

Online Sexual Health Information Seeking, Digital Literacy, and Risk Behaviors among Brazilian University Students: A Cross-Sectional Study

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Abstract

Introduction: Social media are a central source of sexual and mental health information for young adults, yet the impact of this exposure on their practices and well-being remains unclear. It is necessary to understand how online sexual information seeking, digital health literacy, and problematic social media use relate to the knowledge, attitudes, and sexual behaviors of this population.

Objective: Analyze how exposure to digital content related to sexual and mental health influences the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of young adult college students.

Methods: A cross-sectional online survey was conducted with 65 Brazilian university students aged 18–30 years. The questionnaire assessed online sexual information seeking, digital health literacy (eHEALS), mental health literacy (MHLq), problematic social media use (SMDS), symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress (DASS-21), and risky sexual behaviors. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, chi-square tests and correlations, and multivariable logistic and linear regression models, controlling for relevant sociodemographic variables.

Results: Among the participants, most reported having searched for sexual information online, but this behavior was not associated with a lower likelihood of risky sexual practices. No significant associations were found between online sexual information seeking, digital health literacy, or perceived ability to evaluate online information and sexual risk behaviors. In contrast, older age and sexual minority status were associated with a higher probability of reporting at least one risky sexual behavior. Problematic social media use showed a consistent association with higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms, with no clear link to sexual risk behaviors.

Conclusion: In this sample of Brazilian university students, online sexual information seeking and higher perceived digital health literacy were not clearly associated with safer sexual practices. Sociodemographic factors such as age and sexual minority status played a more prominent role in explaining sexual risk, whereas problematic social media use emerged as an important marker of greater psychological distress.

