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The impacts of virtual social networks on mental health: a literature review

Sidney Emanuel Carneiro dos Santos^{1*}; Amanda Aparecida da Silva Caldas²; Débora Patrícia da Silva Lira³; Liliane Giselle da Silva⁴; Andreelly Vidal Barbosa da Silva⁵; Alicia Isabelly Cavalcanti de Andrade⁶; Paula Rejane dos Santos Silva⁷; Elaine Maria Canejo Vicente da Silva⁸; Jennifer Beatriz da Silva Faccioli⁹; Francielly Kamila de Andrade Silva Santos¹⁰; Bianca Amorim Araújo¹¹; Maria Sonally da Silva Oliveira¹²; Pierre Teodosio Felix¹³

1 -12 Psychology Student at University Center of Vitoria de Santo Antônio - UNIVISA

13 Professor Psychology course at University Center of Vitoria de Santo Antônio - UNIVISA

E-mail address: Sidney Emanuel Carneiro dos Santos (sidneycarneiro20@icloud.com)

*Corresponding author

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Abstract: Introduction: The speed of information has never been so high and in the last 20 years, we have seen the digital advancement with the internet evolving at a frightening speed when compared to the evolution of books. The benefits achieved in various areas such as health, safety and especially in education are undeniable, such as what was seen in the COVID-19 pandemic with an important and significant renewal. However, the excessive use of virtual social networks has generated dependence, affected social relationships and impacted the mental health of children and the elderly. In the light of these observations, several authors question the impacts of excessive use of virtual social networks on the mental health of their users. Objective: The objective of this article was to relate the impacts of excessive use of social networks on the mental health of its users. Methodology: The methodology of this article was a qualitative literature review, with a selection of articles, monographs, books, published in a time period from 2011 to 2023. Conclusion: It is concluded in this study that the relationship between excessive uses of virtual social networks results in technological dependence, distancing from social life, increased levels of anxiety, depression and cyber bullying. Affecting the mental health of users, regardless of their age groups, and multidisciplinary psychological support seems to be the only strategy to correct excesses in the use of networks.

Keywords: Social Networks. Mental health. Anxiety. Depression. Technological dependence.

1. Introduction

The speed of information has never been higher and in the last 20 years, we have seen the digital advancement with the internet evolving at a frightening speed when compared to the evolution of books. In 2021, the number of households with internet access in Brazil reached 90.0%, according to data from the National Household Sample Survey. In absolute terms, there are 65.6 million connected households, 5.8 million more than in 2019. It is very common for most people to have access to the internet and at the same time be users of

social networks, Brazil is the second country that occupies the most time per day on the internet, being online on average 9 hours and 29 minutes per day, and 40% (3 hours and 34 minutes) of this time is used in social media (IBGE, 2021). In view of the numbers presented, it is clear how much technology has taken space in the lives of individuals; it is as if human beings could no longer live without this technological tool.

Teixeira makes a connection between the internet and the brain:

"The internet is the most neuromorphic technology that

has ever been invented. In other words, it is extremely similar to the human brain. Its architecture is similar to a huge neural network. [...] Without realizing it, when we surf the internet, we have the feeling that we are traveling inside a large human brain, a complex network of synapses linking neurons to each other. Links, which always refer to other links in a never-ending process, are organized in the same way as the circuits in our brain. Going from one link to another and often even forgetting the original reason why we joined the network happens all too often. [...] The internet, built as a huge neural network, is a gigantic imitation of the human brain. Nothing can be more comforting than to find ourselves in the world when we look everywhere. (TEIXEIRA, 2014, p. 53)".

In view of the comparison described by Teixeira (2014), perhaps it is this relationship that provides a clear dependence of human beings on technology. However, digital advancement has brought undeniable benefits in various areas such as health, security and especially in education, such as what was seen in the COVID-19 pandemic with an important and significant renewal. However, it is clear how much it's excessive use of virtual social networks also brings harm, has generated dependence, affected social relationships and impacted the mental health of children and the elderly.

Silva and Silva, (2017) stated that the use of the internet every day causes family conflicts, resulting from the lack of dialogue, in addition, they lead to superficial relationships, learning difficulties, anxiety disorders and attention deficit. Letters are no longer written or used by the conventional telephone to talk to the interlocutor, as in the past. The vast majority of communication has been through social networks, which has become a powerful tool in the age of the information society.

For (SOUZA and CUNHA 2019) the theme "social networks" has been related to digital technology, internet and mobile devices. Faced with various views, it is notorious that technology has been increasingly influencing the lives of young people, just as it is also visible that there are currently young people depriving themselves of a real social life in exchange for a virtual one. And it is in youth that the use of technology can become a dependency, as it is where pre-judgments are carried out, where relationships are declared and displayed in "public", in front of people who are often strangers.

Social networks have influenced the way we think, act, and behave, since they are [...] more intimate tools, the ones we use for self-expression, to shape our public and personal identity, and to cultivate relationships with others." (CARR, 2011).

It is then a world of attractive and inviting possibilities that the applications and websites of these social networks present to their users, they are platforms created for people to spend the most of their lives there, posting, sharing, liking, following, commenting, watching, consuming content,

buying, it is a new kind of "life", and who is immersed in that moment, with the cell phone in hand and browsing social networks, he is so involved and immersed in the world of networks that this can impact the life that exists outside this immense digital world (COSTA, 2021), social interactions are occurring in a way mediated by social technologies, with a change in the way humanity socializes today.

According to the thinking of (SOUZA and CUNHA 2019), the excessive use of social media reveals an environment where young people come to verbally attack people with ideas and cultures different from their own, which can later cause psychological damage to others.

In accordance with the paragraph above, (COSTA, 2021) states that the excessive use of social networks can generate negative impacts on mental health; users do not consciously consume content on social networks and, therefore, psychological and emotional suffering may emerge as a result of excessive and indiscriminate use; The exacerbated use of digital social networks can contribute to the development of psychological problems such as anxiety and depression.

Excessive use of the internet, which in adolescence can occur at night, can affect memory or the ability to synthesize, with poor school performance, difficulty concentrating or drowsiness being warning signs, in addition, the (RUSSI 2021; CERISOLA, 2017; PIN GROVES, 2019) states that similarly, its use before bed can impact concentration problems or lead to poor sleep, which can affect cognitive performance.

2. Methodology

Regarding the methodology, the research is of a basic, descriptive nature, as for its approach it will be qualitative, hypothetical deductive, it will be carried out through the literature review on research platforms, such as Google Scholar, Scielo, websites, repositories, reports, articles and works published in the time period from 2011 to 2023.

3. Results and Discussion

The excessive use of virtual social networks has generated dependence, affected social relationships and impacted the mental health of children and the elderly. In the light of these observations, several authors question the impacts of excessive use of virtual social networks on the mental health of their users.

When analyzing the use of social networks as a preponderant factor for *cyber bullying* and depression (SOUZA and CUNHA, 2019) followed by depressive symptoms such as social isolation, drop in performance, suicidal ideation. Sampasa-kaying and Hamilton (2015) stated that there is a relationship between depression and *cyber bullying* that is different from other authors who believe that they are two different things

Silva and Silva (2017) selected signs of dependence on

digital technology such as abstinence from the use of networks, emotional instability, drop in school performance in cases of young people and adolescents and consequently difficulty in family and social life, (SOUZA and CUNHA, 2019) presented a quantitative survey among young people and adolescents, where 14% of 566 adolescents said they felt safer in the virtual world.

Brazilians are at the top of the list, worldwide, of the most time spent on social networks according to IBGE (2018) Brazilians are at the top of the list, worldwide, of the most time spent on social networks, knowing that the excessive use of networks directly affects mental well-being, Pereira (2014) it is necessary to measure the time of use, In addition to the constant fear of being outdated, in case you are left without access to the networks, it is necessary to monitor and limit those responsible in cases of young people and adolescents.

Thus, the need to be connected all the time, causing emotional and physical damage, Twenge (2017), states that the suicide rate has grown in recent decades, in the generation of technology.

In view of the above, it is understood that digital social networks have their harms and benefits, such as communicating with someone without necessarily being present in the same space, but they also cause harm to the quality of life, so we have to question ourselves about the quantity of content, in view of everything that has been said.

4. Conclusion

To understand the questions about the impacts of the use of virtual social networks on mental health, it is necessary to have an analysis in the field of psychology and to understand what mental health is in order to proceed effectively, since a large part of the population currently experiences this problem with the media and in an uncontrolled way. The issues of this theme are quite intense, since the internet is now practically everywhere, and has had a great growth with the arrival of COVID-19. Despite being a recent area, a variety of results were found in the research that allowed us to find answers and paths to the questions found at the beginning of this review.

It can be seen that this is a contemporary subject and that it has positive and negative points of the use of social networks, it is something challenging for the field of psychology, but very necessary. This study allows for a broad approach with important aspects of these impacts. The general objective of this research was to address how mental health is immersed in communication technologies. Based on the results found in the development of the research, we can indicate that the proposed object was achieved.

Among the main results, it is highlighted that excessive use of social networks among adolescents and young people can impact mental health, making it necessary to investigate further, with psychologists to identify some types of behaviors outside the standards presented by these young people. This article contributed to describe the impacts of the exaggerated use of social networks on mental and physical health. Where

various types of disorders are observed, with different pathologies.

The present study addressed the impacts of excessive use of virtual social networks on the mental health of different age groups, revealing a contemporary problem that demands attention and intervention. Throughout this literature review, significant results were identified that provide valuable insights into the consequences of excessive use of social networks.

Initially, it was evidenced that the excessive use of social networks results in a technological dependence, affecting the quality of social interactions and the psychological well-being of users. The distancing from social life, the increase in levels of anxiety, depression and the occurrence of cases of cyber bullying are some of the worrying manifestations identified.

A highlight is the needs for multidisciplinary approaches to deal with this problem, since the impacts on mental health are widespread, affecting both young and old. Psychological support proved to be essential to correct the excesses in the use of social networks and promote a more balanced relationship with technology.

In summary, this work contributed to a comprehensive understanding of the impacts of the exaggerated use of social networks on mental and physical health, highlighting the need for appropriate interventions and the continuity of research in this field. The health, well-being, and mental health of the general population can benefit significantly from a more mindful and balanced approach to virtual social networks.

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