



IMPACT OF ADDICTION TO SOCIAL NETWORKS ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF HUMAN MEDICINE STUDENTS, IN TIMES OF COVID-19

IMPACTO DE LA ADICCIÓN A REDES SOCIALES EN LA SALUD MENTAL DE LOS ESTUDIANTES DE MEDICINA HUMANA, EN TIEMPOS DE COVID-19

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Dear. Editor:

I am writing to you regarding the article titled "Determination of the association between social network addiction and mental health consequences in Human Medicine students at Universidad Ricardo Palma in 2021," published in volume 23, issue 4, 2023. In the aforementioned study, Ortiz V et al.⁽¹⁾ found a strong association between social network addiction and the mental health consequences of medical students. However, I would like to propose an alternative perspective for interpreting these findings.

It is undeniable that excessive use of social networks can lead to addiction and, in the long term, contribute to mental health problems among medical students. Nevertheless, it is crucial to understand that social network addiction may be indicative of a more complex underlying issue, such as burnout. A study conducted by Şahin D. (2023) revealed that burnout among physicians acts as a mediating factor in relation to social network use. This study demonstrated that burnout increases cyber-loafing activities, which can contribute to long-term addiction⁽²⁾.

Furthermore, according to research by Luo A.⁽³⁾, 41.23% of healthcare professionals used social networks to escape problems and reduce anxiety, while 48.75% did so as a way to alleviate depression. These findings suggest that the high dependency on social networks among healthcare professionals is linked to work-related stress and fatigue derived from burnout.

Additionally, it has been evidenced that burnout measured over time can act as a predictor of the level of social network intrusion, such as on Facebook. One study showed that the amount of time spent on Facebook increases towards the end of the semester due to academic burnout reported at the beginning⁽⁴⁾. From this finding, it is necessary to consider implementing strategies to improve academic well-being and reduce the tendency towards excessive social network use as a coping mechanism. In this regard, student mentorship programs could be implemented, identifying students at risk of developing an addiction, with the goal of balancing online time and limiting social network use for personal and professional development.

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Excessive social network use is not only a cause but also a consequence of academic burnout. Stress increases the feeling of exhaustion, which in turn leads to greater social network use as a means of escape from academic strain. This situation not only affects mental health but also the quality and quantity of sleep, which, in the long term, worsens health problems⁽⁵⁾.

Therefore, addressing social network addiction without considering academic burnout as a potential underlying cause may be insufficient to comprehensively address the issue. This cycle of exhaustion, sleep disorders, and poor academic performance reinforces the need to implement strategies both to reduce academic load and to promote healthy habits in social network use.

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