

Short attention spans linked to social media distress

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New Curtin University research has found that people who get distracted easily are more prone to suffer psychological distress and mental health issues from high levels of social media use. Published in the *Journal of*

Affective Disorders, the research tracked the phone data of 69 participants ranging from 18 to 58 year olds to see their usage of popular apps including Instagram and Reddit over a week period.

An eye gaze test was used to track participants levels of distraction and inattention and the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale, a well-known psychological scale, was used to measure and quantify measures of distress.

Lead researcher Tamsin Mahalingham, a Masters student from Curtin's School of Population Health, said the results showed a strong link between low levels of attention control and high social [media](#) use having a negative impact on mental [health](#).

"Past research has flagged concerns about the negative mental health effects from high levels of social media use, but there isn't clear evidence about why this is, or who might be most at risk," Miss Mahalingham said.

"Our findings suggest that if you are a very distractable person, high levels of social media use may be particularly bad for your mental health. Study results revealed that those who showed lower levels of attention control were particularly at risk of negative mental health effects of heavy social media use."

"This inability to stay focussed may lead to exposure to more irrelevant and distracting information and potentially longer durations of social media use. On the other hand, those with higher levels of attention control may be able to more easily ignore irrelevant and potentially damaging information in news feeds such as advertising."

Supervising researcher, Dr. Patrick Clarke from Curtin's School of Population Health, said that it was the flow-on effects of increased social

media use that could negatively influence emotional wellbeing.

"Social media apps are designed to draw us in and keep us engaged and the longer we spend on social media, the more we can be exposed to including negative content, or content leading to self-comparison to unattainable ideals, like those often illustrated by influencers," Dr. Clarke said.

"More time on social media also means less time doing other, possibly more important or more productive tasks, which can also increase feelings of depression and anxiety.

"Our research helps to understand who is most at risk from the adverse [mental health](#) effects of social media use and suggests that improving attention may minimize those risks."

More information: Tamsin Mahalingham et al, Attention control moderates the relationship between social media use and psychological distress, *Journal of Affective Disorders* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jad.2021.10.071](#)

Provided by Curtin University

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