The Nature of Social Relationships in light of Using Social Media among Residents Students

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the nature of social relationships in light of social media, using Facebook as a model. The researcher intentionally selected a sample of female students residing at the Belarbi Abdelkader Dormitory in the city of Mostaganem and relied on interviews as a data collection tool while supervising master students. The study demonstrated that social media plays a significant role for these students, as most of them use Facebook primarily to communicate with family and friends, work on academic research, stay updated on each other's news and send messages. The results also indicated that Facebook has transformed social relationships from reality to the virtual world in that it provided students with the opportunity to renew friendships and maintain communication with their families and relatives. Moreover, the study revealed that using this platform enhances and supports the virtual social relationships of the participants. However, extensive use has also led them into a world of internet addiction and social isolation.

Keywords: Social media, social relationships, facebook, resident students.

1. Introduction

It is well-established that humans cannot live in isolation from society; they are inherently social beings, as demonstrated by sociologists. They strive to create social relationships through their interactions with those around them. This highlights that individuals cannot live without these relationships. Although factors may lead to a decrease in these connections, they still bring people together through various social bonds and relationships resulting from their interactions. From birth, individuals live within a network of social relationships that continues until death, varying according to the community to which they belong. This network of social ties persists through the processes of communication and interaction. With social development, urban and industrial societies have emerged, along with evolving social relationships, as they focus on both social structures and the interactions occurring among these organizations. Social relationships have been significantly influenced by the profound and ongoing developments in societies, particularly in the context of the modern technological revolution and the emergence of knowledge and information societies. This impact is especially evident in the realm of information technologies, which have introduced numerous changes to contemporary society, including shifts in prevailing social norms, the customs and traditions of individuals, and the overall nature of their lifestyles. In the present day, social relationships are expanding and evolving through these modern communication tools, facilitating the transmission of various types of messages. The technological advancements of the twentieth century have engendered a substantial communication revolution, with one of the most notable outcomes being the advent of the internet. This technology has enabled users to engage in a wide array of communication services adequate to their needs and preferences, thus enhancing their social interactions.

The internet has established a new paradigm for interpersonal communication through social media platforms and diverse services within a virtual realm, effectively supplanting traditional face-to-face interactions. Characterized by immediacy and efficiency, these digital communication channels have transformed the dynamics of human connectivity, reshaping the nature of social relationships in contemporary society.

Gradually, social media platforms have become integral to human existence, establishing their influence across all facets of life, particularly concerning social relationships. The utilization of these platforms has notably increased, with Facebook emerging as a critical communication tool in the daily lives of young individuals, regardless of their educational or social backgrounds. This phenomenon can be attributed to the platform's capacity to facilitate rapid interaction and engagement with others. Facebook is recognized as the most prevalent social media platform, promoting connectivity, networking, and the exchange of ideas within diverse communities, especially in recent years. The youth demographic represents the largest segment of its user base. This study specifically targets university students, with a particular focus on female students residing in dormitories. Our objective is to examine the phenomenon of Facebook usage among these students and to analyze the implications of their usage of this platform, concentrating on the social relationships and connections they develop. Accordingly, the following question is raised: How is the network of social relationships among female students residing in dormitories through their use of social media, specifically Facebook?

2. Hypotheses

- 1- Social media platforms, particularly Facebook, have significantly contributed to strengthening and enhancing the social relationships among female students residing in dormitories.
- 2- Facebook affects real social relationships, not virtual ones.

3. Sample

The researcher employed a "purposive sampling" method, where they intentionally selected participants based on specific criteria, leaving no room for coincidence. Accordingly, the researcher purposefully selected female students who use social media at the Belarbi Abdelkader Dormitory. The sample comprised 18 resident students. They utilized direct observation and structured interviews, as these methods are straightforward and effective for collecting data and information directly related to the study topic.

4. Concepts

- "Usage": Linguistically, a user, derived from the verb "to use", refers to someone who is asked to utilize something [1]. Terminologically, the word refers to the act of selecting a specific media platform over others, which involves an individual actively utilizing the information they seek. In essence, it represents the cognitive application of information that one consistently needs. Additionally, usage satisfies the user's needs; it fulfills these needs when the desired information is reached, or when it aligns with their actual requirements [2]. Operationally, and in light of this study, "usage" refers to the use of social media platforms, specifically Facebook, by female students residing in dormitories.

- **Social media:** Terminologically, social media platforms are internet sites that allow users to easily participate in the creation or addition of their pages. They are also defined as "an electronic social structure composed of individuals, groups, or institutions, where the fundamental electronic unit, known as a 'node,' is connected through various types of relationships. These relationships may include supporting a specific team, belonging to a particular organization, or holding citizenship in a given country. These connections can manifest in deeper dimensions, such as social status, beliefs, or class affiliation ^[3].
- Operationally, in this study, social media platforms refer to a collection of websites that enable individuals to communicate with one another, allowing them to upload images, videos, and various topics, as well as to comment on content shared by other users. Additionally, these platforms offer a range of features and applications to enhance user engagement.
- University student: This concept refers to an individual who actively seeks knowledge, engaging in learning either through their own efforts or under the guidance of a teacher or mentor who instructs and directs their educational path. Additionally, a university student is characterized as "one whose academic competence has enabled them to proceed from the preparatory level to secondary school and subsequently to university, according to their chosen specialization, facilitated by certification or a degree that qualifies them. The student is regarded as one of the essential active components in the educational process [4].
- **Resident Student**: The term refers to an individual who resides in a university dormitory due to the distance between the university and their home, with the primary purpose of pursuing her studies.
- Social relationships: Terminologically, Badawi defines the term "relationship" as "a bond between two entities or phenomena such that a change in one necessitates a change in the other"^[5]. Social relationships, in their conceptual framework, indicate a form of organization and diversity, characterized by the dynamism and vitality of life domains. They encompass the essential qualities of action and interaction, which are fundamental to social life. Social relationships also signify various aspects of social, economic, and political life, among others ^[6]. Furthermore, they represent "the connections and reciprocal effects between individuals in society, arising from the nature of their interactions, the exchange of feelings and emotions, and their mutual engagement within the community.

Operationally, the social relationships discussed in our research refer to the virtual relationships that occur through social media, using Facebook as a model.

3. Theoretical background of the study

3.1. Theories that explained social relationships

Social relationships are the product of individuals coming together, exchanging ideas, and spontaneously uniting their interests. These relationships fulfill their social motivations, essential needs, and common objectives. Accordingly, several theories have emerged to explain this concept, one of which is the theory proposed by Ferdinand Tönnies who studied the nature of human relationships and concluded the following ^[7]:

Tönnies considered that human will is the source and foundational pillar of all social relationships. He identified two types of groups: he referred to the first type as "local community" and the second type as "society." Tönnies clarified that community represents the main will, while society embodies the "regulatory will." He argued that "natural will" is reflected in relationships based on "blood ties" (kinship), which are most

evident between mothers and their children, fathers and their children, and spouses within a family. Additionally, relationships based on "neighborhood" are particularly significant, especially those rooted in geographical proximity, as exemplified by villages and small rural communities. Furthermore, relationships founded on "friendship" are characterized by mutual benefit, often represented by shared ownership and a unified direction toward common good or, conversely, detrimental outcomes.

As for the "regulatory will," Tönnies argues that this will is manifested in the society, which consists of individuals who interact and integrate with one another based on their rational desires, all aimed at achieving common interests. Society, in this context, is not a product of nature but rather the result of numerous industrial processes characterized by self-interest and the application of reason, alongside either organic or contractual solidarity.

Among the most prominent forms of relationships within society are those centered around the exchange of mutual benefits, including currency, goods, and services. The theory of Charles Cooley addressed social relationships based on his classification of social groups according to the nature of relationships, communication, and interaction among individuals in society. Cooley divided groups into primary and secondary categories ^[8]. The primary groups are characterized by face-to-face interactions ^[9]. This means that primary relationships are direct, based on immediate communication among a limited number of individuals, where each person knows the others deeply. These relationships are considered primary because they provide individuals with early and comprehensive experiences of social unity. Members of a primary group are highly susceptible to its pressures and needs due to their direct contact and ongoing interaction. Consequently, primary groups play a vital role in social regulation, which fundamentally relies on mutual empathy and the depth of relationships among their members.

In such groups, cooperation and solidarity prevail, leading to a dissolution of individual identity within the collective. This results in a complete integration among members, where individuals perceive themselves as inseparable parts of the group. Connections are founded on blood ties, brotherhood, friendship, and personal acquaintance, which contribute to the depth of social relationships. It is important to note that these primary groups are not entirely independent of the larger society; rather, they are closely linked to it and reflect its broader spirit [10].

On the other hand, secondary groups typically exist within vast and culturally complex societies that encompass a large population and are characterized by significant geographic and professional mobility among their members. In such contexts, face-to-face interactions, which are prevalent in primary groups, become nearly impossible. As a result, impersonal relationships replace personal ones, leading to interactions that are superficial, utilitarian, and fragmented. In secondary groups, formal laws and regulations govern relationships. These groups are often exemplified by various organizations, work units, trade associations, or city clubs. Generally, secondary groups are formed to achieve specific and limited objectives, distinguishing them from the more holistic and emotionally rich primary groups. Thus, Cooley emphasizes that the presence of primary groups within a society reflects the nature of relationships therein, as these groups embody the spirit of the community. Furthermore, these groups possess characteristics that underscore their cohesive strength and active role in achieving social regulation, which can be effectively realized in smaller communities.

As a society transitions toward greater complexity in culture, larger geographical areas, and an increasing population, the strength of social relationships may not be as effectively established as it is in smaller communities. Consequently, the form of social groups

evolves, leading to the emergence of secondary groups that are characterized by superficiality and self-interest.

Max Weber asserts that "social relationships" is a sociological term frequently employed to describe the situation in which two or more individuals engage in a particular behavior, taking into account the actions of one another, thereby orienting their own behavior accordingly. A social relationship encompasses any interaction occurring between two or more individuals aimed at satisfying the needs of those involved, as exemplified by the interactions between a seller and a buyer, a student and a teacher, or a judge and a defendant [11].

Weber further explains that social relationships emerge from social actions and interactions, stressing that the concept of social relationships signifies a stable arrangement or organization of elements evident in social action. These relationships do not exist in isolation or apart from social actions; they rather represent imaginative constructs of action that can be abstractly conceptualized as patterns of observable social behavior.

Social relationships require the fulfillment of three essential conditions [12]:

- 1. Existence of social roles played by the individuals involved in the social relationship.
- 2. Existence of a set of behavioral, verbal, and linguistic symbols used by individuals within the social relationship.
- 3. Existence of a goal or purpose that should be fulfilled for a specific need or commitment.

Social relationships are characterized by reciprocal connections among individuals and groups within society, arising from their interactions and engagements with one another. Thus, the concept of social relationships is a broad and inclusive notion that has been the subject of numerous studies within the field of sociology, each approached from different perspectives and areas of focus. Social relationships represent a form of social interaction that occurs among individuals within any community, whether these interactions are positive or negative. They are considered one of the essential necessities of life, integral to the overall structure of society. Human beings cannot exist without these relationships, which are founded on several principles and foundations, such as cooperation, competition, and harmony.

3.2. Social media from a sociological perspective

Social media is defined as "a system of electronic networks that allow participants to create a personal account and connect through an electronic social system with other members who share similar interests and hobbies, including friends and relatives. These networks are categorized as part of the second generation of websites and are termed 'social' because they arise from the concept of community building. Accordingly, users can meet individuals with common interests on the internet, discover additional sites related to their fields of interest, and share their memories and files with family, friends, and colleagues [13].

3.2.1. Social effects of social media

3.2.1.1. Positive effects

Social media platforms have introduced a new positive dimension to the lives of millions of individuals. Some attribute these significant transformative changes to social media that have improved human lives by instigating cultural, social, political, and economic shifts within entire communities. Among the most notable positive effects are [14].

- A Window to the world: Millions of individuals from various nations, particularly in the Arab world, have found a free window through social media to explore ideas and cultures from across the globe. These platforms have served as an outlet for millions of individuals from middle and lower socioeconomic classes, enabling them to connect with like-minded individuals worldwide at no cost and without the need for travel. Furthermore, they have provided an escape for countless women and youth in the Third World, especially in Arab countries, from their surrounding realities, social repression, and the constraints of customs and traditions.
- An Opportunity for self-enhancement: An individual who does not have a way to establish an independent identity for themselves within society—particularly in our Arab communities, where young men and women often find themselves under the influence of their families, adhering to their behaviors, customs, and cultural norms—registration on social media platforms allows them to create an independent identity on a global scale. As they fill out their personal information, young individuals begin to cultivate a sense of their virtual identity, which expands and evolves through interactions with others and engagement with diverse civilizations and cultures. This experience broadens their horizons and perspectives far more than if they remained constrained within the confines of family and tribal affiliations.
- -A Platform for different opinions: A notable characteristic of social media platforms is the ease with which users can modify their profiles and the freedom to disseminate content that articulates their individual perspectives. This functionality enables the expression of opinions, ideas, and beliefs, even when they diverge from those of others. Such a dynamic fosters an environment where diverse viewpoints can coexist and be actively engaged, thereby enhancing public discourse.
- Mitigating civilizational conflicts: While social media platforms may contribute to the phenomenon of cultural globalization, they simultaneously serve to bridge cultural and civilizational gapes. This is achieved through a shared culture of communication among users, enabling a clearer representation of Arab perspectives to the West, free from the distortions of media and the duplicity of political rhetoric. Additionally, these platforms facilitate the conveyance of Western concerns that stem from a lack of understanding of Arab and Islamic cultures, ultimately fostering intellectual rapprochement among individuals within communities and nations.
- Enhancing virtual family connectivity: Today, with the advancement of communication technology, it has become significantly easier for family members to stay updated on each other's lives through social media platforms. These platforms are often more cost-effective than traditional means of communication, allowing many Arab families to check on the well-being of their children or relatives via Facebook.

3.2.1.2. Negative effects of social media

Among the negative effects of social media platforms, we state the following:

- Weakening of personal interaction skills: The ease of communication afforded by platforms such as Facebook, accessible at any time, may result in a decrease in the duration of personal interactions for individuals and groups utilizing the platform. It is widely recognized that interpersonal skills are fundamentally distinct from those required for electronic communication. In face-to-face interactions, for instance, one cannot abruptly terminate a conversation or expunge an individual from one's social network with a mere click of a button, as is possible in digital contexts. This disparity may hinder the development of essential interpersonal competencies crucial for effective face-to face interaction.
- Waste of time: Social media platforms, with the entertainment services they offer to users, are highly engaging to the extent that individuals often lose track of time. This phenomenon has been demonstrated by numerous social studies.
- Addiction to social media: The use of social media platforms, particularly among households and retirees, often becomes one of the primary daily activities due to the prevalence of free time. This reliance makes it exceedingly challenging to abandon this activity or replace it with alternatives such as exercise, reading, or outdoor recreation. Social media thus serves as an ideal means for filling prolonged periods of free time.
- **Characterless users**: A significant challenge inherent in many social media platforms is the lack of privacy, which has resulted in significant moral and psychological harm to the youth. In some cases, this can even lead to material damage. Users' profiles often contain a extensive personal information, as well as their concerns and issues, which can easily fall into the hands of individuals who may exploit this data for malicious purposes, including defamation and harassment.

Easy surveillance via social media: Social media platforms provide an opportunity for any entity to access details of individuals' personal lives, whether that entity is a corporation seeking consumers for its products, a harasser looking for targets, or official regulatory bodies such as intelligence agencies searching for information about suspects. It has been argued that the ease of obtaining personal data through these platforms has facilitated the efforts of Western intelligence agencies to gather extensive information about millions of individuals in the Arab region. They meticulously analyze images, names, and addresses, thereby creating opportunities to penetrate our communities [15].

Based on the aforementioned, it can be concluded that social media platforms, as a prominent media phenomenon attracting a significant segment of the population, facilitate the creation of new profiles and the formation of relationships across diverse fields through the exchange of news and information. However, despite their advantages, social media platforms also exert negative impacts on both individuals and society at large.

4- Facebook and social media

Facebook is deemed a significant social networking platform that provides opportunities for idea exchange, interpersonal interaction, and relationship building. Our interviews with the research participants confirmed this; all participants highlighted Facebook's role in their social relationships, emphasizing its contribution to communication within their immediate and extended families through voice, image, and video sharing. This facilitated the mitigation of negative emotions associated with geographical distance from family members. Furthermore, Facebook positively impacted the participants' ability to maintain contact with their families, regardless of whether they lived at home or elsewhere. It did not distract them from their families; rather, it

significantly strengthened family bonds. The majority of participants reported more frequent communication with their sisters than with other family members, attributed to shared gender and resulting enhanced understanding.

The interviewee N°6 stated: "I communicate with my older sister because she understands me very well, and I find comfort in communicating with her." Similarly, the interviewees maintained near-daily contact with their families to check on their well-being, as illustrated by interviewee N° 4: "Yes, I communicate with my family almost every day to check on them and reassure them of my well-being." For some, the daily contact stemmed from family anxieties related to their absence from home, as expressed by interviewee N° 7: "Yes, I contact them daily because they ask me to; they worry about me if I don't call."

The interviewees frequently utilize Facebook Messenger to communicate with their families, considering it easy to use. Overall, Facebook was viewed as an effective tool for maintaining close family ties, with most interviewees reporting that it fostered a strong sense of connection within their social relationships, encompassing friends, relatives, and classmates.

4.1. Facebook's role in consolidating and expanding social relationships among female resident students

It is well-established that social relationships are the exchange of connections between individuals and groups arising from mutual interaction. Social media technologies, including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, have profoundly impacted the lives of millions of people. Interviews revealed that all participants possessed accounts on various social media platforms, with Facebook being particularly prominent. This preference stems from the platforms' user-friendliness and advantageous features. A significant majority of participants reported creating their Facebook accounts more than three years prior, as exemplified by interviewee N° 6 "I have opened my Facebook account three years ago" and interviewee N° 7 "I have a Facebook account for seven years". The widespread adoption of Facebook is attributed to the accessibility of smartphones and readily available internet connectivity.

It becomes evident from the interview data that most students primarily utilize their Facebook accounts during nighttime hours. Interviewee N° 1 stated, "I use Facebook more at night than during the day," and interview N° 2 similarly reported, "I use Facebook frequently in the evening." This nocturnal Facebook usage among students with internet access is attributed to their daytime academic commitments. While the duration of Facebook use varied, interviewees reported minimum usage periods of two hours without interruption. Interviewee N° 1 noted, "I stay connected to Facebook for more than two hours," while interviewee N° 3 reported, "I access my Facebook account for between two and three hours, or even more."

This field study revealed that interviewees maintain active accounts on social media platforms, particularly Facebook, which they deem highly significant. Facebook serves two primary functions: firstly, as a platform for self-expression, where users share their opinions and daily lives through photos and videos, and reciprocally observe the posts of friends and relatives, thus maintaining direct contact with family and friends. Secondly, Facebook, through its integrated Messenger application, facilitates daily communication, often for extended periods, via voice and video calls with their contacts. Consequently, Facebook contributes to bridging geographical distances, fostering consistent direct contact, and ultimately strengthening and sustaining relationships.

4.2. Reasons for using Facebook

The field study revealed diverse uses of Facebook among interviewees, encompassing personal, academic, and other purposes. However, the majority utilize it for establishing new relationships, engaging in conversations, and connecting with family, as illustrated by Interviewee N° 2: "I use it to meet people, chat with my friends and family." Some interviewees also use Facebook for academic purposes, as stated by interviewee N° 5: "I use Facebook for personal and academic reasons." Therefore, the primary functions of Facebook for most interviewees include communication with family and friends, establishing new acquaintances, academic pursuits, entertainment...etc. Furthermore, Facebook facilitates the exchange of knowledge with classmates, tracking developments in their field of study, and participation in group chats focused on academic curricula, including discussions of research and assignments. The platform also enables participation in subject-related academic groups.

4.3. Implications of Facebook on real relationships

Individuals who use Facebook inhabit a social realm known as the virtual world, existing within a network of virtual social relationships. Although they may know these friends in their real lives, the initiation of communication through Facebook introduces them to another unreal world. Consequently, many scholars caution against prolonged engagement in the Facebook environment, and the internet more broadly.

Psychologists warn about the dangers of internet addiction or reliance on any other technological innovations due to their negative repercussions on individuals' lives and behaviors. Such dependencies can lead to the erosion of societal values and norms, as well as an increase in antisocial behaviors such as crime, violence, and disorder. Furthermore, young people, particularly adolescents in high school or university, are prone to various forms of psychological disturbances, including depression, anxiety, feelings of loneliness, social isolation, heightened psychological stress, and diminished self-esteem [16].

The study demonstrated that all the resident students we interviewed rely on Facebook as a primary means of communication in their daily lives. They spend significant amounts of time on their phones and the internet engaging in chats or calls with friends and relatives. This was declared by most interviewees, including Interviewee N° 7, who stated, "I cannot live without Facebook; when the internet goes out, I rush to recharge it to stay connected. When we inquired whether Facebook has impacted their interactions with family members and if they often feel isolated while using the platform, the responses were illuminating. For instance, Interviewee N° 1 stated "Despite my daily communication with my family, I still feel distant from them; it's not the same as meeting them face-to-face." She also noted that she often isolates herself with Facebook, even when in the same room as her friend, as they both retreat into the platform, entering another world as if they are not present together. Similarly, Interviewee N° 5 expressed, "Deep down, I feel distant from my family despite my daily communication with them, which I only do to reassure them about my well-being. However, my presence with my family cannot be replaced by Facebook. Therefore, I find myself isolated in the virtual world, and when I log out form it, I feel exhausted and regretful for having wasted my time there." On the other hand, interviewee N° 6 stated, "I find myself bold on Facebook, expressing my feelings and thoughts freely. I prefer isolation while communicating because it helps me overcome my shyness. In contrast, my real-life social interactions are quite the opposite; I struggle to communicate effectively."

From these statements and their analysis, we have found that Facebook has both positive and negative aspects. Although it serves as an important communication tool, it significantly impacts the lives of residents through addiction and the isolation they experience away from their families. Additionally, it allows users to express themselves freely, helping them to overcome shyness and personal deficiencies, particularly among females and those with introverted personalities. Furthermore, while internet usage facilitates the formation of virtual social relationships, real-life interactions tend to be limited.

5. Results and discussions

Through the aforementioned analysis, we aimed to address the hypotheses we proposed and found that social media, particularly Facebook, has significantly contributed to strengthening and enhancing the social relationships of resident students in a virtual context, helping them avoid feelings of loneliness and separation from their families. The interviewees reported having accounts on social media platforms, especially Facebook, which they consider highly significant in their lives because:

- It is an expressive space: The interviewees use Facebook as a platform to express their opinions and share their daily lives through the photos and videos they post. This allows them to browse their friends' and relatives' accounts and stay updated on their daily activities, thereby maintaining direct contact with family and friends.
- It is a communication space: The Messenger application, integrated with Facebook, facilitates daily communication for hours through voice and video calls with anyone they know and wish to talk to. Consequently, Facebook has contributed to bringing individuals closer together and enabling continuous and direct contact, thereby strengthening and sustaining virtual relationships.

As for the second hypothesis, which posits that Facebook affects real social relationships more than virtual ones, the research manifested that Facebook has both positive and negative aspects. While it serves as an important communication tool, it impacts the lives of residents through addiction and the isolation they experience from their families. Additionally, it enables users to express themselves freely, helping them to overcome shyness and general personal deficiencies, particularly among females and those who are socially withdrawn. Furthermore, while internet usage facilitates the formation of virtual social relationships, real-life interactions tend to be limited.

6. Conclusion

This study's analysis provided partial insight into the research topic, yielding key findings regarding social relationships among resident female students in the context of social media usage, particularly Facebook. The study revealed strong social connections between the students and their families, indicating close-knit relationships. Furthermore, motivations for social media usage are multifaceted and influenced by various social factors. This research concluded that communication and chatting are primary drivers of Facebook usage among the interviewees.

Social networks have successfully provided users with opportunities to connect with acquaintances, family, and existing social relationships, overcoming limitations of time and distance. These platforms facilitate the maintenance and expansion of these relationships. The platform's success lies in its ability to connect large numbers of friends

and simplify communication with family and relatives, particularly those residing far away—a situation reflected in the experiences of our research participants.

However, our study also acknowledges that individual behavior is considered normal when it conforms to established cultural and social norms and aligns with the individual's physical and cognitive developmental stage. Behavior exceeding these norms, particularly when repetitive and excessive, is deemed problematic. Therefore, internet use, when within acceptable parameters, is considered normal and contributes to an individual's psychological, social, and intellectual development. Conversely, excessive internet use, exceeding acceptable limits and exhibiting significant deviation, constitutes problematic behavior, or internet addiction, leading to social isolation and withdrawal from society.

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