



# Internet as a Haven and Social Shield. Problematic Uses of the Network by Young Spaniards

Internet como refugio y escudo social: Usos problemáticos de la Red por jóvenes españoles

-  Dr. FLÁVIA GOMES-FRANCO-E-SILVA is Assistant Professor at the Rey Juan Carlos University (Madrid, Spain) (flavia.gomes@urjc.es).
-  Dr. JOSÉ-CARLOS SENDÍN-GUTIÉRREZ is Associate Professor at the Rey Juan Carlos University (Madrid, Spain) (josecarlos.sendin@urjc.es).

## ABSTRACT

Universal access to the Internet among young people has been accompanied by new opportunities associated with online developments and practices, but the problematic use of the digital environment also involves threats. In the current scientific literature, there is no clear consensus on the definition of the behaviors that could arise from inappropriate use of the Web, which, as an attempt, is defined with the term «addiction». This article combines a qualitative-quantitative approach, based on a competitive national research project, aiming to identify the main threats posed by digital immersion of Spanish youth between 12 and 17 years old. On the one hand, results obtained from this research confirm the discomfort experienced by young people when they have to be offline during a certain period of time, especially in those intensive users of social networks. On the other hand, it has been shown how damaged or conflicting family relationships lead individuals from 15 years old to spend more time connected to the Internet in an attempt to supplement or protest against their family interactions. This study confirms several trends already mentioned in the specialized literature, and presents new findings that suggest possible future lines of investigation on early detection of cyberpathologies.

## RESUMEN

La universalización del acceso a Internet entre los jóvenes va acompañada de nuevas oportunidades asociadas a las prácticas y desarrollos on-line, pero también de amenazas derivadas de un uso problemático del entorno digital. En la literatura científica actual, no se observa un consenso en la definición de las conductas que podrían derivarse de un uso inadecuado de la Red, al que, de manera aún tentativa, se define como «adicción». Este trabajo combina una aproximación cualitativa y cuantitativa, a partir de un proyecto competitivo nacional, con el objetivo de identificar las principales amenazas que presenta la inmersión digital de los jóvenes entre 12 y 17 años en España. Los resultados obtenidos confirman, en primer lugar, el estrés y/o malestar experimentado por los jóvenes ante la imposibilidad de conectarse a Internet durante un determinado período de tiempo, especialmente en aquellos usuarios intensivos de redes sociales. En segundo lugar, se ha comprobado cómo las relaciones familiares deterioradas o conflictivas influyen en que los adolescentes a partir de 15 años pasen más tiempo conectados a la Red, en un intento de suplir sus interacciones familiares o protestar frente a ellas. El trabajo confirma tendencias apuntadas en la literatura especializada y presenta nuevos hallazgos que sugieren líneas adicionales de interés para futuras investigaciones interdisciplinarias en torno al reconocimiento y la detección precoz de las ciberpatologías.

## KEYWORDS | PALABRAS CLAVE

Internet, social networks, young, addiction, adolescence, cyberpathologies, digital behavior, familiar relationships.  
Internet, redes sociales, jóvenes, adicción, adolescencia, ciberpatologías, comportamiento digital, relaciones familiares.

## 1. Introduction

In a very short period of time Internet has become widespread, especially among the young. Data reveals almost universal access, 91.8%, for those aged between 10 and 15 and up to a 97.4% for those aged between 16 to 24 (INE, 2013). At the same time, there is a remarkable increase in the number of social networking site profiles. As of December 31st, 2012, Facebook in Spain alone amounted to over 17 million (Internet World Stats, 2013), which represents 37.6% of the total population. Besides their extensive use of the Internet, the young are considered to be the age group that is most vulnerable to developing problematic Internet use as they are at a critical stage –adolescence– as regards defining their identities and in a period of insecurity, confusion and instability that can lead them to escape into the world of Internet and social networks with adults hardly noticing it. This outlook has drawn academic interest to detect possible addictions, even if this term does not receive general consensus.

### 1.1. Problematic use of or addiction to the Internet. Conceptualization and measurement issues

The problem of referring to problematic use of or addiction to the Internet and identifying who is developing those behaviors stems from the different interpretations, sometimes blurred, applied to these terms. Establishing whether Internet is actually used problematically together with the different content, services and apps available online (Bergmark & al., 2011; Kim & Haridakis, 2009; Echeburúa, 1999), especially those activities linked to a reward (Kim & Davis, 2009), constitutes one of the most contentious issues. In this sense, Shapira & al. (2003) found a positive association between Internet addiction and some psychiatric illnesses, such as pathological gambling, sexual deviations or compulsive shopping. Nevertheless, empirical research often avoids this question due to its problematic conceptualization.

Understanding problematic use as lack of control in engaging with the Internet which implies distress and negative consequences on a daily basis (Echeburúa & Corral, 2010; Shapira & al., 2003), some authors have drawn attention to the abusive use of the Internet as a problem in itself (Lee & Stapinski, 2012). With regard to the young, some empirical research shows that spending so much time online may have negative consequences for on habits and daily routines as well as in personal relationships in general (Armstrong & al., 2000; Douglas & al., 2008). At the same time, the variety of content and services provided

through the Internet, together with the multitask character of online activity as shown in several research papers (Kaiser Foundation, 2005; 2010; Gross, 2004), challenges the fact that excessive use may turn into a reliable indicator of problematic Internet use.

Linked to the problematic use is the perception of discomfort if use is not possible. Labrador and Villadongos (2010) suggest this reaction being comparable to addiction symptoms. Nonetheless, Carbonell & al. (2012) note the importance of being careful when using this term, because questionnaires might in fact show «concern» or «perception» instead of addictive use.

In this regard, Espinar and López (2009) report youth being attracted by the Internet and making excessive use of it linked to entertainment, while at the same time they acknowledge discomfort if no access to the Web is available, because this may imply having to look for substitutes for spending time. However, this Internet use should not be taken directly as problematic. Additionally, empirical research has shown the perception of problems associated to Internet use may evolve with age (Carbonell & al., 2012; Labrador & Villadongos, 2010) as well as with own experience (Griffiths, 2000), while some authors only notice temporary addiction to online games (Van-Roij & al., 2010).

There are still many inconsistencies when referring to problematic Internet use (Bergmark & al., 2011) and there is also little knowledge of the interrelation of its different dimensions as well as with the factors which may predict it. Therefore, these limitations make approaching the prevalence and real meaning of problematic use applied to national samples more complex.

### 1.2. Factor associated with problematic Internet use

Several studies have focused on connecting time as a predictor to pathological Internet use (Armstrong & al., 2000; Leung, 2004; Yang & Tung, 2007; Douglas & al., 2008; Labrador & Villadongos, 2010; Muñoz-Rivas & al., 2010). Additionally, it is suggested that intensive use of the Internet may vary depending on the reasons for connecting and the prevalence of previous socio-pathologies.

Several research results point to the fact that problematic use of the Web is linked to specific communication apps (Carbonell & al., 2012), particularly those used to look for new friends online, chat and social networking sites (Kuss & al., 2013; Viñas & al., 2002; Lee & Stapinski, 2012; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007; Acier & Kern, 2011). García & al. (2013) con-

firm the use of these communication platforms directly associated to the time spent online. Other authors suggest the problematic use of the Internet being associated to communication of identity disorders (Carbonell & al., 2012), for instance through the adoption of avatars (Wan & Chiou, 2006), which allows the user to pretend to be someone else (Carbonell & al., 2012; Douglas & al., 2008).

However, from the Uses and Gratification theory, it is underlined that media effects are driven by reasons of use which, in turn, may vary from one individual to another, and Valkenburg and Peter (2011) conclude that even the same technologies might be used either positively or negatively. Kuss and Griffiths (2011) suggest that introvert and extrovert young people are heavy users of interactive digital networks, to the extent that the former use them as social compensation tools, while the latter seem to use them as a way to enlarge their social relationships. The same authors point to the fact that both personalities are more likely to risk addiction. These results show how problematic use is not particularly linked to a specific tool usage, but on the contrary to the problematic relationship established with it, which may be explained as a way of escaping other types of day-to-day problems.

Finally, other factors linked to problematic Internet use are connected with the offline world, such as family relationships, although little attention has been paid on this respect so far. Unsatisfactory family relationships (Liu & al., 2012; Viñas & al., 2002; Lam & al., 2009), communication with family (Liu & al., 2012; Park & al., 2008) and a high level of conflict in parent and children relationships (Yen & al., 2007) have been associated with intensive and problematic use of the Internet, through which minors may distance themselves from family conflicts (Douglas & al., 2008).

## 2. Methods

The combination of methodologies is the option chosen in this work with the aim of, firstly, approaching Internet uses and online social tools of preferen-

ce by Spanish youngster between 12 and 17 years old; and, secondly to assess their connection behavior through their own testimonies. At the same time, it was proposed to identify main online activities which could entail a problematic use of the Web.

The first hypothesis (H1) establishes that young people experience stress or distrust through lack of use, especially among those with high connectivity habits and uses of online tools and particularly the social ones. The second hypothesis (H2) establishes

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that low interaction with parents increases stress in young people when faced with lack of connectivity.

### 2.1. Qualitative stage

This phase allowed the researchers to test opinions of young people as well as to elaborate the national survey which follows. Therefore, eight focus groups were conducted between the months of June and July, 2011, at national level, representing students enrolled in public and private secondary education (ESO, aged 12-16) and High School (Bachillerato, aged 16-18).

The study worked with mixed-gender groups separated by age into pre-adolescents and adolescents, considered operatively as individuals aged between 12-14 years old and between 15-17 years old. Six state secondary schools were selected, located in Andalusia (1), Catalonia (2), Madrid (2), Murcia (1), as well as two privately-owned but state-funded establishments found in Galicia (1) and Aragón (1).

Once the centers were selected, researchers got in

contact with school principals to ask them to identify the students, and informed parental consent was also asked. Focus groups lasted one hour and included six students on average. They were directed by a moderator who was in charge of addressing and conducting the discussion around uses and risks of the Internet.

All the focus groups were recorded and transcribed in full and verbatim. After reviewing and editing the texts of the transcriptions, they underwent an initial segmentation process that was in accordance with their semantic importance as per the objectives of our research. ATLAS.ti software was used to help with this task.

They were encoded, taking into account who was talking, their gender and their age. Then, they were automatically processed, generating 14 semantic codes, nine linked to uses, (daily use, amusement, dating, friendship, appropriate content, active appropriate use, passive appropriate use, family education and family relationship) and five linked to risks and control procedures after being tested by the members of the research group. A very large percentage was consistent with the categories extracted from five discussion groups in a previous research project limited to young people in the Madrid region of Spain (García, 2010). At the same time, these categories were compared with two initial focus groups with a view to establishing that they were valid and dovetailed with this project.

These categories were used in the discourse analysis and later discussion. As a result, several analytical inconsistencies were observed, mainly due to the differences found between active and passive uses, even though in the available literature on Internet users there is an established division among those active users who generate content and the passive, who draw on other's creativity (Holmes, 2011; Schaedel & Clement, 2010; Taraszow & al., 2010; Livingstone & Haddon, 2008).

## 2.2. Quantitative stage

The data presented in this study comes from a representative statistical auto-administered survey of young 12-17- year olds attending school at the level of «Educación Secundaria Obligatoria» (ESO), years 1 to 4, and «Bachillerato» (High School equivalent level) in the Spanish State, with the exception of Ceuta, Melilla and Balearic Islands throughout the 2011/2012 academic year.

The data for preparing the sampling frame and the selection of the sample was extracted from the statistics published by the Spanish Ministry of Education (students) and from those compiled from the web

pages of each of the Autonomous Communities analyzed (educational establishments). In total, the study universe would consist of 2,227,191 students at ESO and Bachillerato level from a total of 6,053 state, private and state-funded private educational establishments for secondary education and Bachillerato.

The second step consisted of applying stratified sampling of students by Autonomous Community, stage of education and whether it was a state-owned or privately-owned educational establishment. Over 5,000 questionnaires were collected. To ensure the representativeness of the sample by gender, age, educational level and type of center, 2,077 surveys were selected following the marked assessments for these variables. As the students needed to have parental permission to be able to complete the questionnaire, in the end there was a marginal deviation in the real sample from the theoretic student sample; therefore, elevation indices were established for the purpose of making adjustments.

The sampling error stood at  $\pm 2.2$  for the worst possible case of variability in which  $p$  and  $q=50/50$  and a 95% level of confidence, assuming simple random sampling.

The information was gathered from a classroom-based self-assessment questionnaire used between the months of September and November in 2011. The questionnaire consisted of fifty-four questions relating to types of Internet use and familial tactics of control and supervision. In order to test the comprehension of the questions posed and their consistency, a pre-test was undertaken.

Questionnaires were filtered based on the consistency of the information reported. In addition, frequency analysis or «hole count», flow analysis of the survey, validation filters, outlier controls and controls for to setting the average obtained against the planned were performed. Having obtained parental informed consent, the questionnaire was administered among interviewees after explaining to them the research purpose and requesting participation and openness as well as assuring confidentiality.

The data was analyzed using the SPSS 18 statistical program. As it is customary, the statistical significance level that indicates if the differences detected are due to chance has been set for  $\chi^2 < 0.05$ . A correlational analysis was applied to the available data in order to test interrelations among distress for not having access to the Internet, the perceived difficulty of being offline or having access to specific content and online apps, time of use and impact on their daily life.

### 3. Results

The results presented in this paper are organized around the two research hypotheses mentioned above, and combine the findings of the qualitative and quantitative phases of the study. In the following paragraphs, we first show the most significant aspects associated with the perception of discomfort because of lack of access for a certain period of time. Then, we proceed to link them in order to specify activities that could cause a perception of dependence on the Internet. Finally, personal relationships are observed, within and outside the family, for the purpose of associating them with the habits of connection.

#### 3.1. Stress and/or discomfort perception through lack of Internet access

Approximately seven out of ten young people who answered the quantitative questionnaire consider having no access to the Internet for several days would not imply any problem for them or represent any serious problem despite the inconvenience caused by this situation (see figure 1). 70.2% of them are connected to the Internet every day or almost every day.

If we consider the number of devices used for going online, which increases the chances of exposure to the Web, it is observed that the more the ways to connect are available, the more difficult it is for youths to remain offline. One in ten young users of three or more devices expresses high discomfort when they do not have access to the Internet.

The results show that this trend is recurrent when there is a higher frequency of Internet use. In table 1, it can be seen that the difficulty to stay offline for several

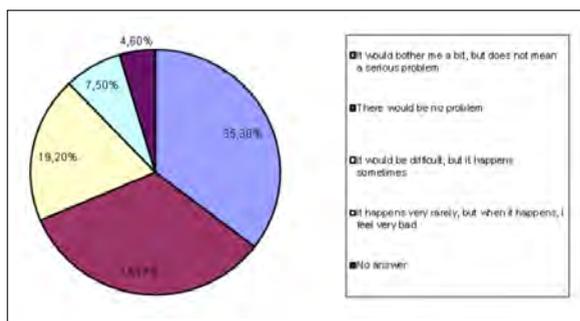


Figure 1: Adolescents' perception through lack of Internet access for several days.

|   | Every day or nearly every day | Three or four days a week | Two days a week | Once a week |
|---|-------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------|-------------|
| It would bother me a bit, but does not mean a serious problem | 38.2%                         | 39.2%                     | 18.5%           | 10.0%       |
| There would be no problem                                     | 23.7%                         | 45.9%                     | 68.9%           | 67.9%       |
| It would be difficult, but it happens sometimes               | 24.0%                         | 8.6%                      | 8.2%            | 2.7%        |
| It happens very rarely, but when it happens, I feel very bad  | 10.0%                         | 1.5%                      | 1.1%            | 3.8%        |
| Don't know  | 3.6%                          | 3.6%                      | 2.6%            | 12.6%       |
| No answer   | 0.4%                          | 1.2%                      | 0.6%            | 2.9%        |

ral days increases in parallel to the time usually spent online.

Therefore, the stress perceived while for not having access to the Web increases when considering connection time. Two out of ten young people who connect more than five hours a week report feeling very bad if they are forced to stay away from the Internet for several days. In this context, if certain applications or specific services are added as a variable, the number of young who expresses distrust on stopping use of using the Internet increases. Four in ten young people would find it quite difficult not to connect to their social network every day at any time, whereas for three in ten it may be challenging not to have access to YouTube.

##### 3.1.1. Online activities associated with a perception of problematic Internet use

It is observed that social networking sites produce increased attachment to the Web and may lead to a perception of dependency. Facebook and Tuenti are, without any doubt, the most commonly used tools among young people, since nine out of ten young people uses them and 75% check them very often. The most requested online activities are: sharing videos (48.6%), surfing a range of websites (45.7%), and downloading different kinds of files including music (37.1%).

After coding the ideas raised in the focus groups, activities referred to by young were connected to entertainment. Sharing different kinds of files, uploading photos and tagging them or chatting with friends online are some of the examples of daily use of the Internet with the purpose of amusement.

There are also some other online activities that could be included in this context: 68.5% of young people use the Internet very often to listen to music and 35.5% watch TV online. Regarding the media consumption, boys do connect more often than girls

to watch movies or series, to watch TV or search for information related to series and/or artists. Downloading television programs is a general activity among the interviewees. 60.5% of young aged between 12 to 14 and 71.2% of them who are in the 15 to 17 years-old range normally download TV programs they were unable to watch live due to incompatibility of schedules or because they prefer to have privacy to watch the audiovisual content they really like.

During the qualitative phase, participants reported

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that one of the main uses attributed by them to the Internet is watching TV either through the computer or the console. This finding is associated with the use of social networking sites, because very often these digital and interactive platforms host the debate on the most popular followed series.

The data collected during fieldwork reveals that each household member may have their own computer while the family usually has only one TV set per household. Participants in the focus groups confirm that their parents or other adults set limits on the consumption of inappropriate television content. Nevertheless, when they go online this control decreases.

### 3.2. Personal relationships

Although there is a trend to link the discomfort caused by the absence of Internet with problematic offline relationships and communication problems, the percentage of young people who reported discomfort when not having Internet access increases among

those who socialize with friends every day or nearly every day. There is a 5.8 percentage point difference compared with those who report not socializing or hardly socializing with friends.

The close family circle was addressed in the quantitative questionnaire through a variety of questions about the relationships of the young people with their parents. In order to qualify them, the interviewees should select one of the following options from a multiple choice question:

- Total confidence. My parents trust me and I tell them everything that happens to me.
- Enough confidence. We often talk about issues that concern us.
- My parents are very authoritarian with me and we have a lack of communication.
- My parents are very authoritarian with me, but they listen to me.
- My parents have no idea about what happens to me and I think they really don't care.
- Others.

When cross-checking the data, it is observed that 21% of the young who report their parents as being very authoritarian and with lack of com-

munication also express a feeling of stress and/or discomfort from an inability to connect to the Internet. The same is true of 19.6% of the young who claim that their parents have no idea about what happens to them, or even do not care about them.

The survey also asked young people about the frequency with which they interact or speak with the people at home. The perception among the ones who would feel discomfort when not having access to the Internet for several days doubles when we include the ones who reported never talking or hardly ever talking or relating to their relatives at home (15.3%).

The young who talk to their parents about Internet use are in the 12-to-14-years-old range. In general, the adults tend to establish clear and concise rules regarding access to the Internet by pre-adolescents, who also say they listen to their parents and respect these rules.

Four in ten young people consider their relationship with their parents to be one of total confidence,

which allows more personal exchanges of ideas and the possibility for the youngsters to ask adults about things which concern them. Interviewees aged between 12 to 14 years old, more often qualify their relationships with parents as of total confidence, while the adolescents between 15 and 17 years old qualify them as of enough confidence.

Nevertheless, when asked about their contacts with strangers over the Internet and whether these contacts turn into a real meeting up, the percentage of youngsters who report these encounters to their parents is much lower (20.9%) than the percentage of young people who prefer their group of friends for such confidences (66.7%). A far smaller percentage of focus group participants report telling their siblings (18.6%), their friends by using a social networking platform or Internet forum (15.4%), and 12.7% prefer not to tell to anyone.

From the qualitative phase of the research it is important to note that no difference has been found between traditional and single-parent families when we focus on the control of Internet use or the digital behavior in the case of 12-to-14-year-olds. According to the interviewees, early access to the Internet (between 10 and 11 years old) is always done under the authorization and consent of their father and/or their mother. Overall, adolescents convey a sense of responsibility when they make a decision about visiting or not an inappropriate website, assuming that a lack of responsibility will, sooner or later, be discovered by their parents or other adults.

The parent-child relationship described by the group of the 15 to 17 year-olds is characterized by the typical defiance attitude of this age. Therefore, they try to solve their problems without any support from their parents.

#### 4. Conclusion and discussion

The association between perception of discomfort because of lack of access and frequency, together with the use of online communication tools has been demonstrated to be pertinent. Young people recognize the inconvenience caused by the inability to access the Internet for several days, but in principle they do not think this could be a problematic experience. However, the perception of discomfort increases whenever additional variables are included in the research. The perception of stress is generally less evident if we consider the number of devices youngsters use to log on the Internet, and, conversely, it increases if there is a higher frequency of connection. The discomfort is even more evident if being offline means not to be able to access

their social networking sites. Thus, the hypothesis H1 seem to be proved, from which elements could be highlighted that could influence the perception of the young people as regards a problematic Internet use.

In terms of the second hypothesis (H2), it has been noted that the young people who do not have good communication with their parents, or when the behavior of the latter is perceived as authoritarian by the interviewees, are the ones who tend to spend more hours online. In this way, youngsters try to compensate for the lack of communication at home. This problem is growing among adolescents in the 15 to 17 years old range, who prefer to have the support of their reference groups instead of talking to their parents in order to solve problems whose origin lie in the use of Internet.

Some of the trends identified in this paper, such as the increasingly early age of connection together with the gradual rise in the number of hours spent online, may become cyber pathological, which suggests new lines of investigation into methods of early detection of disorders aggravated by the daily practices in the digital environment. The first-person accounts, such as those which have been recorded during the focus groups, might help to contextualize the quantitative data. This information may also help to establish a necessary link between the social and cultural dimensions and the Internet uses attributed by adolescents themselves.

An additional finding of this research is that young people show an increasing preference for accessing television content through the Internet. They value the possibility of watching their favorite programs whenever they want, especially the opportunity to comment about them on social media of their choice. This behavior, increasingly prevalent among the young, opens a window of opportunity for audiovisual media in their transmedia expansion to achieve greater audiences.

The methodological triangulation performed in this study has not only helped to reach the objectives set and to prove both hypotheses, but it had also led to the confirmation of some of the trends reported by the research on which this paper is based. Nevertheless, it was found that to go further into the issue and improve the overall understanding of how young people go online and use the Internet, it is necessary to stimulate interdisciplinary synergies, especially regarding the correct use of terms and concepts like addiction or pathological/problematic Internet use.

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