

Is social media use a potentially addictive behaviour?

20 April 2021



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Frequent use of social media may not amount to the same as addiction, according to research at the University of Strathclyde.

The study invited 100 participants to locate specific social media apps on a simulated smartphone screen as quickly and accurately as possible, while ignoring other apps. The participants were varied in the extent and type of their social media use and engagement.

The exercise aimed to assess whether [social media users](#) who reported the greatest level of use were more likely to have their attention drawn to the apps through a process known as '[attentional bias](#),' which is a recognized hallmark of addiction.

It also assessed whether this bias was associated with scores on established measures of social media engagement and 'addiction'.

The findings did not indicate that users' attention was drawn more to social media apps than to any others, such as a weather app; they were also not associated with self-reported or measurable levels of addictive severity. This contrasted with other

studies which have shown attentional bias related to addictions such as gambling and alcohol.

The research has been published in the *Journal of Behavioural Addictions*.

Dr. David Robertson, a Lecturer in Psychology at Strathclyde and a partner in the research, said: "Social media use has become a ubiquitous part of society, with 3.8 billion users worldwide. While research has shown that there are positive aspects to social media engagement, such as feelings of social connectedness and wellbeing, much of the focus has been on the negative mental health outcomes which are associated with excessive use, such as higher levels of depression and anxiety.

"The evidence to support such negative associations is mixed but there is also a growing debate as to whether excessive levels of social media use should become a clinically defined addictive behavior.

"We did not find evidence of attentional [bias](#). People who frequently checked and posted their [social media accounts](#) were no more likely to have their attention drawn to the icon of a social media app than those who check and post less often.

"Much more research is required into the effects of social media use, both positive and negative, before definitive conclusions can be reached about the psychological effects of [engagement](#) with these platforms. Our research indicates that frequent social [media](#) use may not, at present, necessarily fit into traditional [addiction](#) frameworks."

More information: K. Thomson et al, Social media 'addiction': The absence of an attentional bias to social media stimuli, *Journal of Behavioral Addictions* (2021). [DOI: 10.1556/2006.2021.00011](https://doi.org/10.1556/2006.2021.00011)

Provided by University of Strathclyde, Glasgow

APA citation: Is social media use a potentially addictive behaviour? (2021, April 20) retrieved 21 June 2021 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-04-social-media-potentially-addictive-behaviour.html>

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