

SOCIAL MEDIA: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL & PHYSIOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING

Social Media Definition & Use

Social media refers to internet-based communication platforms that let people share information, photos, videos, and ideas. Accessed through electronic devices, platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Reddit encourage frequent interaction and often generate responses from other users.

Although social media is meant to connect people around the world, overuse can become addictive and draw attention away from more important parts of life. For frequent users, the drawbacks may sometimes exceed the benefits. Social media users who post often may also rely on positive responses for self-validation or reinforcing attention-seeking behavior.

From a physiological and psychological perspective, frequent social media use—whether reading content or responding to it—may lead to the following effects:

1. Physiologically, it can stimulate dopamine release, activating the same reward pathways involved in hunger, sexual desire, and social bonding—responses also associated with addiction.
2. Psychologically, it can heighten psychological urges to seek rewards and stimulation.

Why It Is Important to Understand Social Media Use

The phrase “smarter than the average bear” points to the importance of good judgment. People who frequently post or seek constant feedback through messages, photos, or comments may not realize how dependent they have become on attention and responses. In contrast, a self-aware person can recognize this pattern. Seeing the urge to react to every post or comment on social media helps explain how social media can reinforce excessive dopamine-driven behavior in the person seeking the response.

Using social media responsibly requires clear limits for both those who post and those who respond. Frequent replies to posts can encourage even more social media outreach, thereby reinforcing the sender’s desire for repeated, dopamine-driven posts to solicit rewarding responses.

The phrase “smarter than the average bear” emphasizes the importance of self-awareness and wise social media use. Overuse of social media and/or unrealistic expectations for others to respond offer no healthful/meaningful psychological or physiological benefit.

Social media platforms often encourage users to respond by offering built-in spaces for comments and replies. These features can promote excessive engagement, reinforcing continued use and dopamine-related reward responses tied to frequent interaction.

Factors That May Contribute to Excessive Social Media Use

Psychological factors that may contribute to excessive social media use:

1. Low self-esteem
2. Anxious preoccupation with ideas, thoughts, or current events
3. A fragile sense of self
4. A strong need for attention and validation
5. Narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) (Estimated to affect 1% to 6% of the general population)
6. A desire to create an inflated self-image and to seek admiration that reinforces feelings of superiority
7. Fear of abandonment

Conclusion

Social media is here to stay and will continue to shape how people communicate and connect. Understanding how it works can help users benefit from it while maintaining a healthier response to interactions and responses. Good judgment and self-control allow people to engage online thoughtfully and with appropriate restraint.

In that sense, using sound judgment online is one sign of being smarter than the average bear!

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Reference: Cleveland Clinic, "Dopamine" (medically reviewed)