

**Use of internet and social media by university students:
an emerging study field**

**Uso de internet e mídias sociais por estudantes universitários:
um campo de estudo emergencial**

**Uso de internet y redes sociales por estudiantes universitarios:
un campo de estudio emergente**

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Abstract: This study aimed to map the profile of young university students and the way they use social media. This is a descriptive, quantitative and cross-sectional study carried out at a private university in Southern Brazil, with the participation of 143 students. The results showed that the practice of physical activities was reported by less than half of the participants. Few reported checking social media before going to bed. As for social networks and media, all participants reported making daily use of WhatsApp; with respect to Internet addiction, the majority presents mild to moderate addiction. It was possible to conclude that social media, although they are facilitators of communication, directly influence the way people relate to each other in person. It is suggested that future studies map the relationship and influence of social media in university students' lives, as well as interventions that help them.

Keywords: university students; internet; social media

Resumo: Este estudo teve como objetivo mapear o perfil de jovens universitários e a forma como fazem uso de mídias sociais. Trata-se de um estudo descritivo, quantitativo e transversal, realizado em uma universidade privada do Sul do Brasil, com a participação de 143 alunos. Os resultados apontaram que a prática de atividades físicas foi relatada por menos da metade dos participantes. Poucos relataram checar as mídias sociais antes de dormir. Quanto as redes e mídias sociais, todos os participantes relataram fazer uso diário do WhatsApp; no que diz respeito a dependência de internet a maioria apresenta dependência leve a moderada. Foi possível concluir que as mídias sociais embora sejam facilitadoras da comunicação, influenciam diretamente a forma como as pessoas se relacionam presencialmente. Sugere-se que estudos futuros mapeiem a relação e a influência das mídias sociais na vida de universitários, assim como intervenções que auxiliem os mesmos.

Palavras-Chave: universitários; internet; mídias sociais



Resumen: Este estudio tuvo como objetivo mapear el perfil de los estudiantes universitarios y la forma en que utilizan las redes sociales. Este es un estudio descriptivo, cuantitativo y transversal realizado en una universidad privada en el sur de Brasil, con la participación de 143 estudiantes. Los resultados mostraron que la práctica de actividades físicas fue reportada por menos de la mitad de los participantes. Pocos informaron haber revisado las redes sociales antes de acostarse. En cuando a las redes sociales, todos los participantes informaron que hacen uso diario de *WhatsApp*. Con respecto a la adicción a Internet, la mayoría tiene una adicción leve a moderada. Se concluyó que las redes sociales, aunque facilitan la comunicación, influyen directamente en la forma en que las personas se relacionan en persona. Se sugiere que estudios futuros mapeen la relación y la influencia de las redes sociales en la vida de los estudiantes universitarios, así como las intervenciones que los ayuden.

Palabras clave: universitarios; internet; redes sociales

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Access to higher education courses in educational institutions has been growing exponentially over the years (Barros, 2015). The Brazilian university population is currently characterized by a predominance of white students, aged between 18 and 24 years, predominantly enrolled in private institutions (Barros, 2015). Neves and Martins (2016) refer that the growth of the private sector of education occurs in greater proportion when compared to the public sector, pointing out as one of the main causes the fact that private universities offer on a larger scale courses in the evening period. The offer of evening courses enables students to perform paid activities in the opposite shift. Vargas, Cantorani, Vargas and Gutierrez (2015) in a study with 353 academics, point out that 82.6 % ($n = 289$) of college students work during the day and study at night.

In order to reconcile the work routine and university-related commitments, students spend little time for leisure activities, which can directly influence their physical and mental health (Vargas et al., 2015). In order to reduce the symptoms of stress and anxiety arising from the routine and the lack of time for leisure, many students choose to use substances such as alcohol and drugs (Zeferino et al., 2015). However, it is known that one of the tools used for people who have high levels of stress and anxiety is the practice of sports/physical activity. This practice, besides being beneficial for the health and quality of life of college students, can help and improve academic performance (Silva & Ehrenberg, 2017).

Another relevant aspect to the health of the university population refers to the quality and quantity of sleep. A study conducted with 701 college students at a federal university in the state of Fortaleza indicated that 54 % of the participants considered the quality of their sleep bad, 62.7 % of the participants reported sleeping less than seven hours a night. Another important result of this study is the existence of a significant difference in the levels of sleepiness of college students who

study in the night shift compared to college students who study in the day shift, since those who study at night showed poor sleep quality and excess sleep during the day (Araújo & Almondes, 2012). A study conducted with 169 medical students showed that the excessive use of media and social networks also directly influences the quality and time of sleep (Moromizato et al., 2017). It was found that 42.8 % of participants view their social networks whenever they wake up during the night, while 53.3 % reported that in the morning when they wake up their first activity is to check social networks, with the main purpose of communicating with other people and course mates (Moromizato et al., 2017).

Communication is a vital need that accompanies human beings from birth. Throughout life, the human being may develop strategies to communicate with the world, expressing his feelings, desires and needs. In the university context, the internet is used as a communication and learning tool, which tends to facilitate assisting the student, since access to information and content occurs quickly (Moromizato et al., 2017). However, the convenience in obtaining such data, decreases the search for information in physical books and automatically decreases the habit of reading, which directly influences the verbal and written language used by college students (De Oliveira & Lira, 2015).

A study conducted with 389 college students, with the aim of identifying which social networks are most used and the characteristics of these networks at a university in Minas Gerais, pointed out that 94.3 % of participants had profiles on social networks and of these, 89.4 % accessed social networks daily. Among the most used social networks, Facebook predominated (94.3 %), with the purpose of entertainment and interaction (Dos Santos & Lopes, 2013).

Another study conducted with 169 medical students from a university in the state of Sergipe, aiming to identify whether there is a relationship between symptoms of anxiety and depression, internet use and social networks, pointed out that 98.8 % use the internet daily, 47.3 % reported using the internet through messaging applications, 22.5 % reported using the internet for research purposes, 18.6 % exclusively used for social networks, 8.5 % for entertainment, 3.1 % used to access news. Whatsapp was the most frequently used application, pointed out by 94.4 % of the sample (Moromizato et.al, 2017).

The internet together with technology allows devices such as computers, tablets, cell phones, among others, to stay connected and have access to a multitude of content. Besides allowing access to world news, scientific research, professional interaction, the internet and technology allow real-time communication from one place in the world to another. In the face of so many advances provided by technology, dependence on the use of the internet is one of the factors that has generated concern for researchers and health professionals. Although people are connected to each other on a large scale through social networks, Sá (2012) states in his study that the excessive use of the internet tends to cause harm to the individual's social functioning. This information is in line with the findings of Kuss, Griffiths, and Binder (2013), who point out that students addicted to the internet tend to exhibit maladaptive behaviors and high rates of neuroticism. Feelings and behaviors that involve isolation and loneliness are examples of these damages, especially when contact ceases to be social, personal, and becomes only virtual (Sá, 2012).

With the use of the Internet, face-to-face relationships between people become increasingly distant, and isolation can begin in a subtle way, without the individual having this perception. The excessive use of these means of relationships can result in a type of dependence (Sá, 2012). Abreu, Karam, Góes and Spritzer (2008) refer that internet dependent users may seek through the virtual network to minimize feelings of sadness, anguish, and discouragement. Young and De Abreu (2011) describe in their manual, the importance of paying attention to Internet addiction as a risk factor for mental health, since this dependence can become a disorder.

In view of the above, it is necessary to investigate the relationships between college students, the Internet, and social media, seeking preventive measures for anxiety and stress symptoms, for example, in this population. Thus, interventions can be made with the purpose of promoting more quality of life, physical and mental health for students who are in academic formation.

Thus, this study aimed to describe the profile of college students who use the Internet and social media, as well as the context in which they are inserted. In addition, it aims to verify how college students are using these media and how they behave in relation to the media and social interactions. To this end, it sought to identify characteristics of the social media most used by this population and the levels of dependence on the internet and social media that they present.

Method

This is a descriptive, quantitative, cross-sectional study (Sampieri, Collado, & Lucio, 2013). The population of students of a private University in Southern Brazil during the first semester of 2018 (20000 students) was considered. A stratified randomized random sample of 382 participants was chosen, considering the total number of students at the university (20,000). The randomization was carried out through a draw involving all classes of the in-class undergraduate courses of this University, selecting the classes until the number of students proposed by the sample was completed. The classes were contacted by the teacher, who had to accept the participation, and if any teacher refused, the draw would occur again until the number of students was completed. The inclusion criteria were that the students had to be enrolled in one of the higher education courses and over 18 years old.

The instruments used were (I) Sociodemographic and Social Media Use Questionnaire: developed by the group responsible for the research, the purpose of which was to identify characteristics such as gender, age, undergraduate course, social media used, and sleeping habits of the participants. The instrument Critérios de Classificação Econômica Brasil (Associação Brasileira de Empresas de Pesquisa, ABEP, 2015) was inserted into this questionnaire and aims to identify the socioeconomic data of the sample; (II) Internet Addiction Test (IAT) (Young 1998, adapted by Conti et al., 2012): instrument whose proposal is to evaluate, through a Likert scale of five points, 20 statements about how the participant's life can be affected by excessive internet use. This instrument has a cut-off point with levels of internet dependence as normal (20-30), mild (31-49), moderate (50-79) and severe (80-100) (Conti et al., 2012); (III) Adaptation of the diagnostic criteria for alcohol use disorder from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fifth edition (DSM-5; APA, 2014) to understand internet dependence. An adaptation was made of the 11 items that make up the criteria, changing alcohol use to social media use. Since this is a non-scientifically validated adaptation, there is no cutoff point, remaining only as a description for the analysis of separate items.

This research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University (CEP 2.289.637), and after receiving the university's letter of consent, data collection began, which has been going on for three semesters. To this end, we had a team of previously trained researchers who went to the classrooms of the selected classes after the authorization of the teachers in charge. Thus, the forms, instruments, and two copies of the Informed Consent Form (ICF) were given to the students who agreed to participate, so that they could hand them in the following week, when the researchers returned to the classrooms to collect them. At the end of the first semester of collection, from March to July 2018, 143 participants were counted. For data analysis, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) statistical program was used, and descriptive statistical analyses of frequencies and means were performed.

Results

A total of 143 participants were obtained, most of them female, with a mean age of 23.7 ($SD = 7.9$) years, and mostly single. Most of the individuals in the sample live with someone else, and the people pointed out as reference were the father or the mother (more details are presented in Table 1).

According to the Brazilian economic classification, most participants were considered to belong to class B (ABEP, 2015). Regarding mental health, the participants stated through self-report that they make use of psychiatric medication (12.6 %, $n = 18$) and 17.5 % ($n = 25$) claimed to do psychotherapy. As for possible diagnostic evaluations, 14 (9.8 %) participants said they had already been diagnosed with anxiety and/or depression disorders. Other data from the profile of college students are described in Table 1.

Table 1.
Sociodemographic profile of university students

Characteristics of university students	<i>n</i>	%
Sex		
Women	102	71.3
Men	41	28.7
Age		
< 25	114	80.3
> 25	28	19.7
Marital status		
Single	122	85.9
Married	18	12.7
Separated/divorced	2	1.4
Lives with how many people		
Alone	5	3.6
+ one person	27	19.7
+ two persons	44	32.1
+ three persons	42	30.7
+ four persons	16	11.7
Economic classification		
A	24	18.8
B	74	57.8
C	28	21.9
D e E	2	1.5
Reference person		
Father	31	31.7
Mother	19	30.6
Works		
Yes	104	72.7
No	39	27.3
Paid work		
Yes	98	68.5
No	15	10.5

Regarding the practice of sports, the participants did not show predominance for a specific activity, 47.6 % ($n = 68$) said they practiced some sport, which was derived among gym ($n = 19$, 27.9 %), running ($n = 7$, 10.3 %) and soccer ($n = 4$, 5.9 %). The frequency with the highest predominance was up to 3 times a week ($n = 21$, 31.3 %). Regarding the individuals' sleep, 32.4 % ($n = 46$) said they slept 6 to 7 hours during the week and 43.4 % ($n = 62$) said they slept more than 8 hours on the weekends. Regarding the quality of sleep, 38 % ($n = 54$) said they slept sufficiently long and deeply, and 36.6 % ($n = 52$) slept for a short time, but with a deep sleep. Still on sleep-related aspects, 39 % ($n = 55$) of the participants stated that they use social media before going to sleep for 30 minutes or less, and 51.8 % ($n = 73$) reported that they use social media when waking up.

In Table 2, information about the university environment is presented, with no personal identification of the participants.

Table 2.

Characteristics of the university context

Characteristics of the university context	n	%
Location		
Metropolitan region pole	112	78.3
Capital pole	31	21.7
Shift		
Daytime	18	12.9
Nighttime	115	82.7
Daytime and nighttime	6	4.4
School		
Health	47	35.1
Humanities	12	9.0
Law	24	17.9
Business and Management	13	9.7
Creative industry	27	12.7
Polytechnic	21	15.7
Semester		
1° to 4°	81	59.1
5° to 9°	56	40.9

About social media, it is important to stress that all the students used at least one social media, with WhatsApp being accessed by 100 % ($n = 143$) of the participants, followed by Facebook (94.4 %, $n = 135$) and Youtube (93 %, $n = 133$). As for the purpose of using such social media, the results were diverse. However, it is worth noting that for each social media, a different type of use was referred, according to a 5-point Likert scale, being from 0 *never* to 4 *always*. For example, Facebook ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 1.16$), WhatsApp ($M = 4.65$, $SD = 0.78$) and Messenger ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 1.34$) are most used for "talking or keeping in touch with friends, acquaintances or co-workers"; Pinterest ($M = 1.93$, $SD = 1.32$) and YouTube ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.41$) for "learning new things"; the Instagram ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.50$) for "following famous people's lives"; Twitter ($M = 2.45$, $SD = 1.50$), LinkedIn ($M = 1.46$, $SD = 0.77$) and Skype ($M = 1.38$, $SD = 0.67$) for "publishing texts and opinions"; Snapchat ($M = 2.13$, $SD = 1.35$) for "posting pictures of yourself"; and Twitch ($M = 1.32$, $SD = 0.85$) for "watching and sharing other people's videos". About privacy on social media, 57.7 % ($n = 82$) report that they try to maintain some level of privacy on social profiles, with 64.5 % ($n = 91$) usually allowing to participate in their virtual networks only people they know.

According to the results it was possible to verify that 39.2 % ($n = 56$) of the participants checked their social media during activity breaks, 55.9 % ($n = 80$) of the students declared that they felt happy when accessing them, 47.9 % ($n = 68$) declared that they made one to three comments on the networks a day, and 35.2 % ($n = 50$) referred that they made more than ten daily likes. In the case of posting a comment that did not please someone else on their social network profiles, 48.4 % ($n = 15$) would rather apologize in person, while 23.9 % ($n = 34$) believe that they would be able to express themselves better via online social networks compared to face-to-face interaction.

Regarding internet addiction, participants were assessed using the IAT and an adaptation of the DSM-5 Alcohol and Other Drug Disorder criteria for internet addiction (APA, 2014). Importantly, this adaptation was performed by the research group, and further studies are needed to verify the validity and reliability of the adaptation. The results indicate that most students present mild to moderate dependence on social media, as presented in Table 3.

Table 3.
Internet dependency

	<i>n</i>	%
DSM 5		
Nothing	39	29.1
Light	64	47.7
Moderate	31	23.1
Severe	0	0
IAT		
Normally	63	44.1
Light	51	35.7
Moderate	20	14.0
Severe	2	1.4

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the sociodemographic profile and the use of social media by college students, as well as to evaluate the forms of use of such media and the relationship between them. The results found corroborate those of other research carried out with the same population. In this study, most of the questionnaires were answered by females, and this is confirmed in the international scientific literature (Fernández-Villa et al., 2015; Lima et al., 2017; Ostovar et al., 2016; Servidio, 2014; Younes et al., 2016). One can consider this fact as a limitation or obstacle for future studies about internet use among the university population, since the male gender seems to have a higher risk of developing internet addiction and suffering from its consequences (Fernández-Villa et al., 2015; Ostovar et al., 2016; Servidio, 2014).

When identifying data about the academic environment, it was found that 82.7 % ($n = 289$) of the sample study at night, and that 72.7 % ($n = 104$) have some kind of job. These findings corroborate the study of Vargas et. al. (2015), which identifies in its sample that students attend classes at night and work during the day. Of the students who reported working in this study, 68.5 % ($n = 98$) do so remunerated. It is believed that working during undergraduate studies is associated with the financial situation, given the need to maintain personal and academic expenses (Neves & Martins, 2016).

It is worth noting that with regard to the data obtained about rest habits, there was evidence of an association between poorer quality of sleep and excessive internet use (Fernández-Villa et al., 2015; Younes et al., 2016). In the present study, we found that less than half of the sample reported being able to sleep for 8 hours or more daily, even on weekends; in addition, just over 35 % said they slept deeply and long enough. Sleep quality, interferes with several psychosocial factors, and

sleeping for short periods tends to increase academic difficulties (Andreassen, Torsheim, Brunborg, & Pallesen, 2012). In addition, most participants reported checking social media for at least 30 minutes before bedtime and upon waking up, which may have an influence on their sleep quality. Thus, it is suggested that future studies investigate the possible associations between internet use and rest habits in the university population.

In this study, almost half of the participants reported practicing at least one type of sport or physical activity, and just as rest habits influence the lives of individuals, so do physical activities. The study by Vargas et al. (2015) found that students spend little time for extracurricular activities in their daily lives, which may have repercussions on mental and physical health. Silva and Ehrenberg (2017) refer that physical activity is one of the practices that can be performed by people with high levels of stress and anxiety, being beneficial to improve not only health and quality of life, but also in academic performance.

About social media, results indicated that 100 % of the participants reported using WhatsApp daily. This data corroborates the results found in Sergipe, where medical students reported, almost entirely, making daily use of the internet and social media (Moromizato et al., 2017). In São Paulo, a study of university students found that over 95 % of them use social media, and the reasons for this included several perceived benefits. Among them, the ease in obtaining and exchanging information online and in maintaining interactions and communication with people and friends (Lima, de Cássia Leiva, & de Souza Lemes, 2017). This finding is in line with the data described in this study, as 55.9 % ($n = 80$) of participants claimed to feel some level of happiness when using the internet.

From the descriptive analyses performed, it could be seen that the percentage of college students who appear to make harmful use or who are considered dependent on the internet and social media is small, being less than 25 % in relation to the adaptation performed through the DSM-5 and less than 2 % according to the IAT. These results suggest that although there is frequent use of the Internet and social media, the levels of addiction to these technologies are not yet high. The highest percentages of this variable were identified as mild and normal addiction, respectively, DSM-5: 47.8 %; IAT: 44.3 %, that is, most college students have moderate to severe addiction levels.

The boundaries between what is real and virtual - offline and online - can be considered nowadays as not very rigid. Thus, offline events can have repercussions online and vice versa (Brügger, 2012). Such a perspective suggests the need for caution when trying to understand internet use and differentiate it from addiction, since, even for Brazilian college students, the use of online spaces such as social networks is part of social and academic daily life, being able to replace books, bookstores and libraries and facilitating the exchange of information with colleagues and professors (Purim, & Tizzot, 2019; Sancovschi, & Kastrup, 2015). Even in the present study, the fact that all of the sample make use of some social media, established as an inclusion criterion for participation in the research, corroborates such arguments, indicating that the daily and fairly constant use of the Internet can be seen as normal and expected, and not harmful. Thus, it can be seen that, with the dissemination of the daily use of the internet and smart devices, it is difficult and unlikely that people live in today's society without constant contact with such technologies (Lima et al., 2017).

However, it is not possible to claim that the daily use of online spaces such as social networks is risk-free or completely beneficial. Also, among college students, stress can be a cause of smartphone addiction (Kuang-Tsan & Fu-Yuan, 2017), supporting the hypothesis that, although everyday, social media use can escalate to some considerable harm, such as information technology addiction. In the present study, the descriptive data, however, appear to diverge from such an argument, as the percentage of the sample demonstrating severe internet addiction was in the minority. Future research should therefore pay attention to such discrepancies in present hypotheses on the subject.

Conclusion

This study aimed to map the profile of young college students and the way they use social media in order to determine how these habits can influence their interactions and social communication mechanisms. It is known that social media are part of contemporary daily life and that the ways in which people relate to each other are influenced by these new relational models. In this way, the present study identified WhatsApp as a unanimous tool with the purpose of relationship and communication, whether with friends, family, or co-workers. In other words, social media are presented as a facilitator of social interactions. Considering that most participants associate feelings of happiness with the use of social media, it is possible to pay attention to the fact that this type of positive reinforcement, together with the feeling of keeping in touch with a larger number of people, may encourage the use of social media as a means of more frequent communication.

Furthermore, the study identified that college students usually check the social networks during breaks in their activities, demonstrating that the search for this virtual contact is as recurrent as personal face-to-face interactions. Another relevant aspect is the relationship between the use of social media and aspects related to sleep, such as the need to check social media upon waking up. In this way, we pay attention to the fact that social media can acquire a space in the lives of individuals that precedes physical contact relationships. However, it is worth noting the specific characteristics of the population in this study, such as the fact that most of them do not undergo any psychological treatment, which may enhance the evolution of a more severe dependence on social media use, since awareness about the intensity of these habits has been little exercised.

Thus, it is suggested that future studies follow the course of the relationship between young college students and social media, considering other variables that may affect the social exercise of these individuals. Future studies are also indicated in order to have more knowledge about the need for intervention with college students and to train assistance professionals in relation to possible situations of helplessness and management of emotions that suffer interference from this social phenomenon of contemporaneity.

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