COMILLAS
UNIVERSIDAD PONTIFICIA
CIHS

# COURSE SYLLABUS

Course: **MENTAL HEALTH IN DIGITAL SPACES**

| **COURSE DATA** | |
|---|---|
| Degree | Diploma in Humanities and Global Challenges |
| Academic Year | 2025-26 |
| Credits | 6 |
| Course type | Elective |
| Departament | Psychology |
| Language of instruction | English |
| Name and email of instructor | Elena Serrano Drozdowskyj<br>eserrano@comillas.edu |

## SHORT DESCRIPTION

This course explores the complex relationship between mental health and user experience (UX) design, and the prevalence of dark design patterns in digital interfaces. By examining human perception, cognitive biases, and psychological elements of UX design, students will gain insights into how design choices may impact mental well-being in digital environments. Through theoretical exploration, case studies, and practical applications, students will understand how this interaction may lead to mental health problems, especially when it occurs during childhood and adolescence. This course will also enable students to detect dark design patterns and develop strategies for designing digital spaces that can promote positive digital experiences, and thus, mental health well-being. The potential social an clinical applications of these digital tools to help prevent mental problems and support clinical interventions will be also discussed.

## CONTENTS AND STRUCTURE

TOPIC 1: IMPACT OF HUMAN-DIGITAL INTERACTIONS ON MENTAL HEALTH WORLDWIDE

TOPIC 2: HUMAN PERCEPTION AND COGNITIVE BIASES IN UX DESIGN

TOPIC 3: FOUNDATIONS OF MENTAL HEALTH AND HUMAN BEHAVIOR IN THE DIGITAL CONTEXT

TOPIC 4: DARK DESIGN PATTERNS: MANIPULATION AND ETHICS

TOPIC 5: EFFECTS OF DIGITAL INTERFACES ON DIFFERENT AGE GROUPS

TOPIC 6: DESIGNING FOR MENTAL WELL-BEIGN AND ITS APPLICATIONS IN THE CLINICAL FIELD

TOPIC 7: FINAL PROJECT SHOWCASING THE APPLICATION OF ETHICAL DESIGN

## METHODOLOGY

During the course, we will explore the theoretical bases of human and digital spaces interaction. During the classes, case studies of real world situations will be proposed, for individual and group critical analysis, for better understanding the implications of human interactions with digital spaces, with especial emphasis on mental health and UX design ethics.

There will be also a part of the course specifically dedicate to acquire the skills necessaries to design an ethical UX and understand its potential applications in the clinical field. All this learning will be applied to develop a final project that will be presented in class at the end of the course.

## ASSESSMENT AND GRADING

| Assessment type | Assessment criteria | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| FINAL EXAM | Pass the exam with a 5 out of 10 | 50% |
| COURSEWORK | Discussion in class and upload in moodle | 20% |
| FINAL PROJECT | Class presentation and upload in moodle | 30% |

- Committing any serious academic misconduct, such as **plagiarism** of previously published material, or **copying** in the exam or any other graded activity, **will imply not being able to pass the course in the ordinary assessment period**

- The **use of AI** to create complete works or relevant parts, **without citing the source or the tool or without being expressly allowed in the description of the work**, will be considered plagiarism and regulated according to the General Regulations of the University.

- At the beginning of the term the professor will announce the office hours for the course. Tutorials are an essential part of the development of the course, and students may attend tutorials during the course within those office times, but it is recommended that they are arranged in advance with the professor.

- Any non-face-to-face learning activity that requires the submission of an assignment/document, etc. will be submitted by the student through Moodle, always in PDF format.

- To be able to take the final exam, students must not have missed **more than one third of the classes without justification**. If this requirement is not met, the student may lose the right to be assessed both in the ordinary and extraordinary assessment period (art. 93-1 of the General Regulations). Failure to attend to the first hour of a two-hour lecture, means having missed the whole session in terms of attendance, regardless of whether or not the student attend the second hour.

**STUDENT WORKLOAD** (in hours)

| CONTACT HOURS | OUTSIDE CLASSROOM | OVERALL |
|---|---|---|
| 60 | 90 | 150 |

## READING LIST / RELEVANT REFERENCES


Anderson, J.R. (2020). *Cognitive Psychology and its implications. 7th Ed.* Macmillan Learning. ISBN: 9781319279691.

Yabloski, J. (2024). *Laws of UX: Using Psychology to Design Better Products & Services.* OReilly.

Norman, D.A. (2013). *The design of everyday things (Revised and expanded editions ed.).* Cambridge, MA London: The MIT Press. ISBN 978-0-262-52567-1.

Laver-Bradbury, C., Thompson, M.J.J., Gale, C., and Hooper, C.M. (2021). *Child and Adolescent Mental Health*. 3rd Ed. CRC Press. ISBN-10: 0367537389.

Editorial (2022). *Mental health in the digital age*. The Lancet Digit Health. Nov;4(11):e765.

Gray, C.M., Kou, Y., Battles, B., Hoggatt, J. and Toombs, A.L. (2018). *The Dark (Patterns) Side of UX Design.* CHI 2018 Paper. Montreal, Canada.

Haidt, J. (2024). *The Anxious Generation.* DK eds. ISBN: 9780241647660

Hutton, J.S. et al.(2024). *Digital Media and Developing Brains: Concerns and Opportunities.* Curr Addic Rep. 11(2):287-298.

Nivins, S., et al (2024). *Long-term impact of digital media on brain development in children.* Sci Rep. Jun 6;14(1):13030.

Marciano, L., Camerini, A-L, Morese, R. (2021). *The Developing Brain in the Digital Era: A Scoping Review of Structural and Functional Correlates of Screen Time in Adolescence*. Front Psychol. Aug 27:12:671817. eCollection 2021.

Vidal, C., Meshi, D. (2023). *Behavioral Addictive Disorders in Children and Adolescents.* J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry. May 62(5):512-514.

Thorell, L.B., et al (2022). *Longitudinal associations between digital media use and ADHD symptoms in children and adolescents: A systematic literature review.* Eur. Child Adolesc. Psychiatry. Online ahead of print.

Smith, K.A. et al.(2023). *Digital mental health: challenges and next steps*. BMJ Ment Health. Feb;26(1):e300670.