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Risky decisions: Excessive social media use is comparable to drug addiction

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Bad decision-making is a trait oftentimes associated with drug addicts and pathological gamblers, but what about people who excessively use social media? New research from Michigan State University shows a connection between social media use and impaired risky decision-making, which is commonly deficient in substance addiction.

"Around one-third of humans on the planet are using social media, and some of these people are displaying maladaptive, excessive use of these sites," said Dar Meshi, lead author and assistant professor at MSU. "Our findings will hopefully motivate the field to take social media overuse seriously."

The findings, published in the *Journal of Behavioral Addictions*, are the first to examine the relationship between social media use and risky decision-making capabilities.

"Decision making is oftentimes compromised in individuals with substance use disorders. They sometimes fail to learn from their mistakes and continue down a path of negative outcomes," Meshi said. "But no one previously looked at this behavior as it relates to excessive social media users, so we investigated this

possible parallel between excessive social media users and substance abusers. While we didn't test for the cause of poor decision-making, we tested for its correlation with problematic social media use."

Meshi and his co-authors had 71 participants take a survey that measured their psychological dependence on Facebook, similar to addiction. Questions on the survey asked about users' preoccupation with the platform, their feelings when unable to use it, attempts to quit and the impact that Facebook has had on their job or studies.

The researchers then had the participants do the Iowa Gambling Task, a common exercise used by psychologists to measure decision-making. To successfully complete the task, users identify outcome patterns in decks of cards to choose the best possible deck.

Meshi and his colleagues found that by the end of the gambling task, the worse people performed by choosing from bad decks, the more excessive their social media use. The better they did in the task, the less their social media use. This result is complementary to results with substance abusers. People who abuse opioids, cocaine, methamphetamine, among others -- have similar outcomes on the Iowa Gambling Task, thus showing the same deficiency in decision-making.

"With so many people around the world using social media, it's critical for us to understand its use," Meshi said. "I believe that social media has tremendous benefits for individuals, but there's also a dark side when people can't pull themselves away. We need to better understand this drive so we can determine if excessive social media use should be considered an addiction."

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