

Developing Healthy Habits with Social Media: Theorizing the Cycle of Overuse and Taking Breaks

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ABSTRACT

Over the past 10 years, social media users have eagerly adopted social media platforms such as MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. However, many users begin to worry about overuse and seek out strategies to better manage their time online. One example is individuals who take breaks from social media, practices commonly observed at the onset of Lent or in the New Year. Recent research has begun to document the successes and failures of such break takers, but the complex and nuanced reasons for taking breaks are less well explored. This workshop papers theorizes about why social media users feel the need to take breaks, and why they might struggle to do so. I explore how habits impact behavior, and consider the influence of willpower and perceptions of “real life.” This discussion complements the growing body of empirical work in social media abstinence, with the goal of developing frameworks to better understand social media attitudes and behaviors.

INTRODUCTION

Since 2009, Stephen Smith has compiled a list of the top items that Twitter users tweet about giving up for Lent [18]. Lent is primarily associated with Christian denominations, but the practice of fasting, repentance, and moderation has been adopted as a cultural practice in the U.S. among many individuals of various faiths [22,28]. Though non-scientific, Smith’s lists surface evolving practices of public consumption and repentance among social media users over the past five years. They show that one of the most common things that social media users tweet about giving up for Lent is social media itself (see Table 1). In fact, from 2009-2012, Facebook or Twitter overtook chocolate, swearing, and alcohol as the most tweeted abstentions.

Recent research has begun to document this pattern of taking breaks from social media [3,15,17]. In this workshop paper, I theorize about why social media users may be engaging in cycles of overuse and breaks. I draw on two empirical contexts that I have studied: how and why Twitter users give up Twitter for Lent [17], and how parents and children manage social media use in home and school contexts [29,30]. From this work, I hypothesize that social media use becomes habit, and users are challenged to balance habitual behaviors with self-control and willpower. I consider open questions and discuss users’ concerns about social media use not being a part of “real life.” My goal for

participating in this workshop is to explore these and other theories and frameworks for understanding social media attitudes and behaviors, with an eye towards helping users develop healthy social media habits.

SOCIAL MEDIA USE AS HABIT

A habit is a “learned sequence of acts that have become automatic responses to specific cues” [26]. Habits are behaviors that are triggered by a cue in the environment rather than by intentionality or will [6,23]. A social media habit might be opening Facebook minutes after closing it, or swiping the cell phone on, without any intended purpose. Habits are learned through context-dependent repetition such as brushing teeth every day [10]. Context-dependent cues are environmental triggers that trigger a response, like flossing after brushing teeth. Habitual behavior is cued, impulsive, and does not require intention [1,10,14,26]. In contrast, intentional behavior is deliberative, intentional, and consciously mediated. The strength of a habit is associated with the frequency of the behavior [14,27]. For a living bibliography, I propose [14], which nicely summarizes habit, cues, intentionality, and how past behavior predicts future behavior. There are many domains in socio-technical research where understanding habit formation and evolution would be valuable.

Health research is interested in breaking unhealthy habits (e.g. smoking) and encouraging the adoption of healthy ones (e.g. exercising). Healthy habits can be desirable because they instill positive behaviors and because they free mental capacity to do other things at the same time, such as washing dishes while listening to the local news station.

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
1.	Facebook	Twitter	Twitter	Twitter	Being pope*
2.	Twitter	Facebook	Facebook	Chocolate	Swearing
3.	Chocolate	Chocolate	Chocolate	Swearing	Soda
4.	Lent	Alcohol	Swearing	Alcohol	Social networking
5.	Alcohol	Swearing	Alcohol	Soda	Alcohol

Table 1: Topics Twitter users tweet about giving up for Lent (non-scientific compilation by Stephen Smith). *Pope Benedict resigned the papacy, leading to mock tweets.

Unhealthy habits are those that disrupt desirable or valued parts of life, like sleeping, eating, and relationships. Research suggests that frequent Internet use can become habitual and can disrupt other activities [25]. For example, texting late at night for a child or checking email frequently at night for an adult is disruptive to sleep. I am interested in three open questions related to social media habits:

1. How much of social media use is intentional and how much is habit?
2. How do habits form related to social media use?
3. How might undesirable social media habits be disrupted?

These questions pose a number of open research trajectories: in this workshop, I hope to discuss frameworks, methods, and considerations for formulating plans for such research. These questions have many practical applications: for families, young children who become new social media users can establish healthy habits at an early age. However, this requires that parents know what healthy social media habits are as well as how to help their children learn them. For adults, learning to self-identify behaviors deemed healthy or unhealthy and manage them intentionally is both important and challenging.

Strategies for Disrupting Social Media Habits

Social media users employ a variety of approaches to try to break or disrupt their habits. Teenagers have disconnected from Facebook for a period of time by giving their Facebook password to a friend or parent during finals periods. This approach helps them to disrupt their pattern of checking Facebook but also enlists accountability from family and friends. Adults have looked to disrupt social media habits by replacing their Internet use with other activities. One participant in my research told me of his efforts:

I tried reading. But then I said well I can just read online. I tried taking my dogs for walks but that only takes so long. Everything I tried doesn't work. I'm addicted.

While this participant struggled with his social media overuse, he also felt it connected him to more people than he would ever connect to offline. This sentiment highlights the tension that many users experience between the social benefits of social media with the costs of not spending time elsewhere. Many participants in my research have expressed this concern. They worry about the tradeoffs of spending time on social media with other activities. Their concerns are vague—ill-defined feelings of overuse that are often not strong enough to push them to significantly change behavior.

Many heavy social media users (including high profile authors and celebrities, such as Dave Eggers and Nora Ephron) have adopted software tools to help them take breaks from the Internet. Fred Stutzman's software,

Freedom, is a popular application that allows users to turn the wireless off on their laptop for a predetermined amount of time, usually a few hours. Some users heavily praise applications like these that help them overcome the draw of social media; however, others have criticized the removal of agency and willpower that these applications force. Relying on software to overcome behavior surfaces tensions with maintaining agency and self-control. Society (and academic researchers) often cringe at the label "addiction" when discussing social media overuse; yet, many users struggle with how much they are using social media and their struggles are not yet well-defined or understood. I use the word "habit" intentionally, because it leaves open to interpretation labeling of the social media use as good or bad, or healthy or unhealthy. Regardless of the value assigned to social media behaviors, taking breaks from social media habits requires the willpower to acknowledge and change behavior.

Willpower

Willpower, or self-control, involves the ability to regulate emotions, desires, and behavior toward a desired goal [2]. Self-control is generally preferable to impulsiveness, which suggests an inability to self-regulate, delay gratification, or plan for the future. Mischel's Marshmallow Test is one of the best-known experiments of self-control [12]. In this test, four-year-old children were given a marshmallow and told that they can eat it at any time, but if they wait 15 minutes, they would receive another marshmallow. Decades years later, follow up studies showed that early lack of self-control related to later problems with relationships, weight, and drug abuse [16,19].

The behaviorist B.F. Skinner proposed nine categories of methods for self-control: 1) physical restraint and physical aid, 2) changing the stimulus, 3) depriving and satiating, 4) manipulating emotional conditions, 5) using aversive stimulation, 6) drugs, 7) operant conditioning, 8) punishment, and 9) distraction, or doing something else [20]. Behaviorism has been out of vogue within a number of academic communities, and some of these categories (e.g. physical restraint) would be ill-received, but others suggest a variety of new approaches for managing social media use. Some are already used, such as the participant who talked about distracting himself by taking the dogs for a walk, or the teenagers who give their Facebook passwords to a friend to remove the stimulus.

In adults, theories about willpower and self-control are still evolving. For a long time, it was believed that willpower was a limited resource but more recent studies question that claim, showing that it is actually a person's *beliefs* about willpower that determine her willpower [7]. Research suggests that people who believe that self-control is dynamic and unlimited tend to set more resolutions and are more likely to achieve them [13]. A survey of New Year's goals and outcomes showed that 67% of respondents made three or more resolutions but only 25% reported attaining

even one of them successfully [11]. Even when people can identify and establish a target behavior, they still struggle to control it [2]. One possible explanation for this is that individuals with high self-efficacy attribute failure to a lack of effort whereas individuals with low self-efficacy attribute failure to an inability to succeed. For this reason, people who believe that individuals have limited and pre-set amount of self-control performed worse on attaining their New Year's Resolutions [13].

Relying on technological supports to scaffold self-control is one promising approach for helping users manage social media use. Growing movements in quantified self and health informatics have explored data-driven approaches to empowering users. Other research in social computing and online communities has focused on providing online social support and accountability to encourage users to improve or change behavior. Little of this work has been conducted in the context of social media overuse, but it offers promising groundwork for doing so.

Are Social Media Habits a Part of “Real Life”?

A challenge in helping people to manage their social media behavior is that little is known about what ideal or optimal behaviors might be. Many studies suggest that Facebook positively impacts well-being, social capital, and health [4,5], but others suggest it has a variety of negative impacts (e.g. [9]). Recent concerns have revolved around overuse, multitasking, and lack of face-to-face interactions (e.g. [24]). In my research, participants told us that social media use took away from “real life.” For example, one participant told me:

I wish I had more of a real life. Sometimes I thought about deleting my [Facebook] account but I never do. I thought about deleting my friends but I never do that either. I wish my friends online were my friends in real life.

When asked what he meant by real life, he continued:

“I mean I wish I knew more people in real life outside of my house. I feel like I spend too much time online and not trying to deal with life. At the same time, if I wasn't making friends online, I would just be sitting at home doing nothing.”

Nathan Jurgenson has described the notion of “real life” as a type of digital dualism, where online and offline worlds are believed to be separate and distinct realities [8]. Social media critics fear that time online is spent at the expense of engaging with real life offline [24]. Though my sample is relatively small, my research suggests that users have the same concerns. In this workshop, I hope to discuss the tension between online and offline life and what should be characterized as real. This discussion might take a deeply philosophical turn, with theories like the extended-mind thesis arguing that the boundaries between the mind and the tools it uses are fuzzy [21] and thus there could be no distinction. The practical applications are real, however;

and can help social media users overcome their own concerns about how they are spending time online.

CONCLUSION

There is a tension between the myriad social and learning benefits offered by social media and the pervasive concerns about overuse. These apprehensions are widespread, leading users to adopt a range of strategies for trying to overcome overuse. This workshop papers frames social media as habit, and considers how willpower, self-control, and perceptions of real life might be leveraged to better understand and positively impact social media use.

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