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SOCCER AND DIGITAL SOCIAL NETWORKS: the impact of cyberspace on the youth category

O FUTEBOL E AS REDES SOCIAIS DIGITAIS:
o impacto do ciberespaço na categoria de base

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the complex relationship between youth academy soccer players and digital social media, analyzing their usage patterns, motivations, and perceived career impacts. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research combined a qualitative focus group with U-15 athletes and a quantitative questionnaire administered to 40 U-17 athletes. The results reveal complete digital immersion, with 100% of participants using Instagram. Usage is strategic: beyond socialization, these platforms serve as a tool for early personal brand building, where young athletes carefully curate their posted content, prioritizing "the best highlights" while omitting mistakes. Notably, the athletes demonstrate significant psychological resilience. The majority (75%) perceive criticism as an incentive for improvement and are not discouraged by a lack of engagement (60%), maintaining a clear hierarchy where "soccer is life" and "social media is a hobby". The study's most critical finding is the existing institutional gap. While 73% of the questionnaire respondents stated they receive guidance from their club on social media use, the focus group unanimously denied this, revealing that current policies are prohibition-based—such as restricting internet access—which the young athletes admit to circumventing. The research concludes that the modern youth athlete is a sophisticated digital actor who manages their own image and uses social media for learning. However, this autonomy develops in the absence of effective institutional support. The study recommends that clubs replace prohibition with dialogue by implementing media literacy programs to prepare young athletes for the challenges of the digital environment, recognizing that the development of an athlete in the 21st century is inseparable from their development as a connected citizen.

Keywords: Social Media; Soccer; Cyberspace; Future Challenges; Human Development; Technology.

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RESUMO

Este estudo investiga a complexa relação entre atletas das categorias de base do futebol e as redes sociais digitais, analisando padrões de uso, motivações e os impactos percebidos em suas carreiras. Utilizando uma metodologia de métodos mistos, a pesquisa combinou um grupo focal qualitativo com atletas sub-15 e um questionário quantitativo com 40 atletas sub-17. Os resultados revelam uma imersão digital total, com 100% dos participantes utilizando o Instagram. O uso é estratégico: além da socialização, as plataformas servem como ferramenta para a construção de uma marca pessoal precoce, onde os jovens atletas selecionam cuidadosamente o conteúdo a ser postado, priorizando "os melhores lances" e omitindo erros. Notavelmente, os atletas demonstram grande resiliência psicológica. A maioria encara as críticas como um incentivo para melhorar (75%) e não se abala com a falta de engajamento (60%), mantendo uma hierarquia clara onde o "futebol é vida" e as "redes sociais são um passatempo". O achado mais crítico do estudo é o hiato institucional existente. Enquanto 73% dos atletas do questionário afirmaram receber orientação do clube sobre o uso das redes, o grupo focal negou unanimemente, revelando que as políticas atuais são baseadas em proibições, como restringir o acesso à internet, as quais os jovens admitem contornar. A pesquisa conclui que o atleta de base moderno é um ator digital sofisticado, que gerencia sua imagem e utiliza as redes para aprender. No entanto, essa autonomia se desenvolve à margem de um suporte institucional eficaz. O estudo recomenda que os clubes substituam a proibição pelo diálogo, implementando programas de letramento midiático que preparem os jovens para os desafios do ambiente digital, reconhecendo que a formação do atleta no século XXI é inseparável de sua formação como cidadão conectado.

Palavras-chave: Redes Sociais Digitais; Futebol; Ciberespaço; Desafios Futuros; Desenvolvimento Humano; Tecnologia.

1 INTRODUCTION

Football transcends the definition of sport in Brazil, establishing itself as a sociocultural phenomenon that permeates various spheres of national life. Practiced in a wide variety of contexts, it functions as a strong element of cultural identity and social cohesion (Gastaldo, 2021).

Due to its democratic and accessible nature, initiation into the sport often occurs in early childhood, encouraged by the family and social circle. Progressively, the playful activity can evolve into the game, competition, and finally, the dream of professionalization. This aspiration is intensely fueled by the visibility and social prestige that the figure of the professional football player achieves in the country, representing an ideal of ascension and success for many young people.

In this formative journey, which extends from childhood to adulthood, the young athlete is exposed to a complex diversity of socio-emotional experiences. Feelings such as the euphoria of victory, the frustration of defeat, the fear of failure, and the management of public exposure become an integral part of their development (Fiap, 2022).

Such experiences are crucial because they not only shape the athlete's future, whether professional, amateur, or a mere spectator, but also contribute fundamentally to their development as a citizen, teaching values such as resilience, discipline, and teamwork.

The trajectory of an athlete's development, while classic in its essence, now faces an innovative variable that differentiates it from all previous generations: digital social networks. We live in a networked society, characterized by the centrality of the internet and communication technologies in the organization of all social practices (Morão et al., 2020). Digital platforms have reconfigured human interactions, going beyond communication and directly impacting social, cultural, and consequently, sporting behaviors. For the young athlete, this means that their development process occurs simultaneously in the physical and digital realms.

Given this new reality, the central objective of this study is to analyze how digital social networks relate to the youth football environment. Specifically, it seeks to understand how athletes in the Under-17 and Under-15 categories use and appropriate cyberspace, identifying their motivations, interaction patterns, and perceptions of the impact of these platforms on their routines and aspirations. The aim is not to evaluate the quality of use, but rather to map the dynamics of this relationship and the main factors that influence it.

The rationale for this investigation lies in the growing need for young people to integrate into the digital environment, which today is less of an option and more of a condition for socialization and belonging. The search for validation and integration into groups, a natural process of human development, has transcended physical barriers. On social networks, this environment operates without geographical boundaries and with control mechanisms distinct from traditional ones, allowing for instant global connections and an identity management that becomes public by default (Recuero, 2021).

Understanding these dynamics in the context of football, a field of great cultural relevance and immense digital impact, is fundamental. It becomes imperative to investigate how constant interaction with cyberspace can influence the performance and mental health of young athletes.

Topics such as building an athlete's personal brand, early digital exposure, the impact of likes on self-esteem, parental control, and, more critically, the risks associated with *cyberbullying and online* hate speech, are elements that now make up the sports ecosystem (Morão et al., 2020; Souza; Vaghetti; Tubagi, 2023). How young people deal with these factors can directly and indirectly interfere with their trajectory as athletes and their development as individuals.

Therefore, this work aims to deepen the understanding of the relationship between digital social networks and youth football. By investigating the use, motivations, and perceived effects on young athletes, it seeks to offer an overview of how this new generation appropriates digital space, discussing the potential positive and negative impacts that this constant immersion entails for the future of sport and its protagonists.

2 METHODOLOGY

This study, employing a mixed-methods approach with a sequential exploratory design (Creswell; Clark, 2017), was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Institute of Biosciences of the São Paulo State University "Júlio de Mesquita Filho" (UNESP), under opinion number 5.881.939, following the norms of Resolution No. 466/2012 of the National Health Council (CNS).

The research was conducted in two phases. The first of a qualitative and exploratory nature, consisted of a focus group with athletes from the youth category (Under-15) who competed in the first division of the São Paulo Championship. The data collected in this stage, analyzed using thematic content analysis (Bardin, 2018), served as the basis for the development and validation of the instrument for the following phase.

The second, quantitative phase used the "Research Instrument on the Use of Digital Social Networks in Football" – QRSD (Fabris; Serapião, 2025), an *online questionnaire* applied to a sample of 40 athletes from the under-17 category of a team different from the first phase, but which also competes in the first division of the Paulista Championship. The analysis of the quantitative data occurred in two stages: first, a descriptive statistical analysis (frequency, mean) to characterize the sample and, subsequently, a cluster analysis *with* the SimpleKMeans algorithm (via Weka software) was employed to identify usage profiles (Frank; Hall; Witten, 2016).

Finally, the results from both phases were integrated into the discussion stage, using the qualitative data from the focus group to deepen and contextualize the quantitative profiles found, strengthening the validity of the findings through data triangulation. The choice to conduct the focus group with athletes in the Under-15 category and the questionnaire with athletes in the Under-17 category was intentional.

Both represent crucial and complementary stages of the youth category, allowing for a broader view of the phenomenon. The focus group with the younger players (Under-15) sought to capture perceptions at an early stage of exposure to high performance, while the questionnaire with the older players (Under-17) aimed to quantify behavioral patterns that were already more consolidated and closer to the transition to professionalism.

3 RESULTS

This section presents the research results obtained through the QRSD questionnaire (Fabris; Serapião, 2025) and a focus group. The data is presented descriptively, aiming to provide a clear overview of the findings before their in-depth analysis in the subsequent chapter.

3.1 Quantitative results (Questionnaire)

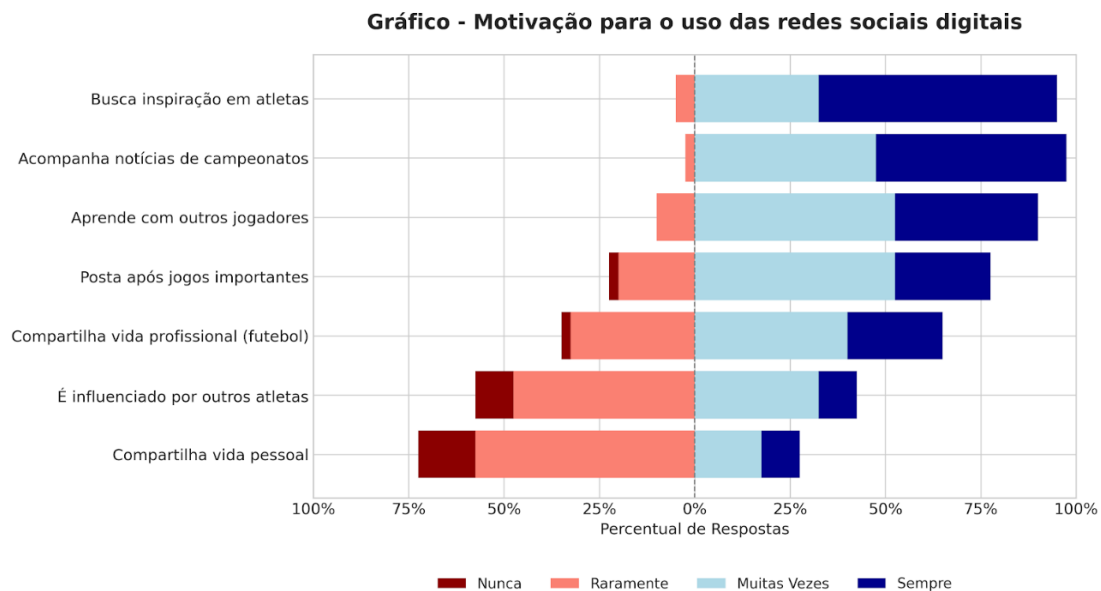
The first part of the results refers to the data collected with the questionnaire ($N = 40$), involving multiple-choice questions and items on a four-point Likert scale (1 to 4).

The presentation of the results focuses on the visual analysis of responses to Likert scales, using stacked bar graphs. This method was chosen because it allows for a clear visualization of the distribution and polarity of the responses. This visual analysis will be complemented in the following section, which will include a descriptive statistical analysis (mean and mode) and an in-depth discussion of the relationships and interpretations of the data, seeking a better understanding of the findings.

Figures 1 and 2 below summarize the data from the two thematic categories of the questionnaire: "Motivation for the use of digital social networks" and "Interaction with content related to football". It is important to highlight the legend of the scale used: for questions 6 to 12 and 31 to 34, the points range from 1 (Never) to 4 (Always); for questions 35 to 39, the range is from 1 (Never) to 4 (Very much). In the graphs, the colors represent the polarity of

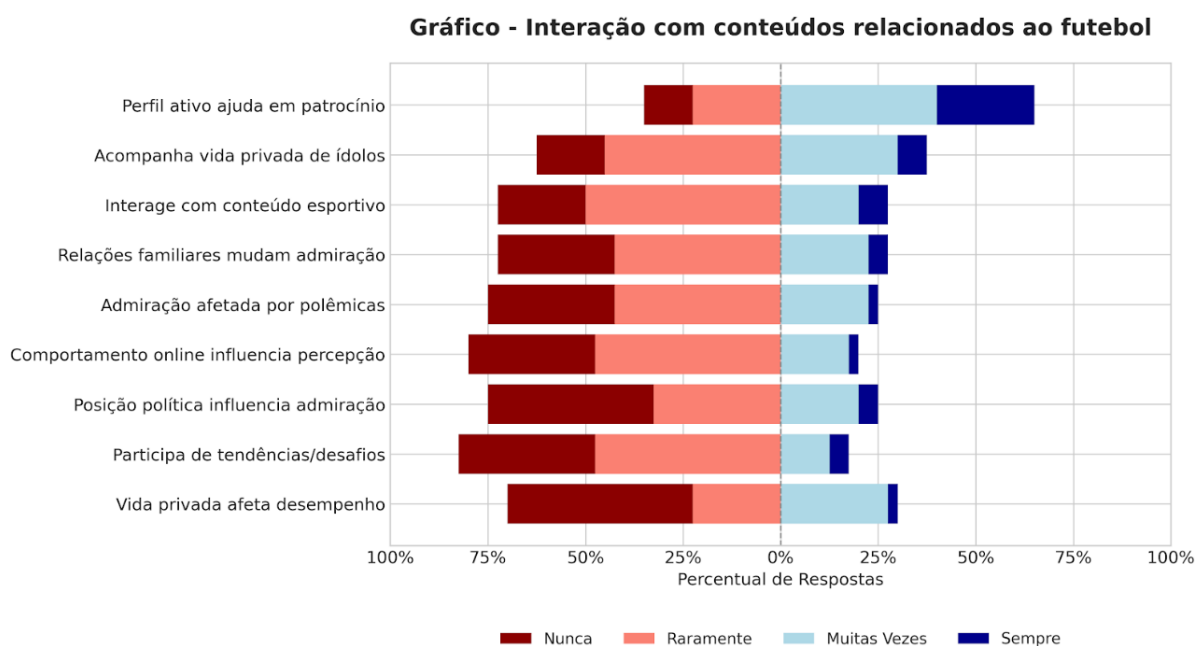
the responses, with shades of red for negative responses (1 and 2) and shades of blue for positive responses (3 and 4).

Figure 1- Motivation for the use of digital social networks



Source: Prepared by the author (2025)

Figure 2 Interaction with football-related content



Source: Prepared by the author (2025)

Table 1 shows the frequency of app usage, highlighting Instagram as the platform used by 100% of participants. WhatsApp and TikTok follow with high penetration, both with 95% usage. Table 2 details the motivations for access, pointing to "communication with friends and family" (95%) and "searching for football-related content" (85%) as the main reasons.

Table 1 – Frequency of use of social networking applications

Answers	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Instagram	40	100.0
TikTok	38	95.0
WhatsApp	38	95.0
YouTube	22	55.0
Snapchat	5	12.5
X (Twitter)	5	12.5
Telegram	2	5.0

Source: Prepared by the author (2025)

Table 2 – Motivations for accessing digital social networks

Answers	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Communicating with friends and family	38	95.0
Search for content and news about football	34	85.0
Search for specific content about football (games, championships, trivia)	31	77.5
Follow profiles of players, clubs, and sports commentators	28	70.0
Search for "humorous" content about football	26	65.0
Use as a hobby	21	52.5

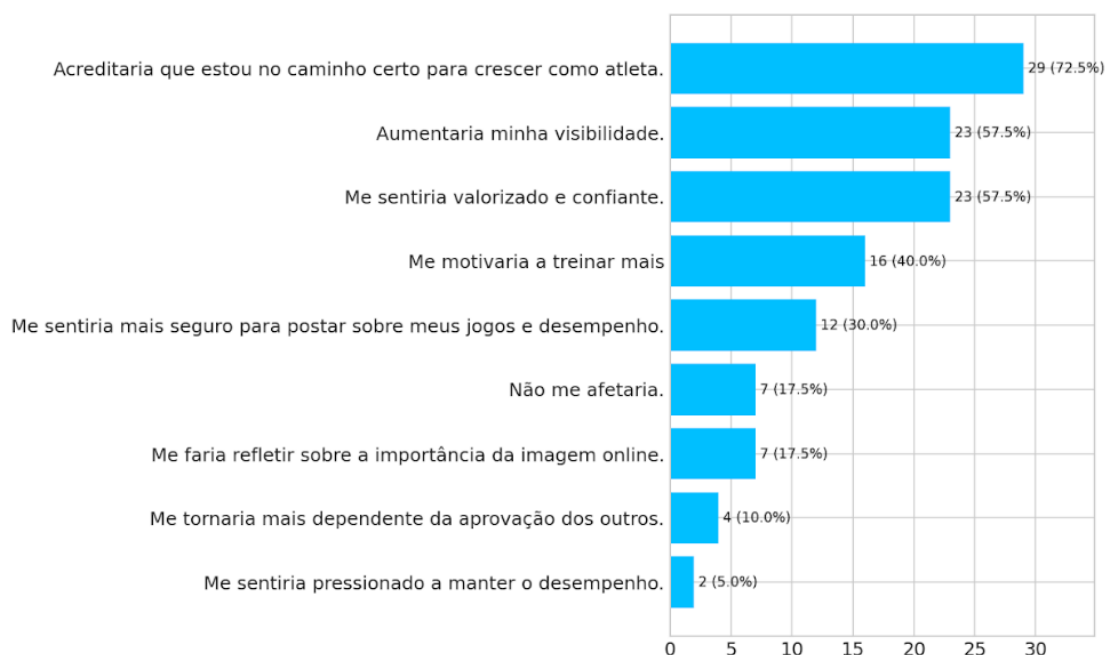
Sharing opinions and experiences about football	18	45.0
Follow news and general content	17	42.5
Entering <i>online games</i>	15	37.5
Sometimes as a hobby	1	2.5

Source: Prepared by the author (2025)

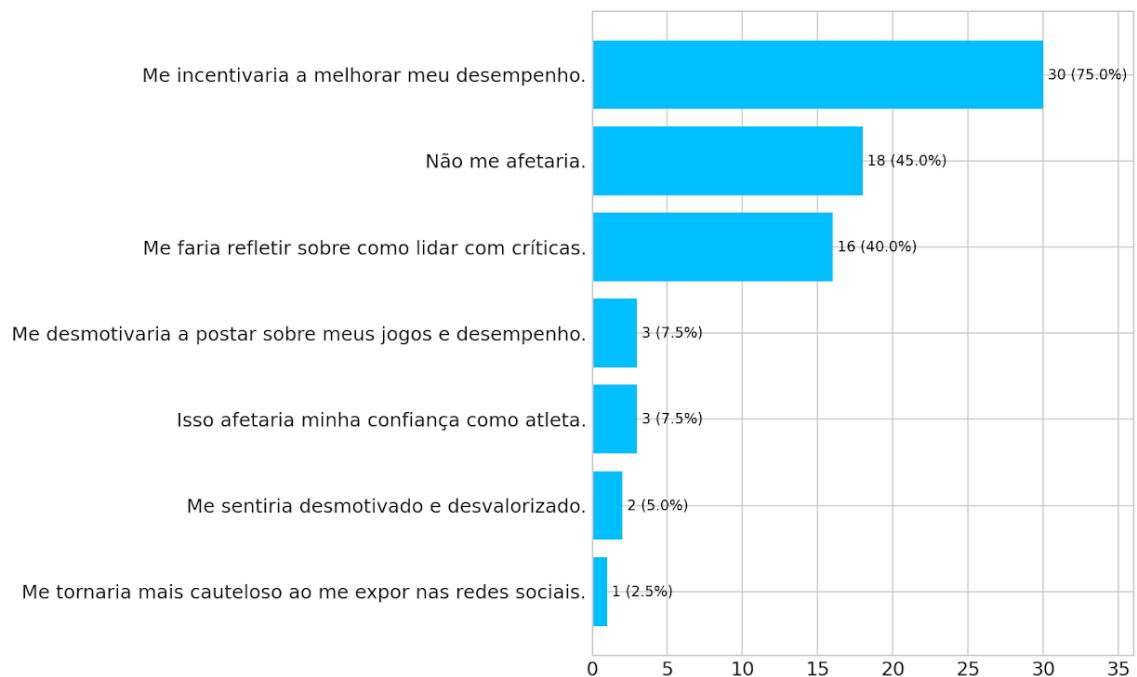
Figures 3 to 6 show the athletes' reactions to different stimuli in the digital environment. The majority (72.5%) interpret praise as a sign that they are "on the right track", while 57.5% say they feel "more valued and confident" (Figure 3). When faced with criticism, 75% of respondents say it "encourages them to improve their performance".

However, 45% stated that they were not affected by them (Figure 4). The absence of interactions on posts would not affect 60% of athletes. For 17.5%, the reaction would be a stimulus to improve the content (Figure 5). If a mistake went viral, the predominant reaction would be "ignoring the comments and maintaining the routine" (62.5%), followed by using the event as "motivation to improve" (57.5%) (Figure 6).

Figure 3- Effects of receiving praise on social media



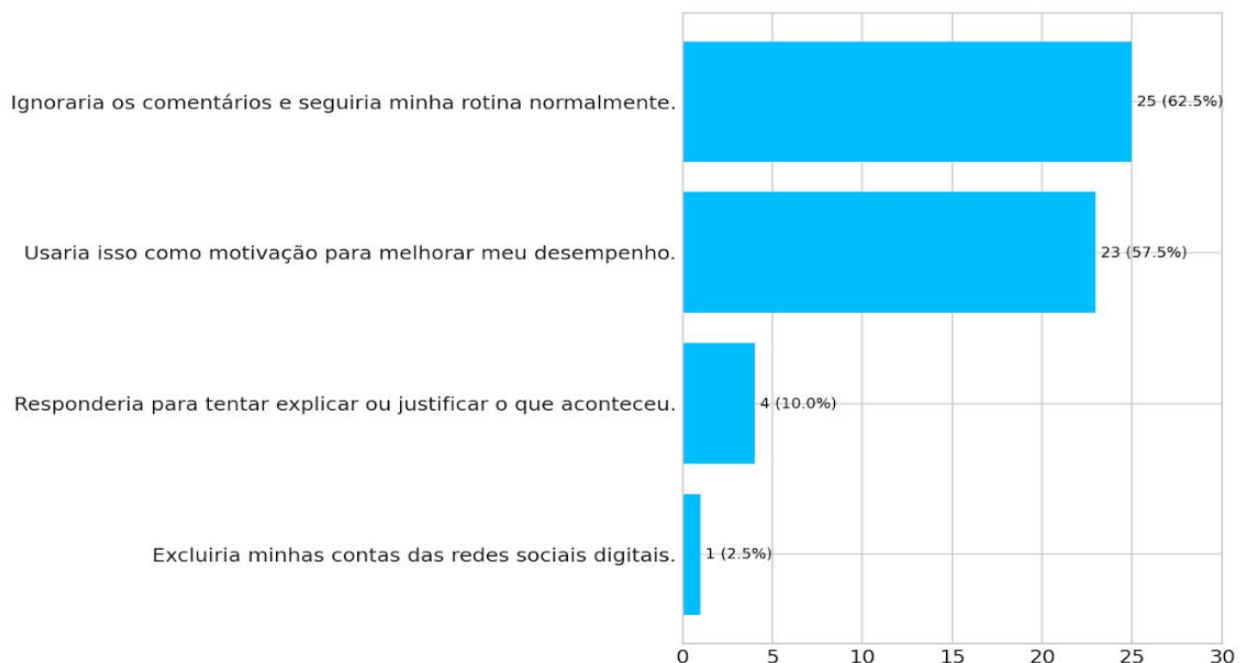
Source: Prepared by the author (2025)

Figure 4- Effects of receiving criticism on social media

Source: Prepared by the author (2025)

Figure 5 - The effects of lack of interaction in publications

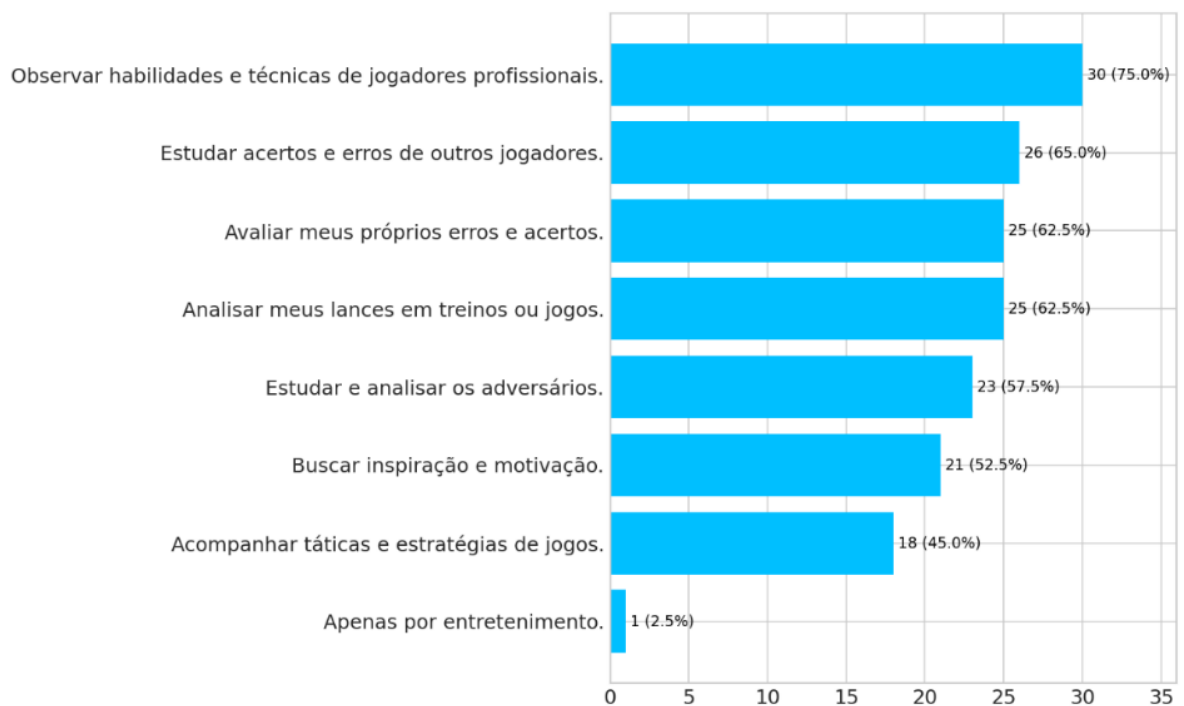
Source: Prepared by the author (2025)

Figure 6- Reaction to an error that went viral on social media

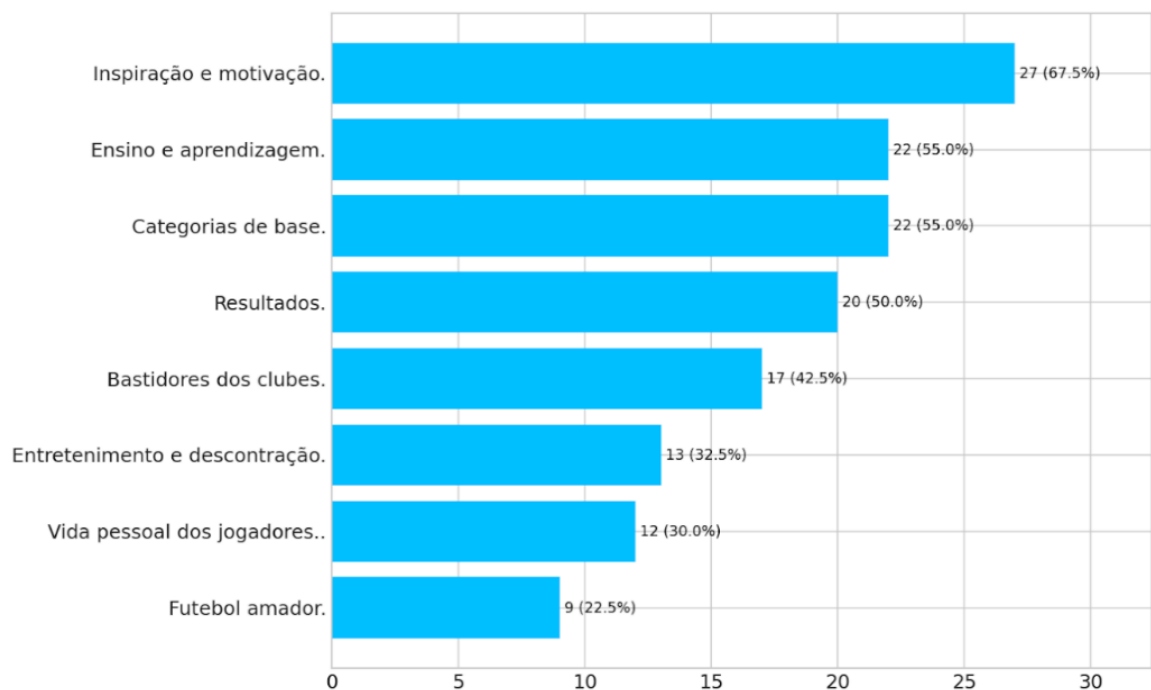
Source: Prepared by the author (2025)

Figures 7 to 9 detail how athletes consume soccer content. The main purposes are "observing skills and techniques" (75%), "studying the successes and failures of other players" (65%), and "performing self-assessment" (62.5%) (Figure 7).

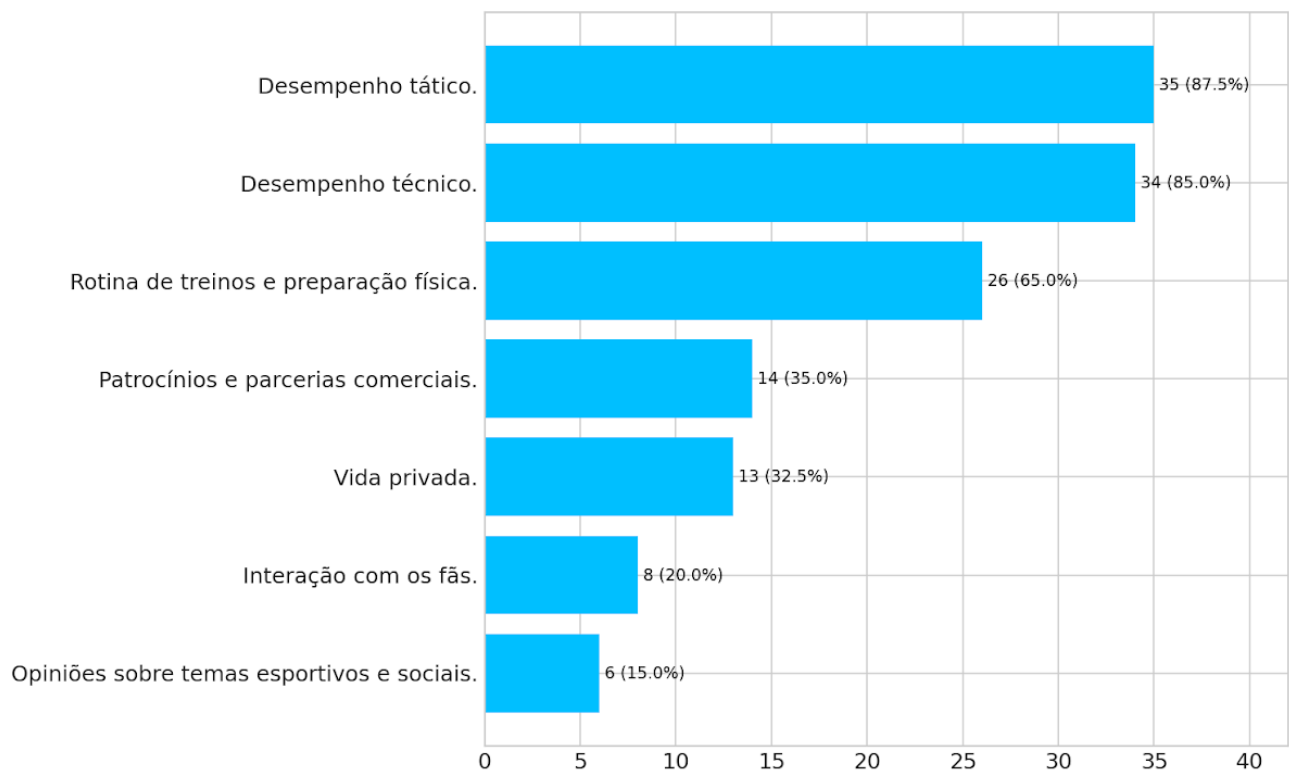
The search for "inspiration and motivation" (67.5%) is the focus, followed by "youth categories" and "teaching and learning" (both with 55%) (Figure 8). The aspects that arouse the most interest are "tactical performance" (87.5%) and "technical performance" (85.0%), followed by "training routine" (65.0%) (Figure 9).

Figure 7- Purposes of watching football videos

Source: Prepared by the author (2025)

Figure 8 - Focus of football content consumed on social media

Source: Prepared by the author (2025)

Figure 9 - Aspects that deserve more attention in content from famous players

Source: Prepared by the author (2025)

Regarding the topic of guidance and rules, 73% of survey participants indicated that they had already received specific guidance on how to use or behave on social media. Additionally, 60% stated that they agreed with the removal or prohibition of the use of these platforms before important games or competitions.

3.2 Qualitative Results (Focus Group)

The analysis of the focus group data was organized into five thematic categories that emerged from the athletes' statements. Each category presents the main points of the discussion, followed by excerpts that illustrate the group's perceptions.

The athletes highlighted their daily use of social media, with Instagram being the most frequently mentioned platform. The purpose of use was revealed to be twofold, encompassing both communication and content curation for image building.

Excerpt: "We use it for both watching and post the best plays from the games. We don't post the worst moments".

This statement highlights a careful selection of what is published to project a positive image, reflecting the construction of a strategic digital identity. Communication was also cited as a central reason:

Excerpt: *"We use it to communicate".*

Despite their intensive use, the group downplays the essential nature of the platforms, placing them in a secondary position compared to other priorities.

Excerpt: *"Communication is necessary, but it's not essential".*

This perception contrasts with the reported frequency of use, suggesting that, for many, access to social networks has already become a naturalized practice integrated into daily life.

Young people demonstrate a strong engagement with sports content, especially when following famous athletes, which reinforces the inspirational and aspirational role of social media.

Excerpt: *"We follow famous players, like Cristiano Ronaldo, Messi, and people from Europe".*

The mirroring of elite professionals is evident, encompassing not only on-field performance but also image management and personal life.

Excerpt: *"He [Neymar] posts about his daily life, photos with his daughter, and now also about his recovery".*

This behavior validates the research hypothesis that amateur gamers use social media not only for self-promotion, but also as a space for learning and inspiration. However, the choice of whom to follow is selective and reflects a critical stance.

Excerpt: *"We don't follow everyone, like Neymar, some people think he's not the best".*

The athletes demonstrated an ambivalent stance regarding the emotional impact of social media. While they downplayed their discomfort with negative comments, their selection of positive content for posting reveals a concern for their image.

Excerpt: *"Sometimes, there are some highlights from our games, but only the good ones".*

The indifference shown towards negative feedback can be understood as a strategy for emotional self-preservation, essential in a high-exposure environment.

Excerpt: *"No", (in response to the question about being bothered by negative comments).*

The interaction between football and social media is perceived as hierarchical. Football occupies a central position in the lives of athletes, while social media assumes a secondary, but still relevant, role.

Excerpt: *"Football is life, almost like therapy. Social media, on the other hand, is a pastime".*

This hierarchy reflects the importance of sports practice as a structuring element of daily life, while social networks function as support for socialization and entertainment. The athletes' view of the relationship is summarized in the emotional value associated with sport.

Excerpt: *"Football is passion. It's essential in life".*

Despite the growing role of social media, participants confirmed the absence of formal guidance from the club regarding its responsible use.

Excerpt: *"No, nobody gives any guidance".*

The only form of control mentioned is the restriction of internet access at specific times, revealing an indirect concern from the technical committee about excessive use.

Excerpt: *"At the accommodation, when it gets to 10 o'clock, we cut off the internet".*

However, the young people revealed that they adopt strategies to circumvent these restrictions, which demonstrates both the importance of social networks in their daily lives and a resistance to the rules imposed.

Excerpt: *"But we take more than one [cell phone] [laughs]".*

4 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

This chapter is dedicated to triangulating and discussing the research findings, synthesizing quantitative and qualitative data to build a deeper understanding of the relationship between youth athletes and digital social networks. The goal is to go beyond description, contextualizing the results within a broader sporting and media landscape, focusing on the reality studied.

The research reveals a starting point: total digital immersion. The hegemony of Instagram, used by 100% of respondents, is the backdrop for dual and strategic behavior. If on the one hand the networks are used for communication and socialization, on the other, they function as a career management tool.

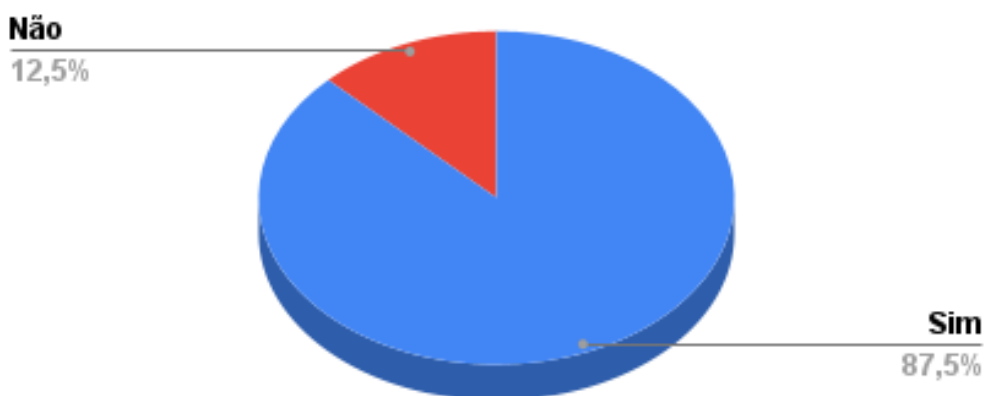
Qualitative analysis enriched this data by revealing a concern with certain content, summarized in the statement "posting only the 'best plays' and omitting the 'worst moments'".

This practice demonstrates that, beyond social use, digital platforms are stages for building a positive professional image (Figure 10). This represents the emergence of a personal and professional brand at an early stage, a phenomenon aligned with the increasing spectacularization of football, where media performance becomes almost as important as on-field performance (Prieb, 2018).

What is observed is a reflection, at the grassroots level, of what is already consolidated in professionalism: the need to manage one's own image as an asset, as seen in cases of young athletes like Endrick, whose brand management and digital presence were strategically built even before his professional debut (Ge.globo, 2024).

Figure 10 - Using social media to promote your career.

20. Você acredita que as redes sociais digitais podem promover a sua carreira?



Source: Prepared by the author (2025)

Alongside the construction of this digital identity, a remarkably resilient athlete profile emerges. Most claim not to be shaken by criticism (75% use it to improve) or by a lack of engagement (60% would not be affected). Qualitative analysis deepens this statistic, revealing the mentality behind it; the clear hierarchy expressed in the phrase "Football is life [...] social media is a pastime" demonstrates a somewhat mature defense mechanism that shields the focus.

This psychological shielding becomes a fundamental survival tool, because in an environment where athletes are frequently targeted by attacks and hate speech, as documented by SaferNet Brasil, developing this dissociation between *online validation* and intrinsic motivation is crucial. The findings of this study contrast with the growing concern for mental health in sports, a topic that led the CBF itself to create specific directorates and protocols for the "well-being" of athletes (CBF, 2023). This aspect found in the research results may indicate not an absence of problems, but the development of individual coping strategies in the absence of more structured institutional support, which is not a positive development.

It is precisely at this point that the analysis encounters its greatest tension. The divergence between the quantitative and qualitative data on club guidance reveals one of the significant findings of this study: while 73% of questionnaire respondents stated that they had already received specific guidance, the response in the focus group was unanimous and opposite: "No, nobody gives guidance". The contradiction deepens when 60% claim to agree with the restriction on cell phones before games, but the focus group openly admits to the practice of circumventing the rule. This discrepancy indicates that the effectiveness of the guidance is directly linked to its ability to generate adherence and conscious behavior, something that does not occur with the focus group.

This lack of adherence is an important point, given the increasing discussions about the risks of excessive use of digital social networks and contact with "screens" for athletic performance. This prolonged exposure, especially at night, is associated with mental fatigue and decreased sleep quality, factors that directly impact reaction time and decision-making (Mello et al., 2017). This tension between autonomy and risk is not experienced in the same way by everyone. *Cluster analysis* deepens this heterogeneity, revealing two contrasting philosophies on how to manage a career in the digital age (Table 3).

Group 1, Socially Connected (52.5%), is characterized by deep immersion in the digital ecosystem. With a greater propensity to share personal and football-related content, this group is more susceptible to the social dimension of sport, being the only one to state that they would unfollow an athlete because of their behavior. The absence of an institutional guide, confirmed in the focus group, seems to intensify their search for *online references and behavioral models*, increasing their connection and sensitivity to the digital environment.

Group 2, Focused on the Field (47.5%), maintains a critical distance from the digital environment. Their philosophy, encapsulated in the phrase "football is life, social media is a pastime", explains why they can maintain a more rigid separation between the field and the

digital public sphere. For them, social networks are an extension of training: 75% use them to "observe skills and techniques" and 85% focus on the "technical performance" of their idols. Media consumption is not passive, but an active learning process, in which digital platforms serve as a vast archive of study material.

Table 3 – Cluster Composition

Characteristic/Variable Analyzed	Cluster 1: Socially Connected (<i>n</i> =21, 52.5%)	Cluster 2: Focused on the Field (<i>n</i> = 19, 47.5%)
Engagement and Personal Exposure		
Sharing personal content (Average 1-4)	2.52	1.89
Sharing of football content (Average 1-4)	3.1	2.63
Influence of Social Networks		
Training is influenced by social media (Standard Response)	"Yes, I have sometimes adopted habits..."	"No, my training is never influenced..."
Perception that private life affects performance (Average 1-4)	2.1	1.58
Unfollowed athlete due to behavior (Standard Response)	Yes	No
Reaction to a technical video (Standard Response)	"I try to reproduce the movement..."	"I share with colleagues..."
Institutional Guidance		
Club provides guidance on the use of social networks (Standard Response)	They guide	They do not provide guidance.
Opinion on the pre-game cell phone ban (Standard Response)	I disagree.	I agree

Source: Prepared by the author (2025), based on the results of the SimpleKMeans algorithm in the Weka software.

In summary, the analysis reveals a profile of a young athlete who is a hybrid and sophisticated digital individual. They are simultaneously content producers, a manager of their own brand, a student of the game, and a young person immersed in the complexities of *online socialization*. Instead of being mere spectators, they act proactively, using content to learn and leveraging feedback to evolve.

However, this autonomy and resilience develop within an institutional gap, where formal club guidance is ineffective or nonexistent. The modern young athlete is therefore learning to play two games simultaneously: one on the field and another, equally or more complex, on their mobile phone screen.

3 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study aimed to analyze how youth athletes interact with the world of digital social networks, seeking to understand their usage patterns, motivations, and perception of the impacts on their career paths. The research revealed a much more complex and sophisticated athlete profile than common sense might suggest. A young person who, while developing their skills on the field, learns to navigate and strategically position themselves in a mediated and intense digital ecosystem.

The results point to three central conclusions. First, the early consolidation of the "brand-athlete" was observed, an agent who uses platforms not only for socialization but also as a tool for image management and personal brand building, in line with the dynamics of the society of the spectacle (Debord, 1997) and adapted to the digital age. Second, an athlete with remarkable psychological resilience was revealed, capable of developing shielding mechanisms against the pressures of the *online environment*, dissociating extrinsic feedback from their intrinsic motivation.

The third and most critical conclusion, however, is the existence of a profound institutional gap. The discrepancy between the guidance that athletes claim to receive and the reality of ineffective supervision and circumvented rules exposes a specific flaw in the clubs. This finding suggests that sports institutions still operate under a logic of control and prohibition, focused on results and performance, rather than one of holistic athlete development.

The practical implications of this study are straightforward. The current approach of clubs is centered on rules and information simply imposed on athletes, without promoting critical reflection (Freire, 2019). The result, as seen, is superficial adherence and veiled resistance. The alternative, therefore, lies in a media-based preparation model based on dialogue, awareness, and the construction of practical tools on how to deal with these issues. Instead of adopting a purely restrictive approach, such as banning cell phones, clubs can develop psychological preparation programs.

In collaboration with athletes, such programs should focus on developing coping skills to deal with the pressures and distractions stemming from digital social networks, which, as Weinberg and Gould (2017) point out, can directly impact concentration, confidence, and anxiety control in the competitive environment.

It is necessary to acknowledge the limitations of this work. The sample, while revealing, represents a specific cross-section and does not allow for generalizations to the entire Brazilian youth football system. Furthermore, the research captures a moment in time, being unable to analyze the evolution of this relationship throughout the transition to a professional career.

In light of the above, this study opens avenues for future challenges. Longitudinal studies that follow the same generation of athletes from grassroots to professional level would be valuable in order to map changes in their digital behavior. Comparative research between different sports, including women's sports, is also essential for a broader understanding of the phenomenon. Finally, the development and evaluation of intervention programs focused on critical media literacy development is suggested, measuring their real impact on the well-being and behavior of young athletes.

It can be concluded, therefore, that training a high-performance athlete in the 21st century is an inseparable task from training a citizen integrated into the digital environment. Ignoring cyberspace is no longer an option. The challenge for training clubs is to update their intervention proposals, replacing prohibition with preparation and silence with dialogue, understanding that the next generation of football players will be forged both on the pitch and online.

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