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WHAT SOCIAL MEDIA IS REALLY DOING TO OUR BRAINS

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It's no understatement to say that social media is a phenomenon now firmly entrenched in our lives. New figures released in March 2016 show Facebook has reached 15 million active users in Australia – that means 62.5% of the total Australian population has a Facebook account. Meanwhile, other social media networks continue to grow, particularly with the younger audience – Instagram has 5 million monthly active Australian users, Twitter 2.8 million, WhatsApp 2.4 million and Snapchat around 2 million. That doesn't take into account the 5.5 million Australians with a WordPress account or the 2.2 million on Blogspot.

Not only are the number of users growing, but also the amount of time spent on these sites, with research from last year showing 49% of us access social media sites every day, and 24% are visiting them more than five times each day.

Social media has become such a commonplace part of modern existence that few of us give much thought to the psychology behind why we're so drawn to it, what it's really doing to our brains and the impact of our growing obsession.

Katina Michael, Associate Professor at the University of Wollongong's School Of Information Systems and Technology, has done extensive research on online usage and how it affects us. She explains that the attraction to social media is the same thing that attracted us to Pong, one of the first computer games ever invented – a tennis-like game where users had to hit back a ball against a computer-driven paddle.

"What made us move then – and what motivates us now – is a dopamine reaction, a dopamine fix that says 'react'," she says.

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"We enjoy reacting because we're human, we want to be engaged."

Experiments and MRI-based tests done on Twitter and Facebook users by neuroeconomist Paul Zak, discovered the brain interprets social media interactions just as it does "real world" ones through the release of the feel-good chemical oxytocin, the same chemical released during mother and baby bonding or when we eat food, fall in love, earn money or do anything that brings us pleasure.

Each time we receive a notification or a 'like' on social media, an area of our brain called the nucleus accumbens lights up to give us a sense of gratification which goes a long way to explain why social media is so appealing and why it can become all-consuming. The danger, explains Katina, is that people are opting for this online gratification at the expense of the real world.

"Researchers have said the internet gives us more of a dopamine kick than having chocolate, than having sex, than achieving high results, than winning a medal, these things we used to strive for that were so important to us a society," she says.

"Even contact between two people, the most intimate thing in the world, gets superceded, because people get more of a fix from friends or even strangers 'liking' them, than the person sitting next to them in the bed with a similar device. Even a cuddle now, is not the same as, 'Oh, 50 people just liked my photo'."

Katina adds that this can be problematic because people are starting to miss out on the true, physical sensations of needing cuddles or eye contact.

"We're starving for acceptance, but not from our own homes, which is the primary place we all sought comfort. Now we have this virtual space filled with millions of people and yet we don't feel accepted, we don't feel we belong, because we don't have that physical intimacy. People can tell you, 'you're great, I love you, you're the best', but we don't feel it. It's not a touch, a physical sensation."

Social media has also been found to bring on some negative emotions from users. A [study](#) by two German universities into social networking found that one in three people surveyed felt worse ("lonely, frustrated or angry") after spending time on Facebook, often due to perceived inadequacies when comparing themselves to friends.

"People see this pressure to present yourself in the best light online, because it has to do with reputation," says Katina, who says that depression and anxiety can be a real issue among users.



According to scientists at [Stanford University](#), social media is also affecting our ability to multitask, with a study showing people who spend a significant time on social media were “more susceptible to interference from irrelevant environmental stimuli” and less able to complete more than one task simultaneously.

“It’s the 17 screen syndrome,” affirms Katina. “We’re getting elite students who can’t submit work worthy of reading and it happens when Facebook or Snapchat is open, they’ve got a video game going, they’re instant messaging, they’ve got work open, they’ve got a news site open, they’ve got a live feed on the cricket going ... If you throw too much at it, your brain just stops. We all think we can multitask, but there’s a limit to our multitasking before we get nothing done.”

More seriously, social media is contributing to the rise of Internet addiction, one of the fastest growing addictions around the world. Internet addiction can take many different forms, such as cyber-sex addiction, addiction to porn, net compulsions, compulsive information overload and online game addiction. Users start to compulsively go onto the internet, are unable to switch off, or feel more comfortable around their online friends than with their real-life ones, putting their personal relationships, work and daily life at risk.

“It’s a real issue and we’ve all seen it,” says Katina, citing examples of teenagers who spend a night out together staring into their phones, CEOs who have lost jobs due to time spent on the net, or couples who go to a restaurant and spend the whole evening looking at their phones. Or most tragically, the case of a Korean couple who were addicted to playing an online game in which they had to look after a virtual baby, while in the real world, their own baby died from their neglect.

So how do we keep the positive aspects of social media without letting it take over our lives and having a negative impact?

“It’s setting boundaries,” says Katina. “We’ve got to have that reflection time, whether it’s through meditation, a game of sport, or whatever takes your fancy. It’s saying, let’s get real, this technology is here to stay, but let’s try to minimise its impact at home – not in the car, not in the kitchen and not in the bedroom. Keep it out of those spaces.”

Kevin Jankelowitz, Co-Founder and Chief Meditation Officer at [Centred Meditation](#), says meditation is a powerful tool to counterbalance the saturation of social media in our lives.

“We live in an attention economy where countless demands are constantly competing for our attention. As a result, we’ve become obsessed with doing, so much so that when we are presented with an opportunity to just be for a while, we quickly fill it up with doing again,” he says. “It’s vital that we start to claim back our ‘in-between’ moments. To use them as a fortunate opportunity to get centred.”

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Kevin says that as well as allowing us to get centred, meditation provides us with those very things that social media may be taking away, such as increased focus and attention; increased productivity and improved ability to multi-task; and decreased feelings of anxiety, anger and stress.

Calming exercise such as yoga is another great way to counteract the effects of too much screen time. Ximena Flanagan, yoga

instructor at [Health Space Clinics](#) explains, “Often when we use technology we are in a passive or sedentary position. Yoga helps to reset the body by moving us in all sorts of positions to counteract the effect of poorly used muscles and limbs, poor posture and poor circulation. Further, yoga gives our body the chance to rest. Screens emit blue light which is disruptive to our sleeping cycles, so if you’re poorly rested from too much screen time, you might be able to catch up by resting in class.”

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About the person who wrote this

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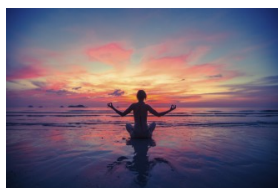
Zoe Meunier is a freelance journalist with over 20 years experience. A mum of two, she lives and breathes the daily challenges of trying to lead a healthy lifestyle while encouraging her kids to do the same. As such, she’s always seeking out new ways of demystifying nutrition, fitness and wellness while making it accessible for all. She is especially interested in the health benefits of red wine and chocolate ...

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