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Social Media Addiction

Social media addiction is becoming increasingly prevalent as access to mobile devices becomes more and more commonplace. Although traditionally when we think of addictions we think of substance dependence, we are now realizing that one can become addicted to a cellphone just as easily as they might to cigarettes or alcohol. This unprecedented mental illness can have massively detrimental effects, both psychological and physical. It doesn't help that most social media platforms are solely funded by ad revenue. This common business model is almost always accompanied by ulterior motives. Facebook, Twitter, and countless other tech giants deliberately exploit the human psyche, fine-tuning their apps until they have achieved maximum addictiveness, and subsequently, income. In this paper, I will address these issues and examine the results of various studies that have done so previously.

Social media addiction can be defined as a physical or psychological dependency on the stimuli provided to the user by social media platforms. This stimuli can take on many forms, and although they may vary greatly from one another, they typically share one common feature: they trigger a dopamine response. When the user hears a notification sound go off or receives an email letting them know they have a new friend request, their brain's reward system is activated and dopamine is released. Soon after the spike in dopamine, however, comes a crash. Withdrawal symptoms often leave the user feeling anxious or depressed as they eagerly await their next dose. Just like with caffeine or nicotine, this vicious cycle of dopamine hits is the primary cause of addiction. Although the research is relatively sparse when compared to that of substance-based addictions, numerous recent studies are reporting shocking results indicating that social media can actually be more addicting than drugs like alcohol or cigarettes.

Dopamine is a neurotransmitter that plays a key role in the the brain's reward system. It is also directly related to motivation levels, memory, attention and even body movements. In short - when it is released, you feel happy. Typically dopamine is released when you satisfy a craving by eating food, listen to a song you love, or exercise. However, by taking drugs you exploit this reward system either by stimulating neurons to release a massive amount of dopamine, or by inhibiting its reuptake (the process in which these levels return to normal). As a result, you enter a state of euphoria. There is a catch, though. When the dopamine wears off, you feel worse than you did when you started - much worse. The increased activity of the neurons actually leaves them incapable of producing normal levels of dopamine like they did before. Low levels of dopamine can lead to various mental illnesses such as depression,

schizophrenia, and psychosis. The only way too feel “normal” again is to take more drugs. This vicious cycle is what makes drugs so addicting.

Much like physical addictions, psychological addictions can be formed as well. Social media companies are aware of this fact, and they are taking full advantage of it. Everything from the the sounds emitted by your phone’s speakers to the eye-catching banners on its screen has been meticulously engineered to ensure maximal user-engagement rate. There is a quote from *The Social Dillema* on Netflix that states “If you can’t see the product, you are the product”. Social networking apps are almost always free, but the companies providing them are by no means non-profit organizations. They simply get their money from a different source – ad revenue. Due to the fact that these companies rely so heavily on income from advertisements placed in their platforms, it is quite literally their job to get as many users addicted as possible. Apps like Facebook and Twitter vary from illicit substances like cocaine and heroin in that they aren’t ingested, but the incessant stream of notifications, likes, and messages effectively triggers the same flood of dopamine that can be seen when one takes drugs. Unlike drugs, however, access to social media is available instantaneously anywhere you have access to the internet – for free.

“According to World Health Organization (WHO), more than 264 million people suffer from depression.” (Malakeh Z. Malak, Ahmed H. Shuhaiber, Rasmieh M. Al-amer, Mohammad H. Abuadas, Reham J. Aburoomi., 2021). A meta-analysis study was performed in Afghanistan in an attempt to determine if there is a correlation between social media usage and increased levels of depression. The study utilized a quantitative analysis approach which involved measuring the participants respective social media addiction levels with Dr Kimberly Young’s Internet Addiction Test, and then using the Centre for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D) to measure their depression levels. The results were indicative of a significant relationship between social media addiction and depression.

Another study performed in Iran examined the relationship between social media addiction and academic performance. 360 randomly selected students were involved in the cross-sectional study. The students’ social media addiction levels were measured with the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale and compared with their grades. The findings showed a significant negative correlation between social media addiction and academic performance. It also found that male students were more addicted to social media, on average, than their female colleagues.

Conclusion

Social media can be a fantastic tool in the arsenal of those looking to establish meaningful connections with others. Whether its expanding your network of professionals on LinkedIn, forming study groups with classmates on Discord, or simply sending a message on Facebook to an old friend halfway across the world, everybody can stand to benefit from the power of these platforms in one way or another. Humans are social creatures by nature, and social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter have made it easier than ever for us to

interact with others, regardless of our physical proximity. Social media can be extremely useful, but there is a fine line between usefulness and dependence.

Although long-term studies on the effects of social media addiction are not yet available due to the fact that the concept of social networking is relatively new, it is quickly becoming evident these platforms can have significant negative effects on the users. The results of the studies examined in this paper indicate that social media addiction can be extremely detrimental to the users' mental health, leading to increased levels of depression, anxiety, and paranoia. While social media addiction is still a relatively new phenomenon and it may be too soon to say for sure, I believe it is possible that the resulting mental health conditions might eventually translate into physical ailments as well. As young people become more conditioned to interacting with others screen-to-screen rather than face-to-face, one can safely assume that their motivation to go outside and participate in physical activity will decrease dramatically. This sedentary lifestyle is already starting to become commonplace, and children are becoming accustomed to devices with access to the internet at a younger age each year. Gone are the days where children would have to ride their bikes to each other's houses in order to "hang out". Instead of playing basketball outside together, they can simply play the latest edition of NBA 2K together on their video game consoles.

There is a quote from *The Social Dilemma*, a Netflix documentary about the effects of social networking, that says "There are only two industries that refer to their customers as users: illegal drugs and software"(3). This powerful statement sheds light on the fact that social media was always meant to be addicting. That is how the companies providing the platforms are able to exist in the first place. It is no coincidence that Wikipedia's donation-based website looks like a small-town local newspaper while YouTube's boasts state-of-the art UI.

It is clear that social media addiction is a condition that should not be taken lightly. As the number of people who are familiar with cell phone technology and the accessibility of mobile devices increases, one can surmise that the number of those affected will increase as well. Unfortunately, unless social media platforms adjust their business models from one that ferociously preys on the attention of their respective users in order to compete for ad revenue, it is likely that the situation will only get worse.

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