

Social media poses considerable risks of psychological harm: How to protect children and adolescents

June 17 2024, by Andrea Weber-Tuckermann



Credit: Yan Krukau from Pexels

Excessive use of social media can impair well-being and even cause disease. To help safeguard children and adolescents, an international

research team coordinated by Ulm psychologist Professor Christian Montag has put together recommendations on social media use and published them in a [consensus paper](#) in the journal *Addictive Behaviors*.

The researchers advise abstinence from smartphones throughout the entire school day. Montag also suggests using EU fines imposed on digital companies violating the EU Digital Services Act to fund further research into problematic [social media use](#) (PSMU).

The team of researchers from the fields of social sciences, psychology and psychiatry suggest that parents should establish specific rules with their children for the use of social media apps, such as YouTube, TikTok, Snapchat, Instagram and the like, even before their first use. Beyond that, parents should also be [role models](#) and lead by example.

The research team also advocates for hard and fast rules at school. In a [Comment](#) published in *Nature Reviews Psychology*, they advise teachers to collaborate with researchers—ideally with the active involvement of the pupils—in order to draw up a clear-cut code of practice for the use of smartphones within the school environment, which would then apply to both pupils and teachers. In addition, children and adolescents should ideally refrain entirely from using their smartphones throughout the school day.

"An evidence-based approach is crucial in order to deal with this challenging topic responsibly. We need guidelines grounded in scientific insights, and further research is undoubtedly required," explains Montag. However, the situation is urgent, and there is already compounding evidence.

The "problematic use of social media," a term for excessive social media use that is harmful to health and well-being, can take on addictive-like forms. Although addictive-like social media use is not yet an official

diagnosis in the World Health Organization's ICD-11, current discussions focus on whether the diagnostic criteria of Gaming Disorder can and should be extrapolated to excessive social media use.

Children and adolescents with PSMU are more likely to suffer from depression and anxiety. Even eating disorders and [self-harm](#) have been observed more frequently. This list continues with emotional and social disorders as well as problematic body image. This said, causality between the associations need to be better established, because much research is hampered by cross-sectional findings.

Some children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable

Why are some people unable to put their smartphones down while others don't need TikTok or YouTube at all? "Not all young people are equally susceptible to problematic social media use. The risk is particularly high among [young adolescents](#). Girls are potentially more susceptible than boys," explains Professor Montag, "but current figures also show that the gap between the genders is closing.

"Emotionally unstable adolescents with little self-esteem and self-control, and therefore psychosocial problems, are especially at risk. Situational and contextual factors, however, also play a role: Have the parents and school established clear rules and binding guidelines for dealing with social media?"

The researchers also looked into the whys behind young peoples' excessive smartphone and social media use. The current assumption is that deeper psychological and social mechanisms are at play.

"Social media might be a means to regulate negative feelings and

compensate for unfulfilled needs. The underlying desire seems to be a sense of belonging, recognition and admiration as well as the fear of missing out," explain the researchers.

"Problematic social media use is not yet recognized as an addiction disorder. Nevertheless, it is important to identify the driving forces behind this excessive online behavior. Not least in order to limit problematic behavior and develop suitable coping strategies.

"For me, the most important question seems to be: To what extent can problematic social media use cause functional impairments and health problems?" says Professor Montag.

Yet there are still significant research gaps. Additional neuroscientific work is needed in particular in order to gain more insights into the neurobiology involved in social media use. What happens to the brains of young people when they consume social media excessively?

Using fines from enforcing EU Digital Services Act for research

Children and adolescents unfortunately quite often encounter non-age-appropriate content on social media—such as pornography and depictions of violence—which can be quite harmful to healthy child development.

In another article, this one a [Correspondence](#) published in *Nature*, in which Professor Montag was also involved, the authors expressly welcome the European Union's initiative to regulate digital services and markets. The EU Digital Services Act package creates an effective, legally binding basis for regulating social media platforms and their responsible use.

Together with Professor Benjamin Becker from the University of Hong Kong, Professor Montag shows how independent, interdisciplinary research on PSMU could be financed on a larger scale by using fines imposed by the EU on companies violating the EU Digital Services Act.

In mid-May, Montag presented the new scientific findings on the use of social media by children and adolescents to members of the Committee on Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth in the German Bundestag.

More information: Christian Montag et al, Problematic social media use in childhood and adolescence, *Addictive Behaviors* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.addbeh.2024.107980](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.addbeh.2024.107980)

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Provided by University of Ulm

Citation: Social media poses considerable risks of psychological harm: How to protect children and adolescents (2024, June 17) retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-06-social-media-poses-considerable-psychological.html>

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