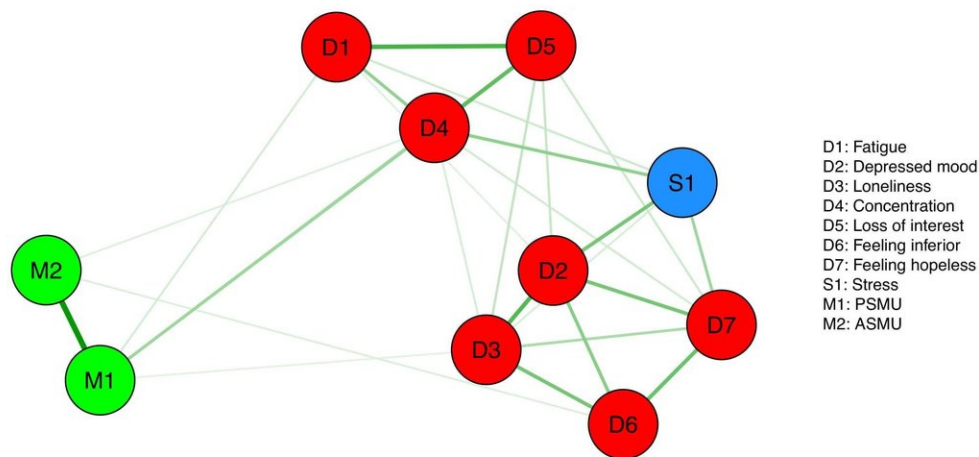


The complicated relationship between social media and depression

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Variables (i.e., social media use, depression symptoms, stress) are visualised as circles. The green lines between circles indicate that two connected variables tend to be 'up' together within the same timeframe. For instance, the green line between M1 and D4 means: when students experience more concentration problems in a given timeframe of two hours, they also tend to spend more time on PSMU in the same two hours. The opposite is also true: when students experience less concentration problems, they tend to spend less time on PSMU. Credit: Universiteit van Amsterdam (UVA)

Over the past decade, social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter have become a central part of everyday life. Despite their massive popularity, however, controversy abounds regarding their impact on

mental health and wellbeing. A new research study by the University of Amsterdam (UvA) has now found a correlation between the passive use of social media and depression symptoms like loneliness and fatigue. The findings were recently published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*.

Tracking wellbeing with an app

For many of us it is a daily habit. Whenever we have a moment to spare, we find ourselves reaching for our smartphones and aimlessly scrolling through social [media](#) feeds reading updates or looking at pictures. This behaviour, called passive social media use (PSMU), is often used to relieve boredom and can swallow up large chunks of personal time. While seemingly innocent, PSMU isn't without controversy – experimental research shows that it can decrease affective wellbeing, a sense of belonging and life satisfaction.

To investigate the link between social media use and [depression](#) symptoms, an international research team led by the UvA recruited 125 students and measured their wellbeing and passive social media use seven times daily for 14 days. A special app on their phones prompted participants at fixed times to complete a 12-item depression questionnaire. Their responses were analysed with a novel statistical technique, which was developed/implemented by researchers affiliated with the UvA's Psychosystems Group (Dr. Laura Bringmann and Dr. Sacha Epskamp). The analysis focused on three timeframes – short-term (within the same two hours), medium-term (prediction from one prompt to next) and longer-term (across the entire 14 days).

Negative feelings and social media

Although the results showed that engaging in PSMU did not predict

depression symptoms, they did reveal a noticeable relation between negative wellbeing and increased social media use. "Feelings of fatigue and loneliness at a given prompt predicted PSMU at the next prompt, indicating that certain depression symptoms might lead individuals to scroll through social media feeds," says George Aalbers, a UvA Research Master's graduate in Psychology and lead author of the study. "We also found that passive social media use at a given prompt co-occurred with a loss of interest, concentration problems, fatigue and loneliness at the same prompt. However, we don't know whether PSMU causes these symptoms or vice versa. This is a topic for future research."

Most importantly, Aalbers adds, the study shows that the link between social media and psychological well-being is more complicated than 'social media make people depressed.' "Instead, specific social media behaviour seems associated with specific depression symptoms, and more research is required to find out how these social media use and mental health influence each other."

The researchers believe the next important step is to replicate the findings in a clinical setting. "Our study used a student sample, in which average levels of depression symptoms, loneliness and stress were fairly low. As previous research suggests that [social media](#)'s adverse effects could be stronger in depressed than in non-depressed individuals, a clinical sample might show a more pronounced link between PSMU and [depression symptoms](#)."

More information: George Aalbers et al. Social media and depression symptoms: A network perspective., *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* (2018). [DOI: 10.1037/xge0000528](https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0000528)

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