# Social representations of adolescents about sexuality on the internet*

Representações sociais de adolescentes sobre sexualidade na internet

Representaciones sociales de adolescentes sobre la sexualidad en la internet

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To apprehend the social representations of adolescents about sexuality on the internet. **Method:** Qualitative research, based on the structural approach on the Theory of Social Representations, with adolescents who are users of virtual media and who are students of two state schools. The free word association test was used, whose data were processed by the Evoc® 2005 software and analyzed in the light of the aforementioned theory. **Results:** A total of 124 adolescents participated in the research. The terms pornography, sexting and violence made up the central nucleus of the representation, signaling the valuation, image and practice dimensions of the investigated object. The similarity analysis confirmed the centrality of the violence element and added virtual dating and pedophilia. **Conclusion:** The social representations of adolescents point to the lack of security in the virtual environment regarding the exercise of sexuality, with predominant values and negative dimensions, which distance themselves from what is established as sexual rights, since adolescents have the right to live and express their sexuality freely.

## DESCRIPTORS

Adolescent; Sexuality; Internet; Social Networking; Pediatric Nursing.

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# INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is one of the phases of life that, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), covers the age group of 10 to 19 years old. In the case of national programs, this stage of life is understood by the age group of 12 to 18 years old, as established by the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (SCA)[1]. In addition, there are changes in physical and psychological/emotional aspects, with emphasis on the sexual hormonal outbreak that is active in the evolution of sexual maturity and the development of secondary male and female sexual characters[1].

The construction of sexuality is individual and collective, because it is expressed and influenced by the context in which the adolescent lives. For WHO, sexuality is defined as a central axis of the human being, which begins at birth and accompanies it throughout life. Therefore, it is not limited to sex, eroticism, pleasure or intimacy, but encompasses identities and roles of gender, sexual orientation, reproduction and the various forms of sexuality to be experienced and expressed, such as thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, practices, roles and relationships[2].

Thinking about sexuality in adolescence requires looking at a series of interactions among biological, social, psychological, political, ethical, religious, historical, spiritual, legal and cultural factors. For today's adolescents, the cell phone has become the main device for staying connected to the internet, making contacts with people that ate distant, seeking health information and carrying out other activities that put them at risk because they are largely vulnerable, despite the surveillance of parents and the materialization of the rights of children and adolescents, which were established in the SCA[3].

Considering this virtual space as an environment in which adolescents express and get to know other sexualities, research has been developed on the changes that the internet introduces in the daily lives of individuals and on the psychological and social consequences resulting from these changes, in view of the concern with the improvement in the sexual health conditions of this population group[4–5].

Regarding the approach to sexual and reproductive health of adolescents in primary care, this is done by professional nurses, predominantly focused on biological issues, the use of condoms and contraceptive methods, early pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, among others. What leads to the distancing of the exercise of sexuality, self-care and psychological and socio-cultural issues[6]. However, it is worth mentioning that nursing has endeavored to make use of the internet and social networks as a relevant tool for various daily tasks that involve teaching, research and care[7].

However, the accessibility to the most varied virtual content related to sexuality draws attention to the research, since the implications of using the internet on the social and sexual behaviors of adolescents are not yet clear. Thus, it is urgent to explore the meanings attributed by adolescents to sexuality in virtual media, considering that social representations reverberate in practices, conduct and policy implementation.

Considering this, the following question arose: how do adolescents represent sexuality in virtual social media? Social representations are a socio-cultural construction whose contents are influenced by the processes emerging in modern society, which influence reality, their thoughts and attitudes[8]. Appropriating the theoretical and methodological support of the Theory of Social Representations, the objective of the study was to apprehend the social representations of adolescents about sexuality on the internet.

# METHOD

## TYPE OF STUDY

This is a qualitative, descriptive study, based on the structural approach to the theory of social representations, as proposed by Celso Sa[9]. Social representations are a set of concepts, propositions and explanations that originate in everyday life through interpersonal communications. The structure of social representations is configured along the dimensions of information that organizes knowledge, the field of representation that refers to the idea of image or concrete content about a precise aspect of the object of representation, and the attitude that focuses on the global orientation in relation to the object of social representation[9].

## SCENARIO

The developed study involved two institutions with different teaching profiles at the secondary, state level and located in the city of Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Educational activities in sexual and reproductive health are developed in these research fields, through an extension project at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, nine years ago.

## SAMPLE DEFINITION

The intentional sampling consisted of 124 adolescents, constituted by the following criteria: understanding the age group of 14 to 19 years old, according to the second phase of adolescence defined by the World Health Organization[10]; being regularly enrolled in the researched institution; being internet users and have at least one active account on some virtual social media.

As for the number of participants, it was established considering the recommendation to be composed of about 100 or 200 individuals, which allows more reliable estimates of the occurrences of the phenomenon in the population[11]. For this purpose, 300 adolescents were contacted, 182 accepted to participate in the research, but 58 adolescents discontinued, which consisted of 124 participants.

## DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected from June 2017 to October 2018, using the Free Word Association Test (FWAT), which seeks to access the organization and structure of the investigated

social representation. FWAT is a technique to collect the constituent elements of the content of a representation, this technique is used often in the structural approach and consists in asking participants that, from an inductive term, say words that come to their mind immediately[9,12].

The FWAT took place with the students who were in the classrooms or courtyards of the schools, but both circumstances had in common the free time, in which an instrument with two sections was delivered: the first was for identification data and characterization of the participants, the second one corresponded to the test with the adolescents.

Adolescents were asked to write on the instrument only the first three words that they thought as soon as they heard the inductive term "Sexuality on the internet". The definition of the inducer term occurred after conducting a pilot test with the term sexuality on social media, which was unknown to adolescents.

### Data analysis

The corpus was read, singular/plural, masculine/feminine forms were unified, and synonyms were added, based on the most frequent evocations of adolescents, in order to balance the material.

Subsequently, the evocations analysis took place with the use of the corpus processing in the EVOC® 2005 software, which helps in the calculation of the average evocation order of each word, as well as the average of the orders in which it was evoked by the various participants. The combination of the evocation frequency and the average evocation order of each word makes it possible to survey those that belong to the central nucleus of social representation and the intersection of the average evocation frequency of the entire set of words with the average of their respective average evocation orders, which define four quadrants with different degrees of evidence[9].

Another central core salience indicator is the large number of connections that an element maintains with other elements of the representation, the analysis of these data relies on a technique called similitude analysis, whose data analysis leads to three types of structuring: star, triangle and circle. Thus, the star appears when one cognition connects with at least five others, which shows the existence of a central organizing element, while the triangle connects with three cognitions, two by two, and the circle with more than three cognitions, whose connections start at an element passing through others and ending at the starting point configuring the circular formation[9].

### Ethical aspects

The study complied with national and international standards of ethics in research involving human beings, as it is approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Anna Nery Nursing School, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, protocol 1920489/2017, and is in compliance with Resolution No. 466/2012, of the National Health Council[13]. The adolescents received guidance on the research and documents necessary for their participation,

and the Informed Consent Form (ICF) was delivered in person, which were signed and returned via WhatsApp, as a strategy of valorization to the context of the adolescent of the digital age.

## RESULTS

A total of 124 adolescents participated in the study: 83 (66.9%) women and 41 (33.1%) men; aged 17 to 18 years old, 63 (50.8%); followed by the 15 to 16 age group, with 61 (49.2%); first year students, 74 (59.7%); second year, 20 (16.1%); third year of high school, with 30 (24.2%).

As for the beginning of sexual life, 43 (51.8%) of the girls answered affirmatively for this question, and this event happened predominantly in the 15- to 16-year-old age group, which totaled 29 (34.9%). As for the boys, 32 (78.0%) had already started their sexual life, and for most of them the age group of this event was between 14 and 15 years old, being 13 (31.6%).

Adolescents prefer to access the internet from their own home, 120 (96.8%), via cell phone 117 (94.4%), and every day of the week 118 (95.2%). Regarding the search or sharing of content related to sexuality, 77 (62.1%) access it for this purpose, whose virtual activities involve research on Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI) corresponds to 54 (43.54%), searches for sexual content or pornographic add up to 26 (21%) and the practice of Sexting with 17 (13.7%).

In response to the inductive stimulus 'sexuality on the internet', adolescents evoked 370 words. The construction of the Four House Table (Chart 1) was based on the average frequency of the words (18) and the AOE (2). The distribution of terms in the quadrants made it possible to analyze the structure and contents of the representation, formed by the central core, peripheral elements and contrast zone.

Considering the premises of the structural approach, the elements that obtained the highest frequency and the lowest average evocation order are found in the upper left quadrant, called central core. In this research, the central core was constituted by the terms 'Pornography', 'Sexting' and 'Violence', as they have a higher frequency and are readily evoked.

The upper right quadrant is intended for the peripheral elements of the representation due to their higher frequencies and late evocations, being called first periphery[9]. In the lower left quadrant, which is called contrast zone, the elements with low frequency and readily evoked are found, composed of the elements: 'Fake', 'Photo', 'Gender Inequality', 'STI', 'Immoral', 'Freedom', 'Death', 'Pedophilia', 'Character' and 'Prejudice', aspects that reinforce the elements arranged in the central core.

The words located in the lower right quadrant are those with lower frequencies of evocation and evoked later, composing the elements of the second periphery of the representation. The elements 'Respect', 'Homosexuality', 'Trust', 'Online dating', 'Disrespect', 'Child', 'Unwanted pregnancy', 'STI', 'Twitter', 'Exposure', 'Video', 'Danger', 'Privacy', 'Information' and 'Online sex' make up the space

Chart 1 – Distribution of elements, according to frequency of evocation and average order of evocation of adolescents about sexuality on the internet – Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil, 2019.

| Central Core Elements Frequency ≥ 18 Average Order of Evocations < 2.0 | | | Elements of the 1st Periphery Frequency ≥ 18 Average Order of Evocations ≥ 2.0 | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Element | Freq. | AOE | Element | Freq. | AOE |
| Pornography | 38 | 1.579 | | | |
| Sexting | 36 | 1.944 | | | |
| Violence | 25 | 1.720 | | | |
| Contrast Zone Elements Frequency < 18 Average Order of Evocations < 2.0 | | | Elements of the 2nd Periphery Frequency < 18 Average Order of Evocations ≥ 2.0 | | |
| Element | Freq. | AOE | Element | Freq. | AOE |
| Fake | 3 | 1.33 | Trust | 3 | 2.667 |
| Photo | 8 | 1.875 | Child | 4 | 2.500 |
| Gender inequality | 6 | 1.833 | Disrespect | 3 | 2.667 |
| STI | 11 | 1.545 | Exposure | 5 | 2.600 |
| Immoral | 3 | 1.000 | Unwanted pregnancy | 5 | 2.000 |
| Freedom | 3 | 1.667 | Homosexuality | 3 | 2.333 |
| Death | 3 | 1.333 | Information | 12 | 2.167 |
| Pedophilia | 16 | 1.625 | Online dating | 3 | 2.667 |
| Character | 7 | 1.857 | Danger | 8 | 2.000 |
| Prejudice | 15 | 1.667 | Privacy | 9 | 2.333 |
| | | | Respect | 3 | 2.333 |
| | | | Online sex | 15 | 2.200 |
| | | | Twitter | 5 | 2.000 |
| | | | Video | 6 | 2.000 |

for representing sexuality on the internet. In certain contexts, elements present in the peripheries of the representation can be considered central, given the high frequencies with which they were evoked. Thus, in a complementary way, the maximum tree has been accepted as a second indicator of centrality due to the large number of connections that an element maintains with others of the representation, in addition to the salience[9].

The analysis of the connectedness of the evoked elements, presented in the similarity tree (Figure 1), supports this hypothesis.

The cognitive reading of the similarity tree allows us to observe that 'Violence', 'Pedophilia' and 'Online dating' are elements with characteristics of centrality, as they are connected with a greater number of other elements and forming stars, that is, structures radiated with minimal connection with five other elements.

The first star formation from the term 'Violence' is composed of the elements 'Death', 'Danger', 'Online Dating', 'Unwanted Pregnancy' and 'Trust'. The second star formation begins in the element 'Online dating', being articulated with the terms 'Information', 'Online sex', 'Violence', 'STI' and 'Twitter'. The third star formation initiated in the element 'Pedophilia' is linked to the terms 'Fake', 'Child', 'Disrespect', 'Exposure' and 'Danger'.

For adolescents, the elements of the third star formation correspond to a heavy burden of judgment and a negative value that surround sexuality on the Internet. This valuing dimension is so significant for the participants that in addition to star training, the following triangulation emerged: 'Pedophilia', 'Disrespect' and 'Exposure'.

It is still possible to notice the formation of another triangular link composed by the elements 'Gender Inequality', 'Prejudice' and 'Respect'. In addition, there are two circular connections, one composed of the following elements: 'Sexting', 'Trust', 'Violence', 'Death', 'Prejudice', 'Gender Inequality' and 'Online Sex'; the other one is composed of the elements: 'Violence', 'Unwanted pregnancy', 'STI', 'Online Dating', 'Online Sex', 'Gender Inequality', 'Prejudice' and 'Death'.

## DISCUSSION

The study of a representation presupposes investigating what individuals think, why they think and how they think. In this case, "social representations are almost tangible entities; they circulate, intersect and crystallize continuously through speech, gesture, meeting in the everyday universe"[8].

Every representation is organized around a central core that is its fundamental element and it determines its meaning and its organization. The central core has the function of creating a meaning, assigning meaning and value to the constituent elements of the representation, in addition, it unifies and stabilizes the representation because it is considered as the most stable part, with less possibility of changes[9].

According to the principles of the structural approach of the Theory of Social Representations, the words arranged in the upper left quadrant characterize the possible central core of the representation[9]. The first element in this quadrant, 'Pornography', has an evaluative dimension, that is, in social representations, expressing a symbolic value is a way that the subject finds to understand the object[14].

This dimension is probably marked by ideological and historical factors that correspond to the normative register of cognitions, since pornography has always existed. However, the internet has changed its form of consumption, becoming a stronghold of privileged pornographic content, providing advantages and facilitations to its access[15]. Despite the increase in the consumption of pornography on the internet and its role in the development of sexuality, researchers reinforce the negative effects of pornography through the propagation of violent behaviors, idealizations or sexual addictions that confuse adolescents' romantic relationships[16].

The second most evoked term was 'Sexting'. The Sexting element has a practical and image dimension as it has a direct relationship with the social practices that the participants develop in relation to the object. It is important to understand Sexting as an element that has been part of the relationships and interactions in adolescents' digital environments, motivated by curiosity, the search for bonds with their peers and as part of sexual development[16].

**Figure 1** – Similitude tree of the evocations of adolescents about sexuality on the internet – Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil, 2019.

The practice of Sexting allows us to highlight the constitution of other ways of living sexuality, finding in technologies the spaces that promote and influence these sexual behaviors. However, this phenomenon has two faces that cannot be ignored, one of them involves fantasy, desires and pleasure; while the other involves risks/vulnerabilities and the consequences of sharing without consent, which is beyond the control of the parents and even the adolescents[4].

The term Sexting first appeared as a possible element of the Central Core. However, in the similitude tree it is part of a circle and is linked with the words 'Trust', 'Violence', 'Death', 'Prejudice', 'Gender Inequality' and 'Online Sex', reinforcing a negative aspect of sexuality on the internet. Many adolescents who practice 'Sexting' are not clear about the risks inherent in sending personal photos or videos with sexual content, as most of them are based on 'Trust' as an essential factor for exchanging these materials.

The findings reveal that Sexting is part of the representation of sexuality on the internet by the adolescent. A meta-analysis revealed that this practice is prevalent among adolescents, being a cause for concern for leading them to situations of online and/or offline sexual violence, which implies several impacts, such as humiliation, shame, prejudice, gender inequality and despair, to the point of thinking about death and attempted suicide[4,17]. Therefore, it is extremely important to provide and involve this population group with guidance on the practice of sexting

and its consequences, their sexual health and the use of social media in the context of sexuality[4].

The word 'Violence' had the third highest constancy among participants during the structural approach. This element brings with it the idea of danger that seems to emerge when the adolescent loses privacy in the virtual environment, either through the unauthorized dissemination of intimate images or by other types of violence, which result in criminal behaviors such as Grooming, cyberbullying and Revenge Porn[18].

Due to the ease of photographing and filming, as well as the sharing of these materials, a new form of violence is born. As an example, sexting has the potential to generate virtual violence, as it is predominantly a consensual practice. However, its non-consenting posting constitutes, as well as the form of revenge porn[19–20], a type of digital abuse in the affective-sexual relationships that was recognized by the adolescents, an assertion confirmed by the similarity analysis.

In the similitude tree, 'Violence' is a central element with greater connection with the other elements and integrates the circular formation 'Violence', 'Unwanted pregnancy', 'STI', 'Online dating', 'Online sex', 'Gender Inequality', 'Prejudice' and 'Death'. Violence is close to 'Virtual dating', as many adolescents use the internet for this type of relationship. However, they recognize that when the 'Trust' is breached, it can bring situations of 'Danger', ranging from an 'Unwanted pregnancy' to 'Death', which is why the formation of this group is observed.

For the study participants, 'Unwanted Pregnancy' is linked to 'Violence' both as a consequence of the sexual act without consent and without protection, but also by the way this situation can affect the adolescents' life, changing their perspective of the future and exposing them to judgments and criticisms of family and friends, also represented in the evocations of prejudice, gender inequality and death from adolescence to adulthood[20].

In the second periphery, 'Twitter' brings with it the idea of the main media for 'Online Dating' and 'Video' sharing about 'Online Sex'. However, 'Respect' and 'Trust' are essential among peers to maintain 'Privacy'. From the moment that 'Disrespect' occurs, such as the breach of trust and agreements made, there is a negative consequence of 'Exposure' personal files without consent. These terms seem to complement the representational analysis made at the Central Core.

Although the risk of disclosure and 'Exposure' are present, it is 'Trust' that favors the exchange of sexual content, 'Videos' or personal photos, through technology and virtual media[21]. The evocations of the words 'Child' and 'Homosexual' are considered, by the participants in this study, as population groups most vulnerable to 'Danger' in the virtual space, referring to the theme of Sexuality on the Internet.

The child seems to have been referred to as one of the groups at greatest virtual risk, this was due to its naivety and even immaturity, as it is difficult to distinguish the limit between public and private, true and false, much less who is really behind the phone or computer screen and how to report it[22].

In relation to the homosexual element, it is a group of people who have been suffering criticism, swearing and even violence with a high degree of aggression, mainly on the internet, which suggests, for the participants, to be understood as one of the groups vulnerable to dangers of the virtual world. The triangular link 'Gender', 'Prejudice' and 'Respect' reflects our society's common sense, especially when these issues are related to vulnerable and minority groups in the context of sexuality[23].

'Information' is linked to the daily practice of these adolescents, when they seek knowledge on topics related to sexual and reproductive health issues. However, the care to be taken in order to find reliable information about sexual health and reproductive health must be punctuated in order to effectively guide adolescents about sexuality, affectivity and risks[24]. Among the most recurring themes, when talking about sexuality in adolescence, we have: unplanned pregnancy, unsafe abortions and increased rates of STI/Aids in this population group, which may explain the terms evoked 'STI' and 'Unwanted pregnancy'[10].

On the other hand, it is in the second periphery that the second element with the greatest connectivity is located in the similarity tree, this being 'Online Dating' and its affective and relational dimensions. In this relationship, adolescents seek and exchange 'Information' with the person they are connecting with, and it is exactly in this exchange of data that online sex can occur. It is also known as cybersex, it

occurs when intimate sexual images are requested, spicy messages, masturbations, and sexting are exchanged, among other practices for the purpose of sexual pleasure[25].

The internet, through a range of image and textual content, offers several virtual scripts as an invitation to exercise fantasy, that is, "Internet browsing is a new refuge for sexual fantasies, as it allows users to explore more intimate things with their own psychic script, through the scripts of cyberspace"[26].

Thus, 'Twitter' has been increasingly mentioned by the participants as the main network for presenting new sexual behaviors and relationships, as it is a space far from the surveillance of parents and guardians, it is dynamic and with a quick fluidity of sexual materials that awakens the interest of this audience and feeds their curiosity. In this type of virtual network, the problem of the possibility of the situation of Violence is once again recognized.

'Online dating', as well as 'online sex', can have a connotation of 'STI' security and prevention. However, the online relationship when it is brought to reality makes adolescents think that they have known each other for a long time, that they already have enough familiarity, confidence and that they do not need prevention in sexual relations, which implies the appearance and increase of STI among adolescents, because the virtual bond favors the search for pleasure, satisfaction and little sexual security[27].

In the Contrast Zone, the elements 'Photo', 'Fantasy' and 'Freedom' are classified in the image dimension with positive content in the representation of "Sexuality on the internet", contrasting with the meanings of the Central Core. These meanings refer to an image of acceptance and pleasure linked to sexuality on the internet.

Sexual health includes pleasure and encourages determination, communication and interpersonal relationships. Thus, new technologies and virtual spaces foster and convey new ways of stimulating sexual pleasure and fantasy[28]. However, these positive meanings seem to be once again suffocated with greater representativeness of the unfavorable aspects linked to "Sexuality on the internet". The evocations 'Immoral', 'Fake', 'Death', 'Gender Inequality', 'STI', 'Pedophilia', 'Prejudice' reinforce a negative representational structure of the object of study.

The freedom that the internet offers for adolescents to access and share sexual content can be threatened by the presence of fake profiles, created to manipulate them and to practice pedophilia, which is considered an immoral attitude. Another factor that limits this freedom is exemplified when a photo is exposed and disseminated to other audiences, outside the original context of sexting production, being received most often with moral assessment and condemnation, causing serious repercussions on physical or mental health, or both, in the life of those who experience it[5,29].

In society, the predominant speeches are that adolescent girls are more exposed to situations of moral and psychological violence, but they end up being responsible for the production of the images, reinforcing the victim's blame. What seems to be incoherent is based on the asymmetry of

power in gender relations, which are based on the perceived differences between genders and on the meaning attributed to power relations, especially with regard to the experience of sexuality[29].

Gender issues that focus on female and male adolescents in homosexual or heterosexual relationships determine the experience of sexuality in the online environment. When reflecting on how girls play a passive role in the production of sexting for male consumption, it is possible to perceive the reproduction of gender dynamics, in which they face the same problems in affective-sexual relationships outside the virtual environment, which are characterized by dynamics of power and submission, suggesting new forms of gender-based violence[17].

Although the prevalence of suffering or practicing digital abuse in relationships is high, for both men and women, the characteristics differ according to gender, since boys share sexting with partners and girls practice control and monitoring of partners through virtual social networks, these attitudes are often confused as a necessary component of a romantic relationship[18].

Thus, Sexual Health needs a positive and respectful approach to sexuality, which allows a pleasurable and safe sexual experience, free from coercion, discrimination and violence, without forgetting that it is necessary to discern the freedom to experience and share sexuality with the conscience and respect for their image and that of public and private spaces[29]. Sexuality must originate pleasure and positive experiences, avoiding any kind of psychological or moral punishment in contemporary or future society.

The Pedophilia element, present in the contrast zone, is also in the similitude tree as central to the representation and in the triangular link 'Pedophilia', 'Disrespect' and 'Exposure'. The speed at which accounts in virtual media are created and, on the other hand, little knowledge built to recognize and distinguish between a true and a false profile, popularly known as Fake, favors the ideal scenario for children and adolescents to be key pieces of criminals, abusers and pedophiles. It is known that the use of the internet facilitates the growth of Pedophilia, and it is through websites that these criminals obtain information on how to approach the victims and easily take advantage of them[30].

The generation of digital innocents needs a necessary mediation about the limits that must be established in virtual social media. About this, the role of the family in mediation stands out, since the findings reveal that adolescents access the internet daily from their own homes[3]. Although the space is dangerous due to several factors already mentioned, the participants reinforce their indignation with the existence of this situation when we see the element 'Disrespect' directly linked to the element 'Pedophilia'.

The proximity between the elements of the tree of similarity that make up the star formation centered on pedophilia means that the constant lack of respect of abusers is characterized by another danger on the internet, often hidden in fakes profiles. These elements show a plurality of constructs that make up the image and evaluative dimensions of the social representations of sexuality on the internet.

This study is limited by data collection only with participants in the second phase of adolescence (14 to 19 years old) and the difficulty in monitoring the dynamics regarding the emergence of virtual social media in which adolescents are inserted, since it is necessary to know them to guide them on safe use. Furthermore, the use of the structural approach may have left gaps for the interpretation of the object under investigation. Therefore, it is considered that other forms of analysis of the sexuality object on the internet could corroborate, or not, the configuration and dimensions found here, expanding the knowledge on the theme.

However, the findings presented here can contribute to raise awareness of the new challenges inherent in the use of technology and virtual media in the field of sexuality by adolescents and, from that point on, direct sexual education initiatives, individual or collective, which include the prevention of possible risks and negative consequences, caused by this use, in the sexual and reproductive life of adolescents. In this regard, the nursing professional stands out, who, when occupying several spaces in the health field, plays an important role in promoting educational and counseling practices that contribute to the safe exercise of sexuality by the adolescent, considering the potential risks present in the use of the internet.

## CONCLUSION

In the context in which there are biological needs, cultural and social aspects interconnected, we were interested in exploring the social representations related to the universe of adolescent sexuality in the vast field of the internet. In this context, the dimensions of adolescents' social representations of sexuality on the internet encompass the Valuable, Practical, Affective, Relational and Image dimensions.

The social representations of Sexuality on the Internet by adolescents are understood by the elements Violence, Pedophilia and Online Dating, which are elements with greater connection, which demonstrates content and values of predominance of the evaluative and negative dimensions of the studied group.

Sexuality is involved in the most diverse meanings, from the cultural scope to personal experiences, and this is no different when it comes to sexuality on the internet. The interaction and connection with others instantly, added to the ability to express the adolescent's sexuality through photos, videos or other digital materials, in addition to dynamizing relationships, favors the realization of fantasies, awakens desires and the freedom of expression of adolescent sexuality in the virtual environment.

Despite transformations that have taken place over the years on sexuality – and that at the same time seeks to bring associations with freedom, equality, growth, pleasure, identity and human rights – the representation of this phenomenon linked to the virtual world for adolescents seems to anchor in a model of sexuality in the danger, control, repression, inequality, distancing from what is established as sexual rights, that is, the right to live and freely express sexuality.

Therefore, there is a need to include, in the care of adolescents, information and advice on the use of the internet for the manifestation of sexuality, clarifying the risks and strategies aimed at the safety of this group in the use of technologies and social media, guaranteeing them autonomously enjoy their sexual rights.

Finally, future research should investigate with adolescents their perception about the approach to sexuality on the internet made by parents, as well as with health professionals who work with adolescents, and who seek to validate the virtual interactions of adolescents in their interventions in health.

## RESUMO

**Objetivo:** Apreender as representações sociais de adolescentes acerca da sexualidade na internet. **Método:** Pesquisa qualitativa, fundamentada na abordagem estrutural da Teoria das Representações Sociais, com adolescentes usuários das mídias virtuais e que são estudantes de dois colégios estaduais. Foi utilizado o teste de associação livre de palavras, cujos dados foram processados pelo *software Evoc®* 2005 e analisados à luz da referida teoria. **Resultados:** Participaram da pesquisa 124 adolescentes. Os termos pornografia, *sexting* e violência compuseram o núcleo central da representação, sinalizando dimensões valorativas, imagéticas e práticas do objeto investigado. A análise de similitude confirmou a centralidade do elemento violência, e acrescentou namoro virtual e pedofilia. **Conclusão:** As representações sociais dos adolescentes apontam para ausência de segurança no ambiente virtual quanto ao exercício da sexualidade, predominando as dimensões valorativas e negativas, que se distanciam do que é estabelecido como direitos sexuais, dado que os adolescentes têm o direito de viver e expressar livremente a sexualidade.

## DESCRITORES

Adolescente; Sexualidade; Internet; Rede Social; Enfermagem Pediátrica.

## RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** Aprehender las representaciones sociales de adolescentes sobre la sexualidad en la internet. **Método:** Es una investigación cualitativa, basada en el enfoque estructural de la Teoría de las Representaciones Sociales, realizada con adolescentes usuarios de medios virtuales y alumnos de dos colegios públicos. Se utilizó la prueba de asociación libre de palabras, cuyos datos fueron procesados por el software *Evoc®* 2005 y analizados a la luz de esa teoría. **Resultados:** Participaron en la investigación 124 adolescentes. Los términos pornografía, sexteo y violencia constituyeron el núcleo central de la representación y se percibieron dimensiones valorativas mediante imágenes y prácticas del objeto investigado. El análisis de similitud confirmó la centralidad del elemento violencia, y agregó relación virtual y pedofilia. **Conclusión:** Las representaciones sociales de los adolescentes señalan una falta de seguridad en el entorno virtual respecto al ejercicio de la sexualidad, con predominio de las dimensiones valorativas y negativas que se alejan de lo establecido como derechos sexuales, ya que los susodichos tienen derecho a vivir y a expresar su sexualidad libremente.

## DESCRITORES

Adolescente; Sexualidad; Internet; Red Social; Enfermería Pediátrica.

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