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Harmful Online Content and Cross-Cultural Challenges Faced by Adolescents: Findings from Focus Groups Conducted in Brazil and Australia

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Abstract. Internet and social media content offers a psychological risk and protection challenge for the development of children and adolescents, depending upon the quality of supervision they receive. Moreover, understanding the levels of online content risk between diverse cultures is an under investigated area of research. To address this, the current study presents partial findings from an ongoing research project involving researchers from Brazil and Australia. Phase I of the study aimed to identify the self-reported contemporary concerns and experiences of adolescents in Brazil regarding harmful online content, as well as the perceived concerns of parents, educators and health service professionals. Thirty-three people from Brazil participated: 13 adolescents; 11 parents or legal guardians of adolescents; and 9 professionals who work with adolescents in different services. Data collection included a questionnaire to characterize sociodemographic variables and separate Focus Groups (FGs) with the above-mentioned groups. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the sociodemographic variables, and qualitative data from FGs were analyzed through Thematic Analysis. 15 themes related to the risks and concerns raised by the participants were found, and 9 of them were similar among the three groups. This research may inform future interventions aimed at improving adults' guidance and supervision regarding adolescents' use of the internet and social media. Phase II will be replicating this study with an Australian population and will allow a cross-cultural analysis to determine whether there are any differences regarding concerns of the groups by country of origin of the participants.

Keywords. Social media, online violence, misinformation, bullying, youth, mental health

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1. Introduction

The internet has profoundly changed social dynamics, interpersonal relationships, and developmental processes (social and psychological) of children and adolescents [1]. Researchers have been concerned about the influence that excessive internet use can have on the development of adolescents, especially when its use is accompanied by harmful behaviors and poor supervision by parents or other adults [2]. Unregulated content such as sexual content, inappropriate health advice, strategies for committing suicide or hurting oneself, and content related to drug use, all pose clear risks to the healthy psychosocial development and physical safety of adolescents [3].

While literature demonstrates the importance of supervision when adolescents are online [2], there is a scarcity of evidence-based programs designed to help parents and professionals to provide structured support in order to better psychosocially prepare them for the content they may encounter [4]. There is also a lack of recent cross-cultural studies into the concerns adolescents and adults have about adolescents' use of the internet and social media [5, 6], particularly for newer social media platforms such as TikTok and OnlyFans.

As part of an ongoing research project involving researchers from Brazil and Australia, this work-in-progress research aimed to identify the self-reported contemporary concerns and experiences of adolescents in Brazil regarding harmful online content, as well as the perceived concerns of parents, educators and health service professionals, using Focus Groups.

2. Methods

This research received approval from the Federal University of São Carlos Human Research Ethics Committee (Protocol number 79002224.5.0000.5504). The fieldwork involved recruiting three groups: (i) adolescents of all genders, aged 12-18 years old; (ii) parents or legal guardians of adolescents; (iii) professionals who had been directly involved with adolescents in public services and policies for at least one year. Recruitment of all participants was conducted through posting flyers in virtual environments (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp) and through snow-ball sampling. Adults had to sign a consent form to participate, while adolescents had to complete an assent form. After obtaining their signatures, a link was sent to potential participants to inform them about the subsequent steps.

Data collection occurred in two distinct stages via online platforms. In stage 1, participants completed a questionnaire to capture sociodemographic variables and adolescents' use of the internet and social media. Stage 2 involved participating in the Focus Groups (FG). The FG question script was predefined and included questions about adolescents' internet and social media usage time, their most frequent activities, online risks they identified and perceived, negative experiences they or other people they knew had faced, and challenges in supervision (in the case of FGs with parents and professionals), among other topics.

3. Results

3.1. Demographic

Thirty-three people participated in the research: 13 adolescents (FG1-A); 11 parents or legal guardians of adolescents (FG2-Pa); and 9 professionals who work with adolescents in different services (FG3-Pr). FG1-A consisted of adolescents (7 girls and 6 boys) aged between 14-17 years (M = 15.76; SD = 1.36), studying in public schools in São Paulo state. 76.9% reported being Black, 15.4% White, and 7.7% Indigenous. All participants identified as cisgender, with 84.6% identifying as heterosexual and 15.4% as bisexual. 38.5% reported spending more than 5 hours per day on the internet or social media, 30.8% said they spend up to 5 hours online daily, 15.4% up to 3 hours, 7.7% up to 4 hours, and 7.7% were unsure. The social media platforms most used by participants were Instagram (100%), WhatsApp (100%), TikTok (92.3%), YouTube (53.8%), and websites or virtual platforms for school tasks (38.5%).

FG2-Pa was comprised of 9 mothers, 1 father, and 1 grandmother, residing in 3 different Brazilian states (São Paulo, Paraná, and Pará). Ages ranged from 33 to 69 years old (M = 45.81; SD = 7.00), with 6 participants identifying as white and 5 as lack people. Ten participants (90.9%) reported being responsible for only 1 adolescent, and 1 participant (9.1%) reported being responsible for 2 adolescents. All identified as cisgender and heterosexual. When asked about how much time they believed the adolescents they were responsible for spent daily on the internet or social media, 36.4% were unsure, 27.3% said up to 5 hours, 18.2% up to 3 hours, 9.1% up to 4 hours, and 9.1% more than 5 hours per day. Regarding their preparedness to supervise adolescents' internet and social media use, 54.5% said they sometimes felt prepared, 36.4% felt prepared, and 9.1% reported not feeling prepared at all.

FG3-Pr consisted of 6 women and 3 men, all residents of the state of São Paulo. The age of participants ranged from 30 to 48 years (M = 37.33; SD = 5.43), with 88.9% being White and 11.1% Black. 55.6% were psychologists, 22.2% social workers, 11.1% educators, and 11.1% lawyers. Regarding their years of experience working with adolescents, 66.7% had over 5 years of experience, 22.2% up to 4 years, and 11.1% up to 5 years. All participants also identified themselves as cisgender and heterosexual. Based on their previous experiences with adolescents, they were asked how much time they believed adolescents, in general, spent using the internet and social media. 44.4% believed they spent more than 5 hours online per day, 22.2% up to 4 hours, 11.1% up to 5 hours, 11.1% up to 3 hours, and 11.1% were unsure. Regarding their preparedness to provide guidance to adolescents about internet and social media use, 55.6% of FG3-Pr said they *sometimes* felt prepared, while 44.4% said they did feel prepared. It is important to note that in both FG2-Pa and FG3-Pr, no participant reported feeling *completely* prepared to provide precise guidance to adolescents on this topic.

3.2. Main concern and challenges revealed in the Focus Groups

The thematic analysis [7] of the data derived from the FGs revealed 15 themes related to the risks and concerns raised by the participants. Among these, 9 themes were similar across the three groups: **(1)** compulsive use of the internet and social media, as well as the implications for adolescents' mental health (*I think he only doesn't use it* [social media] *when he's sleeping.* – FG-Pa-P2); **(2)** strategies to evaluate and seek the

credibility of the information, content, and sources accessed (*Some teenagers don't seek medical attention because they follow advice from Google.* – FG-Pr-P6); **(3)** prevalence of cyberbullying in virtual environments (*I wear glasses and braces. Several people have already said horrible things to me online. It's sad!* – FG1-A-P1); **(4)** abrupt changes in interpersonal relationships, with implications for face-to-face verbal communication (*I can't talk to people anymore. I'm very shy and feel like I depend on my phone* [to talk to other people]. – FG1-A-P5); **(5)** sexting and the non-consensual dissemination of intimate images (*I know a girl who had her* [intimate] *photo posted on Instagram.* – FG2-Pa-P8); **(6)** content associated with suicide induction (*There were* [online] *challenges that led young people to commit suicide.* – FG3-Pr-P8); **(7)** uncertainties about Artificial Intelligence (AI) and its usability (*AI ends up harming my classmates because many people don't know how to write* – FG1-A-P6); **(8)** gaming, both in terms of time spent and content (*I've been monitoring teenagers who are betting* [in online games] *and doing it regularly* – FG3-Pr-P5); **(9)** peer pressure exerted in virtual interactions (*I'm afraid that soon someone will convince her to say: 'No, leave your mom out of this, you don't need to tell her'.* – FG2-Pa-P3).

Additionally, professionals and adolescents shared concerns regarding **(10)** the induction of self-harming behaviors (*There are* [online challenges] *of self-mutilation. There are* [online] *groups that do the opposite of our work in promoting mental health.* – FG3-Pr-P2) and **(11)** the need for adolescents to be better prepared to make posts and engage in virtual interactions more critically and consciously (*You have to think twice before posting and commenting. If you're going to comment, you have to think: 'If they were commenting this to me, would I like it?'* – FG1-A-P20). Both parents and adolescents raised **(12)** concerns about online scams, such as card cloning and fraudulent sales (*I tell him* [adolescent]: *'Do you think you're only going to pay this amount?'. This is a scam. Can't you see the price is too low?* – FG-Pa-P1). Professionals and parents reported that **(13)** they sometimes feel unprepared to provide guidance, especially due to the rapid changes occurring in virtual environments (*I'm a complete layperson when it comes to technology, I'm terrible. So, I don't have the knowledge to talk about the internet. I think one of the first things we need is to get familiar with the subject.* – FG3-Pr-P1).

Finally, two themes that emerged only in FG1-A were **(14)** the existence of anonymous accounts and fake profiles ([I'm concerned about] *anonymous accounts, because they create anonymous profiles, put the school's name, and start posting pictures of people who study at the school. They start speaking badly or well about them.* – FG1-A-P2) and **(15)** the overload of school activities they receive. Regarding this last theme, adolescents highlighted the contradictions between the advice they receive from professionals and their parents (to reduce screen time) and the number of tasks they are exposed to daily with the school routine (*One thing I don't understand is that the teachers complained that we were on our phones all the time, but now the state sends a lot of* [digital] *school activities. In my opinion this contributes to phone dependency as well.* – FG1-A-P1).

4. Discussion

The results showed that the adolescents who participated in the study use the internet and social media intensively on a daily basis, which is similar to findings from other countries [8, 9]. No professional or parent reported feeling completely prepared to supervise or

guide adolescents regarding their usage time, which may be explained by the lack of educational programs targeted at parents [10, 11], or the scarcity of training opportunities for professionals regarding technologies and virtual interactions [12]. All groups reported several challenges and problems that adolescents are exposed to online, however, it was noted that some themes seemed to be universal (i.e., all groups raised them) while others appeared were raised by only one or two groups. These results could inform future interventions specifically targeting each group by ensuring they include information on risks and concerns that weren't raised by that group (e.g., parents did not raise self-harm as an issue, professionals did not raise scams as an issue). It is important to highlight that the adolescents were able to describe in detail the various risks to which they are exposed to, mainly because they had already experienced online challenges or were aware of incidents that occurred to others. These findings can challenge misleading narratives that adolescents are unaware of online risks and, therefore, more susceptible to being victims of different forms of online rights violations [13]. Nonetheless, it is recognized that adolescents need access to self-protection strategies and should be aware of places they can reach out to if they need help [14].

5. Conclusion

This research may inform future interventions aimed at improving parental supervision regarding adolescents' use of the internet and social media, as well as the associated risks. Additionally, the data compiled in this investigation can be utilized in developing training programs for professionals who work with this population, enhancing their knowledge and repertoire on these topics and enabling them to provide more precise and effective guidance to their clients. Replicating this study with the Australian population will allow a cross-cultural analysis to determine whether the concerns of the groups are the same regardless of the country of origin or if there are specific issues related to different cultures.

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