

Sharing your #shopping on social media can damage your health and your wallet

August 1 2018, by Hillbun Ho



Credit: Andrea Piacquadio from Pexels

Posting images on social media when we buy new clothes, eat out or purchase the latest gadget may seem harmless enough. But this consumption-oriented sharing may be undermining both our bank

balance and our mental well-being.

Our research has found that this sort of social media engagement is linked in some people to greater anxiety, lower self-esteem and an increased likelihood of excessive spending.

Around 40% of the world's population [uses social media](#), with young people spending the greatest amount of time online. So understanding the influence of social media on health and well-being is critical to reducing potential harm.

Consumer-oriented posts trigger social comparison

We surveyed 900 Singaporean university students aged 17-24 about their social media activities, to explore whether sharing product information had an influence on well-being.

On platforms like Facebook and Instagram everyone looks happy: enjoying holidays, going to fancy restaurants, buying luxury goods and clothes. We were curious to understand whether this glossy portrayal has a psychological impact on social media users.

Previous [research](#) has looked at the impact of time spent on social media, but our research specifically examined the link between consumer-based content – such as posts about products or shopping experiences – and well-being.

Our survey was conducted face to face at several college campuses. Participants voluntarily reported their behaviours related to social media usage, peer comparison, well-being and spending levels. This data allowed us to assess the impact of participants' sharing of consumption-related content on well-being, while controlling for demographics and media usage habits.

The findings suggest that when young adults engage in social media, creating and sharing content about products, it can trigger a social comparison process. In the end, this hurts their psychological well-being, lowering their self-esteem and increasing anxiety levels.

Feelings of inferiority, low self-esteem and anxiety in some cases led to uncontrollable spending sprees – seemingly in an effort to close the gap between the students' own lives and what they see in their news feeds.

While Singaporean culture has a strong focus on material life and peer comparison, the results are also applicable to Australian social media users, particularly young people.

Of particular concern is the link we found between consumption-oriented sharing and risky spending behaviour, including higher credit card debt. Just sharing general experiences does not seem to have the same impact.

Healthy parental relationships help curb the problem

Negative impacts were more common in students who felt that materialistic possessions and financial success are "very important". But those who said they had a good relationship with their parents were less affected.

Students who told us that they have a close, healthy relationship with their parents, using self-rated measures of attachment, support and warmth, did not suffer the same feelings of inferiority. Nor did they succumb to the behaviour that this can trigger.

The research has implications for government policy and awareness programs for young people. We are keen to conduct similar research in Australia, to better understand ways to help young people develop self-

regulation and resilience.

The study also has ramifications for marketers because of what it says about the potentially negative impacts of marketing products through social media "influencers" – people like beauty and fashion bloggers with large [social media](#) followings who are given free products or paid to endorse brands online.

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