

# Behavioral disorders and Internet social networking

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Updated by topics

## SUMMARY

On the present study, the concepts regarding Internet social networking, psychological addiction and behavioral disorders are described and analyzed from a psychological perspective with the purpose of understanding the phenomenon of the persistency of using ISN and its possible implications. Derived from this, some recommendations are presented that will support professionals in the study of the human behavior meaning to identify and avoid or minimize a potential problem for the activity abuse that belonging to such networks imply.

**Key words:** Internet Social Networking, psychological addiction, behavioral disorders.

## RESUMEN

Se describen y analizan los conceptos relacionados con las redes sociales en Internet, la adicción psicológica y los trastornos de conducta desde una perspectiva psicológica con el fin de comprender el fenómeno de la persistencia de uso de las RSI y sus posibles implicaciones. Derivado de lo anterior se exponen algunas recomendaciones que apoyarán a los profesionales en el estudio del comportamiento humano para identificar y evitar o minimizar un potencial problema por el abuso de la actividad que implica pertenecer a dichas redes.

**Palabras clave:** Redes sociales en Internet, adicción psicológica, trastornos de conducta.

## INTRODUCTION

### Social Networking

With the advent of information and communication technologies and their insertion in society, the ways of communicating have changed through the last 10 years in nearly the whole world. With the exception of the citizens of countries which carry out cyber censorship, like Saudi Arabia, Armenia, Bahrain, Belarus, Burma, China, Cuba, Iran, North Korea, South Korea, Syria, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Vietnam (CPJ, 2012;<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia<sup>2</sup>), among others, nearly most of the world's society has access to the Internet and, consequently, to the mentioned Internet Social Networks (ISN). To talk about social networking implies understanding its meaning. A social network is a structure made up by a set of actors, individuals or organizations that are linked by interpersonal bonds, which can be interpreted as friendship, kinship or common interests relationships. Thus considered, we all belong, one way or another, to a social network. Nowadays, and specifically Internet Social Networks (ISN), are diagrams that allow in-

dividuals to deal with a common point of interest to share contents on different communication formats and establish interpersonal relationships. Their peculiarity is the communication through the Internet.

Every time people naturally need to establish communication with others and ISN have broken the time and space barriers for establishing and continue interpersonal relationships by means of ideas exchange, ISN have become an important opportunity for the users since synchronous and asynchronous means of communication are provided.

The importance of the ISN lies in how easy it is to subscribe to them, the speediness for sending and receiving information, the protection and distribution of the narrative expressed there, the contacts addition and multiplication, the versatility of topics to be treated nearly at the same time, the expeditious way of making new relationships and, even, to grow indifferent to them. According to ComScore Inc.,<sup>3</sup> the use of ISN is the most popular activity in the whole world, representing almost one in each five minutes spent on the Internet globally. On 2011 it was calculated that, among people older than 15 years of age, 82% of them has access to the Internet from a personal computer at home or

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at work and each one of them has an account on some ISN, Twitter and email. Back then, Facebook had more than half (55%) of the worldwide audience.

It is interesting to know that there is a great number of ISN with great topic diversity and their popularity greatly depends on the geographical area where the source of support is located, the topic they deal with and the original language or languages of their of the target users. Various informative sources have attempted to measure the *ranking* of the ISN and most agree that Facebook, Flickr, LinkedIn, Myspace, Twitter, Badoo, hi5, Orkut, Qzone and Renren were the 10 main ISN of the world during 2010-2011, according to Google,<sup>4</sup> Periodista Digital,<sup>5</sup> Web Empresa 2.0,<sup>6</sup> Taringa,<sup>7</sup> SocialDente<sup>8</sup> y El Economista.es.<sup>9</sup>

In a study performed by Mashable,<sup>10</sup> the number of accounts was reported that the following ISN have on the first quarter of 2012 in the United States: Facebook, seven billion; Twitter, 182 million; Pinterest, 104 million; LinkedIn, 86 million; Tagged, 72 million; Google+, 61 million. In the case of Mexico, the Mexican Internet Association (AMIPICI)<sup>11</sup> reported that 90% of the people surveyed in a study performed on 2012 use Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google+ and LinkedIn. The age groups of the users who use Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Google+ range between 12 and 34 years old, being the larger proportion those between 12 and 24 years old. Part of this information was confirmed through Consulta Mitofsky,<sup>12</sup> which stated that 57% of Facebook users are between 18 and 30 years old. In the case of Twitter, the greatest use is within young people who attend school and who belong to a high socioeconomic level; 60% of its users are between 18 and 30 years old. On the other hand, Social Baker<sup>13</sup> confirmed that there are nearly 40 million Facebook accounts registered in Mexico, thus occupying the fifth place on the global *ranking*. Regarding Twitter, Semiocast<sup>14</sup> ascertained, at the beginning of 2012, the existence of nearly 10.5 million accounts registered in Mexico, thus occupying the seventh place worldwide.

Although there are many means of communication, supported by information and communication technologies, not every option provides the user with the diversity offered by the specialized ISN. In the case of the Facebook platform, we have the possibility to, among other things, check the profiles of potential and accepted friends; search, invite, receive or reject contacts, forming new communities or groups, sub groups or combinations of them; placing images, classify them, assign them to the wall, rate, touch and label them; send instant messages (*chat*) or using email with an inbox for integrating or sharing the received messages; interacting face to face through videoconferences; play in thousands of social recreational spaces; post Rich Site Summary messages (RSS), use it as a reference space for redirecting to other websites of interest and share communication tools with other web resources, including

Twitter; administering events with a calendar that gives alerts about the registered dates, as well as locate, share, see and hear music or video archives.

On the other hand, Twitter is a free *microblogging web* application (140-character messages) that possesses the advantages of *blogs*, social networks and instant messaging. Both applications, Facebook and Twitter, work through the *web*, on mobile phones or other devices connected to the Internet.

## COMMUNICATION

In spite of the diversity of communicational functions that can take advantage of the scenarios of the ISN, it is important clarifying the one thing is the "information transfer process" and another thing is the "communicative process". In the first the static nature of the role of the emitter prevails, while the communicative process is known for the reciprocal action between emitter and recipient by constantly changing said roles. The remittance of a message (data) through the means of communication of the ISN does not guarantee that the potential recipient will receive it and transform it into information. When the emitter sends a content to another person – the potential recipient – and he decodes it (deciphers and understands it= information) to subsequently change his role as a recipient to an emitter and acting reciprocally with the objective of giving feedback to the original emitter about the content received, social interaction is promoted, according to Saladriga.<sup>15</sup> Seeing the communicational process from this perspective, it becomes important recalling some definitions of communication:

"...exchange of feelings, opinions or any other kind of information through speech, written word or other types of signal";

"...it is a structure transfer process between those parts of a system that are identifiable in time or space";

"...a mechanism by which the human relationships exist and are developed, i.e. all the symbols of the mind along with the means for transmitting them through space and preserving them through time";

"... a transactional phenomenon affected reciprocally or mutually affected by the members that are part of it, who are also influenced by it". (Taken from Flores).<sup>16</sup>

The diversity of definitions is caused by communication scholars paying special attention to the message transfer process, the efficacy of the process, the meaning of the message or on symbolic transmission, as informed by Beltrán<sup>17</sup> on 2006.

## Behavioral disorders

The world changes continuously and with the popularization of ISN a diversity of new behaviors has been identified

in societies and their individuals. In the field of health, a new kind of "addiction" is being discussed, known as *Internet addiction*, *cybersex addiction* or *social network addiction*, topics still being studied by international psychiatry and psychology literature. The repercussion of the assessments interpreted as atypical behaviors by the use of Internet resources promoted that during 2012 the pertinence was analyzed as whether to consider them (or not) within the classification of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5)<sup>18</sup> published by the American Psychiatric Association on May, 2013, since on that same Manual, on the DSM-IV version, the topic was not included, as commented by Luengo.<sup>19</sup>

Apart from the possible insertion of the many "addictions" derived from Internet use on the aforementioned Manual, a variety of behaviors have become more and more evident, even though there were previously not observed in people, precisely because the resources offered by the Internet today did not exist then; at least they were not at the people's dispose like now. This kind of "abnormal" behavior have been studied since the second half of the 1990's decade, still as possible addiction to the Internet since the wide variety of communication resources that exist nowadays has not been spread or developed. Nowadays the topic has been thoroughly reviewed and there are organizations that take for granted the existence of addictions linked to the use of the Internet or its services. As an example, the following Websites that help society to identify or analyze possible Internet addictions and treatments can be mentioned: Rider University,<sup>20</sup> The Center a Place of Hope<sup>21</sup> or Healthy Place, from the American's Mental Health Channel.<sup>22</sup>

It becomes necessary now to direct our attention towards the term "abnormal" since its meaning has various interpretations. Let us begin with the following question: ¿Abnormal (countering "normal")... to whom? Let us see some examples.

On 2011, in the city of Oaxaca, Mexico, the application for civil marriage was denied to a female couple. The correspondent authorities supported their rejection in the State Civil Code, which considered marriage as a legal union between a man and a woman (Provincia Newspaper).<sup>23</sup>

In this case, what is "normal" is subject of a "rule" which comes from the customs and habits of a community, regardless that other States of the Mexican Republic and other countries have modified the civil codes regarding this subject and marriage between individuals of the same sex is now allowed.

Another example: for a great amount of people older than 65 years of age, a videoconference made through a computer can seem to be something that is "not normal" (abnormal) since most of their lives they did not have contact with this resource; but for most of

today's young people it is part of daily life, as well as the use of mobile devices and ISN. Here, what is normal is subordinated to the criteria related to the element usage amount or frequency, regarding people's lives.

In China, using the name of politician "Bo Xilai" or his initials "BXL" on ISN is penalized with risk of being blocked or even pursued by the law, since authorities of the country interpret said action as a threat, for the possible rumors regarding civil protests, which could provoke social problems oriented towards a "coup d'état", according to Lara.<sup>24</sup> I.e, for the chinese government, the use of ISN for communicating political messages threatens the functionality of its organization. Using ISN for sending political messages is abnormal among the chinese.

From this, we could accept that the behavior qualified as "abnormal" is that which is deviated from the rules or criteria of what is considered as right in a certain group of people, in a determined culture and historical moment.

Specifically, on the research field that studies human behavior the topic has been analyzed from various perspectives with the purpose of attempting to understand the so-called abnormal behaviors (Sarason and Sarason)<sup>25</sup> and, on the whole, the landmark of abnormal psychology lies on the comprehension and description of what causes unhappiness and disorganized behaviors on people. This is why it studies *mismatch behaviors* (unbalance between what people does and wants to do, apart for the requirements of the environment he has to cope with), its causes, consequences and treatment. As mentioned by Chopitea,<sup>26</sup> this includes the things related to what it feels like to be different, what it means and the way society treats people they consider as different. Concatenated with this, it becomes relevant pointing out that *behavioral disorders* or psychological disorders refers to behavior dysfunction or the impediments in the subject's functioning that become evident through a non-characteristic or not socially expected response. This psychological dysfunction can present itself in the cognitive, emotional or social spheres of the individual.

Now that has been stated, it is convenient making clear that, in the social field, behavioral disorders can appear on different magnitudes. The disorders of larger interest are those qualified as "severe", behavior patterns that persist throughout time which affect the rights of others and break the rules appropriate for the person's age and frequently end up being considered as unmanageable or uncontrollable, according to Kazdin and Buela.<sup>27</sup>

Reconsidering the subject of age, it has been said that most Internet and ISN users are people between 12 and 30 years old. The topic is utterly preoccupying when it can affect the proper development of teenagers since we can assume that adults can take on the responsibility of their acts; but not so with teenagers.

## Internet Addiction

Some of the first works about this particular topic were expressed by Ivan Goldberg (referred by Tracy),<sup>28</sup> Enrique Echeburúa<sup>29</sup> and Nacho Madrid,<sup>30</sup> among others. Madrid guides his analysis towards psychological addictions and provides some explanations for the reasons why people can display an addictive symptom related to the use of the Internet. The contribution of this author and the bibliographical resources on which we was based upon for analyzing the topic of behavioral disorders and Internet Social Networking will serve as a thematic axis.

First, it must be considered that the term "addiction" is related to a context of use of chemical substances, which are invasive for the organism. From there is that agents like alcohol, tobacco or other substances, when excessively consumed, are considered as part of addictions, specifically "chemical addictions".<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, considered as non-chemical addictions, or "psychological addictions",<sup>32,33</sup> we can include gambling, eating, sex, work or shopping, when practiced atypically. Just like it was already mentioned, these possible diseases were not included on the DSM-IV. In their case, they were considered as "Habit and impulse control habits", alongside "pathological gambling", on the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD-10).<sup>33</sup> It is a highly incapacitating disorder that grows progressively and chronically, which deteriorates all the areas of the individual.<sup>34</sup>

Based on the characteristics of chemical addictions, we can take up again some reference elements for the identi-

fication of the possible and until now called "social network addiction".

- Prominence. When an activity in particular becomes the most important one in the life of the individual, dominating their thoughts, feelings and behavior.
- Humor changes. Subjective experiences, of the emotional type, experienced by the person as a consequence of getting involved in the problematic activity.
- Abstinence. Unpleasant emotional states, causing even physical consequences that happen when an activity in particular is interrupted or suddenly diminished.
- Conflict. It refers to the problems developed between the addict and
  - a) Those around him (interpersonal conflict),
  - b) Assumed responsibilities (labor or social),
  - c) The individual itself (intrapsychic conflict) for being involved in the activity in particular.
- Relapse. Tendency to repeating the early patterns of the problematic activity after having parted from it or having, apparently, controlled it.

### Addiction to Internet Social Networks?

Taking what was said before into consideration, let us try with the clearer words the possible problem of behavioral disorders and Internet or ISN addiction, by using an analogy in the context of medicine: If it is identified that a person recurrently thinks about going to a bar — and actually goes there frequently — and his perseverant behavior creates emotional changes and problems at work or with his family, it is not acceptable diagnosing an "addiction to bars". Someone might assure that the problem is not an addiction to bars, but an addiction to alcoholic beverages. But... to what kind of beverage? There is a wide variety of alcoholic beverages (and wines). Of course, the possible addiction is to the substance, alcohol (specifically ethanol). Thus, "addiction to the Internet" is not such. Neither will it be to the Internet Social Networks but to specific actions of the environment of these ISN or to the contents provided by said environment.<sup>35</sup> Following the same idea, the effect and problems caused by abusive alcohol use (on any presentation) are the so-called Alcohol Use Disorders (AUD): organic dependency (remember we are trying to set the topic in the purely medical field), memory loss, alteration of the metabolism, of which the liver is in charge, erosions on the gastric mucosa, dehydration, breathing alteration, heart-rate increase and diminishment of the sugar on the blood.<sup>36</sup> The psychological disorders derived from this anomalous behavior can affect the addict himself and the people who surround him. Would it be worth asking: What are the reasons or circumstances which gave place to the beginning of the behavior that would later on become an addiction?

Resuming on the ISN topic, the addictive syndrome can be identified when the user of the resources of the said networks:



Figure 1.

- Is dominated in his thoughts, feelings and behavior by their usage (prominence)
- Invests great amounts of time and effort on their activity and increment.
- Alters his emotional states (anxiety, anger) as a consequence of using them (humor changes).
- Becomes unstable when interrupted from the activity or when the access to them is diminished (abstinence).
- Begins to have problems with the people around him (inside and outside the ISN) or with himself; this causes him to persist on doing the activity or stop dealing with the responsibilities assumed or imposed at work, school or home (conflict). In the case of the social interaction outside the ISN, this begins to diminish.
- Resumes the activity persistently once he, apparently, has quitted it or reduced it (relapse).
- Denies having consequences because of the activity and brags about being able to quit it whenever he wants (and does not prove it).

Other behaviors, of lesser magnitude, but that can be considered as alarming symptoms are:

- Isolating oneself from face-to-face social relationships, substituting this kind of relationships on the ISN.
- Lowering the school performance occasioned by the permanent presence in the ISN.
- Neglecting responsibilities or activities considered as important at work, school, family or couple environment.
- Displaying euphoria when taking part of the activities of ISN.
- Displaying excessive irritation or anxiety when there is no Internet connection and, therefore, to the ISN.
- Lying about the time spent connected or about what is being done on the ISN.
- Persistently thinking and talking about the topics and circumstances occurring in the network, among acquaintances; even when one is not connected to it at the time.
- Losing track of time or space due to the frequent or constant permanence in the ISN.
- Sleep deprivation for being connected to the ISN.
- Arguing about the use of ISN with the people around the user, like co-workers, schoolmates or relatives.

Here arises the need to ask again: What are the reasons or circumstances which gave place to the beginning of the behavior that would later on become an addiction?

Regularly, atypical behaviors are accompanied or appear when the individual suffers (consciously or unconsciously) from problems with himself, a situation that favors the incursion to problems with others and that, unfortunately, increase personal maladjustment; a vicious circle of possible disastrous consequences. Also consider the fact that parents can be too permissive or dominant and

this can cause that the boy believes he is not understood, listened to or loved. In other cases, the use of ISN is a palliative for satisfying the group belonging need that we all have.

As stated by Xavier Mañé et al.,<sup>35</sup> the topic is still a challenge since the addiction to the Internet is a growing phenomenon that is being lived nowadays, the first theories start to appear and there are no unified criteria about the diagnostic options and the same addiction that can be developed by the exaggerated use of the medium. If it is difficult to set the topic, it is even more difficult to determine, at the time being, the possible addiction to the Internet Social Networks.

In spite of this, like in all types of behavior that alter the life of individuals, the best option is prevention. Hereafter are some recommendations that experts on human behavior can transmit to the parents:

- Establishing schedules for the use of devices that can connect to the ISN.
- Supervising the contents the child has access to, every once in a while. Obviously, there must be confidence in order for the parents to enter the personal account.
- If a computer is used to have access to the ISN (warning, this can also be done throughout the mobile phone), it should be located in a common area of the house and positioned so that it is possible to visually supervise what appears on the screen.
- Promoting activities outside the ISN that boost or direct the pursuit of knowledge, physical activity or social relationships with people of the same age. It is important that this activities are done in family, and something very important:
- Knowing, as parents, the functioning and options provided by the ISN. This will permit having a greater contact with the children and, somehow, demonstrating the comprehension of the ranges and limits of remaining active on these networks.

To date, there is not a trustworthy instrument that can provide data that help in the making of a diagnostic about the possible addiction to the ISN due to denial being prevalent in the supposed addicts. Both those who are possibly disturbed, as well as those who are not, will respond negatively to questions that prove if he is indeed an addict or if he distracts himself from his responsibilities by remaining active in the dynamics of the ISN.

## CONCLUSIONS

The so-called Internet addiction and Social Network Addiction cannot be qualified as such. There is not an addiction to the Internet, but behavior problems caused by the access to the variety of contents provided by the Internet.

The concept of addiction is applied when the noxious agent is a substance. Before attempting to assign an adjective to abnormal behaviors caused by the excessive use of ISN, it is necessary to deal with the subject of the possible disorders that can stem from an unmeasured use of them. The most vulnerable population to the possible effects of the excessive use of ISN is teenagers and young adults. While experts on the subject reconcile the terminology of this phenomenon, it would be advisable that specialists provide parents with some preventive strategies, as it has been done for other types of behaviors that distort the individuals' reality, when this is not a product of a serious disorder. The topic remains open for the compilation of information, mainly on the Psychological and Psychiatric practice, in order to have elements that permit the prevention, diagnosis and treatment – when necessary – of behavioral disorders related to the use of ISN.

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