites, allowing all to have access to the published material.

I write that I am in the hospital, that I want to leave here soon, this clinic, then many people ask me why... I posted it like that, but do you know when we regret something? I regretted it, because some people get curious, then we have to keep explaining all the time... I like it when people ask, but sometimes I don't, because it's all the time. (Adolescent 6, 16, asthma attack)

I posted: "So, dengue fever caught me and I'm in the hospital", then people wrote comments and liked it... the comments are supportive, right? Oh, I felt happy to see there are many people that remember me. (Adolescent 9, 13, dengue fever)

The adolescents expressed their welfare and gratitude when they received support messages from friends and relatives. The continuity of social relationships and the social support offered through online social networking websites helped patients to go through hospitalization more easily, which contributed to reduce the impact of negative feelings, such as anguish and anxiety.

Thanks everybody for standing by me, God bless you... I'm better, everything went fine. God is in charge of everything, I'll get better quickly and soon will be playing with you... I'm strong and this disease won't make me give up, God is my doctor and He is in charge! Thanks. (Post by adolescent 1, 13, appendicitis)

The support received through friends' and relatives' messages revealed an important embracement resource for the adolescents, who felt happy and thankful to read support messages and speedy recovery wishes.

The studied patients experienced support and sympathy from family and friends through posts and comments. Many manifestations had a religious and spiritual nature.

Some things can't be explained. It's distressing and sad, but I know victory is certain. Soon you'll be better and making our lives better. I love you so much, little sister. (Post by adolescent 11's brother, 14, appendicitis)

Get well soon, cutie, everything is fine, God has wonderful plans for your life and He never forsakes His children. You're the apple of God's eye, full of honor. I'm fully behind you and I hope you get back better than you were before. All the best. (Post by a friend of adolescent 5, 15, pneumonia)

Man, chill out because God is with you, I'll check with your mother which hospital you're at to visit and hug you. I love you very much, you're my friend, we experienced so much joy, sadness, many arguments, etc. I love you very much, you'll be fine, God is with you. I'll never abandon you, you know I'm with you all the way. I'll try to see you tomorrow and hug you. I love you boy, get well soon, love you. (Post by a friend of adolescent 8, 13, dengue fever)

DISCUSSION

The content analysis based on the virtual ethnography perspective allowed to obtain an innovative interpretation of the results of the present study, which aimed to understand the role of virtual social networking websites during hospitalization and how they help ease the difficulties faced by adolescents admitted to health institutions.

The data showed that all the participants used Facebook® as their main virtual social networking website, a finding that corroborates the results reported in a recent investigation¹⁴ carried out by the Brazilian Internet Steering Committee, indicating that around 15 million adolescents have access to the internet and most of them use it to have fun, communicate with friends, do school works and use information search services. Among this population, 85% have a profile in a virtual social networking website. Facebook® is the platform most accessed by the teenagers (94%), and Google+® and Instagram® were also mentioned by the interviewed sample.

The internet is a structure that connects computers and other devices and allows the record, production, transmission and reception of information, facilitating communication.¹⁵ The easiness to transmit information turned the internet into an important dissemination and search tool in health care. Searched topics include diseases and their treatments, prevention of pathologies, nutrition, hygiene and healthcare services.¹⁶

In the health area, the internet is also considered a powerful strategy to handle several clinical conditions, offer better quality of life to users, promote more autonomy, proactivity and self-confidence in patients and provide greater freedom of choice, helping patients and families make decisions.¹⁷ With this information availability, the internet can be seen as an empowerment instrument for patients for being a resource to promote health and impacting individual and collective care.¹⁷

The internet is increasingly more present in people's lives because of the expansion of social networking.¹⁸ In these virtual spaces, there is a growing number of websites and communities about people who face a specific illness or the loss of beloved ones. These environments are important, given that they allow people to share information about a disease,

treatment, medication, loss and how they are going through these experiences.¹⁸

Adolescents all over the world are increasingly sharing information about their lives in online social networking websites;¹⁹ for them, these websites are an important means of expression, communication and interaction with their groups.¹ These networks present many benefits for teenagers, such as socialization and communication, because these tools allow the development of many activities of daily living. Being connected gives adolescents the opportunity to make new friends, share pictures, discuss ideas and achieve knowledge. Homework can be done online in a group, facilitating the exchange of information.^{19,20}

Another benefit of online social networking is the contribution to the development of a sense of identity. Sharing information about themselves provides users the opportunity to shape their individual identity according to the selection of information about their lives.²¹

Hospitalization is construed as the loss of contact with friends and relatives, absence from home and school, and loss of freedom and privacy. This justifies the long time that hospitalized adolescents spend online,²² which shows the importance of the use of technologies and access to social networking websites to have fun and occupation.²³

Many teenagers, especially those with chronic diseases, use the internet not just to look for information about their condition or find people with a similar diagnosis, but also to keep informed about their social lives and their relationships with friends.⁵ When admitted to a hospital, they need to seek normality and participate in activities common to their daily life, even if they are under treatment. To achieve that, they expect to receive social support by sharing information about their experience.²⁴

It is important that healthcare professionals see social networking websites as a means of interaction and social support to adolescents during the hospital stay, once they allow teenagers to keep a link to the world and the reality that surrounds them.

The main limitation of the present study was the fact that data were collected in a single public institution.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Adolescents use online social networking websites as a means of communication, in which they share moments of their lives through posts. The present study provided an insight into how these networking websites contribute to the daily life and hospitalization process of teenagers. Social networking websites are an environment to express feelings and perceptions allowing hospitalized adolescents to interact with the external world and receive support and sympathy messages from friends and relatives.

The findings of the present investigation pointed to the importance of resources that provide access to online social networking websites, such as wireless equipment, computers and mobile devices, e.g. smartphones and tablets.

Healthcare professionals must take into consideration the relevance of the use of social networking websites by hospitalized adolescents, encouraging access to these instruments and providing resources in the hospital context to facilitate their use.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE NURSING FIELD

Further research on this topic is needed, given the importance and pertinence of the subject. Nevertheless, it is fundamental that healthcare professionals understand how social networking websites can be used as an interaction and learning environment to contribute to the development and welfare of adolescents, and consequently be aware of their benefits and risks. Thus, professionals will be able to reinforce their relationship with teenagers, helping them in the hospitalization process and improving interventions.

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