

'It is hijacking my brain'—a team of experts finds ways to help young people addicted to social media

February 15 2024, by Annie Margaret and Nicholas Hunkins



Credit: AI-generated image

Many people have compared the [addictive nature of social media to cigarettes](#). Checking your likes, they say, is the new smoke break. Others say the unease over social media is just the next round of [moral panic about new technologies](#).

We are a pair [of researchers who investigate](#) how social media affects the mental health of young people. More than 75% of teens check their phone hourly, and half say they feel like [they're addicted to their devices](#).

Here are some of the things they've told us:

"TikTok has me in a chokehold."

"I would 1,000% say I am addicted."

"I feel completely aware that it is hijacking my brain, but I can't put it down. This leaves me feeling ashamed."

Maybe you've had similar feelings yourself, no matter your age. Although it's true social technologies offer clear benefits—unlike smoking—many people still feel uncomfortable with how much time they spend online and often wonder if they're addicted.

Years of investigation have led our team to this conclusion: Perhaps a better approach is to view your media consumption as a diet. Just as there are many ways to have a healthy diet, there are also a variety of ways to develop healthy and personalized social media habits.

The search for answers

A deluge of research on social media usage that began in the early 2010s shows [negative impacts](#) in areas related to body image, eating disorders and [social comparison](#).

Conversely, other studies point to the mental health benefits of social media, including [social well-being](#), [strong friendships and exposure to diverse perspectives](#).

Still other studies [show conflicting results](#). In fact, [inconclusive or mixed results](#) seem to be a recurring pattern when researching this subject.

The inconsistencies in these studies highlight the very hard problem of characterizing healthy interaction between two complex systems—social media technologies and human behavioral psychology.

One issue is that the stress, anxiety and challenges to [self-esteem](#) experienced by users may vary from moment to moment, depending on what they are viewing. Consider that not all time spent on social media is equal. For example, messaging distant friends for one hour a day will likely leave you feeling more fulfilled than spending 30 minutes a day [doomscrolling](#), which refers to an excessive amount of time consuming negative media.

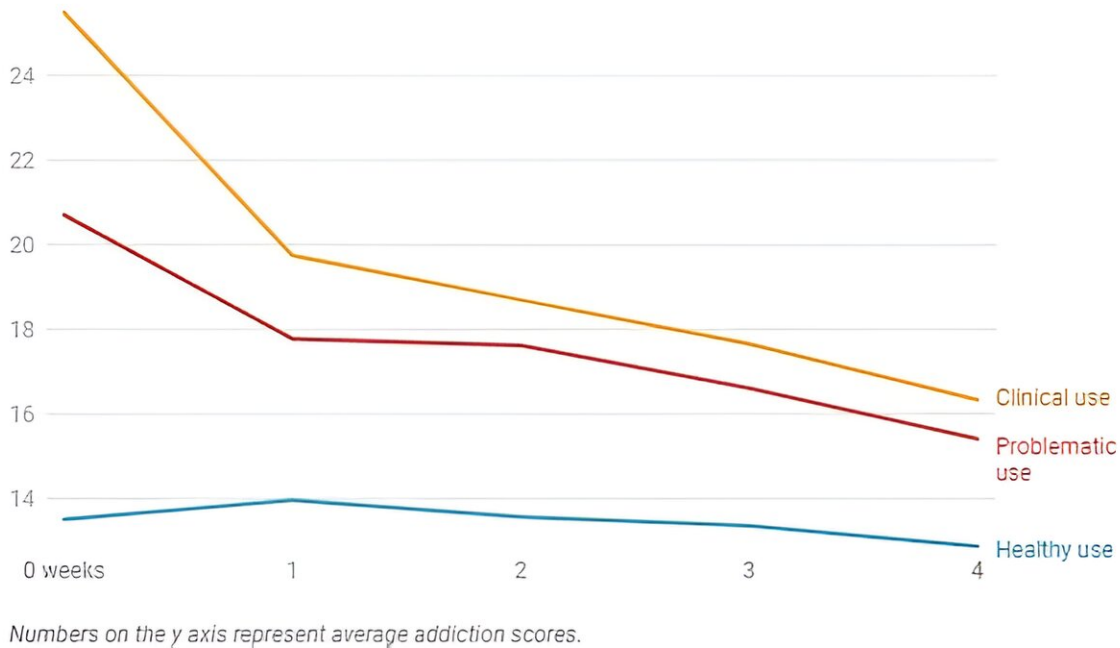
That's why researchers are trying to distinguish between the active and passive use of social media. "Active use" refers to social exchanges, like sending messages or posting content, while "passive use" is strictly the consumption of social media content without participation, contribution or [engagement with others](#).

But even this distinction is too simplistic and [has come under scrutiny](#). Some active behaviors, such as trolling on Reddit, are likely unhealthy for everyone involved. And some passive behaviors, like consuming educational videos, are beneficial.

Because healthy media consumption varies considerably from person to person, our research takes a different approach and focuses on users developing personal agency with respect to their media consumption.

Social media use improved over a four-week intervention period

Over a four-week period, study participants reported their success at adhering to social media usage goals. Participants showed a significant reduction in social media addiction over the course of the social media challenge. Those with clinical levels of addiction scores saw the most improvement.



Credit: The Conversation

A four-week intervention

More than 500 [college students](#) with a wide range of social media habits have participated in our [ongoing study](#). The students begin by reflecting on their current relationship with social media and then set goals for the changes they want to make. This might include spending less time mindlessly scrolling, curating their feed on an app or not sleeping with the phone in the bedroom.

For four weeks, participants report their success in adhering to their goals. They also reflect on their feelings and experiences through journaling and completing standard psychological surveys that capture [social media addiction](#) and other mental health outcomes.

Our initial analysis indicates that the four-week intervention significantly reduces social media addiction for those who started with [problematic](#) or [clinical](#) levels of [social media addiction](#).

Problematic social media addiction is associated with a host of negative effects including moodiness, anxiety and an excessive amount of time and energy spent on or thinking about social media. People with clinical social media addiction levels experience those same effects but to a great degree, with their habit patterns around social media resembling that of an addict.

Those with problematic social media addiction scores at the start of the intervention showed a mean reduction of 26%, and scores for participants who began with clinical social media addiction scores fell by 35%. These reductions brought both groups into a healthy range of social media use by the conclusion of the intervention.

At the end of the four weeks, participants reported [positive changes](#) in their relationships with social media with statements like the following:

"I feel as though my connections have strengthened with my friends because when I now communicate with them, it is to have an actual conversation, rather than to pass the time responding to Snapchats."

"I find (social media) a lot less appealing in a lot of ways and haven't really felt the urge to post something in a long time. I think I am ... using it for fun or connectedness instead of distraction."

"This challenge has positively changed how I view social media, and social approval."

Positive change takes time

Much like any behavior change, adopting healthier [media consumption](#) habits requires time, dedication and self-reflection. While our research focuses on college students, we believe a similar four-week process focused on agency and reflection can lead to profound improvements in overall well-being [for people of all ages](#).

That said, there are [practical steps you can take right now](#) to reduce your dependence on social media. This includes turning off notifications, removing or limiting apps that you find harmful, curating your social media feed by unfollowing certain accounts, [setting your phone to grayscale to reduce the appeal](#), and reserving phone-free time. You can get started right now by taking a free, psychologically validated survey to [assess your level of addiction](#).

If you can't eat gluten, you probably don't keep wheat-based bread in the kitchen. A truly [healthy diet](#) requires learning which foods make you feel your best and finding joy in eating certain foods in moderation. Similarly, our research shows that spending some time setting goals and engaging in [self-reflection](#) can change your relationship with [social media](#)—for the better.

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