

## **Digital Changes and Cybercoexistence in Young People from Rural Schools**

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### **Abstract**

*Virtual social networks have become digital spaces that allow social interaction and enable the construction of communication and support networks that transcend geographical boundaries; they have also generated various dynamics of sociability that can create risk behaviors in relation to interactions. From there, a research process was developed with the purpose of investigating the social and virtual interactions maintained by students in a boarding school in San Martín (Meta). Therefore, this document questions the interpretation of emotions and practices in the online interaction of young people from the Iracá Educational Institution, located in the rural area of the department of Meta; therefore, the following pages aim to contribute to the understanding of the different interactions of young people through ICTs; From the introduction, the population is contextualized and the development of the research process is described; which was supported by a qualitative-ethnographic method, which led, in the results, to identify and reveal the particular and common factors among students that allow the creation and consolidation of friendship networks. Thus, the discussion was framed in the socialization practices of students on/off line.*

**Keywords:** *Young people, socialization, cyber coexistence, interaction, social networks.*

### **Introduction**

The global health crisis caused by SARS-CoV-2 or Covid-19 brought about significant changes for societies around the world. Social isolation as a protective measure is undoubtedly one of the main challenges for communities. In the case of schools, they have been forced to close as the virus progresses to support distancing efforts. UNESCO (2020) estimates that more than 89% of the world's school-going population is currently out of school.

This phenomenon has led to communication in education being digitalized and mediated through new technological media or ICTs. These tools receive, manipulate and process information, facilitating communication between two or more subjects, bringing with it significant consequences in the way of processing and distributing knowledge (Katz, 2003), since technology acts as a new form of fast and effective network communication, and, mainly, detached from a physical place. Thus, cybercommunication has been a strategy to maintain educational processes; however, it has also been a mechanism to preserve interpersonal relationships and forms of social interaction that schools used to have as a space for development.

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In this context, This exercise is part of the project entitled "Audiovisual narratives and artistic languages as a strategy for the reconstruction of the historical memory of the armed conflict and coexistence from the differential approach in San Martín (Meta)", which among its specific objectives sought to analyze the dynamics implemented by young people to protect themselves from aggressions, to interact and strengthen social ties. To that extent, part of this study was developed with a group of 50 heterogeneous young people (victims of the armed conflict, displaced people, migrants, etc.) who participated in an ethnographic research on the ways of relating with their peers at school and maintaining their friendships in times of social isolation. This was done with the aim of discovering emerging subjectivities in the students, new emotional and moral forms that virtual coexistence summons and the significance of communication in the digital network for schoolchildren in times of crisis.

In this sense, we identify and analyze the elements that allow the construction of friendship networks that are not limited to the physical space and are configured from virtuality; also, we pay attention to the practices of virtual social networks (RSV) that are used by young people to strengthen emotional bonds, to communicate emotions and to protect members of their groups. Consequently, questions are raised about the interpretation of emotions of a group of young people in the context of online interactions. Likewise, we seek to analyze the implicit norms generated in these interactions in relation to the possible hierarchies within the groups. These questions contributed to highlight the most sensitive elements and the reiterative moral considerations of cyber coexistence.

## Literature review

Schools have been recognized in recent years as important spaces for the construction of forms of sociability of children and young people (Dubet & Martuccelli, 1998; Maldonado, 2000; Tomasini, 2011; Weiss, 2012; Paulín, 2013; López, 2020). There, relationships among students assume different group and intergroup configurations and are constituted under heterogeneous practices of integration and differentiation that link both aspects of school culture and the students' immediate contexts. Thus, they may include the presence of stigmatization, discriminatory actions, socially legitimized power relations, as well as supportive attitudes of companionship and positive affectivity (Ortega, 2002; Paulin, 2014; López, 2020). In those "natural forms of coexistence that drive to establish relationships and interact with others in a playful form of association" (Simmel, 1986, p. 198), friendships appear as one of the most recurrent forms of sociability in school spaces in Colombia (López, 2020), being a type of relationship that transcends the interpersonal and emotional plane beyond affective and biological limits, articulated with dependent cultural, historical and social elements; In addition, issues such as age, sex and class endow it with particular forms among communities and allow us to glimpse groupings, distances and power relations under premises that constitute the relationship such as good treatment, reciprocity, affectivity, common interests and intimacy (Cucó, 1994; Requena 1994; Pahl, 2000). However, with the current global health situation, this form of relationship and some other practices and styles of student interaction have had to move to a virtual space.

Research conducted before the pandemic had already demonstrated the frequency of Internet use by young people and children in their socialization practices (Wolak et al.2003; Wentzel,2007; Caldevilla, 2010; Universidad EAFIT & TIGO UNE, 2018; Jiménez, Garmendia et al, 2018) highlighting virtual social networks (VSN) as the main platforms for accessing and meeting others. Multiple positions have highlighted the positive and negative aspects of the virtual and of the VSNs in the relationships of schoolchildren. It was recognized that cyber communication facilitated access to information, the request for help and the meeting of needs among people in the same

network (Tenzer et al., 2009). It was also highlighted that the Internet could also enhance the possibility for young people to play different roles by exploring different personifications and serve as a mechanism for modifying their self-image (Chou & Peng, 2006; Smahel & Subrahmanyam, 2007; Archila, 2009). Similarly, researchers such as Campbell (2005) pointed out that some of the positive aspects of connection through VSNs would be related to ease of communication, a fact that stands out as useful for people who suffer from problems in establishing social bonds. As negative aspects, arguments around the growth of solitary behaviors, technological stress, dissemination of offensive messages towards people, cyberbullying and issues related to data security are found (Gordo, 2006; Yudes-Gómez et al, 2018; Díaz-López, et al. 2020). Likewise, Sánchez, Prendes and Serrano (2011) stated that the constant use of VSNs could generate difficulties in reaching agreements in peer groups, hostile and aggressive behaviors among users, shallow and impersonal relationships, low levels of self-awareness and in general, negative effects on the individual's well-being.

With a less dichotomous position, some authors have considered virtual media and VSN as tools with varied uses and potentialities (Halpern, et al, 2020). In the case of sociability, both at a distance and in the close environment, it has been recognized that they allow people to increase the quantity and variety of their social relationships, in addition to generating community feelings of belonging and empathy (Castells, 2001; Campos, 2008; Reig, 2012). From this position, students' sociabilities have been recognized as being constructed in an offline/online continuum (Morduchowicz, 2012). Thus, as Winocur (2006, p. 577) asserts, virtual interaction neither weakens nor replaces traditional forms of exchange, but rather reinforces and reproduces in virtual space these links, which are threatened by modern lifestyles.

However, in contexts of social distancing such as the one the planet is now experiencing, online communication is almost an imperative. Internet traffic increased by 56% according to technology operators around the world. In the case of Colombia, the Communications Regulation Commission "Comisión de Regulación de Comunicaciones" (CRC) stated in a report from April 2020, that the nation's internet usage increased by 37%. Although there are wide connection gaps between rural and urban areas of the country, more and more people want to join the digital world given the current circumstances, especially there is a population interest in accessing VSN, platforms that promise low data consumption and flow of different types of information.

In the case of schools, the use of VSNs for adolescents and young Colombians has been a determining factor in their learning processes during the pandemic, especially in rural areas or areas far from urban centers, given their free and easy use. However, this new form of connectivity, as mentioned above, has brought with it other elements apart from access to learning, aspects that students already shared in the school culture: constant interaction with peers, the position of their role as students in the midst of processes of redefinitions, individual constructions, new experiences of their age stage and the different social demands. Thus, while the spaces for formal and informal sociability are increasingly restricted by the virus, virtual sociability offers schoolchildren multiple possibilities when it comes to interacting with those they already shared at school.

In regards to the Iracá Educational Institution, 57% of the students have been able to maintain contact with teachers after the confinement, due to the fact that most of the young people live in isolated areas of the school and the urban center. However, contact between friends has been maintained despite the distances, since many of the friendship groups continue to communicate even if they have to travel. This is evidence that for the young people in this institution, friendship relationships transcend academic commitments.

According to Giró (2011), friendship is based on the construction of peer groups with similar purposes, who become a relevant factor for the development of social

competencies; therefore, the time shared by the members of the group is fundamental for the maintenance of a friendly relationship. Generally, these friends share their time when they are at school; however, what happens in institutions that host students permanently, which raises the question: How are these friendly relationships structured in a boarding school, where young people share the whole day with their friends, including evenings? In the case of I.E. Iracá, some students live for months at the school, therefore, friends become family. Through the friendship groups, the young people of this institution seek to face the difficulties of being away from their family, build and rebuild their identity, a sense of belonging, the possibility of sharing lifestyles and the presence of emotional empathy.

## Method

This article is based on the results of a qualitative research with an ethnographic approach. The ethnographic study is recognized as an appropriate way to approach virtual forms of sociability, since it allows not only to know the voice of the subjects, but also to reconstruct and understand the complexity of the meanings and experiences (Guber, 2001) under which the relationships between students are configured and transformed. In this sense, we resorted to face-to-face and virtual ethnography and used data from field diaries, group and individual interviews, participant observations, focus groups and sociometric studies, to which qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis and triangulation were applied.

The face-to-face fieldwork was developed in 2019, in which the dialogue and direct communication with the students was an important tool to learn about the perceptions, motivations and practices of students inside and outside the school. In the case of virtual ethnographic work (Hine, 2004), this allowed us to explore and analyze the forms of interaction in virtual environments through the use of technology, which contributed to obtain and analyze information directly from the place where the interactions of the working group took place: Instagram, Facebook and WhatsApp.

The analysis of the information was carried out with the support of the Nvivo tool, the logical analysis of data and the content analysis (Colle, 2011), which allowed the conceptual ordering of the information through an open codification and an interpretative reading by phases. The categorization was carried out in a deductive and inductive process, a task that implied a dive of the theoretical and empirical, in addition to a dialogue between variables, an important point to present the voices of the young people of Iracá that support this work.

The following table shows in detail the activities developed in the research process:

Method	Objective	Activity	Number of participants	Sessions
Face-to-face ethnography	To reconstruct the meanings and experiences of the forms of relationships among students at school.	Group interviews	50	10
		Individual interviews	25	15
		Focus groups	10	4
		Field diaries	2	4 months
		Participant observation	2	4 months
Virtual	To explore and analyze the forms of interaction in virtual	Questionnaires applied online	45	10
		Non-participant	2	3 months

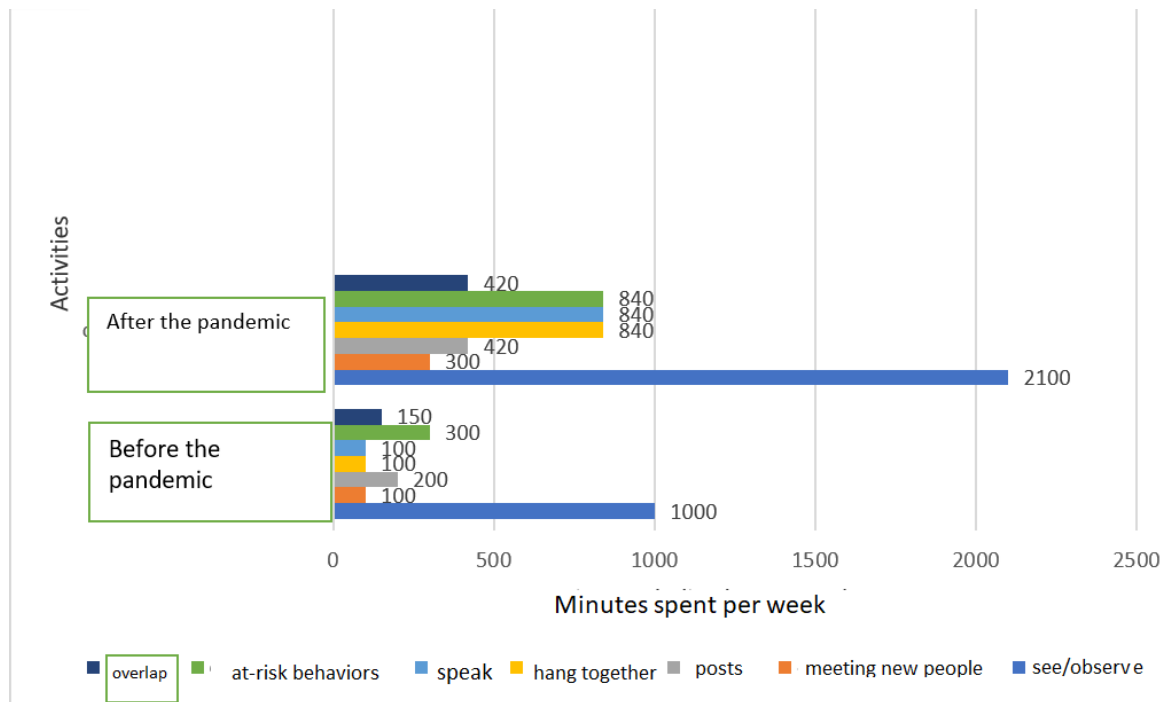
Ethnography	environments through the use of technology	observation		
		Field notes	2	3 months
		Sociometric test	50	20

## Results

In the face-to-face ethnographic work, it was possible to recognize that 97% of the students in the sample belonged to friendship networks within the school. These groups were formed by an average of five or eight people gathered under the principles of reciprocity, affectivity, voluntariness and shared interests. Friendship was found to be a determining element in the daily coexistence in the school and in its institutional dynamics; in addition, it was possible to recognize this type of relationship supported by objective circumstances and subjective dispositions of the students. During the fieldwork it was also found that students moved between their face-to-face and virtual realities with absolute ease; they entered and left simultaneously and continuously from the physical/real to the virtual, both spaces converged and were integrated in their daily friendships; however, being linked to a rural context with few possibilities of internet connection, offline interactions were privileged by 95% of the students, since only 10% had a steady internet connection.

As a result of the pandemic, the above data underwent changes. The questionnaires applied showed that, given the geographical distance and the impossibility of offline interaction, the increase in students' connectivity increased by 50% due to the acquisition of equipment through their own purchase and State management, with devices such as cell phones and tablets being the main means of connection, to this percentage can be added 25% of students who have access to intermittent connectivity, thanks to equipment on loan from their parents, neighbors and relatives. Thus, virtual environments have been prevalent in student interactions in the first months of 2020.

In the online interviews with students, it can be highlighted that the intensification of sociability practices in the virtual environment is given by the intention to maintain the school's friendship networks and the affective links already in place. Eighty-seven percent of the students highlighted a concern and interest in maintaining communication with their peer groups, above academic interests (13%). Online interaction between the different members of the collectives is mainly carried out through applications such as WhatsApp (60%), Facebook (20%) and Instagram (20%). These tools are mainly chosen for their free of charge, trendiness and offer of multimedia content. In the process of information analysis, it was found that there are seven cyber behaviors performed by friends in these VSN.



1. See/observe content: This activity is directly associated with entertainment and leisure. For young people, it is a way of getting out of their own reality and making others' reality visible, thus learning and confronting ways of acting, interests, styles and tastes that are decisive in the coexistence of groups of friends. Although this activity could be seen as circumstantial and simple, through it the groups strengthen their sense of belonging and social inclusion, since they recognize their own patterns of identification and behavior.

In the members of the groups, a constant need was identified to show recognition, competence and distinction from others through the contents they share and that others can see. This idea is supported by many comments made by the students: "the thing is that in these times, whoever is not recognized is nobody" (L, 17 years old), "We always have to show that we are different from others" (J, 15 years old), "We cannot show that we are all the same on a screen, we have to make it clear that there are differences among us" (S, 15 years old). The need felt by friends to show distinction is also mixed with economic power and racial premises that speak of a social time in a crisis of identity patterns crossed by the desire for freedom and success: "We have to show that we are peasants, but not poor" (S, 15 years old) "It is to show through networks that we are not left behind and that we can succeed" (E, 16 years old). These referents mentioned by the students are important to make visible in the VSNs, since they show an economic capital put in ostentation through consumption, where both capital and consumption are more virtual than real, but where the need to differentiate among themselves must be reinforced, since it is difficult to achieve this social distance within the school. If economic power does not distinguish, it is important for friends to distinguish physical characteristics, what is bought, listened to, visited, eaten, what is liked and the models of group identification. It is there where young people find the visibility of cyberspace as a support for self-expression and representation. Although watching/gossiping is an activity that is usually performed individually, other virtual spaces (inbox, personal chats and even video calls) allow sharing the perceptions generated from this practice to friends. In this way, there is a constant dialogue of the content being viewed.

2. Meeting and adding new people: 45% of the sample mentioned that during the confinement there was an increase in friend requests on spaces such as Facebook and Instagram. For friends this accounts for an increase in the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2000) that group members acquire by self-managing their own profiles. However, for the I.E Iracá groups, sharing online with people outside the face-to-face network is seen as a

dangerous action with the capacity to generate conflicts and cause ruptures within the groups. It became evident that the groups are hermetic when it comes to receiving other members, since they recognize that this implies generating an opening of interests, secrets and previously established activities. This means that, in spaces such as groups and fanpages, the forms of interaction are limited to the subjects themselves, with the presence of outsiders being limited and even denied.

The off/online exclusivity for friends denotes a high level of group cohesion and care. However, this principle can undergo modifications through cyber-agreements such as: adding friends of friends and jointly adding the same person, this last point applies to particular profiles "people who show similar interests to those of the group, who are pretty, who travel, who lead a cool activity, who have eye-catching publications" (S, 15 years old). "People who do novel things, who are haters of things we also hate" (M, 16 years old). Those who manage the opening agreements are mostly the leaders of the collectives, young people who stand out for their personality and experience with high levels of prestige and trust within the group, seen as mediators.

3. Posts, commenting and responding: These activities are a form of constant connection between friends that can be done through small actions such as generating statuses, liking, tagging and reacting. Indicating that a content was seen, taken into account and that it called for a reaction. Their reciprocity among groups is important because it shows that there is correspondence and approval among friends. In this sense, 70% of the sample reported performing these actions through hypercoordination strategies (Madell and Muncer, 2005) such as constantly checking their friends' profiles, configuring their VSNs to receive immediate notifications of their peers' status, searching for multimedia content where friends can recognize specific communicative messages from the group, posting and responding before someone outside the network does so, among other activities. These cyberbehaviors receive a high degree of approval in the peer group and allow the collectives to measure the actions performed by the different members, accounting for the levels of involvement and commitment. Some of these actions are obligatory practices considered implicit or naturalized actions in the actions of friends.

Actions such as "ghosting", not responding, not reacting and keeping distance generate conflict in the groups, because it seems to place the subjects in an inferior position in which they are not taken into account; in the same way, it seems to place the individuals in the same hierarchy as formal organizations and institutions where the students consider that there are communication gaps. Conversations between friends are then expected to correspond and reciprocate when they post, since being part of the friendship group demands these principles for young people. When a friend is identified as having connectivity problems, payments are usually sent and a long response time is given; however, it should be noted that the response should always exist to maintain proximity.

4. Hang together: On some occasions, in order to strengthen bonds and feel that they are building together, students perform online collaborative activities such as: participating anonymously in the construction of a status, a story or in the viralization of an image. These actions generate the feeling of group bonding and help positive emotions to pass through the collective. "You can be there and suddenly someone posts something funny or memes, and you comment, and your friend also, and your other friend and it becomes a very funny thing" (H, 17 years old).

Other collective group activities are more inclined to seek acceptance, recognition or popularity from people outside the network. To do so, friends reproduce viral challenges, fads, hashtags and trends of the moment by appropriating them to their context and making them public. It should be noted that these cyberbehaviors are influenced by the styles of the people they admire, almost always individuals who stand out for their achievements (athletes, actors), or for their fame acquired through online activity (youtubers, instagramers, influencers of all kinds). Within the groups there are no

regulations or guidelines for the realization of these practices unless they are actions that are fashionable, that do not threaten the individual or group integrity, - because friendship is conceived based on the care of the other - and that they are the initiative of the person who performs it, conceiving the freedom and voluntariness that exists in the members of a group. When any of the above criteria is not met, friends decide to delete content, taking into account that one of the advantages of online dynamics is the ability to add, add and discard content without restriction.

5. Speak "Expressing emotions": Students identify VSN as a tool capable of moving between the public and private spheres. When it comes to expressing feelings and emotions, students move intermittently in these two forms to make known their affections, disputes, moods, among others.

For friends in the private via online, group intimacy prevails, therefore, they use tools such as inbox, personal chats, restricted comments and even video calls, since these "are closed spaces that allow them to comment on those involved without anyone else noticing" (O, 16 years old). For their part, the public actions that are made among members of the groups fundamentally contain a positive message "since they are exposed to the view of everyone", however, these activities change according to gender. Expressing an affectionate word in cyberspace among a group of male friends, when there are contacts such as children or women present, can be interpreted as a game between friends, a way of teasing or drawing attention to oneself; However, this reading changes when the observers are other males or strangers. In this case, the friends consider the exchange of affectionate words as a way of demonstrating weakness in public, since they expose the feelings of the group to the eyes of others who consider them to be on an equal hierarchical footing, and open the way to opinions and comments that can circulate publicly.

Similarly, it became evident that male groups prefer to share their perceptions in public virtual spaces such as walls, viral images without public restriction and memes, where their publications have a direct message, reaffirming their virility with obscene words, joint mockery and macho behavior. In the case of women, group ideas are rarely shared in spaces visible to all types of public. Emoticons, indirect phrases and verbal references are used that are only understandable to people in the network. It is not easy for friends to communicate their feelings in VSNs, they must interpret the scenario and the participants in each situation, and they must also take into account other signals from their previous experiences to know what to say or how far to move so as not to generate ill-intentioned comments. In this regard, 70% of the sample considered reviewing what they share with their peers on more than two occasions before uploading it to the networks.

6. Overlap "Acting freely": The freedom that is supposed to accompany relationships between friends (Cucó, 1994) is experienced with different off/online tensions. One of the foundations of the collectives is that the actions of the members should be voluntary, however, they should not put at risk the integrity of others, nor their image, good name and reputation. These behaviors are considered by young people as unacceptable when they exist; it is the members of the collective who determine their treatment, which is usually given in two ways. In the first, there is a total rupture of friendship; the members of the group choose to distance themselves, cut off their forms of contact and limit their forms of bonding. The second, on the other hand, reconfigures the role of the person who failed and his or her interaction within the collective actions; this also implies a complete redesign of the network of relationships.

It should be noted that practices related to cyberbullying and harassment are spontaneously mentioned in the groups; however, such actions are justified by the young people as horizontal confrontations, with time and action limitations "only to those who deserve it and what they deserve" (P, 16 years old). Online attacks are carried out by the groups, in most cases, taking advantage of public situations such as comments and publications, to



make the other feel bad, to reject their content, to disapprove their tastes through memes and mockery or with the conformation of gossip. These acts are considered by the students as necessary within the coexistence with the other, such legitimization is given by recognizing the use of violence as a common element in the society of which they are part; even 80% of the sample mentioned knowing specific cases in the VSN (hate groups), where offensive messages to particular people predominate, it is important to note that for the young people of Iracá, they do not follow, add, comment to people with whom there are already offline conflicts. Blocking or deleting people is an act of non-aggression and peaceful coexistence mediated by distance.

7. At-risk behaviors "Seeking support": For students, belonging to an offline/online friendship network is an opportunity to increase their possibilities of support and distance from their parental forms. However, in virtual spaces, students highlighted a greater sense of autonomy and support in daily activities. For the collectives, such cyberbehaviors are able to account for the parallelism of relationships, such as when friends accompany or overlap actions that oppose school rules and can cause inconveniences with school, family or classmates: "posting offensive memes, sensual photos, forbidden likes" (W, 17 years old). These acts unite the subjects not only with the use of similar verbal expressions, binding discursive codes in front of others and the manifestation of particular attitudes of rejection, but also allow defining conditions such as trust, commitment and intimacy within the groups.

Other behaviors are carried out in support of the tasks to be assumed by the members of the collectives. In this way, through virtuality students exchange papers and exams, distribute the topics of the different subjects and share profiles for their classes; these are tactics that schooled young people have created to respond to and controvert the demands of the school (DeCerteau, 2007). This is because the school system is identified as a promoter of conflicts and divisions among friends.

Thus, the students' cyberbehaviors not only respond to what Esteban (2015) would call mutual support networks, referring to groups of people who characterize their ties by correspondence and care in material and symbolic aspects of everyday life, but also reiterate the need to detach themselves from the practices and behaviors they have witnessed and that have accompanied their formation. For the young women, the proposal to live in a network of complicity and mutual help online is therefore an effective strategy, not only for survival, but also to confront traditional life models and contemporary society in which individualism and competition predominate.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

The objective of this article was to understand some of the changes brought about by the new forms of cyber coexistence in the sociability of young school students between 15 and 18 years of age. The results of this study showed that the conceptualization of friendship is created from one's own experiences and is based on the same principles inside and outside the VSN. To that extent, friendship circles are created in relation to the experiences of each of the students, so that affinities or shared experiences are prioritized for the creation of affective bonds, as Espinar and González (2009) state.

However, young people state that the use of VSNs allows them to maintain contact with friends with less difficulty; however, this is done in a different way depending on the affective bond (Espinar and González, 2009). In this sense, young people agree that social networks help to break the barriers of time and space, since connectivity does not limit them. In fact, in the context of confinement, the students stated that they sought other strategies to communicate with their friends, such as defining meeting places that were half the distance away or collecting money among friends to pay for the data of those who could not connect to the network.

The permanent connectivity that VSN allows facilitates contact between friends and even contributes to the structuring of the rules that govern these relationships, since the willingness or unwillingness to connect can influence the permanence within the group. Therefore, among young people, frequent communication is considered a relevant factor for the maintenance of any friendship (Tenzer, S., Ferro, O., & Palacios, N., 2009).

On the other hand, young people affirm that, in the case of introverted or very shy people, social networks help interaction and linking to groups of friends, due to the fact that this resource generates some confidence when expressing themselves, without being forced to have physical or visual contact.

Although VSNs encourage permanent contact among the members of the group of friends, they are also characterized by the absence of physical contact, which hinders the creation or preservation of affective bonds, especially in men, since this type of contact is fundamental when establishing hierarchies within the group. In this regard, it is evident that the visual resources offered by these networks, such as emoticons, are not enough to express their affections. In fact, some say that some of these icons generate confusion when interpreting them.

On the other hand, the participants report fearing that other people may have access to the information, that the interlocutors may be impersonated, the veracity of the information and even of the photographs posted, and that they may be victims of aggression or mockery due to the interpretation of the information they themselves post. Specifically, privacy is threatened by the distrust produced by digital interactions.

Consequently, the adolescents' perception of the concept of friendship and friendly relationships seeks to maintain the basis of face-to-face interaction; however, there is also evidence of adaptability in relation to the ways of expressing affection through VSNs. To that extent, the interpretation of emotions in online interaction among the young people of the Iracá Educational Institution responds to cultural stereotypes and personal experiences; likewise, the permanence or not in a friendship group depends on compliance with the rules established within it.

In summary, the results of this study contribute to identify the perceptions of young people from Iracá High School in relation to emotions within the framework of the VSN, which can facilitate friendship relationships. However, these networks are also defined as a complement to physical contact, although it is evident that it does not replace real interactions.

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