

Even brief abstinence from social media causes withdrawal symptoms

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In many cases, just a seven-day break from social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp is sufficient to induce withdrawal symptoms like those caused by addictive substances. This is the conclusion of a

study by Austrian scientists, which was published today in an international journal. The study identified classic withdrawal symptoms, including significantly increased urges, boredom, and an influence on whether the subjects were in a good or bad mood. Most surprisingly, 90 of the 152 participants were unable to do without social media for seven days without "relapsing."

The name speaks for itself: for many people, [social media](#) are now part and parcel of social interactions, and also of everyday life. In-depth studies of how and when people use social [media](#) have already been carried out, but little is known about users' reaction to a period of abstinence. How much do they miss being on social media – and what are the consequences of such "withdrawal"? These were the questions investigated by two researchers from Karl Landsteiner University of Health Sciences in Krems (KL Krems) and the University of Vienna. Their answers chimed with findings from the field of addiction research. The findings were published today in the journal *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking*.

Addiction

"As it turned out, a seven-day abstinence from social media triggered mild [withdrawal symptoms](#) among the subjects, similar to those associated with [addictive substances](#)," explained the author of the study, Prof. Stefan Stieger of the Department of Psychology and Psychodynamics at KL Krems. "In particular, we saw a sharp increase in the desire – the craving – to use social media during the period of abstinence. This effect was even measureable when the subjects were allowed to use social media once again." Other symptoms included boredom and a sense of significantly stronger peer pressure to go back onto social media. The latter was attributable to a feeling that people expect to interact with their friends on social media, or a belief that they could be missing out on something. "This feeling of [peer pressure](#) is all

the more astonishing because the subjects were allowed to use other communication channels such as short text messages (SMS) and e-mail," Prof. Stieger pointed out.

A total of 152 people aged between 18 and 80 took part in the study, 70% of them women. Speaking about the fact that more than 1,000 people saw the invitation to participate, but only about 30% of them were interested in taking part and ultimately just under 15% were prepared to spend time away from social media, Prof. Stieger commented: "This suggests that the people who registered to take part in the study were those who would find it easier to do without social media – meaning that their withdrawal symptoms could be milder than those in other [people](#). So the effect on other individuals could be much more pronounced."

Unexpected results

When it came to the impacts on the subjects' moods, the researchers' observations ran counter to their intuitive suppositions. Although subsequent analysis showed that these observations were not statistically significant, the study revealed that not only was the feeling of being in a positive mood reduced among some subjects – as was expected – but the same also applied to negative sensations. This was both unexpected and surprising, as it does not tally with typical withdrawal symptoms, where a stronger feeling of negative moods would be expected. Equally surprising was the number of participants who relapsed and ended up using social media during the seven-day abstinence period. Although this only occurred rarely (less than twice on average) and for a short time (an average of three minutes), almost 60% of the subjects "cheated." In Prof. Stieger's view, this is a sign of how deeply embedded social media are in day-to-day life, and consequently how difficult it is to stick to a commitment to do without social media, even among those who are prepared to do so.

The study published today also used a survey method that Prof. Stieger is continually optimising for use in psychology. The method is based on a smartphone app, which is tailored to each individual project and enables subjects to provide data in a familiar environment. This rules out artefacts caused by laboratory settings and the like. The study once more underlines KL Krems' innovative approaches to generating knowledge in key bridge disciplines such as biomedical engineering, psychology and psychodynamics.

More information: Stefan Stieger et al. A Week Without Using Social Media: Results from an Ecological Momentary Intervention Study Using Smartphones, *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* (2018). DOI: [10.1089/cyber.2018.0070](https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2018.0070)

Provided by Karl Landsteiner University of Health Sciences

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