

Is social media making you unhappy? The answer is not so simple

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You may have seen headlines that link social media to sadness and depression. Social media use goes up, happiness goes down. But recent studies suggest those findings might not be so straightforward.

Although it is true that people's feelings of envy and depression are linked to high [social media use](#), there is evidence to suggest social media use may not be *causing* that relationship. Instead, your mindset may be the biggest thing affecting how social media connects to your well-being.

People who feel they are able to use social media, rather than social media "using them", tend to gain more benefits from their online interactions.

Why do people use social media?

Social media covers a broad range of platforms: social networking, [discussion forums](#), bookmarking and sharing content, disseminating news, exchanging media like photos and videos, and microblogging. These appeal to a wide range of users, from individuals of all ages through to massive businesses.

For some, social media is a way to connect with people we may not otherwise see. In the United States, 39% of people say they [are friends with people they only interact with online](#).

For [older people](#), this is especially important for increasing feelings of connectedness and well-being. Interestingly though, for older people, [social media contact with family does not increase happiness](#). Meanwhile, younger adults report *increased* [happiness](#) when they have more social media contact with family members.

Teens, in particular, find social media most useful for [deepening connections and building their social networks](#).

With social media clearly playing such an important role in society, many researchers have tried to figure out: does it make us happier or not?

Does social media make us happier?

Studies have taken a variety of approaches, including asking people directly through surveys or looking at the content people post and seeing how positive or negative it is.

One survey study from 2023 showed that as individuals' social media use increased, [life satisfaction and happiness decreased](#). Another found that [less time on social media](#) was related to increases in work satisfaction, work engagement and positive [mental health](#)—so improved mental health and motivation at work.

Comparing yourself to others on social media is connected to feelings of envy and depression. However, [there is evidence](#) to suggest depression is the predictor, rather than the outcome, of both social comparison and envy.

All this shows [the way you feel about social media matters](#). People who see themselves using social media rather than "being used" by it, tend to gain benefits from social media and not experience the harms.

Interviews with [young people](#) (15–24 years) using social media suggest that positive mental health among that age group was influenced by [three features](#):

- connection with friends and their global community
- engagement with social media content
- the value of social media as an outlet for expression.

There are also studies that look at the emotions expressed by more frequent social media users.

The so-called "[happiness paradox](#)" shows that most people think their

friends on social media appear happier than themselves. This is a [seeming impossibility](#) that arises because of [the mathematical properties](#) of how friendship networks work on social media.

In one of our studies, Twitter content with recorded locations showed residents of cities in the United States that [tweeted more tended to express less happiness](#).

On the other hand, in Instagram direct messages, happiness has been found to be [four times more prevalent than sadness](#).

How does internet use in general affect our well-being?

Some of the factors associated with decreased mental health are not aligned with social media use alone.

[One recent study](#) shows that the path to decreased well-being is, at least partially, connected to digital media use overall (rather than social media use specifically). This can be due to sleep disruption, reduced face-to-face social interaction or physical activity, social comparison, and cyberbullying. None of these exist for social media alone.

However, [social media platforms](#) are known to be driven by recommendation algorithms that may send us down "rabbit holes" of the same type of (increasingly extreme) content. This can lead to a distorted view of the world and our place in it. The important point here is to maintain a diverse and balanced information diet online.

Interestingly, interacting on social media is not the only thing affecting our mental state. [Rainfall influences](#) the emotional content of social media posts of both the user experiencing rain, and parts of their

extended network (even if they don't experience rain!).

This suggests that how we feel is influenced by the emotions in the posts we see. The good news is that happy posts are the most influential, with each happy post encouraging close to two additional happy updates from a user's friends.

The secret to online happiness therefore may not be to "delete your account" entirely (which, [as we have found](#), may not even be effective), but to be mindful about what you consume online. And if you feel like social media is starting to use you, it might be time to change it up a bit.

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