Social Media Consumption and Psychological Wellbeing

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What we found

Time spent using social media *can* have a positive effect on psychological wellbeing, but it depends on the type of social media and, specifically, the kinds of interactions people are likely engaging in. Spending time using social media platforms that tend to facilitate *truly social* interactions (e.g., with close friends, family members, and meaningful social contacts) was found to be associated with higher psychological wellbeing. The effect was detectable although relatively small compared to other common drivers of psychological wellbeing unrelated to social media. On the other hand, spending time using social media platforms that are more likely to facilitate interactions of a *less truly social* nature (e.g., following strangers, influencers, brands) was not associated with psychological wellbeing (i.e., neither a positive nor negative effect).

What we did

Social media is used by billions of people around the world, making it a significant part of everyday life for many. Given such ubiquity, for some time academics, policymakers, and the general public have questioned how consuming content on social media platforms affects people's well-being. Prior research reports mixed evidence, however. In the current research, we ran two longitudinal studies (one for about six months and another for about four months) involving a total of 1,856 adult internet users in, primarily, the UK and US. In both studies, participants downloaded and installed a mobile phone app used to unobtrusively collect—with full consent of participants—how much time apps were in use on their smartphones (what participants did while using their apps was unknown). Using this data, we measured the total amount of time per day each participant used various social media and messaging apps. Additionally, once every two weeks, each participant was asked to complete an online survey in which we measured their psychological wellbeing. Questions included items such as, "I am satisfied with my life as a whole these days" and "I lead a purposeful and meaningful life."

We thought that there could be a positive effect of time spent using social media on subsequent psychological wellbeing if people used it to develop and maintain real, meaningful relationships with others (i.e., *truly* meaningful social interactions). We call this a "truly social" use of social media, which we contrast with social media use that is more about accessing news, following people of interest (e.g., influencers), and interacting with brands (which we call *less truly social*). Think Facebook (with meaningful social interactions) and messaging (with private and small group interactions with close friends and family) versus Instagram (following people and topics of interest) and Twitter (news and what's happening in the world).

Overall, the average daily time spent using social media and messaging had a small positive effect on subsequent psychological wellbeing. We then split social media and messaging apps into two types. Time using the *more truly social* apps (those that typically facilitate meaningful social interactions; Facebook, WhatsApp, Messenger) was positively associated with subsequent higher psychological wellbeing. Conversely, time using the *less truly social* apps (e.g., Instagram, Pinterest, Reddit, Snapchat, Twitter) was not associated with psychological wellbeing (neither positively nor negatively).

Why it matters

Press reports over the last few years overwhelmingly point to the negative impacts of social media on psychological factors such as self-esteem, feelings of isolation, and overall happiness or wellbeing. We do not disagree with prior research, although note that it has tended to examine very specific wellbeing-related outcomes, such as self-esteem, and not directly psychological wellbeing itself. Also, some of the prior research has relied on small and narrow samples or rudimentary research methods. Given the widespread importance of social media in the daily lives of literally billions of people around the world and it now one of the predominant forms of global communication, it is vital that we understand the ways in which we are affected by *consuming* one's time by using social media. The current research is by no means the end of the story, as all forms of social media continue to evolve and new platforms, with new types of content and usage, are introduced. Our research does, however, suggest that when social media platforms are used for the facilitation of truly social interactions—just like offline socialising between friends, for instance—they may serve an important, positive role in supporting users' psychological wellbeing.

Actions

- **Individuals should try to use social media apps in *truly social* ways.** Use social media to develop and maintain real relationships with others, such as staying connected with family and friends. Connect and chat with people who you see as relevant and important to you. Engage in "meaningful social interactions" with them.

- **There's no need to discontinue, based on our findings, using other types of social media apps.** We found no evidence in our research to suggest that other kinds of social media apps, i.e., those that tend to be less truly social, are harmful to users with respect to their psychological wellbeing. However, based on other research it may be prudent to be mindful of, and potentially limit, how much time one spends using social media to focus on people they do not have real relationships with or who will not socially engage them (e.g., celebrities).

- **Social media platforms should consider putting weight on meaningful social interactions**. Facebook has done this by engineering the feed algorithm to try to make sure that users see more posts from close friends and family (i.e., facilitating *truly social* use of Facebook). Other platforms with an interest in users' psychological wellbeing could also consider this approach.

- **Be sure to do other things, outside of social media use, that are shown to improve wellbeing**. For instance, engage in fulfilling and meaningful work, exercise, and socializing with people in person.