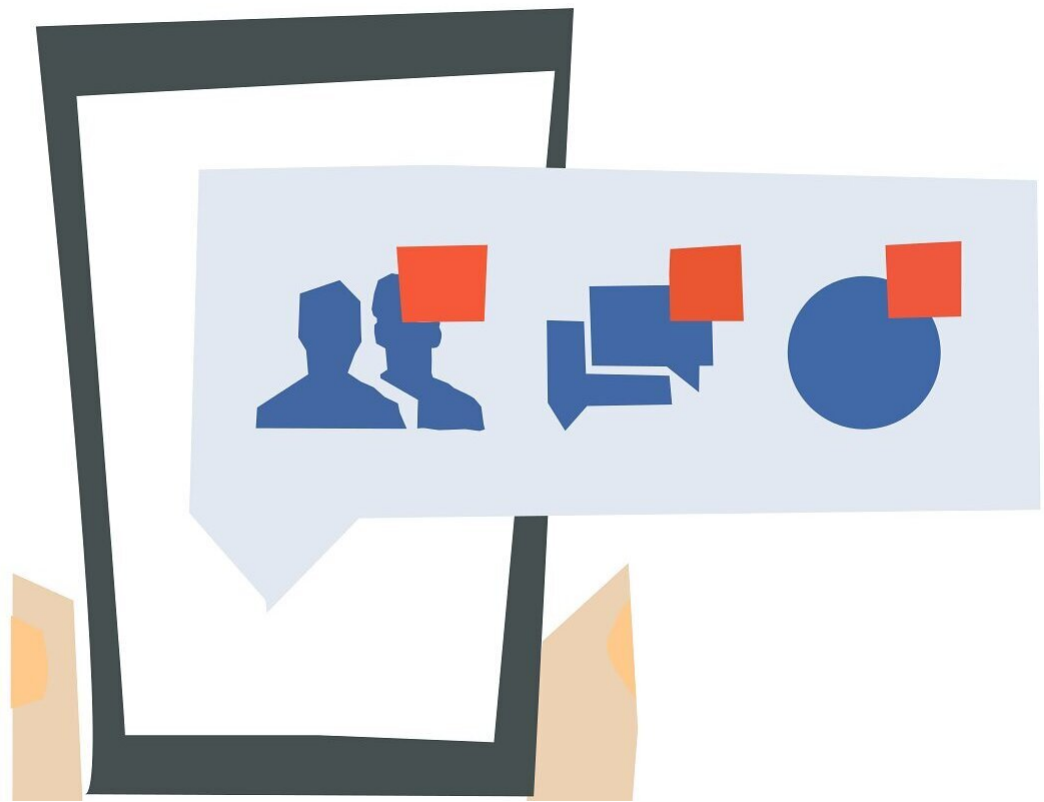


Social media's addictive loop compels users to share mindlessly

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People join social media to enhance their social lives, make new friends and build an online identity while expressing themselves. However, as they delve deeper into these digital realms, their behavior changes.

Engaging in likes, shares, posts and retweets becomes habitual, eclipsing the original motivations that initially drew them to the platform. What was once a conscious choice transforms into automatic, almost impulsive action.

Those are the findings of a new study by researchers at the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences.

Despite public health experts [raising concerns](#) about the negative impact on mental health and overall well-being, particularly among young users, a significant majority of Americans—70%, [according to Pew Research](#)—still find themselves drawn to their apps daily, some even hourly.

Psychology researchers Wendy Wood and Ian Anderson at USC Dornsife compared posting rates of frequent, habitual users with those of infrequent, nonhabitual users. They wanted to know if those groups' rates varied in response to the reactions and comments they received from others. The research was published online earlier this year in *Motivation Science*.

The researchers conducted three consecutive studies focused on Instagram and Facebook posting behavior. They found evidence that users develop posting habits that differ based on how frequently they use the two apps.

The studies highlighted how a daily habit of posting can become insidious over time—shifting from posting with a goal in mind to posting automatically with little thought. And this behavior can lead to a never-ending urge to share content on these platforms.

Using metrics from Facebook and comparing habitual users with infrequent or new users, the researchers investigated whether [social rewards](#) motivate the two types of users in the same way.

Anderson said he and Wood also looked at whether automatic, habitual, repeated posting on Facebook or Instagram happens when social motivation is limited or absent. "In other words, do these frequent users just post no matter if they are receiving likes or comments from their posting? Or are they posting just out of sheer habit?" he asked.

Social rewards only work for some

The researchers found that likes, comments and shares had less impact on frequent habitual users' motivation to post than on infrequent users and new users.

In a preliminary study using Instagram user data gathered from a study conducted by Emilio Ferrara of the USC Viterbi School of Engineering, Woods and Anderson found, as expected, that social rewards in the form of likes indeed did motivate users to engage more frequently and faster. The more likes a user received, the more frequently they posted. Fewer likes resulted in a slower posting rate.

However, digging a little deeper, the researchers made an intriguing discovery: Social rewards such as likes increased engagement primarily among new or infrequent users. In contrast, frequent users continued posting at their usual rate regardless of the reactions they received from others.

Woods and Anderson conducted a second study to test this theory further, examining more than 1,900 Facebook posts.

They found that positive reactions motivated increased and faster engagement only among infrequent and new users but not among frequent users. Replicating the results from Instagram, habitual Facebook users continued to post quickly regardless of whether they received positive or negative recognition.

Habitual users don't care what you think

The findings confirmed what Woods and Anderson suspected: With enough repetition, users form habits or mental associations tied to specific contextual cues. Context cues include factors such as the location or time when they use the app or receive notifications. For example, a user who frequently uses the app while lying in bed, sitting on the couch or at a particular time of day will start associating using the app with those specific situations. Once these habits are formed, users respond quickly and automatically whenever they encounter these context cues, with minimal deliberation.

In this second study, the researchers also surveyed the participants and found that for those with really strong habits, even though they said they cared about the social rewards and reactions from other people, their behavior told a different story. These users post at roughly the same rate, no matter how many likes they get. This can have [adverse consequences](#), Anderson said.

"They're not just ignoring the likes, they're also ignoring the consequences of posting, which is how misinformation starts to spread," he said.

The study indicates that motivational interventions won't impact habitual and nonhabitual users in the same way. Simply telling people not to share certain types of content that could be harmful, dangerous or false will not be effective for habitual users, even if it works for nonhabitual users.

Structural site changes may work

To further test the hypothesis that frequent habitual users are not motivated by positive feedback or warnings about not posting harmful or

misinformation, the researchers examined whether a structural change in a [social media](#) platform would alter the posting rates of such users.

In 2007, Facebook changed its platform design to increase engagement, launching a status update bar and placing content from a user's friends at the forefront of their news feed.

The change initially slowed down highly frequent posters' automatic responses. But, for infrequent users, the structural change did what it intended to do: increase engagement with others and speed up their posting rate after receiving positive reactions.

The study demonstrated that the design of social platforms could have an impact for the better on the posting rates of habitual posters by slowing them down for a moment.

However, over time, these users regained their posting speed, suggesting that they re-trained their habitual posting behavior to fit the platform's new design.

Anderson concluded that if social media companies are serious about addressing issues such as misinformation, hate speech and adolescent [mental health](#), they must also change their platforms' structure to impact habitual users.

"Interventions that work for one type of user just don't work for the other. There will have to be something really disruptive structurally on these social media sites to change the behavior of habitual users," he said.

He said that if Facebook and Instagram wanted to move behavior in another direction, they would have had to change the structures to make users post accurate content. That has not happened to the degree

necessary to break frequent users' bad habits.

More information: Ian A. Anderson et al, Social motivations' limited influence on habitual behavior: Tests from social media engagement., *Motivation Science* (2023). [DOI: 10.1037/mot0000292](https://doi.org/10.1037/mot0000292)

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