

THE CIGARETTE OF TOMORROW

HOW TO TREAT SOCIAL MEDIA
TO INCREASE DIGITAL WELLBEING

Two-pager
April 2022

FI/INSTITUTE
Future Investment Initiative Institute

Impact
on Humanity

sync

THE QUEST FOR DIGITAL WELLBEING

The issue at stake: Cyber-Addiction and Cyber-Bullying pose serious risks for the health and wellbeing of the individual – especially for children and adolescents. How can society reduce these risks and increase digital wellbeing?

WHY IT MATTERS

→ Everyone does it: About half the world is taking part in social media activities – and about every child that has its own smartphone spends time on platforms like TikTok, Instagram or WeChat.

No-one knows what to do. Especially parents are worried about the effects of social media use on their children. Is it useful or useless? Is it fun? Is it a threat? And what should they do: Allowing? Forbidding? Controlling? Setting rules – and if so: which rules? The first step is to get informed, said Marc Berkman at the Sync Digital Wellbeing Summit in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. The CEO of the US-based Organization for Social Media Safety advocated against fear and for facts: “We need to have evidence-based discussions about how to mitigate harm for social media use.”

And there are risks of online technologies on adolescent mental well-being, as a comparative analysis of 43 studies showed (see table): The research led by John Naslund from Harvard Medical School found increased dangers especially for already mentally challenged individuals – people with major depressive symptoms have greater odds of becoming victim of online harassment than people without symptoms. Other risks mentioned in the analysis are increased exposure to harm and social isolation or concerns about stigma and being judged, to name just a few. But on the other hand, the same analysis also identified a lot of benefits – as increased self-esteem, perceived social support, increased social capital, safe identity experimentation and increased opportunity for self-disclosure. Do the risks outweigh the benefits?

It depends on the individual case, Berkman says: “We need to be objective about analyzing the risks, but subjective in determining where to draw the line with social media use.”

Those risk-reward relations are as different as the people and their behavior themselves. There are more and less vulnerable persons, more and less dangerous social media platforms and more or less risky ways to use social media.

Just one example: A study led by Mesfin Bekalu from Harvard University under American adults showed that while routine use of social media is associated with positive health outcomes, emotional connection to social media use is associated with negative health outcomes. But even though risk and exposure differ on an individual level, it is not just the job of users and parents to mitigate their risks, it is also a job of society.

Two main reasons were pointed out by speakers at the Sync Digital Wellbeing Summit:

– “We are dealing with a problem of addiction”, said Mo Gawdat, former Chief Business Officer at Google’s research branch Google X. And whatever substance or behavior is a suspect of causing addiction should be controlled or regulated.

– Bestselling author Simon Sinek (“Start with Why”, “The Infinite Game”), highlighted the mode of operation of the human brain that is more hooked on short-term fun than on long-term risk assessment: “When we use our smart phones, we don’t think ‘is this healthy?’. We recognize that it feels good, but we don’t think about the liabilities.” For Sinek, this is a typical behavior when a new technology is introduced: “Just like tobacco – after decades of smoking we thought about health the first time.”

“When we use our smart phones, we don’t think ‘is this healthy?’. We recognize that it feels good, but we don’t think about the liabilities.”



Simon Sinek

Bestselling author (“Start with Why”, “The Infinite Game”)

“Regarding Social Media, we are dealing with a problem of addiction!”



Mo Gawdat

Former Chief Business Officer at Google’s research branch Google X.

Sinek’s tobacco analogy may be helpful far beyond the brain argument. It can be a guidepost for the further development of strategies that can be applied for the fight against social media abuse and for digital wellbeing. The initial position is similar: vulnerable people are falling for the harmful substance, a mighty industry is reluctant to address the problem, and the public is on a long and winding road of gaining awareness and elaborating counter-measures.

But the road ahead could also take a short cut, if social media use is seen and treated as a potentially harmful substance. Societies have a huge toolbox for social, economic and political action to limit scope and scale of any potentially harmful substance. Using this toolbox against social media abuse can reduce the risk for vulnerable people and increase the overall digital wellbeing at the same time.

Table:

Potential benefits and challenges of social media for mentally vulnerable individuals

Challenges	Example	Benefits	Example
Impact on symptoms	Studies show increased risk of exposure to harm, social isolation, depressive symptoms and bullying	Facilitate social interaction	Anonymity can help individuals with stigmatizing conditions connect with others
Facing hostile interactions	Greater odds of online harassment in individuals with major depressive symptoms than those with mild or no symptoms	Access to peer support network	Online peer support can help to seek information, discuss symptoms and medication, share experiences and learn to cope
Consequences for daily life	Individuals have concerns about privacy, threats to employment, stigma and being judged, adverse impact on relationships and facing online hostility	Promote engagement and retention in services	Individuals with mental disorders can connect with care providers and access evidence-based services

Source: Naslund, John A. et al: Social Media and Mental Health: Benefits, Risks, and Opportunities for Research and Practice. Journal of technology in behavioral science 5 (2020)

CALL TO ACTION

1 Special rules for children: There are good reasons to demand stricter rules for exposing kids to social media than for exposing grown-ups.

2 Limits for the industry: When dealing with (potential) addictive behavior, companies may be tempted to promote it instead of protecting customers. Societies should limit their scope of action in a way that protection pays off.

3 Challenge for education: Adolescents can learn about the risks of social media and how to control their use of it. Parents and teachers should follow best practice examples for how to do it.

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→ FII INSTITUTE is a new global nonprofit foundation that has an investment arm and one agenda: Impact on Humanity. Global, inclusive and committed to Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) principles, we foster great minds from around the world and turn ideas into real-world solutions in five critical areas: Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Robotics, Education, Healthcare and Sustainability.

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ABOUT SYNC

→ Sync is a digital well-being initiative launched by King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture (Ithra) with a vision to create a world where we are all in control of our digital lives. The initiative is guided by extensive research in collaboration with global entities to understand the amplifications of technology and how it's affecting our lives, and translate the knowledge gained into awareness campaigns, tools, experiences, educational content and programs aiming to raise the global public awareness around the topic.

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