



Internet, smartphone & social networks: between use and abuse, before addiction

Internet, smartphone y redes sociales: entre el uso y abuso, previo a la adicción

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Abstract

The intensive use of digital technology for watching videos on the Internet, communicating through Smartphones and interacting on Social Networks brings satisfaction and contributes to the psycho-social development of young people, which is why they are so successful. However, when they start at too early an age, the abuse and future addiction might be a risk. Therefore, to prevent schoolchildren's problems in the future, the present study has the objective of finding out whether any type of technological abuse is occurring in order to identify and intervene in the subjects who are developing it. The sample of the present research is made up of 197 students between 11 and 12 years of age, all of them in the sixth year of Primary Education, who answered a validated questionnaire (Ministerio de Interior, 2014) that analyses the technological use habits of young people. The instrument is organized into multiple-choice questions that provide information on issues such as frequency of use, place of use, internet, social networks, etc. The results obtained show that most of the students who participated in the study use digital technology in a reasonable way. However, one in ten students misuse it. Therefore, it is suggested that educational intervention is needed to prevent these students from falling into dependence and addiction, given the potential negative influences on their personal and academic lives that these habits could have.

Keywords: Abuse, addiction, teenagers, smartphone, internet, social networks.

Resumen

El uso intensivo de la tecnología digital para ver videos en internet, comunicarse a través del *smartphone* e interactuar en las redes sociales produce satisfacción y contribuye al desarrollo psicosocial de las personas más jóvenes, de ahí su éxito. Sin embargo, cuando se inician a una edad demasiado temprana, pueden acabar abusando de ellas y finalmente caer en la adicción. Por ello, para que los escolares no tengan problemas en el futuro este estudio tiene por objetivo conocer si se está produciendo algún tipo de abuso tecnológico para identificar e intervenir en los sujetos que lo están desarrollando. La muestra de esta investigación la componen 197 estudiantes entre 11 y 12 años de sexto de Educación Primaria, quienes respondieron un cuestionario validado (Ministerio de Interior, 2014) que analiza los hábitos de uso tecnológico de los jóvenes. El instrumento se organiza en preguntas de opción múltiple que ofrece información sobre cuestiones como frecuencia de uso, lugar de uso, internet, redes sociales, etc. Los resultados evidencian que la mayoría de estudiantes que participaron en el estudio utiliza la tecnología digital de forma razonable. Sin embargo, uno de cada diez estudiantes hace uso abusivo de la misma. Por ello, se sugiere que se intervenga educativamente para que este alumnado no caiga en la dependencia y adicción, dado las potenciales influencias negativas en la vida personal y académica que estos hábitos tendrán.

Descriptor: Abuso, adicción, jóvenes, smartphone, internet, redes sociales.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays people live in a liquid modernity characterized by the dizzying speed of changes that weaken economic, political, institutional structures and human bonds and their relationships (Bauman, 2000). Technology has been incorporated into communication processes and has generated a new digital dimension that influences traditional reality (Nitsevich, 2018), specifically social uses and habits (Besolí *et al.*, 2018; Martínez-Rodrigo *et al.*, 2019).

The smartphone is now a widespread communication device in society, especially among the youngest, partly because it has evolved a lot in recent years, offering more and more. In addition, its accessibility and ease of use have made it a very valuable tool for staying connected and communicating with other people at any time and place (Altuzarra Artola, 2018). Its use is widespread, to the point that three quarters of students between eleven and twelve years old own one (Garmendia *et al.*, 2019; AIMC, 2018).

In Spain, although some people live in rural areas or remote areas where connectivity may be more limited, internet access is generally good and most teenagers have internet at home (González Fernández *et al.*, 2020).

Meanwhile, social networks have a great impact on society, especially among young people since they can share content, connect with friends and family, and participate in online communities. In addition, they also offer a variety of entertainment options, such as games and music (Moreno Freites and Ziritt Trejo, 2019).

The data obtained in different studies (López-de-Ayala *et al.*, 2020; ONTSI, 2019) allow to point out that young people start using a smartphone autonomously following a simple pattern; specifically, it is observed that pre-adolescent boys are initially motivated to using the cell phone to play video games and observe how gamers perform on Twitch, a vertical social network that brings together people interested in this subject. On the other hand, girls

tend to join directly the horizontal or generic social networks, in which they barely interact or share images or videos and dedicate themselves to observing what is happening through their mobile (Garmendia-Larragaña *et al.*, 2016; González García and Martínez Heredia, 2018).

Once they finish this initial and independent experimentation phase of mobile device use in which they have incorporated and adapted the smartphone into their daily life, both boys and girls join the trendiest social networks. Hence, they start using YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat (Rivero, 2019; Spain IAB, 2019), without anyone having previously taught them or even shown them how to interact correctly and safely on social networks (Tejada *et al.*, 2019). Although young people use smartphones to access these digital ecosystems, they do not have sufficient digital competence to perform correctly (Fernández-Montalvo *et al.*, 2015).

Many families allow teenagers to use smartphones autonomously at very early ages, before fourteen or fifteen years old, because they do not reflect on what is the most appropriate age to do so (Zubizarreta *et al.*, 2018) and because of the social inertia in which they are involved. As a result, children join social networks earlier than they should. Even though most of them know that they should be at least thirteen years old or older to join social networks, children solve this problem by altering their date of birth in the register, which they sometimes do with the help of an adult (Del Prete and Redon Pantoja, 2020).

Social networks are now a fundamental resource for young people who use networks to socialize (Cantor-Silva *et al.*, 2018). It is a catalyst for inclusion or exclusion, and for some authors (Bonilla del Río and Sánchez Calero, 2022) it has contributed to the interpersonal relationships of younger people becoming even more complex and sometimes problematic. Not surprisingly, bullying can also happen digitally.

Another problem of this early incorporation of smartphones is the dependence on the device itself and the actions carried out by using



it. The fact that young people are in a critical period of their psychological and social development (Ortega *et al.*, 2012) makes it difficult for them to measure and assess the excessive and intensive use they make of social networks and digital technology in general (Gordo *et al.*, 2018).

Young people respond positively to the dynamics of interaction proposed by social networks and continuously post and share information that belongs to their personal and private lives, and they do so mainly because in this way they define their personal characteristics through the acceptance of others (Pérez *et al.*, 2009). Specifically, they introduce new information very frequently, mainly images and videos to be seen and valued by others.

Many young people need to constantly connect to social networks to post and observe the responses generated by their posts, since this action releases dopamine in the brain, causing them pleasure (Martín Critikián and Medina Núñez, 2021). Thus, as each interaction generates a low stimulus, people interact frequently to obtain a set of micro-incentives of satisfaction, thus moving from the use to the abuse of social networks, which can result in problems related to bio-psychological, social and family aspects when networks become addictive (Silva-Ortega and Zambrano-Villalba, 2018).

People who abuse the use of social networks and the Internet are characterized by being people who may have both a high degree of feelings of loneliness and boredom (Zhou and Leung, 2012), as well as extraversion and low responsibility, and because it allows them to interact while remaining anonymous through a fictitious identity (Wilson *et al.*, 2010).

The excessive use of smartphones, internet and social networks represents the previous step to a dependency that can eventually lead to a non-chemical addiction, also known as behavioral or non-substance addiction, which refers to a set of mental disorders in which a person has a compulsive need to perform certain activities, such as playing video games, watching pornog-

raphy, gambling, compulsive shopping, among others. These addictions can be as strong as chemical addictions, such as alcoholism or drug addiction, and can have a negative impact on a person's life, affecting their mental and physical health, their relationship with others, and their work and academic performance (Becoña, 2018). In young people, it is more related to the rupture of some habits (Del Castillo, 2013).

Likewise, the philosophy of contemporary consumerist culture can contribute to the emergence of non-chemical addictions, by emphasizing the importance of excessive consumption and the search for immediate satisfaction regardless of the consequences. This culture can lead people to constantly seek new experiences and stimulation, which can trigger a compulsive need to perform certain activities (Pérez del Río and Martín, 2007).

To assess the extent to which young people abuse digital technology, there are no standard instruments or measures that allow to estimate the risk situation of a student. However, it is possible to measure the frequency and type of interactions of young people on social networks and contrast them with the responses or actions conducted by people of the same age and adults, which should not exceed both in any case.

1.1 Objectives

The research collects the concern expressed by some studies on addictive behavior in relation to the use of virtual media and social networks (Basteiro *et al.*, 2013; Escurra and Salas, 2014; Peris *et al.*, 2018) and is related to studies that address the use of digital technology (Keller *et al.*, 2020; Marín-Suelves *et al.*, 2022).

Thus, the main objective of this research is to know how students in the sixth grade of primary education use smartphones, the Internet and social networks and to assess the extent to which they are abusing them. To this end, it aims to answer the following research questions:



- What do students use the Internet for?
- At what age did students have a smartphone?
- Do they use social networks safely?

2. Research methodology

2.1 Sample

Due to the limitations to conduct the research due to the subject matter, a non-probabilistic sampling was carried out and the selection of the school that participated in the study was made at convenience. Thus, four schools participated in the study and the sample of students was made up of 197 students who voluntarily participated in the study. Of these students, 51% were male (N=101) and the remaining 49% were female (N=96). The students who participated in the study were in the sixth grade of primary education and were between 11 and 12 years old.

2.2 Research instrument

The tool used to carry out this research was the questionnaire "Survey on internet use and safety habits of young people in Spain", designed by the Home Office (2014). This instrument of multiple-choice questions, allows to know the frequency of use, place, internet and social networks, etc. The reliability analysis confirms an acceptable internal consistency of the questionnaire by obtaining a value of 0.78 in Cronbach's alpha coefficient.

2.3 Procedure

Before starting the research, the purpose of the study was explained to the principal of each school and the approval and informed consent of the students' families and guardians was obtained. Finally, they were told that completing the survey was completely voluntary. They participated in the study, answered the questions electronically and had twenty-five minutes to do so.

2.4 Research design

The work carried out is quantitative and exploratory, so an analysis and frequency study of the responses to the multiple-choice items of the survey was carried out to calculate the percentage they represent.

3. Results

The data obtained show that only 10.8% of students indicated that they rarely connect to the Internet, a quarter of the students (15.3%) mentioned they connect once or twice a week, 31.8% do so almost daily and finally 40.1% daily. Considering the last aspect, both girls (42.9%) and boys (37.5%) access the network in the same proportion.

Regarding the frequency of hours spent on the Internet, 71.8% of students stated that they connect one hour or less per day, 11.5% said that they connect daily for two to three hours, and 1.3% stated that they do not connect daily. Likewise, 15.9% mentioned that they did not know how much time they spend on the Internet.

The study also showed that students use the Internet mainly to watch videos (87.3%), do academic work (80.9%), communicate (61%) and play video games (42%). It was also found that girls (85.7%) use the Internet about 10% more than boys (76.25%) for academic work.

As for the resources for accessing the Internet, the students indicated that the device they use most is their smartphone (42.7%), followed by the computer (34.8%) and the t (23.6%). The study highlights that the resource they use the least is their parents' cell phone (1.3%).

Likewise, regarding the acquisition of the cell phone, it was observed that most of the girls who participated in the study (80.07%) got their smartphone on their birthday, while boys (61.15%) received it in summer (61.15%), twice as often as the girls (30.65%). 60.7% of the girls and 36.2% of the boys said that they use their cell phones to communicate with their



friends. Regarding cell phone use, 63.6% of girls and 24.8% of boys said that they can use mobile plans to use their cell phones, i.e., more than twice as many.

The students also stated that they mainly use instant messaging for communicating with their friends (61.4%), being girls (57.15%), compared to boys (40%) the ones who use it the most. Likewise, girls (16.9%) also prefer email as a means of communication with their classmates more than boys (2.5%). However, among students who communicate through social networking resources, such as chat rooms, 13.4% are boys and 7.6% are girls. The same is also true for online video games, since all those who indicated that they communicate in this environment were boys (5.7%).

The students surveyed also stated that YouTube (68.8%) and WhatsApp (61.1%) are the social networks they use the most, and to a lesser extent Instagram (36.6%) and TikTok (28%). In contrast, the networks they use the least are Twitter (8.3%) and Facebook (4.5%). From a gender perspective, girls (71.4%) and boys (66.25%) use YouTube to the same extent and,

in contrast, girls (71.4%) use 20.15% more than boys (51.25%) WhatsApp and TikTok, 44.15% and 31.65%, respectively.

Regarding the configuration or design of the students in their social networks, 62.5% stated that they do not have any profile. Among the students who do have one, 33.1% confirmed that they show their own photo in their profile, 14.6% their name and surname, 5.1% the place where they study, 4.5% their real age and 8.9% a false one. Also, only 1.9% included their telephone number and 0.6% their home address. Finally, it was observed that 11.15% are aware that they use false data in their social profile.

On the other hand, most students (79.6%) know that they have not contacted people they do not know in their social network, while 10.8% of students state that they have done so. Girls accounted for 85.7% of the responses and boys 73.75%.

8.9% of the students indicated that in the last year they have accepted people they did not have in their contacts and 5.1% have searched for new friends on the Internet. Likewise, 3.8% said that they had tried to be a person they were not.

Table 1

Information on social network profiles (frequency)

Item	Boys	Girls
I identify myself in my profile using a real personal photo.	33.75%	32.5%
I identify myself in my profile using a photo that does not identify myself.	22.5%	33.75%
I show my real age	5.2%	3.75%
I show a false age	10%	7.8%
I show my identity (name and surname)	17.5%	11.7%
I show the school where I study	3.75%	6.5%
I show my personal phone	3.75%	1.25%
I show false data	11.25%	11.7%

Boys (12.9%) have added more contacts they did not know beforehand to their networks than girls (5.2%). Likewise, 6.25% of boys have looked new friends on the Internet, compared to 3.75% of girls. However, 5.2% of girls tried to be a person they were not, compared to 2.5% of boys.

Finally, 63.1% of students indicated that they perceive that they control their social networks, specifically 63.65% of women and 62.5% of men. On the contrary, less than a quarter (19.7%) considered that they did not.



4. Conclusions

It can be concluded that the students who participated in the study use smartphones, the Internet and social networks in a reasonable way. However, it is noted that some students abuse the digital technology, both in terms of the type of posts they make and the frequency.

Thus, it is observed that four out of ten students access the Internet daily and that both boys and girls do so with the same frequency. Likewise, it was found that seven out of ten students connect between thirty and sixty minutes a day, so they do not exceed adults in the habit of connecting to the network and are within the range of young people as indicated in other studies (Spain IAB, 2020; Ministerio del Interior español, 2014).

However, evidence indicates that some students spend too many hours or abuse of the Internet, which is consistent with Blanco *et al.* (2022). Specifically, one in ten students surveyed stays on the network between two and three hours a day and the same number of students do not know how much time they spend online. For this reason, it is recommended to conduct prospective or follow-up studies of students at an early age to identify those students who stand out for their intensive use of the Internet. This would allow preventing future technological and digital dependencies and addictions (Soto *et al.*, 2018).

Regarding the actions done by students on the Internet, it is found that most of them perform within the limits indicated by the works on network safety. Specifically, eight out of ten students connect to watch videos and do school tasks, which is consistent with Rivero (2019) and the study by Spain IAB (2020), with girls outnumbering boys in both cases (Holtz and Appel, 2011; Fernández-Montalvo *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, it is concluded, on the one hand, that students use the Internet to perform academically and for this purpose they use the personal computer, since the use of smartphones has not been normalized at the school (Romero Rodríguez *et al.*, 2021). On the other hand, it

is also concluded that students use the network for entertainment and leisure activities, since the creation of audiovisual digital content is not produced, as occurs in older students.

The study shows that girls tend to communicate more than boys through instant messaging and email. However, boys use the communicative resources embedded in social networks more than girls, as indicated in the study by Valencia-Ortiz *et al.* (2020) conducted with adults. Therefore, it would also be important to identify these students who would be outside the social norm that corresponds to their age.

Regarding the use of social networks, most of these students use YouTube, WhatsApp, TikTok and Instagram and, contrary to what adults do, they do not use Facebook as much, as stated in the Spain IAB study (2022), the two most used social networks in Spain.

The students in this research perform numerous overexposure actions on Social Networks, even though they believe they know how to use them. Thus, boys show images that reflect their identity on social network profiles and girls do the opposite. Likewise, boys are inclined to put an age other than their own and girls omit it outright. In either case, they do not show their telephone number and home address, which is in line with what was already pointed out by the report of the Home Office in the work carried out in 2014.

On the other hand, although most of the students have not contacted someone they do not know beforehand, one out of a hundred students has done it so, and it can be said that this attitude is not safe. In addition, men have performed this type of action more than women (Spain IAB, 2020).

Students need to be educated in the safe and responsible use of technology and in protecting their privacy online. This may include teaching them how to set up their social networking accounts safely and to be careful about the personal information they share. It is also important to remind them not to share images or personal



information that could compromise their safety or that of others (Castillejos *et al.*, 2016).

Finally, it is concluded that the abuse of educational technology can cause a dependency that can have a negative impact on the daily lives of individuals and students who are immersed in psychosocial maturational processes.

Therefore, it is important to pay attention to social network usage habits and take measures to prevent social network addiction. This may include setting limits on time spent on social networks, seeking alternative activities to spend free time, and seeking professional support if necessary.

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