THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL NETWORKS ON THE INDIVIDUALS AS WELL AS SOCIO-CULTURAL STEREOTYPES AND SOCIAL DEPENDENCE ON THIS SOURCE

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Abstract

This article aims to analyse the impact of social networks on the individual, by the main exponent Facebook as well as a socio-cultural stereotype, but also the addiction to this source of socialization. How much it influences our life, how toxic viral information, mostly unverifiable can become, maybe due to the fact that many internet users don't even question if they ought to do it. Does Facebook influence your life? Does it transform us from people living in society in lonely people addicted to a keyboard that connects us to a virtual world? Are we ready to use the Internet as a simple communication tool or have we become prisoners to an alienated way of living from a human and social point of view?

Keywords: *social network, information, addiction, socio-cultural stereotype, morality.*

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Introduction

To spend hours on social networks daily has become practically a way of life for many of us. Somewhat for good reason, maybe just for the fact that the Internet "brings" home our loved ones which are away, but, especially, because it connects us, in real-time, to everything that is happening around the world. The information, "explicitly" presented, is offered to us already processed, just to be assimilated and conveyed forth, as a personal opinion.

The Internet, with all that it entails: social networks, e-mail, messenger, but especially the information provided has become the main source of information for the majority of us in recent years. Accordingly, the library, with its books and halls, as letters, with the emotion of trembling letters and their forgotten scent, have remained in the collective consciousness as anachronistic, dusty museum items. In this context, phrases like "you don't have a Facebook account, you don't exist" seem to have more coverage. Seductive, especially through its forms under permanent transformation, the virtual community inoculates the impression that your opinion counts and, the more vehement or downright aggressive, the more comments it generates and the more likes it collects. In the virtual community, friendships, opinions, romances, tragedies are born. In a world which is apparently constantly on the move, tireless and always present, psychologists and psychiatrists talk about addiction but, above all, about a lack of confidence, about alienation from the real world, about loneliness.

Methodology

This study included men and women, over the age of 18 years old, in all eight counties of the region of Moldavia, respectively Galati, Vaslui, Bacau, Iasi, Neamt, Vrancea, Botosani and Suceava, both urban and rural areas as, all with Facebook account. The selection of respondents took into account a selection area without cultural, religious, ethnic, domicile or training limits. 1100 questionnaires were distributed to be filled out, which were divided equally, among both female and male respondents in May 2014 to May 2015. In the end, 480 questionnaires filled out by women and 496 by males were effectively taken into consideration. The 976 respondents who effectively entered into the study answered to 6 questions, all with simple complement. The responses were processed statistically, depending on the gender of the participants, their residence, level of training, category of age, estimating that these variables could influence the respondents' attitude towards the means of social media.

Results

The interviewees answered six questions, which focused on motivational, social, moral as well as ethical issues. The first question was exploratory: *"1. Why have you created a Facebook account?"* The respondents who ticked answer a), i.e. to keep in touch with family, to resume relations with old friends or colleagues who live in other cities in the country or abroad, represented a significant proportion, demonstrating the usefulness of social media networks. Thus, men in a ratio of 26%, but especially women (39%), are mainly motivated by the desire to keep in touch with people who left home, whether to work abroad or to study, or with people who settled down in another country. However, for the majority of the respondents who ticked answer c), i.e. to have an account on the social network, the latter is equivalent to existing in the great, diverse and, why not, appealing virtual world. Thus, 43% of the men who filled out the questionnaire successfully identify with this form of communication (*Figure 1*). In a slightly lower percentage, 35% of the women who took part in this research also embraced the phrase "if you don't have facebook, you don't exist".
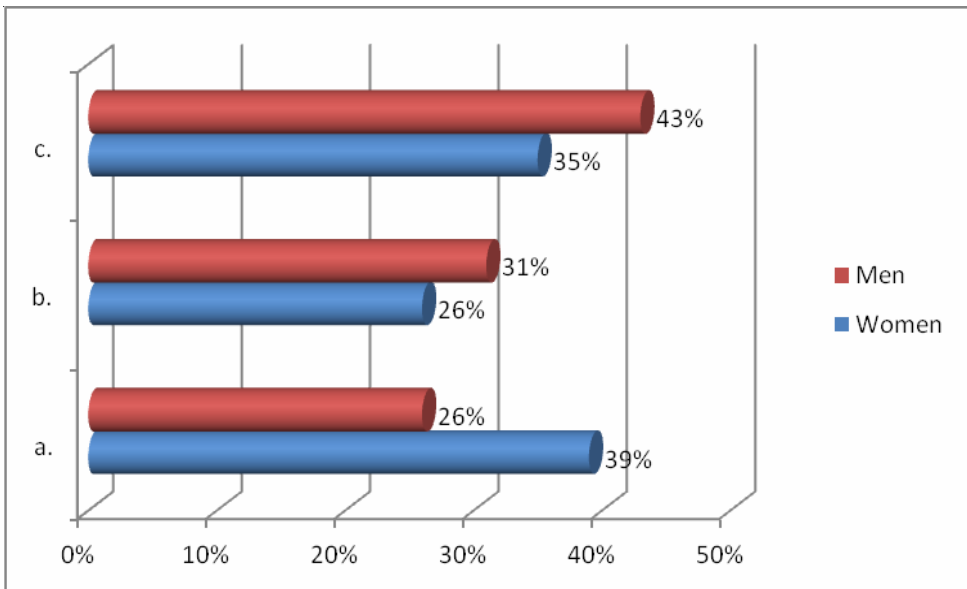

a. To keep in touch with family, to resume relations with old friends or colleagues who live in other cities in the country or abroad

b. Because it is important for me to know what others think about various topics of interest

c. Because if you don't have a Facebook account, you don't exist.

Figure 1. *The respondents' motivation to create a Facebook account*

There were also respondents who, by means of the answer provided (26% - women, 31% - men) expressed their desire to be informed in real-time, especially when it comes to topics of widespread interest. For them, other people's opinions matter; therefore, they consider it important to find out what their social group, and not only, think about such topics. The second question aimed at revealing, from a motivational perspective, *"What are the criteria that guide you in choosing friends on Facebook?"* The results obtained for this question were interpreted by taking into account the independent variable "residence", urban/rural, respectively. As a general remark, the answers obtained from participants from each county were substantially equal, suggesting the fact that there are similar social and cultural stereotypes in the whole region of Moldova.

Regardless of the area in which they live (urban/rural), whether it's about women (28%-urban, 20%- rural) or men (31% - urban, 28% - rural), in a nearly perfect similarity, the subjects have admitted that the temptation to be part of a greater community, which, in real life they can't identify, represents the primary motivation to choose virtual friends (*Figure 2*).
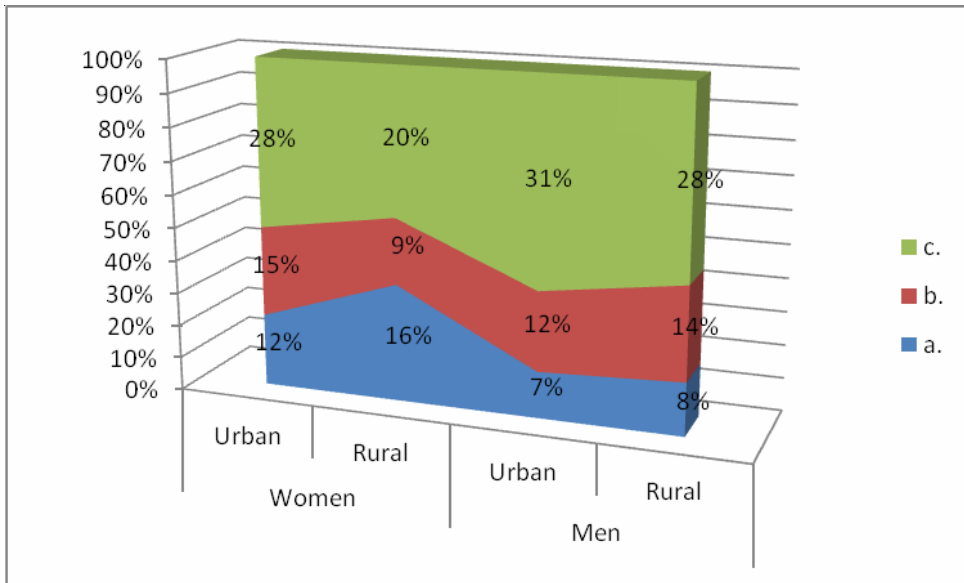

a. My list includes solely people I know
b. I add to my list persons in whose comments I find my own opinions
c. I request and accept friendships, because I like to be part of a bigger community

Figure 2. *Criteria according to which the participants in the study choose virtual friends*

Some caution in establishing virtual contacts is shown by the female respondents from the rural environment (16%), who claim that they limit solely to known persons, while the urban female respondents (15%) are tempted to socialize, and to add into the list of friends people with whom they find they have similar opinions on the various topics discussed on the forums.

By the third question *"Do you think that it is natural for teenagers up to the age of 13 to have a Facebook account?"*, social morality, but also family safety, and especially that of minors under the age of 13 years, were targeted. In order to acquire as comprehensive an image as possible, the answers to this question were interpreted by reporting to the independent variable of *age*.

If for adults being present in the virtual space is a choice which depends strictly on the personal decision of each individual, for children, the temptation of such a diverse, active and apparently full of opportunities world can turn into real traps. Somewhat predictably, those who voiced their reluctance for teenagers under the age of 13 to have Facebook accounts are persons, both women (14%) and men (17%) in the age group of 30-39 years, namely those whose children have the mentioned ages (*Figure 3*).
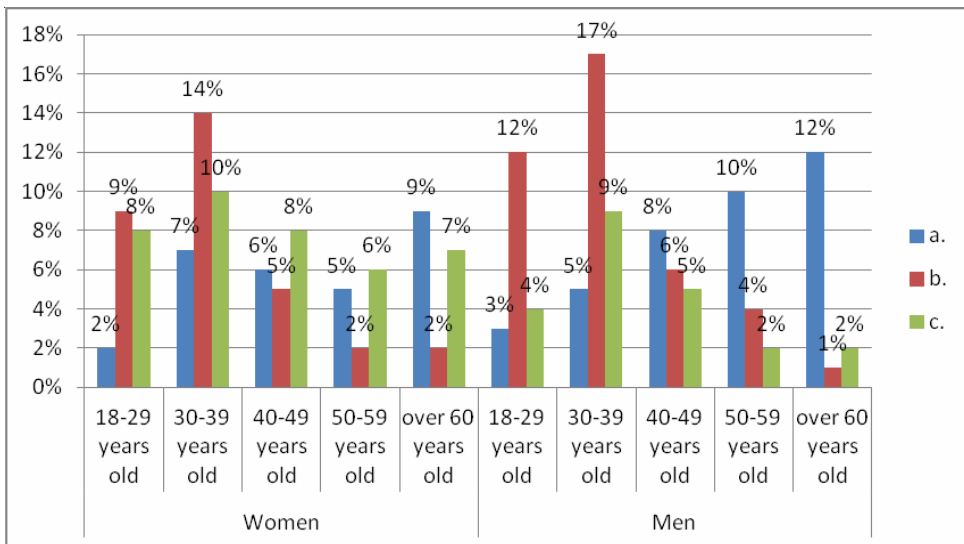
a. Yes, if parents can have control over the posts
b. No, because any child can become the victim of malicious individuals, who may push them to do severe actions, difficult to predict and control by the family
c. I did not think about this issue because every child can create a Facebook page without parental consent

Figure 3. *The respondents' opinions on the right of children under the age of 13 to have accounts on social networks*

On the other hand, if men with ages ranging between 40-49 years (6%), those in the age group of 50-59 years (10%) and, especially, those over 60 years of age (12%) accepted that teenagers under the age of 13 years have Facebook accounts, if they are supervised by the parents, about 40% of the questioned women, regardless of age, think that adults can't have a real control over the actions of their children.

Question no. 4, *"Have you thought that by posting family photos in intimate situations on your Facebook page, you expose yourself in a virtual public space that you cannot control?"* has also raised motivational and social morality issues into discussion, as well as matters related to the management of the public space, and to protecting the private space. This time, the answers were interpreted by taking into account the independent variable of "education", assessing the respondents' opinion based on their level of education. In this context, the tendency of women, regardless of education, (15% - 8 grades, 13% - 12 grades, 21% - graduate studies), is to be as present in the virtual world as much as possible, to know and be known by as many people. However, men recognized, on the one hand, that they are not disturbed to be exposed in a virtual public space that they cannot control (14%-12 grades, 16%-graduate studies), on the other hand they argue that they were not concerned about this issue (16%-8 grades, 8%-12 grades, 12%-graduate studies) (*Figure 4*).
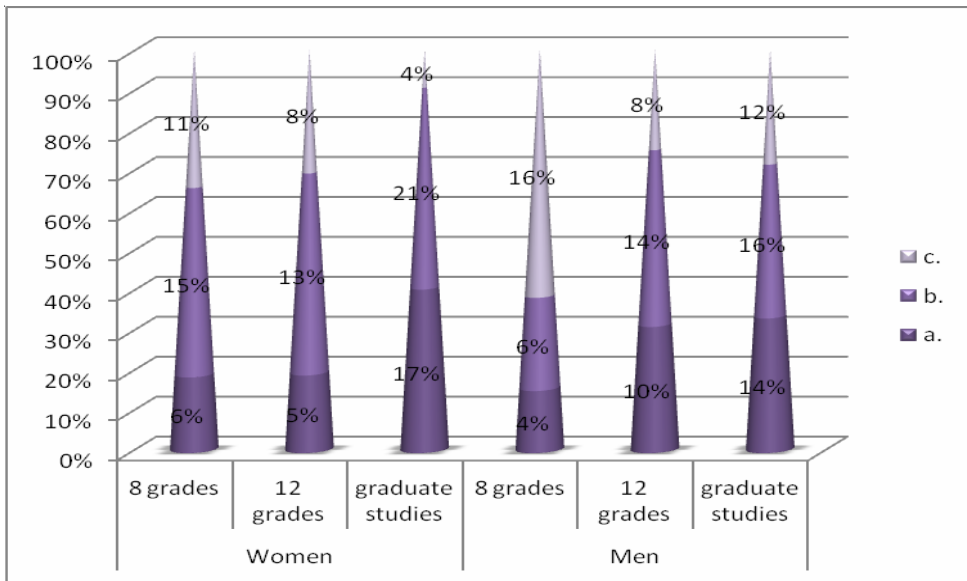


a. Yes, and that's why all my posts are neutral
b. No, because that is the idea, to know and be known by as many people as possible
c. I did not think about this issue

Figure 4. *Respondents' answers to exposure in the social media environment*

A limited percentage of participants in the study expressed concern for ensuring a certain degree of privacy, even in the public space. Most of them have completed higher education studies (women-17%; men-14%).

Question no. 5, *"Do you think that certain posts or comments made on Facebook, under real or fake identities, are intentionally placed to influence public opinion?",* aimed at an etical approach and interpretation of the answers of the participants in the study. "Residence" was established as an independent variable in order to attempt to place the moral and social values promoted by the urban environment, on the one hand, and by the rural environment, on the other hand, in antithesis.
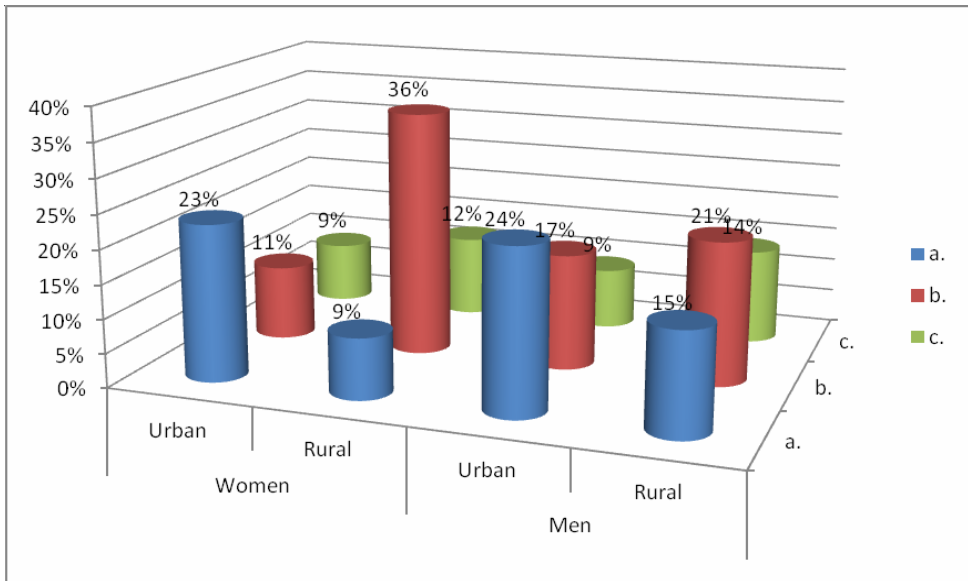
a. Yes, there are the so-called "over-sharers" or opinion leaders who, by their omnipresence, regardless of the subject, have the role to create true or false opinion tides.
b. I do not think so. I believe that there are very active people who do nothing but expose their own views.
c. I did not think about this issue

Figure 5. *The respondents' opinions on manipulation through social media*

Permanent, but mostly active presence on Facebook of some so called opinion leaders is differently interpreted by the respondents in this study. If women (23%) and men (24%) residing in the urban area are convinced that certain posts or comments are intentionally placed in the virtual space in order to influence the opinions of others or to create tides of opinion which are either true or false (*Figure 5*), the persons in the rural areas (36% women, 21% men) believe that

these people are just very active and with a desire to share their opinions with others. A somewhat important percentage of respondents, 25%, said they did not even think about this issue.

Question no 6., *"Do you think your personal, couple or family life was in any way influenced from the time you created your Facebook account?",* aimed at revealing if and how the communication between partners after registering with social networks was affected. The variable chosen was the respondents' "gender", considered as the general assessment variable. The answers obtained were rather impressive. The percentages (women-70%, men - 82%), are disarming (*Figure 6*), given that they reflect a common addiction in family life to communicate in the virtual space.
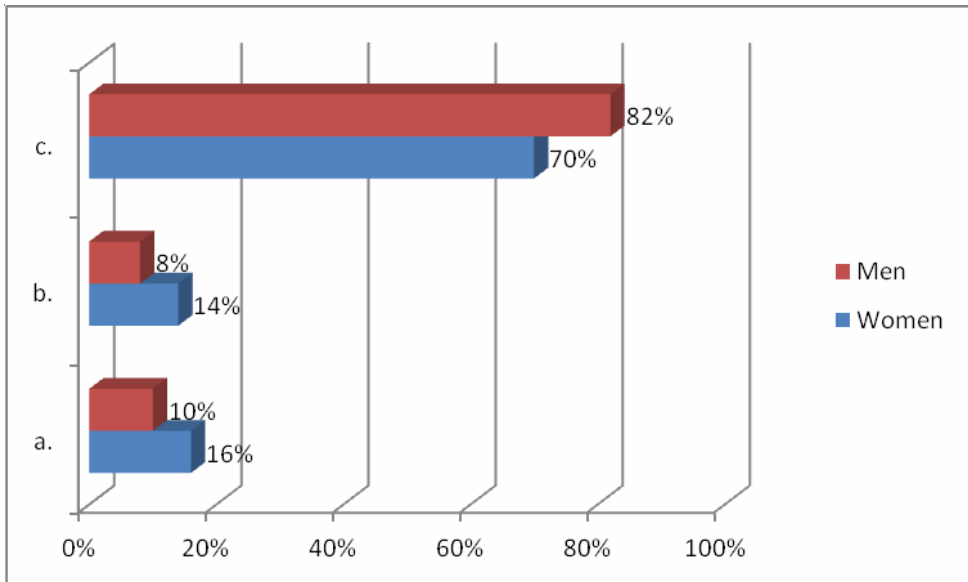
a. Yes, some of the time I spent with my family is now spent in virtual space.
b. No, I am careful to enter on Facebook only when I am alone.
c. I did not think about this issue, because each family member has a Facebook account and spends time in virtual space.

Figure 6. *Respondents' opinions on the manner in which social media influences their personal life*

It is also impressive that this activity has become part of couple / family life so that the participants who provided these answers sincerely admitted to never having even considered the issue of emotional alienation, given the fact that they are physically in the same home. Very few of the subjects in this research (14%

women, 8% men) think that they must protect their family relationships, by choosing to be present in the virtual space only when they are home alone.

Discussion

In 2010, the American Psychiatric Association mentioned new forms of addiction, including addiction to Facebook. The literature on the subject extensively dwelt on internet and local network addictions (Whang *et al* 2003; Li and Chung, 2006; Houssem et Kaouther, 2015; McIntyre *et al.* 2015). Basically, Facebook social network has exploded in use, becoming the second world social site after Google. Globally, in 2015, there were 1.5 billion users, 8 million in Romania alone. Networked intelligence emerges, addressing methods of virtual communication and, especially, the consequences of this type of digital communication. Children, young and older people are spending hours on end at the computer or smartphone socializing in the virtual world with known or unknown "friends" (Armstrong *et al.*, 2000; Casale *et al.*, 2015). A simple "touch" and you have the world at your feet. Parents can talk to children who are working abroad or study in another country. In this way, the longing for family can be more easily dealt with and those living such situation have every reason to be thankful to Mark Zuckerberg, although most of them haven't even heard of him. Thus, social media has become a virtual "highway" (Bernard, 2005; Dutton, 2005; Kadushin, 2012). From very early ages, up to the most respectable ages, people create such accounts. Although the rule imposed by the administrators of this site is that all its users be above 13 years of age before creating an account, the reality is different altogether, and anyone, regardless of age, may become a member of this community.

Because no one can control the accuracy of the data provided by the person who wants to create a social media page (Zhao, 2006; Hampton, 2007; Tokunaga & Rains, 2010). In favour of waiving this rule, otherwise hypocritical in the context, there is a tide of opinion talking about discrimination, marginalization or a lie tacitly accepted by parents. Quite legitimately, some people ask what is the difference between a child of 12 years and 11 months and one of 13 years and one month, for example. Most likely, none; however, in order to create the illusion of control, Facebook administrators have set an age limit, in which, incidentally, no one believes. The idea is that, eventually, the parents are the only ones who can determine what is best for their children. They are the ones who can accept it or not but, equally, they must be aware of the dangers to which their children are exposed while left to socialize in a heterogeneous virtual world where they can become targets of persons with doubtful intentions. If the viral "Izabella's Birthday"- caused by a 12 years old teenage girl, who has accidentally invited over 100,000 virtual friends to her birthday - was regarded with sympathy, well, dozens, maybe hundreds of children have become victims of some individuals, most often

under false identities (Kalpidou *et al.*, 2011), which have manipulated them emotionally, easily becoming targets of verbal, sexual or physical abuse. That is precisely why, in this context, the role of the family is absolutely essential.

However, children are not the only ones who can be manipulated through social networks. Among the "friends" who post opinions about different topics, news, events, there are always at least two or three that do not leave anything behind, whether it's about politics, economics, sports, etc. In Facebook language they are known as "over-sharers", in the elegant language, opinion leaders. They are the ones who make the law on forums (Bernard, 2005; Ellison *et al.*, 2007). They establish guidelines and tell us who to support, who to curse, which are the politicians who are thieves and who are honest, correct our own opinions with a categorical leader attitude or, equally, publicly "admonish" the ones who exaggerate. They pose as moderators, absolute masters of forums, with dozens of fans who rush to support them, confirming their opinions. Generally, these over-sharers are paid to create tides of opinion, to shake or to strengthen confidence (Dutton, 2005), whether it is about people, laws, events, decisions, arguments that can be true, half true or false. Their ability to manipulate is often made easier by the fact that many of those who are part of their faithful audience are captives in this virtual world that gets to teach them how to think, react and, essentially, how to choose their life milestones (Ebeling-Witte *et al.*, 2007; Farahani *et al.*, 2011).

Psychologists say that moving your personal life in cyberspace is a sign of social alienation (Moore & McElroy, 2012; Gokce *et al.*, 2013). Unfortunately, this is more and more frequent. It has almost became a habit to find our significant others on social networks. Romantic walks have become obsolete in regard to a date at the mall, a café, where, although they are sitting at the same table, each lover "scrolls" absently on its mobile phone. "Today the internet has crashed and I had to spend some time with my family. They seem nice people!" This joke that obviously circulated on Facebook is very relevant and highlights the very essence of socialization in a virtual world that you cannot control but, instead, it controls you.

Studies conducted on representative groups of virtual socialization addicts claim that these people are lonely people with antisocial personalities (Sheldon, 2008; Ong *et al*, 2011) who, due to the fact that they cannot find their place in the real world, build their life as they want it to be and not as it really is, where they can get rid of the complexes of direct confrontations, where everything is allowed, without the fear of being ridiculed or marginalized. Where, they have many friends when opening the social network page, but actually, they are very lonely once they close it (Kadushin, 2004; Ryan & Xenos, 2011; Moore, 2012). Alienation from real life does nothing but accentuate the addiction to a virtual world, which is materialized by pushing away family, friends, normality. Incidentally, whole families recognize that, although they spend time in the same room, they almost don't even see each other, because each one is glued on social networks.

The fact is that transforming the activity on the social network page in a modus vivendi can be completely unhealthy for both the spirit and the body, but this does not necessarily mean that this type of communication lacks in consistency and validity (Houssem et Kaouther, 2015; Peter et Valkemburg, 2007; Snijders, 2001). It is up to us to use Facebook only as a tool and not as a way of life.

Conclusions

Undoubtedly, the use of social media is a key factor in establishing a connection with loved ones who are usually abroad. For them, real-time connection is a method to interconnect and to facilitate activities which people located in different geographical areas can do together. The phrase *"If you don't have Facebook, you don't exist"* is a major motivation, especially for young people, but also for adults who have difficulty adapting to real life. However, in such situations, there is a danger of total transfer from the real to the virual world, the latter of which is much more permissive and convenient at social and human level than the former, which, with just one click away, allows you to access or to leave it. Although the minimum age for those who want to create a Facebook account is 13 years old, the adults admit that they cannot have real control over their children, as they can "juggle" the site administrators by providing inaccurate data. This takes place in a reality marked by technological boom, in which the control of the social media is a utopian notion. In this context, the emotional and even physical safety of social networks users, especially of minors, can remain only a desideratum.

On the other hand, men are more willing than women to expose themselves in the virtual space, which they admit that they can not control; recognizing that desire to be on social networks is stronger than the caution by which they could avoid unpleasant situations. Women and men residing in the urban area are convinced that certain posts or comments are intentionally placed in the virtual space in order to influence the opinions of others or to create tides of opinion which are either true or false. The respondents in the study admitted that their personal and family life was overwhelmingly influenced after they have created Facebook accounts. Thus, the fact that the large-scale introduction of new digital technologies is implicitly reflected on the notion of identity of each and every individual has been confirmed.

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