

Digital Sociability: Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic among Young Adults

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Abstract: Intense social network use and its psychosocial consequences, especially among young adults, have been addressed by the literature. This study aimed to understand the digital sociability of young adults during the period of social isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a qualitative study involving 19 young adults ($M_{age} = 21.2$ years, 9 men, 10 women). Data collection consisted of socio-economic questionnaires and four audio-recorded sessions of collective remote interviews based on a semi-structured guide. The data were processed using IraMuTeQ program using the Descending Hierarchical Classification tool. Three main themes emerged from the analysis: the use of social media platforms during the pandemic, the dynamics of relationships via social media, and the experience of existing on social media. The results suggest that young people live ambiguously with the sense of security provided by social networks while feeling anxious about the judgment of others regarding their posts.

Keywords: young adult, social interaction, virtual relationship, social networks, COVID-19

Sociabilidade Digital: Desdobramentos da Pandemia da COVID-19 entre Jovens Adultos

Resumo: O uso intenso das redes sociais e suas consequências psicossociais, especialmente entre jovens adultos, têm sido objeto de preocupação da literatura. Este estudo teve por objetivo compreender a sociabilidade digital de jovens adultos durante o período de isolamento social na pandemia da COVID-19. Trata-se de estudo qualitativo. Participaram 19 jovens ($M_{idade} = 21,2$ anos, 9 homens, 10 mulheres). A coleta de dados consistiu na aplicação de questionários socioeconômicos e na realização de quatro sessões áudio-gravadas de entrevistas coletivas no formato remoto fundamentadas em roteiro semiestruturado. Os dados foram processados pelo *software* IraMuTeQ a partir da ferramenta Classificação Hierárquica Descendente. Da análise, emergiram três grandes temas: uso das plataformas e redes sociais durante a pandemia, dinâmica dos relacionamentos via redes sociais e experiência de existência nas redes sociais. Os resultados sugerem que os jovens convivem ambigualmente com o senso de segurança propiciado pelas redes sociais ao mesmo tempo em que se sentem ansiosos em relação ao julgamento de terceiros a respeito de suas postagens.

Palavras-chave: adulto jovem, interação social, relacionamento virtual, redes sociais, COVID-19

Sociabilidad Digital: Implicaciones de la Pandemia del COVID-19 entre Adultos Jóvenes

Resumen: El uso intensivo de las redes sociales y sus consecuencias psicossociales, especialmente entre los adultos jóvenes, han sido objeto de preocupación en la literatura. Este estudio tuvo como objetivo comprender la sociabilidad digital de los adultos jóvenes durante el periodo de aislamiento social en la pandemia del COVID-19. Se trata de un estudio cualitativo en el que participaron 19 adultos jóvenes ($M_{edad} = 21,2$ años, 9 hombres, 10 mujeres). La recogida de datos consistió en cuestionarios socioeconómicos y cuatro sesiones grabadas en audio de entrevistas colectivas a distancia basadas en un guion semiestructurado. Los datos se procesaron con el programa IraMuTeQ utilizando la herramienta de Clasificación Jerárquica Descendente. Del análisis surgieron tres temas principales: uso de las plataformas de redes sociales durante la pandemia, dinámica de las relaciones a través de las redes sociales y experiencia de la existencia en las redes sociales. Los resultados sugieren que los jóvenes viven de forma ambigua la sensación de seguridad que proporcionan las redes sociales y, al mismo tiempo, se sienten angustiados por el juicio de los demás sobre sus publicaciones.

Palabras clave: adulto joven, interacción social, relación virtual, redes sociales, COVID-19

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The 18-24-year age group, object of this study, exhibits a heterogeneous range of living conditions as to study, work, family, gender relations, and sexuality. During this period, young adults experience transitions that do not necessarily denote the closure of youth (Sposito et al., 2018). An international study indicates that young adults have exercised their sociability through intense use of social networks (Li et al., 2021), a similar situation to that currently observed in Brazil (Andrade et al., 2023). A national survey on internet behavior and consumption, conducted by the Datafolha Institute in March 2022 with 1,802 users of social networks, found that, among young Brazilians aged 16 to 24 years, 90% declared having an account on Instagram, 86% on Facebook and 58% on TikTok. Of this group, 47% chose Instagram as their preferred social network (Moraes, 2022).

In the present study, digital sociability refers to the process by which social interactions and relations are mediated and determined by digital technologies and online communication networks. This concept covers distance communication enabled by digital content and the transformation of interactions into binary data. Digital sociability examines how social practices and dynamics arise in the context of continuous connectivity, influenced by factors such as algorithmic control, state surveillance, and corporate interests. Thus, digital sociability investigates both how technologies determine social relations and how these relations, in turn, influence the use and development of technologies (Miskolci & Balieiro, 2018).

Intense social network use and its psychosocial consequences, especially among adolescents and young adults, have been addressed by the literature (Rosa et al., 2021). A study with young Chinese individuals showed a correlation between intense *smartphone* use and feelings of loneliness and escape from frustrating real situations (Li et al., 2021). Stressed individuals are more likely to experience nomophobia (fear of internet signal being unavailable on the *smartphone*) (Majeur et al., 2020). A study with 244 Serbian students indicated that heavy internet use may be associated with reduced self-esteem, a condition that negatively affects social life, family relationships and academic/professional performance, which may contribute to feelings of loneliness, despair and hopelessness (Pantic et al., 2017). Intense internet use was associated with symptoms of depression, anxiety and dissatisfaction with life in a sample of psychology students and psychologists living in Brazil (Andrade et al., 2023).

Studies have shown that restrictive measures (social isolation recommendation) to contain outbreaks, epidemics or pandemics caused by respiratory viruses, such as Sars-CoV-2, which causes COVID-19, aggravated mental health problems such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and anxiety disorders (Prime et al., 2020). This condition – in the period from 2020 to 2023, the period of the Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC), according to the World Health Organization (WHO) – impaired the interpersonal relationships and academic performance of young people.

In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, social networks, when used to connect people during the social isolation period, leading to the maintenance of personal bonds and ties, had less negative effects on well-being (Midgley et al., 2024). However, social isolation had a strong impact among young adults: this group had difficulty adopting isolation measures due to the intense need for contact and experiences. During the social isolation period, social network use led young Brazilians to significant psychological suffering and mental exhaustion (Oliveira et al., 2022).

Self-image and its cognitive, affective and social aspects are significantly relevant in social network use (Cambre & Lavrence, 2019). The construction of profiles is associated with the individual's self-image, a condition that contributes to ambiguous experiences in the social media environment and can aggravate the psychological suffering of those who exhibit problematic use of digital platforms. Using social networks leads individuals to compare themselves with others in the context of a cult of perfection and hedonism, a condition that impacts self-perception and self-esteem (Rosa et al., 2021).

In this study, self-image refers to the means by which individuals express themselves on social networks through comments, posts and selfies, whose posting is based on a ritual consisting of: the subject, smartphone, camera, applications, platforms and the third party/users of social networks. Self-image is part of a digital sociability marked by pleasurable, mild or conflictual interactions between social network users for the purpose of spontaneous or intimate communication (Braga, 2011).

Among the resources used for social network interactions, selfies are of note, being understood as a ubiquitous instrument of sociability. Selfies are associated with issues such as narcissism, psychological distress due to appearance, and seeking recognition. These imperatives create an atmosphere of ambivalence and anxiety generated by processes of self-objectification through selfies, perceived both as a source of fun and as a source of loneliness and sadness (Cambre & Lavrence, 2019).

Self-objectification is one of the processes resulting from that which Han (2015), currently, calls the burnout society. Marked by tiredness and self-demand, the burnout society's structure exerts control and surveillance of everyone by everyone through virtual connections mediated among others by social networks. In the name of freedom and supposed spontaneity, young people expose themselves freely on social networks, blurring the boundary between public and private, driven by the illusion of freedom. The subject of the burnout society is characterized by excessive positivity, submission to constant internal demands for performance, multitasking, being unable to slow down and rest, a condition that can culminate in "psychic infarctions" (Burnout Syndrome), according to Han.

That is the homo digitalis, the one who actively participates in social networks through cultivation of user profile and virtual identity. These tools are useful in the competition for attention, encouraging narcissistic behaviors

and the neoliberal logic of seeking performance instead of providing experiences of encounter/recognition (Han, 2018). Digital sociability leads to the degradation of interpersonal relationships, as there is no contact with the presence of the other/third party (Han, 2022). Social isolation, recommended by Brazilian health authorities to contain COVID-19, aggravated these conditions in the case of young adults.

The principle of positivity – which is characteristic of the performance society – is present in relations mediated by social networks. A study found the main identity markers by the tags used in more than 2.5 million selfies published on Instagram. Physical appearance, events, social interactions and good health were some of the categories that composed the identities, with positivity being the exercise of maintaining the appearance of happiness without effort, without the negative/painful part of everyday life, such as failures, frustrations or misconceptions. Positive virtual identity becomes more attractive to consumption by the other/third party, responsible for approving performance through likes or matches. Relationship applications, such as Tinder, for example, boost the subject's notion of freedom/autonomy by offering a range of options as to profiles and identities available for encounters/consumption, constituting an affective market that has performance as a fundamental value (Cary et al., 2024).

Given the probability of new pandemics, the field of Psychology is responsible not only for examining the psychosocial consequences of the restrictive measures to contain them, but also for discussing the impacts of the indiscriminate use of digital media on the mental health of young adults. This should be conducted both from an individual and collective perspective, aiming at the formulation of support programs that provide for appropriate preventive actions and public policies. Such scientific production will be fundamental to inform health care policies and services, considering the next outbreaks, epidemics or pandemics (Freedland et al., 2020).

This study sought to understand the digital sociability of young adults during the period of social isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Method

This is a qualitative, cross-sectional and exploratory study, developed according to the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ), recommended for data collection based on interviews and focus groups (Souza et al., 2021).

Participants

Participants were 19 young adults, university students, of both sexes, aged between 18 and 24 years ($M_{age} = 21.2$ years), single (marital status). Of the participants, 50% self-declared as bisexual, 63.16% belonged to the upper economic class (A1 and B1), and 83.3% self-declared as white. Group 1 (G1)

had 9 members: 4 women and 5 men. Group 2 (G2) had 10 participants: 4 men and 6 women.

Instruments

Sociodemographic questionnaire. It aimed to collect general information about the participants' sociodemographic conditions and was made available via an online form.

Brazil Economic Classification Criteria (Brazilian Association of Research Companies [ABEP], 2021). An instrument used to economically classify the participants was made available via an online form.

Semi-structured guide for conducting collective interviews. Prepared specifically for this study, with the objective of exploring issues that were central to digital sociability among young adults during the COVID-19 pandemic. The guide covered issues such as interaction through social networks, construction of profile on social networks/self-image, impact of social isolation during the pandemic on the use of social networks, affective-sexual relationships via social networks. In the first part, participants were encouraged to talk about their preferences, hobbies, and experiences during the pandemic, including changes in the frequency of social media use, self-image, and social comparison in social networks. The second part of the guide addressed specific issues such as selfie practices, digital platform use for affective-sexual relationships, and affective-sexual relationship transformations during social distancing. In the final part of the guide, participants reflected on the process of participating in the research and commented on the most significant moments of the discussion.

The issues were selected through a literature review, seeking to understand the nuances of digital sociability in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Cambre & Lavrence, 2019; Majeur et al., 2020; Rosa et al., 2021). The remote collective interviews adopted a dialogical approach: participants shared their experiences and opinions openly, but structured by the aforementioned guide.

Procedure

Data collection. Participants were recruited through social networks used by young adults, such as Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp groups, from a public university in the non-metropolitan area of the state of São Paulo, in June and July 2022, shortly after the end of the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, which occurred from December 2021 to May 2022 (Malta et al., 2023), when the institution resumed in-person classes for undergraduate programs. For the purpose of this study, this data collection period was fundamental, as it enabled young adults to compare digital sociability during the social isolation period, considering that, at the time of data collection, they were finally resuming in-person activities at the university.

The collective interview was chosen, in the remote format, as this tool enables putting in dialogue young adults' conceptions of digital sociability during the social

isolation period. The remote sessions were conducted according to the methodological foundations of the online collective interview technique for qualitative data collection (Robinson, 2023) and the COREQ guidelines (Souza et al., 2021).

For data collection, two groups were formed (Group 1 - G1, Group 2 - G2). The participants of each group participated in two remote sessions each according to the composition of the group: Group 1 - Session 1 (G1-S1), Group 1 - Session 2 (G1-S2) or Group 2 - Session 1 (G2-S1), Group 2 - Session 2 (G2-S2) carried out through the Google Meet application. The meetings lasted an average of 1 hour, were recorded in audio/video files, and transcribed verbatim. We sought to balance the number of men and women in each group to promote affinity and sense of belonging among the participants according to gender. However, the differences between genders were not analyzed in depth in the discussion of the results. The criterion for closing the groups, after each member participated in two sessions, was the exhaustion of the issues addressed in the semi-structured guide and the saturation of the interactions and discussions on the objectives of the study. The main researcher acted as moderator, with the support of a female research assistant.

Data analysis. Data analysis included lexical analysis using the piece of software called *Interface de R pour les Analyses Multidimensionnelles de Textes et de Questionnaires* (IraMuTeQ) (version 0.7 Alpha and R version 3.2.3), software available free of charge. The sequence chosen for the analysis (1st session of Group 1 and 1st session of Group 2) was aimed at forming two textual *corpus*, one for each group, listing their main questions and compare them, since both addressed the same issues.

For preparation of the analyses, the following IraMuTeQ resource was used: Descending Hierarchical Classification (DHC). This form of analysis was chosen as a tool, as it enables analyzing the texts as a whole, that is, as a collective subject. The DHC aims to trace vocabulary classes that allow inferring what are the main ideas of the textual *corpus*. All tools available through IraMuTeQ are based on statistical analyses generated by the R software for data analysis. Sociodemographic data and data related to the Brazil Economic Classification Criteria were organized in an Excel spreadsheet in order to obtain general information about the participants through descriptive statistics only to contextualize their living conditions.

Ethical Considerations

Data collection and analysis followed the ethical procedures of respect for participants according to Resolution No. 510/2016 of the National Health Council (CNS). The project was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Universidade Federal de São Carlos (UFSCar) (CAAE No. 54845521.5.0000.5504). To safeguard anonymity and maintain confidentiality regarding the identity of the study participants, names and other information that could identify them were replaced with fictitious elements.

Results

The Descending Hierarchical Classification aims to obtain classes from different text segments (TSs) that have similar vocabulary to one another and different vocabulary from the TSs of other classes, represented by chi-square (χ^2), whose significance begins with $\chi^2 = 2$, bond strength between the word and the class (Salviati, 2017).

Group 1

The *corpus* of Group 1 of Session 1 (G1-S1) had 215 TSs, with analysis by IraMuTeQ of 181 of them, that is, 84.19%. Based on the 181 TSs, 6 subcorpus were *organized*, which are presented in a dendrogram format (Figure 1).

In the analysis, two main issues were traced: social network use during the pandemic (Class A) and dynamics of building relationships in social networks (Class B).

Class A: Social network use and the pandemic. Class A was composed of two *subcorpus*: A1 and A2. *Subcorpus* A1 addresses the pandemic and covers topics such as taking photos ($\chi^2 = 41.24$), posting images ($\chi^2 = 28.77$), and the impact of the pandemic on social media use ($\chi^2 = 29.63$). An example of account related to this *subcorpus* is: “I greatly decreased the use of taking photos, taking selfies and posting things on Instagram after the pandemic ended” (Participant 2).

Subcorpus A2 explores the topic of selfies, including topics such as taking selfies ($\chi^2 = 29.33$), editing images ($\chi^2 = 17.4$), and frequency of use ($\chi^2 = 34.85$). One participant said: “This selfie thing I don’t usually take much and, when I take it, I don’t post it because, I don’t know, I feel like Instagram has generated anxiety for me” (Participant 6).

Class B: Dynamics of building relationships in social networks. Class B was divided into two *subcorpus*: B1 and B2. *Subcorpus* B1 addresses the dynamics of building relationships, subdivided into B1.1 (games of interest) and B1.2 (relationships). In *subcorpus* B1.1, topics include personal interest ($\chi^2 = 29.56$) and the evaluation of potential partners ($\chi^2 = 21.22$). One participant reported: “There were some people I have no contact with, but I think they were interested in me” (Participant 6).

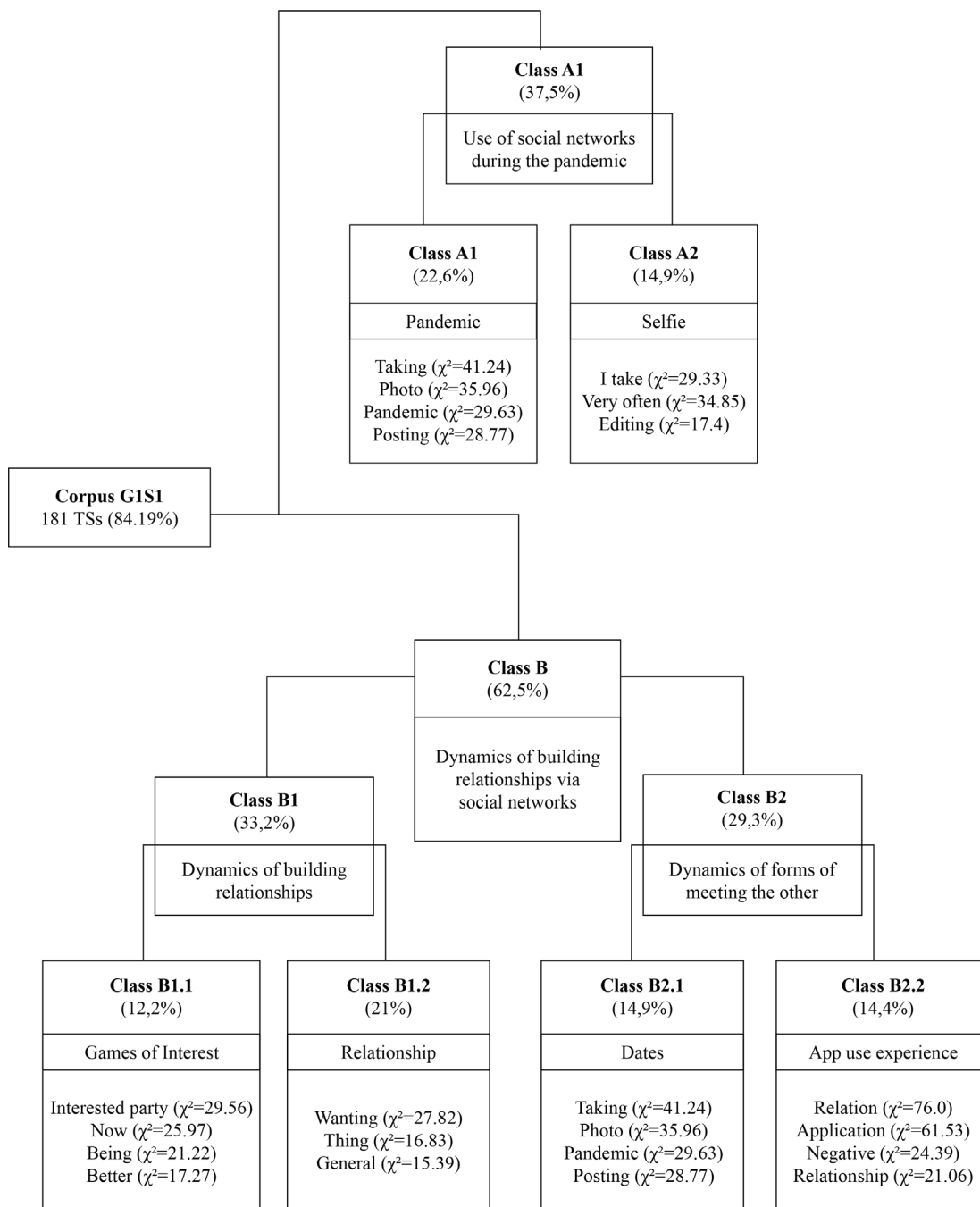
Subcorpus B1.2 addresses the development of relationships, with themes such as the desire for connections ($\chi^2 = 27.82$) and general expectations about relationships ($\chi^2 = 15.39$). An example of account is: “Ninety percent of people on Tinder are looking for something casual, almost no one goes there looking for a relationship” (Participant 2).

Subcorpus B2 examines the dynamics of dating and the experience of using dating apps. In *subcorpus* B2.1, topics such as the perception of taking selfies ($\chi^2 = 41.24$) and posts on the network ($\chi^2 = 29.63$) are addressed. One participant commented: “I realized that I can’t be attracted to a static photo, only to people I already know” (Participant 1).

Subcorpus B2.2 explores users’ experience with apps, including negative feelings ($\chi^2 = 24.39$) and relationships established on these platforms ($\chi^2 = 21.06$). One participant noted: “I have a complicated relation with this flirting app thing” (Participant 8).

Figure 1

Dendrogram for Group 1 - Session 1 (G1-S1) generated via IraMuTeQ. This dendrogram illustrates the main categories of discourse traced such as the use of social networks during the pandemic (class A) and the dynamics of relationships via social networks (class B), with their respective subcorpus. The analysis included 181 of the 215 text segments (TSs), resulting in 84.19% of the analyzed corpus. Class A covers accounts about reducing social media use after the pandemic, while class B details dynamics of building relationships and experiences with flirting apps



Group 2

The *corpus* of Group 2 of Session 1 (G2-S1) had 237 TSs, with analysis by IraMuTeQ of 195 of them, that is, 82.28%. Based on the 195 TSs, 8 subcorpora were classified, presented in dendrogram format (Figure 2).

In the analysis, two main issues were traced: platforms used and forms of relationship (Class A) and experience of existing on social networks (Class B).

Class A: Platforms used and forms of relationship. Class A was composed of two main *subcorpora*: A1 and A2. *Subcorpus* A2 focuses on the issue of platforms used and covers

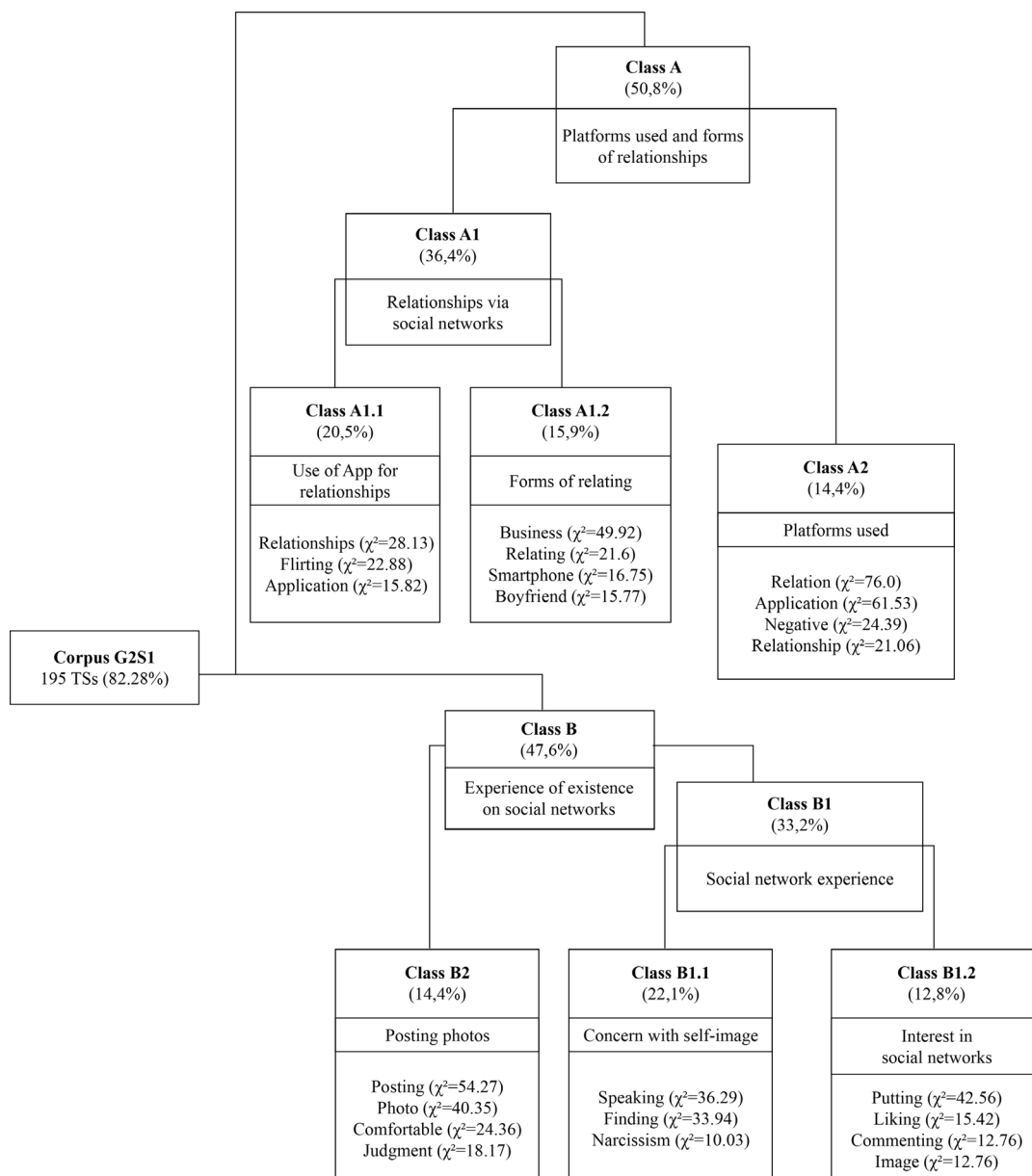
topics such as the use of Twitter ($\chi^2 = 71.41$) and TikTok ($\chi^2 = 62.87$). An example of account related to this subcorpus is: “The platforms I use are mainly Instagram and Twitter. I have a Facebook, but I never log in. TikTok, I tried to use, but I didn’t adapt to it” (Participant 16).

Subcorpus A1 addresses relationships via social networks, subdivided into A1.1 (use of applications) and A1.2 (forms of relationship). In *subcorpus A1.1*, themes include relationships ($\chi^2 = 28.13$) and flirting ($\chi^2 = 22.88$). Examples

of the participants’ accounts include: “I am currently in a relationship that started on Discord, because they called me to play Valorant and we played while in a call on Discord” (Participant 12). “I like much more being face-to-face, so much so that in the pandemic I practically did not relate to anyone. I had to start with my phone because I wasn’t leaving the house and I wasn’t going to do that. It’s very anxiogenic for me” (Participant 14).

Figure 2

Dendrogram for Group 2 - Session 1 (G2-S1) generated via IraMuTeQ. This dendrogram illustrates the main categories of discourse traced, such as the platforms used and forms of relationships (class A) and the experience of existence in social networks (class B), with their respective subcorpus. The analysis included 195 of the 237 text segments (TSs), resulting in 82.28% of the analyzed corpus. Class A is subdivided into subclasses that address the platforms used (subcorpus A2) and relationships via social networks (subcorpus A1, which includes the use of apps for relationships and different forms of relating). Class B details the experience on social networks, covering the posting of photos (subcorpus B2), concern with self-image (subclass B1, composed of subcorpus B1.1 and B1.2), and interests in social networks



Class B: Experience of existing on social networks.

Class B was divided into two main *subcorpus*: B1 and B2. *Subcorpus* B1 addresses the experience in social networks, subdivided into B1.1 (concern with self-image) and B1.2 (interests in social networks). In *subcorpus* B1.1, themes include exposure in networks ($\chi^2 = 36.29$) and narcissism ($\chi^2 = 10.03$). One participant reported: “My image there was not being cool. So, as much as this narcissism, you know, of having been validated existed there, I was not being validated in something that I would like to be validated, you know?” (Participant 16).

Subcorpus B1.2 addresses interests in social networks, with topics such as posting ($\chi^2 = 42.56$), image ($\chi^2 = 12.76$) and commenting ($\chi^2 = 12.76$). An example of account is: “I will start taking photos for myself, taking photos I like and

posting when I want to. Then there was a situation where I did a different makeup than I would usually do, took a photo and thought: why am I going to post it?” (Participant 14).

Subcorpus B2 examines the dynamics of posting photos. Topics such as posting ($\chi^2 = 54.27$), photo ($\chi^2 = 40.35$), comfort ($\chi^2 = 24.36$) and judgment ($\chi^2 = 18.17$) were addressed. One participant commented: “I think that’s what Participant 13 said, a little bit about seeming narcissistic. Maybe I don’t post many selfies because I don’t want people to think I’m a thumbs-up whore, you know?” (Participant 17).

Based on the above, we compiled a set of data that records, through the tool used, the topics addressed in each group. Table 1 shows the compilation produced by the Descending Hierarchical Classification of both G1 and G2.

Table 1

Summary of Descending Hierarchical Classification

G1-S1						G2-S1					
Class A			Class B			Class A			Class B		
Social network use and pandemic			Dynamics of building relationships via social networks			Platforms used and forms of relationships			Experience of existence on social networks		
			<i>subcorpus</i> B1		<i>subcorpus</i> B2	<i>subcorpus</i> A1			<i>subcorpus</i> B1		
			Dynamics of building relationships		Dynamics of forms of finding the other	Relationships via social networks			Social network experience		
Class A1	Class A2	Class B1.1	Class B1.2	Class B2.1	Class B2.2	Class A2	Class A1.1	Class A1.2	Class B2	Class B1.1	Class B1.2
Pandemic	Take Selfie	Games of interest	Relationship	Dates	App use experiences	Platforms and relationships	Application use	Forms of relating	Posting photos	Concern with self-image	Social network interests

Discussion

The results organized by the piece of software called IraMuTeQ present the main concepts discussed and enable the exploration of convergences and divergences between groups. In G1 - Session 1, *subcorpus* A1 appears as the index with the greatest weight (22.6%); therefore, the theme “pandemic and relationship” was the most significant. If compared to the highest weight index of G2 - Session 1, *subcorpus* B1.1 (22.1%), whose theme is “concern with self-image,” it is possible to infer a central difference between the groups.

These differences are maintained when analyzing the groups considering all classes. In G1, we note the discussion of topics such as the COVID-19 pandemic, relationships and how their dynamics are involved in flirtations, which produce an atmosphere of anxiety, with expressions of interest occurring through social networks. In G2, we note the theme of relationships; however, its questions were less related

to affective dynamics and more focused on the experience of validation of existence through digital sociability. These situations produce anxiety in relation to the judgment of others and guilt for alleged narcissism, a condition that shows an atmosphere of shame and insecurity in relation to oneself within the scope of digital interactions.

G1 was more focused on the theme of relationships: it focused on the relationship of young people with others/third parties through the participant’s own presence in the networks by means of selfies and posts. G2 seems to have been more focused on existential issues, as the relationship with others/third parties would be important to validate/endorse existence, that is, it showed the young adults’ pursuit of recognition.

These differences may reflect the socioeconomic and sociodemographic characteristics of the groups. G1 had a greater variation of participants from different social classes in relation to G2; it emphasized a discussion on how the pandemic

impacted relationships and the anxiety associated with digital interactions. G2 had a higher concentration of participants belonging to the upper class compared to G1; it emphasized the pursuit of recognition of existence and the impact of digital sociability on self-image. In general, both groups (G1 and G2) were characterized by white, heterosexual and bisexual people belonging to the upper class.

Recognition, a theme emphasized in G2, can be divided into three fundamental dimensions: self-confidence, self-respect and self-actualization. Self-actualization corresponds to the dimension that aims to endorse the process of esteem/recognition, characterized by symmetrical relationships with the development of individualization, autonomy of similar subjects, interests in the particularities and differences of each other (Honneth, 2003).

In the context of digital sociability (Miskolci & Balieiro, 2018), the pursuit of recognition depends on the valuation processes of the algorithms. Known as datification, this process transforms likes, comments, etc. (expressive gesture of recognition) into data, that is, it organizes the forms of recognition by the production of data/informational capital. Therefore, datified recognition quantifies the subjects' actions and reactions in an environment of valuation of identities based on numerical metrics. In these dynamics, the approach to the other is based on the user's own characteristics (profile, tastes, lifestyles) in the search for another user with similar personal characteristics. The achievement of recognition and esteem results from the perception that their achievements and values are important for the individual (Campanella, 2021).

In Group 1, interest in other people is central in young people's social media interactions, as if this were the purpose of the participants' presence on these platforms. The main goal is to find and relate to other people. In Group 2, interest in other people is seen as a means to achieve another goal and not as an end in itself. In this case, the intention would be to obtain endorsement of the experience of existing. According to Han (2015), in the performance society, typical of western urbanized societies of the 21st century, this other/third party appears as an equal/similar, since one of the characteristics of this society is the annihilation of negativity and difference, a condition that hinders the recognition process.

Based on the above, we can define three major issues addressed by the groups and organized through IraMuTeQ (Table 1): Issue 1 - Use of platforms and social networks during the pandemic; Issue 2 - Dynamics of relationships via social networks; and Issue 3 - Experience of existence on social networks.

Issue 1 - Use of platforms and social networks during the pandemic

Participants presented ambiguous and contradictory reports in this regard. They reported that, during the pandemic, they created new profiles and intensified the use of social networks, especially Instagram, mainly related to seeking attention/social reinforcement and distraction. According

to Carletti and Safra (2021), the COVID-19 pandemic intensified changes in sensitivity, in the experience of intimacy and in the perception of temporality due to the intense use of social networks: the profusion of images and information leads subjects to try to follow them confusedly, dispersing from the interaction with people who are in their in-person environment.

At the same time, some participants reported having decreased the frequency of use of social networks or even deleted their profiles, due to the anxiety generated by the comparison with other people and the need to "disconnect" from their own image. In both cases — for those who increased the use and for those who decreased the use —, there was a reverse movement shortly after the end of the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, which occurred from December 2021 to May 2022 (Malta et al., 2023), when they returned to in-person classes at the university, in June 2022.

Social networks are often presented as tools for cultivating the self and socializing; however, they work through conditioning to ready-made models of exposure and interactivity, segmenting the forms of expression and interaction, an understanding corroborated by Cambre and Lavrence (2019) and Pantic et al. (2017).

Tinder, the dating platform for romantic dates or casual sexual rendezvous, is an example of a conditioning dating app. The *corpus* of the present study gathers reports of anxiety, suffering and irritation resulting from the use of Tinder during the pandemic. This understanding corroborates a study conducted by Her and Timmermans (2021) with young users of the above platform: the intense use of Tinder triggered social comparisons, symptoms of anxiety, feelings of sadness and feelings of failure. Tinder users tend to report dissatisfaction and shame about their bodies, as the app provides intense internalization of appearance ideals through comparison with others (Strubel & Petrie, 2017).

As a means of mitigating the feeling of failure and self-exposure, participants in G1 and G2 reported the possibility of migrating from Tinder to Instagram, for example. This migration used to occur when young people met on a certain relationship platform and, once the virtual contact became closer, migrated from this platform to a more comfortable social network, where the bond could be deepened, with greater control of the exposure of their own profile.

The popularity of Tinder, the affective-sexual dating platform mentioned by the participants, is also associated with the flexibility of affective-sexual relationships in this decade in Brazil, especially among young adults belonging to the middle classes: affective-sexual relationships have become flexible based on agreements established by couples. Traditional, patriarchal and monogamous representations of love and sexual bonds have been amalgamated with representations that question this model (Risk et al., 2023).

Dating platforms such as Tinder, used by the study participants, on the one hand, provide the exercise of sexuality and affection in a more flexible manner, while, on the other hand, being associated with anxiety and suffering due to

frustrating and unsatisfactory experiences among app users. These results corroborate Rosa et al. (2021): the integration of digital resources into socialization, especially in youth, leads to transformations in relationships, prompting the need to research the new dynamics of intimacy and identity.

Issue 2 - Dynamics of relationships via social networks

Like the previous issue, the associations on this issue were permeated with ambiguities. According to the study participants, social networks constitute a safe and comfortable environment for building relationships, where interest is expressed through the exchange of reactions (likes, loved, etc.), comments on *posts* in the feed and stories. According to Campanella (2021), this safety and comfort, to a large extent, is associated with the very functioning of social networks by conditioning to the standardized technical resources offered that serve as the substrate of interactions such as posts, shares, reactions, comments, etc.

Such resources support a supposed promise of freedom; however, in practice, what occurs is imprisonment by the permanent exposure and consumption of information, reifying experiences of bonds and relationships. Existence is reduced to instrumental/artificial relationships: personal contracts to be fulfilled that, if their “clauses” are not complied with, are immediately dissolved (Han, 2022).

On the other hand, by analyzing the *corpus* of the present study, it is apprehended that social networks were also mentioned as a source of anxiety concerning the uncertainty as to the interest of the other/third party and the preparation/construction of a profile that is sufficient for approval of oneself/self-image. The concept of *homo digitalis* (Han, 2018) is applicable to the dynamics of competition for attention in social networks, as the cultivation of the profile can lead to narcissistic behaviors to the detriment of experiences of encounter and recognition.

The dynamics of flirtation, configured by the platforms, can lead to imaginary and artificial relationships, since the relationship is centered on the absence of the other, as reported by the participants. The absence of the other is a proper resource of social networks, which reinforces it more than the presence, because, concretely, relationships occur between posts and not between actual people, since singularity is lost in the publication process. This whole process reflects the mechanism of market of individual happiness, in which the profile, the identity, the self become sources of investment in the pursuit of authenticity, in general, associated with consumption, by young adults.

Issue 3 - Experience of existence on social networks

There were expressions of self-criticism, anxiety in building profiles and bios (description of main user characteristics), insecurity regarding selfies and appearance. In addition, there were reports of profile exclusion as a means of avoiding judgments. In this issue, the other/third party

appears ambiguously both as a source of anxiety and as a reference/support that can relieve it depending on the quality of the interaction. We note, in the participants’ accounts, the pursuit of validation, either in the validation as a person — a recognition as a human being — or in the validation of the gender expression with which they would like to be identified. Selfie end up representing the process of making oneself exist and being perceived by the other.

These results corroborate studies that demonstrate a direct connection between self-objectification (sexuality and appearance), socialization experiences in social networks and psychological suffering (Strubel & Petrie, 2017). The suffering of *homo digitalis* is the result of the neoliberal logic that promotes the anguish of failure and dissatisfaction with one’s own expectations. In social networks, *homo digitalis* submits to the neoliberal logic of seeking individual performance and recognition endorsed/validated by the other/third party. They become a servant of themselves, exploiting themselves voluntarily in the name of freedom. The construction of digital identity aims to achieve illusory autonomy: the subject produces information/content either by selfie practices or profile creation. At the same time, they are constantly watched and controlled by the gaze of the other present in the networks, building an environment of anxieties and fears, mainly related to self-image, which affects their freedom and autonomy (Han, 2022).

Digital sociability among young adults is permeated with fears, anxiety and expectations, experiences shared by G1 and G2 participants. Although both groups had expectations regarding the other/third party, the differences were manifested in the content of these expectations and in the forms of relationship with the other/third party. This appears both as an object of interest for relationships and as an instrument for validation of the subject themselves in the context of digital sociability.

Therefore, ambiguity in relation to the other/third party exists because this can be both a source of anxiety and relief depending on the quality of the interaction on different digital platforms. This ambiguity is also observed in social networks that were reported as a safe and comfortable environment for building relationships and simultaneously as a source of anxiety about the interest of the other/third party and self-image. These difficulties were intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic: the young adults’ ambiguity involved both building new profiles and the intensified use of social networks and the exclusion of profiles to alleviate frustrations experienced in the digital environment. According to Rosa et al. (2021), although, initially, young adults report pleasure/gratification due to the intense use of social networks, the feeling of “missing out” something important (posted by friends/colleagues on social networks) and the effects of comparing oneself in relation to others are sources of dissatisfaction for this group.

Although this study presents relevant results, it is important to recognize limitations regarding the generalization

and interpretation of its results. The sample, composed predominantly of young people aged 18 to 24 years, belonging to the highest economic classes and mostly white, does not reflect the diversity of the Brazilian population, limiting the applicability of the findings to other social and economic contexts. Social desirability is another relevant issue: participants may have been inclined to answer what they consensually viewed as more commendable instead of expressing their genuine opinions. In addition, the remote format of the collective interviews – adopted due to health recommendations to avoid contamination by COVID-19 – may have affected the spontaneity of interactions and the expression of more intimate experiences.

On the other hand, the adoption of the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) improved the quality of the results presented, in addition to the very nature of qualitative studies being related to the universe of meanings, worldviews and values without intending to quantify or generalize results. The demographic data presented in relation to the sample served only to socially contextualize the group, without any intention of correlating variables of this nature in relation to the results.

The results highlight the urgent need for interventions aimed at promoting the mental health of young adults, especially considering the ambiguity, ambivalence and anxiety related to self-image and social judgment in social networks, which suggests the importance of mental health programs that foster critical, rational and conscious use of these digital platforms.

The results organized by the piece of software called IraMuTeQ presented the main conceptions discussed in the groups and enabled the exploration of convergences and divergences between them based on the conceptions of young adults. It was observed that Group 1 focused more on affective dynamics and the relationship with the other/third party, while Group 2 was more concerned with existential issues, such as the validation of existence and the pursuit of recognition. The use of social networks during the pandemic resulted in ambiguous and contradictory reports, with the creation of new habits and the increased use of platforms, but also with the emergence of feelings of anxiety and loneliness.

For future studies, we recommend a heterogeneous sample in terms of social class and race/skin color, in addition to the use of different data collection techniques such as face-to-face collective interviews and face-to-face individual interviews using a semi-structured guide, among others. These studies may deepen young adults' conceptions of digital sociability in the post-COVID-19 pandemic context. These studies may be useful for the formulation of programs to support the mental health of young people, both in the circumstances of epidemics or pandemics caused by respiratory viruses and in their own social coexistence in normal health situations.

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