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THE EFFECTS OF VIRTUAL WORLD CAPTIVITY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT — In recent decades, access to digital technology has increased, and labor productivity has required the acquisition of digital knowledge, so that the same skills used to meet hedonic tendencies, have led to the initiation and amplification of harmful behaviors. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted normal activities globally, generating multiple challenges for people's physical and mental health. The adaptation to the new lifestyle, imposed by this pandemic, has increased the use of digital technology, which has led to the development of addictive behavior in some users.

The purpose of this work is to bring to the attention of specialists, how the effects of virtual addictions, during the pandemic, act on mental health and unexpectedly change the normal rhythm of life. This work is a synthesis of possible addictive behaviors and mental disorders triggered by the use of digital devices, classified according to: the field in which the addictive behavior is installed, predisposed age groups and the association with pre-existing mental disorders. Changing people's behavior, associated with other stressors, can lead to a multitude of ailments, ranging from mental disorders to changes in compliance in organic diseases. Consequently, addictive behaviors have different intensities, occupy variable durations, have a fluctuating mental consumption. They generate a gradual social dysfunction, to which pre-existing mental suffering is added, and people involved develop disorders requiring the intervention of a specialist in the field of mental health.

KEYWORDS — virtual addictions, pandemic, coronavirus, mental health, psychiatry.

INTRODUCTION

The industrial internet is considered by our society, the fourth structural revolution, which changes the behavior of society and work. In recent decades, access to digital technology has increased, and labor productivity has required the acquisition of digital knowledge, so that the same skills used to meet hedonic tendencies have led to the initiation, strengthening and amplification of harmful behaviors (Boşintă et al., 2018; Molchanova et al., 2020; Simion, 2021; Şteţu, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted normal activities globally, creating multiple challenges,

both for people's physical health and mental health. (Ali & Bhati, 2020; Luca et al., 2020a, Grigoras & Ciubara, 2021) The adaptation to the new lifestyle, imposed by this pandemic, has increased the use of digital technology, which has led to the development of addictive behavior in some users.

METHODS

Objective

The purpose of this paper is to bring to the attention of specialists, the effects of virtual addictions, during the pandemic, on mental health, by unexpectedly changing the normal rhythm of life.

The paper is a synthesis of possible addictive behaviors and mental disorders triggered by the use of digital devices, classified according to:

1. association with pre-existing mental disorders

- depressive spectrum disorders
- anxiety spectrum disorders
- adaptation disorder
- personality disorder
- disorders related to the consumption of psychoactive substances

2. types of addictions

- social media addiction
- online shopping addiction
- online stock exchange transactions
- online dating and relationship addiction
- information searched excessively on several sites
- addiction to watching movies and series in the marathon: excessive viewing phenomenon (Starosta & Izydorczyk, 2020)
- addiction to internet pornography
- video games on computer or smartphone
- addiction to internet gambling, also called 'invisible disease' (Gainsbury, 2015)

In the DSM-5 there is also a disorder proposed for further studies called internet gambling disorder, a condition that refers to people who continuously use the internet to play games, insofar as it interferes with social relationships and performance in the workplace (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Not be confused with social gambling, which occurs on special occasions, with friends, and with predeter-

mined acceptable and tolerable losses (Boland et al., 2021).

More than a year ago, about 3 billion people around the world were forced to stay home, and more than 130 countries have ordered a certain level of restrictions to restrict movement in order to prevent the spread of human infections with the new coronavirus. (Ali & Bhati, 2020; Baroiu et al., 2021)

Also, quarantine and isolation at home, telework or work from home, online school, have significantly increased the use of digital technology.

In the context of the conditions imposed by the pandemic, people, being social beings, have adopted methods to adapt to unpredictable changes:

Some people have satisfied their need to communicate, to relate, through virtual socialization, using the multitude of applications created for this purpose. Depending on the emotional needs of people, virtual socialization has taken forms that can be taken to the extreme, by long duration (hours), by the large number of participants (online conferences, with a very large number of participants) (Luca et al., 2020b).

Some users have adopted virtual socialization as a method of anonymity, which allows them to express their feelings, without always enduring the consequences (trolling, adopting false identities) (Radulescu et al., 2020). The association between anonymity, convenience and escape, promotes the Internet as an object of psychopathology.

Some people have adapted by completely denying reality and expressing it in the virtual environment, thus supporting conspiracy theories, denying the actual existence of the virus, stating that the appearance of this infection has a terrorist purpose, denigrating the medical system, etc.) (Douglas, 2021). Unfortunately, society is also made up of these individuals, who with access to the virtual world, can confirm each other's defense mechanism, can coagulate into groups that mutually enhance their ideas and, through this amplification, end up canceling logical thinking.

Some users have met certain needs, through regression to childhood and refuge in the virtual world. Regression in the childhood world involves reliving the feeling of childhood and the need for protection, by an adult, associated with the flight from responsibilities, depending on the tendencies of dependent personality or associated anxieties (Luca et al., 2020c). These people either became completely isolated or relived childhood-specific activities. When a person begins to take refuge in the virtual world, he will gradually spend more time watching movies, playing online games, socializing with others, shopping online, scrolling through social networks, until these activities take place. obsessive, then compulsive.

Symptoms of internet addiction

It is well known that *internet addiction disorder* is not listed in the mental health official handbooks, like the Classification of Mental and Behavioural Disorders ICD-10 (World Health Organization, 1992) or the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders DSM-5, but it has been formally recognized as a disorder by the American Psychological Association (Shaw & Black, 2008).

"Although Internet Addiction can be found on 28 million websites, the APA chose not to include it in DSM-5 in 2014, focusing on content rather than the technology used to convey it." (Sadock et al., 2017)

Individuals with internet addiction suffer both physical and mental consequences:

1. Psychological symptoms:

- guilt
- anxiety
- depression
- aggressivity
- procrastination
- mood swings
- defensive attitude
- social (physical) isolation
- feeling of loneliness
- the tendency to avoid work
- loss of the notion of time
- state of psychomotor agitation
- loss of patience for repetitive activities
- hedonic feelings of satisfaction, euphoria, while using the internet
- inability to prioritize activities or follow a well-established schedule

2. Somatic symptoms:

- headache
- insomnia
- malnutrition
- weight fluctuations
- poor personal hygiene
- carpal tunnel syndrome
- pain in any area of the body
- sleep-wake disorders
- eye diseases (dryness, hyperemia)
- spine pain (cervical and lombar)

Related disorders

- online gambling addiction
- online gaming addiction
- internet-communication disorder (compulsive talking with other people) (Wegmann & Brand, 2016)
- virtual reality addiction
- video streaming addiction

DISCUSSION

Changing the behavior of people associated with other stressful psychological factors (fear of death, anxiety, unpredictability of the future), can generate a range of conditions ranging from mental disorders to changes in compliance with organic diseases.

"Any form of addiction is bad, whether the narcotic is alcohol, morphine or idealism." (Jung, 1962). In other words, it is essential for our health, physical and mental, to stay as far away from harmful behaviors that can become diseases that affect our lives.

Consequently, addictive behaviors have different intensities, occupy variable durations, have a fluctuating mental consumption, and generate a gradual social dysfunction, to which are added pre-existing mental suffering, and some of the people involved develop disorders, which involve the intervention of a specialist in the field of mental health.

As in any other aspect of life, whether we are talking about food, rest or professional life, when it comes to time spent in the online environment, we need balance and moderation.

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