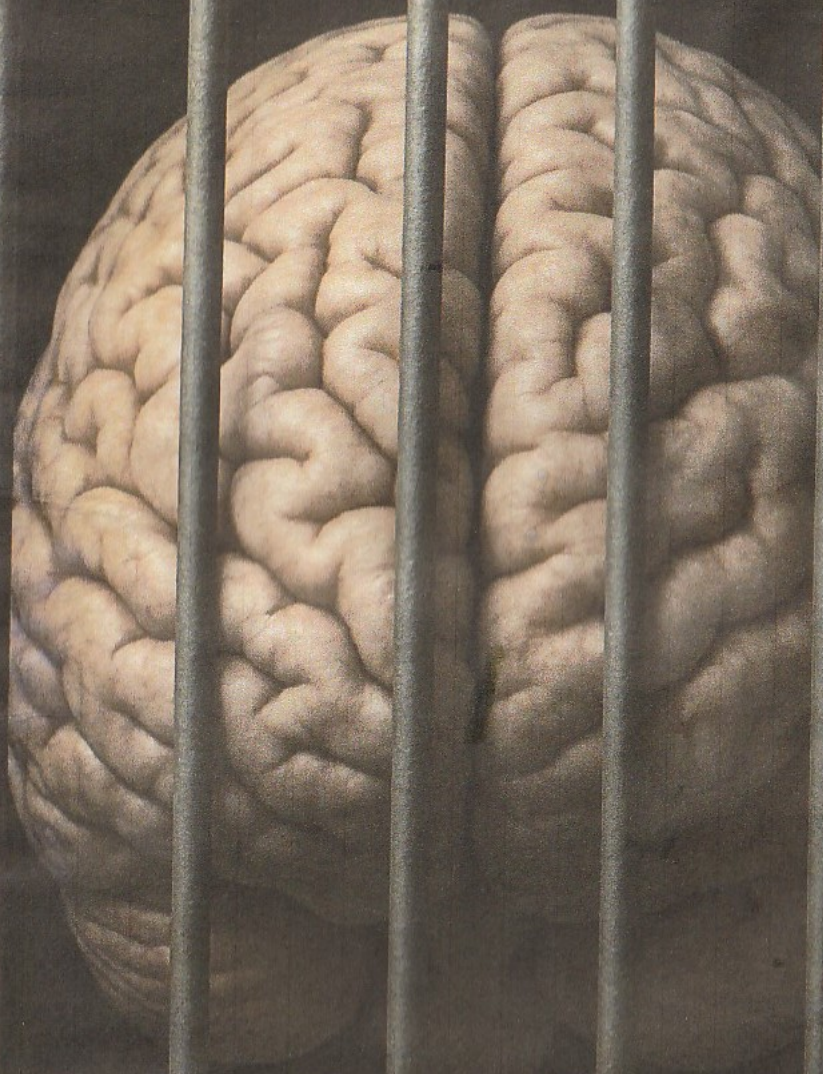


LIKE, SHARE, CRY



SENSORY DEATH BY A THOUSAND POSTS

Paul Williams

FROM SOCIAL TO UNSOCIAL MEDIA

Social Media is the creation, sharing, consumption, and engagement of asynchronous and real-time user-generated content using digital technologies. It promises a lot of things:

Community

Social
Reach

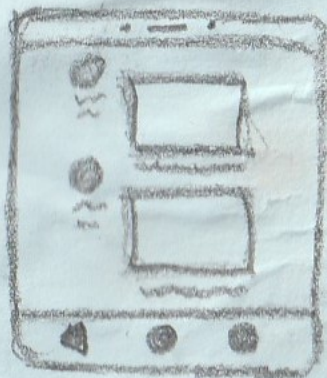
Connection

Find Love &
Friendship

Let your
voice be
Heard

Social Media addiction is the obsessive-compulsive and inadequate control over Social Media use to the point it interferes with effective functioning of daily life and real relationships (NHS 2024; Amirthalingam and Khera, 2024).

We rarely notice our dependency taking hold. What started as a five minute check on the latest gossip becomes a twice daily three hour binge a few months later. And like any addiction, the effects are felt by those around the addict. As more and more time is spent socialising in the digital world, less and less time is spent engaging and maintaining relationships in the physical one.



"When I dreamed about those I had crushes on, it wasn't just steamy beach encounters that I fantasized about; I imagined the moment that, post-beach encounter, we changed our Facebook statuses to 'in a relationship.'" (Walansky, 2022)

Everyone is susceptible to Social Media addiction but some much more than others:

EASY PREY

Younger people are more prone than the older, probably because age is negatively correlated with social media use and care less about other peoples opinions (Rüther, Jahn and Marksteiner, 2023). However, Social Media is a new phenomenon so this state of affairs may not persist into the future.

Women are more prone to Social Media addiction than men (Schou Andreassen et al., 2016; Rüther, Jahn and Marksteiner, 2023). This can partly be explained as social media engagement is a much larger component of women's online interaction but also because women are more socially sensitive, especially at adolescence.

It should be of no surprise that one who lives at the intersection are the easiest prey of them all.

Anxious and lonely people are particularly at risk. They use Social Media to compensate for their lack of in-person social interaction (O'Day and Heimberg, 2021). This is enhanced by FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out): you want to join in and you often don't even know how. Social media is seen as an ideal compromise.

The relationship between social media addiction and low self-esteem levels is well researched (Colak, Bingol and Dayi, 2023). Body image is often a key factor mediating this relationship as Social Media gives us a place to validate our selves. Unfortunately, it's also a place for us to compare ourselves against the world's best; the average person will always look worse.

"It got to the point where I started feeling depressed and my anxiety would spike every time I got on social media. I started thinking I had to post in order to make my life more appealing and exciting than it was. I started prioritizing social media and getting the perfect photo instead of enjoying the moment in real life. On top of that? I felt more alone than ever before, even though I was receiving hundreds of likes." (Young, 2021)

ENGAGEMENT BY DESIGN

There are quite a few things within the social media landscape and design of applications that keep us hooked. I want to focus on just a few that are individually benign but combine to create fertile ground for addiction:

Infinite Scrolling is a content layout method that greatly reduces the friction of moving between pages of content by enabling endless scrolling on a single page instead (Rixen et al., 2023; Sera, 2023). The effort and time required to scroll a little and scan the next item is very small, almost effortless, that we fail to realise these tiny interactions add up. But infinite scrolling by itself is not enough to keep us hooked.



[Creative Fabrica:
phoenixvectorart, 2023]



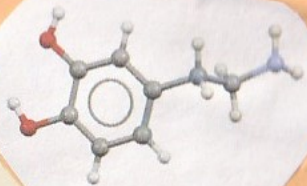
[Mythologian, 2025]

Due to the sheer volume of different content on our feeds, not everything we see will interest us. According to Dvir-Ovirsman (2022), in a study on news engagement on Social Media involving eye-tracking, participants partly or fully read only half (52%) of Facebook news posts. Even less received any form of user-engaged reaction (7%). But each time we do find something we're rewarded with a fleeting sense of satisfaction. We don't scroll for no reason, we scroll to find the next nugget of gossip or insight.

The next piece of the puzzle is that infinite scrolling puts people in a state of normative dissociation, a state of reduced self-awareness and memory disruption (Ruiz, León, and Heuer, 2024). It's a flow state. We are so focused on scrolling and scanning that we lose track of time and disconnect from the real world around us.



[Shutterstock, 2024]



[Mills, 2013]

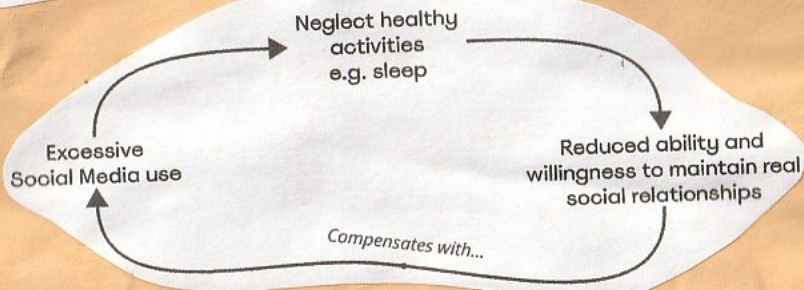
Those pieces of the puzzle are glued together with Dopamine: a neurotransmitter and hormone created and used by human body to regulate mood, help us focus, and motivate us to achieve goals (Cristol, Mitchell and McPhillips, 2024). In particular, the rewards we are seeking are insight, knowledge, and social interaction.

DOPAMINE + DEPRIVATION

While Dopamine is essential for us to function, it does not discern between healthy and unhealthy activities and goals. Social Media organisations know this and their designs exploit our biological and cognitive nature to maximise engagement (Amirthalingam and Khera, 2024).

There is a clear correlation between time spent on Social Media and the likelihood of experiencing a negative impact on emotional well-being, quality of life, and social relationships (Christensen, 2018). Which is interesting because Social Media was conceived and is sold as a means to enhance social relationships.

"I started valuing other peoples' opinions too much; I started believing the words of others a lot more than my own. I let abuse survivor Tiktok and trauma Tiktok plant the seeds in my mind that my husband was abusive, rather than the other way around. I wasn't looking in the mirror, I wasn't acknowledging that I was the actual problem." (Strive, 2021)



Sleep deprivation, lack of nutrition, and inadequate exercise are particularly problematic effects. Addicts consume well into the early hours of the morning leaving them limited time to sleep and rest for the next day's work or study. This is well studied, e.g. sleep deprived people are less social and effective in their daily activities which leads to deteriorating health, job performance, and relationships (Social Media Victims Law Centre, 2024).

"2 months ago I was convinced I had ADHD because I lost total control over my thoughts and ability to focus. I would stay up all night, scroll twitter and reddit, refresh the feed and reread the same shit over and over again, it was becoming automatic. Now I have to take medication if I want any form of sleep." (Anon, 2023)

PRINCIPLES

Design Justice Principles

"We use design to **sustain, heal, and empower** our communities, as well as to seek liberation from exploitative and oppressive systems."

Some people have used Social Media to empower and heal from their pains and liberate themselves from corporate and governmentally controlled media. But we see that the design also exploits and disempowers people, trapping them in a mental loop of consumption that leads to mental and physical health issues.

"We **center the voices of those who are directly impacted** by the outcomes of the design process."

Social Media gives those negatively affected by Social Media a voice and point out the problems that Social Media design produces. However, they are amongst an orchestra of other voices which include those who are positively impacted by the design and wish for no change.

"We **prioritize design's impact on the community** over the intentions of the designer."

The impact of the design is clearly prioritised for the designers and not the community. The removal of cues that naturally invoked users to take a break, e.g. page turning, is like giving kids unlimited ice cream; many will gorge themselves into obesity.

The benefit of Social Media is that you can voice your lived experience. You can make brilliant contributions to the design of everyday things in the moments that suit you, and on the things you care about.

"We believe that **everyone is an expert based on their own lived experience**, and that we all have unique and brilliant contributions to bring to a design process."

The outcomes are here are certainly not community led or controlled. But we must acknowledge users do potentially have indirect influence in the way they use Social Media platforms. If there are no users, there is no app. Harnessing that power is tricky though.

"We work towards sustainable, community-led and -controlled outcomes."

The current design of Social Media applications is certainly exploitative of users need for social interaction and connection. Fair is fair, these platforms do connect us and a great many relationships have been forged and flourished as a consequence. But it has also disconnected and flourished as in-person friends and families.

"We work towards **non-exploitative solutions** that reconnect us to the earth and to each other."

COGNITIVE CONSUMERISM

Money! They are commercial organisations after all. Their income has a range of sources including selling user data, premium user packages, microtransactions, and investors. While all these encourage app engagement, advertisement is arguably the biggest influencer of design of addictive interfaces.

MONEY

The social media company sells advertisement slots to other companies who wish to advertise their wares to the world. How much these companies are willing to pay will depend upon things like, the number of people on the platform, its demographic, how and where their adverts will appear, and the amount of time users spend on it, i.e. the average user's exposure to advertising.

ADVERTS

I hope it's clear from that description that a social media platform can maximise its gains by maximising the number of ads while having as many users as possible spend as much time as possible consuming and interacting with content. This is enhanced by making the app free to use so even the poorest people are customers (because in the developed world even they have access to smartphones, computers, and the internet).

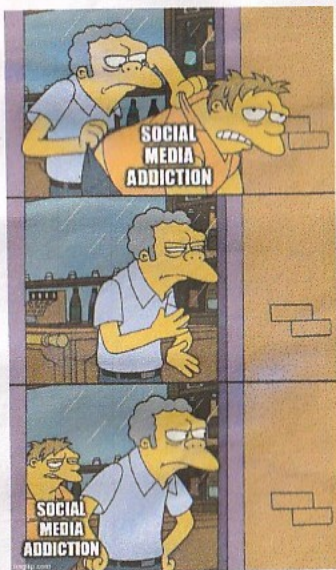
SMART PHONES

We can view this as another form of consumerism, the drive for growth and wealth by encouraging consumption of goods and services beyond which is reasonably necessary or appropriate (not to be confused with capitalism which is an economic system).

A CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

Thai et al (2023) found that limiting adolescent access to social media use to one hour a day drastically improved appearance perception and self-esteem over a three-week period. Big Social Media platforms now provide statistics on your usage of their apps making easier to be conscious of your screen time. Platforms like FaceBook also allow users to be given daily reminders to check their usage and schedule what times in the day the app is allowed to send notifications (quiet mode).

Platforms could be implemented to lock people out after certain usage limits are hit but regulation will undermine the Design Justice idea of user freedom and control. Most suggested interventions to excessive Social Media use are behavioural and involve some form of voluntary act on the part of the user. I think self-regulation is the ideal solution because it keeps control with the user. The problem is many people openly express that they cannot control themselves, they want to but struggle to.



(Williams, 2025)

"I try to delete the apps during the week. However i always find myself redownloading them and procrastinating while i KNOW consciously what i'm supposed to be doing. I am off of tiktok and facebook, but snapchat and instagram are my weak points." (Kallyfromthevalley, 2023)

It's clear to see there is a conflict of interests when dealing with Social Media use. Platforms want to maximise engagement but tackling addiction requires limiting engagement. The user should have full control over their time and life but are strongly influenced by their biological instinct to seek social interactions and news.



[Baloch, 2025]

SLAYING THE DRAGON

Reading people stories and their attempts to purge Social Media from their lives feels like a great battle to slay an evil dragon. But the dragon is not evil, it merely does what a dragon has evolved to do. The dragon's nature was shaped by it's interactions with people. It eats people because we designed it to.



[Jean52Photosstock, 2021]

I'm conscious that there are many users who do not have a problem and find the design of these apps optimal. So I think the best solution is a compromise between design, control, sensible defaults, and above all, more effective options and settings to help users regulate themselves. Here are a few ideas:

1

All Social Media platforms should have options to disable infinity scrolling, set personal usage limits, and schedule the disabling of notifications on a schedule. The user should have some control over how they consume content to manage their usage.

2

Where possible, Social Media platforms should have usage management active by default. They should even prompt and encourage users to regularly reflect on their consumption habits and modify their settings to reflect their needs and struggles. Some platforms now do this but it must be a primary designer concern, not tagged on minor content.

3

And my favourite idea! Usability friction determined by recent usage levels. As a user consumes content the usability friction slowly increases reducing the ease of viewing more content. At some point the user will want to break away due to the effort to consume more content. Friction could be in many forms, e.g. slower loading times, hiding reaction controls behind menus, or switching to pagination with ever decreasing posts per page. Because it's tied to recent usage, closing and reopening the app will reset friction. Friction dissipates over time and you should be able to disable the feature if you don't need it. What's cool about the idea is that it doesn't prevent use so when you need to get your voice out or keep a track of a very fast moving and important event, you can!

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