

Abstract

This paper examines how social media like Facebook and TikTok addict the masses. Social media addiction can take different forms such as doom scrolling, attention seeking, or clout chasing. This addiction can lead to depression, anxiety, fear of missing out, and even withdrawal-like symptoms. These effects can lead people to do all sorts of things. For instance, there are many examples of people dying or getting seriously injured while trying to create a social media post.

Based on the current research, the addiction has both a psychological and a social aspect. Getting notifications can give you dopamine, which causes you to use it more to get more dopamine. Peer pressure also plays a factor in social media usage. Affected people may be unwilling to admit or even unaware that they have a problem. One can break the addiction by using different services, cutting back on usage, or completely stopping usage.

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Social Media Addiction: An Overview

Social media, for better or worse, have taken over our lives since its inception in 2004. It has become one of the main ways we as a society communicate. However, in recent years with the advent of TikTok, the constant usage of social media is starting to seem more like an addiction than simply connecting with the world around us. Let us examine how social media like Facebook and TikTok addict the masses.

First, we must define what social media addiction is as it can take different forms. Doom scrolling is a popular form. Doom scrolling is when you endlessly scroll actively seeking out negative information. When asked by Cleveland Clinic, Dr. Susan Albers said, “A lot of times, you might not even be aware you’re doing it. But it becomes such a habit that if you have a down moment, you might pick up your phone and start scrolling without even really being aware of it” (“Everything”). As she says, you may be unaware this is happening, or your brain may even realize this behavior is irrational but keep doing it because it is a habit.

Another form is attention seeking or clout chasing. Clout chasing is a bit like the opposite of doom scrolling; instead of fishing for negative news to compound your negative mood, you are looking to get hits of dopamine to make you feel constantly happy. The way this behavior manifests can look very different from person to person. It could be an X (formerly Twitter) user posting all their opinions online to get external validation, an Instagram user posting attractive selfies to garner likes, or a TikTok user chasing trends to gain followers and likes. These “influencers” often do these things to acquire fame, however much they can get, in whatever way they can get it.

What are the effects of social media addiction? This addiction can lead to depression, anxiety, fear of missing out, and even withdrawal-like symptoms, among others according to Jessica Miller, Editorial Director of Addiction Help. These symptoms in turn can cause “feelings of isolation” and a “warped sense of reality” (Miller). Think about that for a second. This tool that can connect you to billions of people across the globe also can make people feel incredibly isolated.

These effects can lead people to do all sorts of things, from the relatively tame examples of social media “influencers” wanting to get another dopamine hit to accidental death as Jordan Guiao points out in his book, *Disconnect: Why We Get Pushed to Extremes Online and How to Stop It* (92). He talks about several archetypes of frequently online people, including the Social Media Narcissist (Guiao 91-121). Within that archetype, he gives the example of, in the pursuit of a good selfie, “two Russian men . . . [dying] after posing with a hand grenade with the pin pulled out” (Guiao 92). This behavior is not limited to still images. In their study on social media addiction, S Rajeshwari and S Meenakshi detail the tragic events of a 16-year-old accidentally hanging himself while attempting to film a fake hanging video to post on social media.

So, what is the root cause of this addiction? It is a two-part problem: psychological and social. Writing about dopamine and smartphone usage, Trevor Haynes, a Research Technician at Harvard University says, “Smartphones have provided us with a virtually unlimited supply of social stimuli, both positive and negative. Every notification, whether it’s a text message, a ‘like’ on Instagram, or a Facebook notification, has the potential to be a positive social stimulus and dopamine influx.” This can cause us to crave these notifications and seek them out as much as we can. Haynes also connects this to gambling, saying, “Similar to slot machines, many apps implement a reward pattern optimized to keep you engaged as much as possible.” In addition, Angeliki Nikolinakou, Joe Phua, and Eun Sook Kwon, writing about a connection between brand addiction and social media addiction, say, “Emotional suppression is also a significant predictor

of social media addiction. Individuals who employ social media as a coping mechanism in order to escape negative emotions may become addicted to social media.”

In addition to the psychological, there is also a social component. Because of how pervasive social media are, it has become increasingly necessary to have accounts for all these different apps to keep up with what your friends are doing. We journal our lives on these services to show the world, for better or worse. Despite these problems, social media can also be a beacon of light to loners who find themselves not fitting in in their local community; they can find their own communities online based on shared interests.

The addiction can also be brought on by the desire to become famous. The internet, and social media especially, has made it easier to get your fifteen minutes of fame. Children may watch creators on YouTube and start to admire or even idolize them. This in turn causes some to want to become just like them—internet famous. These children may end up taking drastic measures to try to go viral, not unlike the previous examples of the two Russian men and the 16-year-old.

How can one break the cycle? The first step, like with many addictions, is recognizing that you have a problem. Carl D. Marci, in his book *Rewired: Protecting Your Brain in the Digital Age*, gives a list of ten “warning signs of problematic smartphone technology use” (165). These include an “increase in time spent with technology,” especially alone time, “unsuccessful attempts to cut back or change behaviors,” and interference with social relationships, work, or school, among others (Marci 165).

One method is to use alternate means. Social media as an addiction often attempts to fill a hole in your life, whether it be loneliness, depression, or simple boredom. The popular platforms of Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube try to suck you in to get you to spend as much time on them as possible to generate revenue from ads. Primarily using an alternate method of communication

such as texting with close friends could ease your loneliness. If you use social media to get your news, you might use a dedicated news aggregator instead.

Another method is to cut back on your usage. Marci details ten rules to maintain what he calls a “healthy tech-life balance” (172-210). The tenth rule he gives is to let your mind wander rather than constantly distracting yourself (Marci 205). To illustrate his point, he details a 2014 study carried out by the University of Virginia in which young adults were instructed to sit alone with their thoughts for fifteen minutes without technology so they could let their minds wander (Marci 206-7). He reports the results, “Nearly 90 percent achieved some mind wandering, but almost half reported that they did not enjoy the experience” (Marci 207). They went on to conduct several more tests, culminating in a test where the participants are asked to do the same as the first experiment—sit in a room for fifteen minutes uninterrupted—but if they wanted to get out of it, they could give themselves an electric shock (Marci 207). Marci concludes by saying, “Astonishingly, two-thirds of the men and one-quarter of the women in the study chose the shock over sitting quietly with their own thoughts” (207).

Another—more nuclear—option is simply going dark. If you find cutting back is not working and you tend to relapse, you might try deleting your accounts and living without social media entirely. This can be a tricky landscape to navigate with how pervasive social media have become and can be completely infeasible for some people. For instance, some may have obligations to their work that make it impossible to completely remove oneself from social media.

In the end, social media addiction is an addiction that is not at the forefront of people’s minds. People may be unaware or unwilling to admit that they have a problem. Cutting back on your usage and letting yourself just be bored can give you the space to find yourself and become more creative.

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