

Social Media and Addiction: How a Tool for Communication Can Make Us Feel Our Needs for Social Connection are Being Met

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Editor's Note: This editorial was written by Dr. Stephanie Diez as part of our [Special Series on Addiction and Social Media](#).



The future is now. We live in an era where constant technological marvels, engineering feats and scientific breakthroughs are being made almost every single day. With these advancements, daily activities that were once ideals of science fiction are now realities. Within our pockets, we grasp smart phones and other devices that provide the convenience of constant

connectedness through the Internet. We are able to contact family, friends, colleagues, and strangers through various social media platforms online in the matter of mere seconds closing the gap of a 2,000-mile distance within the span of a few seconds. Faster Internet speeds and more Internet access is being expanded across the globe and we now have approximately 4.021 billion people using the Internet worldwide.

With this commodity comes many advantages, however I would like for you to consider in the age of connectedness via social media how the Internet has altered our behaviors for human connection. As a licensed clinical social worker, I have spent much of my career researching and aiding individuals who are seeking behavioral changes in their lives from addictions. More specifically, I have helped individuals seeking recovery from substance use disorders, and behavioral addictions including Internet gaming disorder, Internet addiction, and social media addiction. In therapy, this often begins by examining how certain components of the Internet affect social and behavioral aspects of our lives and by reviewing the consequences that these problematic behaviors have on individuals, their family or friends, and with work and/or school. While there are undoubtedly positive effects of social media and the Internet, we should also recognize and discuss a behavior that is often overlooked and becoming increasingly problematic amongst children, adolescents, and adults across the globe. That is, the problematic behavior of social media addiction.

I first became interested in Internet and social media addiction during my junior year of undergraduate psychology studies when I took a course focused on treating addiction. The late Professor Dube taught this course and, along with his vast knowledge of psychopharmacology, he brought his personal experience with addiction as he was in long term recovery from a substance use disorder. The fervor with which he taught and emphasis he placed on using a person in environment model when examining human behaviors igniting my interest in research and practice with addictions. Over the next decade of my academic and professional career, I dedicated my focus and energy to research, education, and treatment for Internet based compulsive behaviors and addictions among children, adolescents, and adults. During this time, resources were scarce, information was not widely available on the topic and I felt a calling to intervene on the social, emotional, physiological, and psychological effects Internet addiction was causing to individuals, families, and society. In response to that calling, I founded [Reboot & Recover](#), a 501 (c) 3 not for profit organization

devoted to reducing the negative impacts of technology overuse and addiction by helping individuals achieve a healthy and happy life balance.

To begin to understand how an individual can use social media in a problematic or addictive way, we must consider how human needs and motivations contribute to this behavior. As humans we desire a sense of caring and belonging from others. Psychologist Abraham Maslow's paper published in 1943 titled ["A Theory of Human Motivation"](#) can provide the framework for understanding human motivation. Maslow describes human motivational factors as a hierarchy of needs. In ascending order these needs are: physiological needs (food, water, warmth, rest), safety needs (security, safety), belongingness and love needs (intimate relationships, friends), esteem needs (prestige and feeling of accomplishment), and self-actualization (achieving one's full potential, including creative activities). When speaking to a group of adolescents or young adults, I ask how many of these needs they feel are being met through sharing and participating on social media. The response has been consistently unanimous, with the adolescents and young adults reporting that their need for belongingness and love, esteem, and self-actualization are being met through social media. In some cases, youth have also reported their safety need is met through social media, particularly when their home environment is not safe. In continuation, I will provide a breakdown of how we have come to reason that social media fulfills our basic human needs.

Belongingness and love need: intimate relationships, friends. Social media can give us a sense of connectivity via glimpses of others' lives in videos and snaps. Posts expressing emotions of joy or sadness can be paired with an image or video to create an impactful message that reaches out to the billions of Internet users worldwide. This creates what feels to be human belongingness, which is a form of connection, but how real is this connection? Is it the same as connecting with a person face-to-face? Consider the following scenario: You exchange information with someone you briefly met and are communicating with them as a potential romantic interest via instant messages. You have long text conversations including emojis and GIFs. You feel a physiological reaction of butterflies and anticipation when you see three dots on your screen, knowing on the other end is a human being typing who might be sharing your experience. Then, the day arrives when you plan a date, and sitting across from this person you notice the conversation does not feel the same. You are aware that even though you are communicating effectively face to face, the sensation is not the same. The human connection is not the same. In my community work, I use this scenario to describe

how communicating with someone via the Internet is not synonymous with human connection. Human connection produces a feeling, and when communicating through a screen, our mind can fabricate some of the sensations we yearn to feel. Although, I would be remiss if I did not note that there can be genuine cases of human connection online that translate to human connection in real life.

Esteem needs: prestige and feeling of accomplishment. Popularity is often a driving force in social media connections, as we see people employing excessive effort to gain social media retweets, likes, and followers. The idea of being a social media celebrity or going viral is universally prevalent among children and adolescents who aspire to careers as YouTubers, Instagram models, and social media influencers. Although this might provide a good medium for certain outlets such as education and fitness, what is the driving force behind the like, followers, and posts? Research indicates a neurochemical response occurs when we see a new like, retweet, or follower on social media, as the [neurotransmitter](#) dopamine is [released in our brains](#). The brain includes several distinct dopamine pathways, one of which plays a major role in the motivational component of reward-motivated behavior. Dopamine is also released when engaging in other potentially addictive behaviors such as eating, drinking, and smoking.

In addition to the physiological sensation accompanied by the release of dopamine, there is a psychological fulfillment of prestige and accomplishment that accompanies popularity. Through social media, popularity is measured in the number of likes, retweets, and/or followers. An additional component of psychological accomplishment is derived from competition of when we compare likes, retweets, and follows to others. This comparison validates our self-esteem and generates a feeling of accomplishment. However, those with problematic social media use or addiction report that this type of accomplishment feels synthetic and is not equal to the sense of accomplishment and esteem felt after completing a difficult task at work, helping a friend with a project, or challenging themselves to learn a new skill.

Self-actualization needs: achieving one's full potential, including creative activities. Along with the compulsive use of social media, some of the contributing factors to this addictive behavior come from the popularized term FOMO. FOMO is an abbreviation for: Fear Of Missing Out. [Studies report](#) that FOMO is a predictor for compulsive social media use or addiction and is directly correlated with depression, anxiety, neuroticism, and negative body image. The

images and snippets seen on social media are often curated so that what is being presented gives off the appearance of a perfect life. Therefore, when one views their social media feeds and see others posting only the best quality photos and aspects of their lives, one may begin to feel as if they are not achieving as much as others. This translates to FOMO in many aspects of life including: travel, raising families, attaining a work promotion, work that is fulfilling, a work/life balance, self-image, physical fitness, and so forth making one feel as if they are not achieving their full potential. As a result of continually being exposed to feelings of not meeting the need for self-actualizing via comparing our self and our lives to others on social media, many begin to follow the same pattern and sensor or fabricate the reality of their own lives through a self-portrayal that is not truly who they are. In practice and through research, this can lead to feelings of isolation which are most commonly accompanied by anxiety, depression, symptoms of narcissism and issues with body image. These real and persistent mental health issues are a direct result of social media overuse and addiction.

Social media addiction has yet to be categorized as a formal disorder by the American Psychiatric Association or the World Health Organization (WHO), however both institutions recognize that there are components of the Internet, such as video game playing, that possess capabilities of fostering compulsive and addictive behaviors. In 2013, the American Psychiatric Association [recognized Internet gaming disorder](#) to be considered as a formal disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5 (DSM-5), and requested further research be conducted. More recently, the WHO [included Internet gaming disorder](#) in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) as a formal disorder.

To the many individuals and families who have suffered and are suffering with social media addiction, the pain, shame, and guilt associated with this behavior is directly proportionate to that of any other addiction. For those who are considering if social media addiction is a problem, let the evidence and this article serve as validation. Know that there is support, there are therapists and treatments that can help. Social media addiction, like other substance use disorders and behavioral addictions, impacts us physiologically and psychologically. With the physiological neurochemical reaction of dopamine, which is released in a roulette of unpredictability for how many likes, shares, retweets, or follower you will attain keeps social media users returning for more. And with the psychological fulfillment of our hierarchy of motivational needs

through social media, this entices us to keep scrolling through feeds for longer periods of time than intended. In conclusion, the psychological and physiological components accompanying social media use creates a behavioral pattern where it is difficult to limit or resist use of social media. Meanwhile, research indicates that limiting social media use to approximately 30 minutes or less per day leads to a [significant improvement in overall well-being](#). All in all, when using social media, it is important to ask yourself what your motives are, how much of the interactions on social media are genuine, and is it truly fulfilling our needs for human connection or are we just isolating behind a screen?

Author Biography

Dr. Stephanie Diez is the founder and clinical director of Reboot & Recover and an Assistant Professor in the Department of Social Work at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania. Prior to this, as a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) and a Florida State Master Certified Addiction Professional (MCAP), Dr. Diez worked for over a decade within nonprofit community organizations and community hospitals in Miami and throughout South Florida. She provided direct therapeutic services, education, prevention, research and consultation to address behavioral health issues, such as substance use disorders, with populations of children, adolescents, adults, families, and communities. Her experiences in research and fieldwork inspired and motivated her to intervene and address the social, emotional, physical, and psychological effects of problematic technology use on individuals, families, and communities.

Subsequently, in 2013, Stephanie founded Reboot & Recover, a 501(c)3 not-for-profit organization devoted to the education, prevention, research, and treatment of problematic technology use. Since the inception of Reboot & Recover, Stephanie has held over 55 focus groups, presentations, and forums in communities across South Florida and the U.S. to discuss concerns and issues relating to problematic internet and video game usage. Dr. Diez is the recipient of the Most Next Award for Innovation in 2019, a grant awarded by the AICP Foundation in recognition of her work with Reboot & Recover.

For more information about Reboot & Recover, including free assessment tools for social media addiction or internet addiction, visit rebootandrecover.org.