Habitual Behaviors in Problematic Social Media Use and Strategies for Change

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Abstract: Social media has become an integral part of daily life, allowing individuals to obtain information, maintain interpersonal relationships, and regulate their emotions. However, when social media use develops into a fixed behavioral pattern characterized by automatic checking, aimless browsing, repeated monitoring of social feedback, and difficulty stopping, it may negatively affect learning, work, sleep, and offline interactions. Problematic social media use is not simply a matter of spending too much time online. The habitual nature of behavior and the persistent pursuit of immediate feedback also deserve attention. Existing research has examined the psychological mechanisms associated with problematic social media use from several perspectives, including usage motivation, attentional bias, fear of missing out, experiential avoidance, and self-control. These findings also provide a basis for developing behavioral change strategies. Given the characteristics of habitual behavior, interventions can focus on identifying behavioral triggers, modifying the usage environment, introducing response delays, improving emotion regulation, and developing alternative activities in everyday life. Behavioral change should not rely solely on limiting screen time or exercising short-term willpower. It also requires attention to the psychological needs fulfilled by social media use, together with continuous self-monitoring and feedback to reinforce new behavioral patterns. Combining habit identification, environmental modification, and psychological regulation may help reduce automatic social media use and improve individuals' ability to manage their behavior independently.

Keywords: problematic social media use; habitual behavior; behavioral change; self-control; emotion regulation

1. Introduction

Social media provides convenient channels for obtaining information and has changed the ways people maintain relationships and organize their daily activities. Checking messages, browsing updates, watching short videos, and participating in online discussions have become routine activities for

many people. Normal social media use can meet needs related to information exchange, entertainment, and social interaction. However, when individuals repeatedly use social media, gradually lose control over their behavior, and begin to neglect academic tasks, rest, or offline relationships, their usage patterns may become problematic.

Problematic social media use involves several factors, including personality traits, emotional experiences, social and psychological motivations, and individual cognition. It cannot be explained simply by the amount of time spent online (Jiang, 2018a). Motivations such as social interaction, presenting oneself as more popular, and passing time or seeking entertainment are associated with problematic social media use (Kircaburun et al., 2018). These factors help explain why individuals choose to use social media, but further analysis of specific behavioral processes is needed to understand why certain patterns of use continue to recur.

In everyday life, some people open social media without a clear purpose. They may reach for their phones when waiting, taking a break, feeling bored, or encountering difficulties. They may repeatedly enter an application even when no new messages are available. After realizing that they have spent a considerable amount of time online, they may regret their behavior. Yet when a similar situation occurs again, they often repeat the same actions. This pattern of repeated behavior, triggered by familiar situations and involving progressively less deliberate decision-making, reflects the habitual characteristics of problematic social media use.

Usage inertia, attentional bias, fear of missing out, and self-control provide different perspectives for understanding this phenomenon. Inertia-related motivations are positively associated with social media engagement, while individuals with problematic usage patterns may display attentional biases toward social media-related stimuli and greater difficulty disengaging their attention from them (Zheng et al., 2017; Jiang et al., 2019). These findings offer important clues for understanding repetitive use. However, further consideration is needed to explain why such behaviors continue in familiar situations and how specific habits can be changed.

Habitual behavior offers a relatively concrete perspective for examining this issue. Compared with focusing exclusively on the amount of time spent online, examining when a behavior occurs, what triggers it, what immediate satisfaction it provides, and why it is difficult to stop may help identify more effective points of intervention. This paper examines habitual behaviors associated with problematic social media use, analyzes their main characteristics and underlying mechanisms, and proposes strategies involving behavioral identification, environmental modification, emotion regulation, and alternative activities. The aim is to provide practical insights into reducing unnecessary social media use.

2. Understanding Problematic Social Media Use and Habitual Behavior

2.1 The Meaning of Problematic Social Media Use

Problematic social media use refers to patterns of social media engagement characterized by difficulty controlling use, persistent or repeated engagement, and negative effects on everyday functioning. It is not necessarily the same as frequent use. Some people spend considerable time on social media every day because of academic, professional, or social demands, yet remain able to complete their tasks and stop using applications when necessary. Others repeatedly check applications without a clear purpose, struggle to stop at their intended time, or continue using social media even after recognizing its negative effects on their lives.

Problematic mobile social media use may involve increasingly persistent engagement, physical discomfort or harm, fear of missing out, cognitive difficulties, and feelings of guilt. These dimensions have been incorporated into assessment tools for problematic mobile social media use, providing a reference for understanding its different manifestations (Jiang, 2018b).

Problematic social media use should not automatically be equated with clinical addiction, nor should it be identified solely on the basis of a single episode of prolonged use. Assessment requires consideration of whether individuals lose control over their behavior, repeatedly act against their own intentions, and experience persistent interference with learning, work, sleep, or interpersonal relationships.

2.2 The Meaning of Habitual Behavior

Habitual behavior refers to an action that becomes increasingly associated with a particular context through repetition and is more likely to occur automatically in similar situations. Once a habit has developed, individuals may not need to make a deliberate decision each time. Environmental cues can trigger a familiar behavioral response.

In social media use, cues may include a phone screen lighting up, a notification sound, a brief period of free time, being alone, feeling bored, or encountering an unpleasant situation. When individuals repeatedly open social media in these circumstances, the situations themselves may become associated with checking behavior.

Habitual behavior differs in certain respects from deliberate use. Deliberate use usually involves a relatively clear purpose, such as replying to a friend's message, finding course materials, or obtaining specific information. Habitual use may lack a clear goal, with individuals simply repeating familiar actions in response to particular situations. The two forms of behavior are not entirely separate. A person may initially open an application to check a message and then continue browsing without a specific purpose.

Social media engagement is not always driven by an immediate information need. Inertia-related motivations may also encourage individuals to continue participating in social media activities (Zheng et al., 2017). Connecting this phenomenon with habitual behavior makes it possible to examine how usage inertia develops in everyday situations and how individuals can gradually reduce their reliance on automatic responses.

2.3 The Relationship Between Habitual Behavior and Problematic Use

Habitual behavior does not necessarily produce negative outcomes. Checking work messages at scheduled times, maintaining regular contact with family and friends, or browsing interesting content during a planned break can all become stable and useful daily habits. Problems arise when these behaviors lack appropriate boundaries and increasingly conflict with important personal goals. Habitual behavior may make problematic use more persistent. Individuals no longer need to make a new decision each time they open an application. Instead, they repeat the behavior in familiar situations. Even after their original entertainment or social needs have been met, they may continue using the application. The relationship between the behavior and the immediate need may become weaker, while the behavior itself remains frequent.

Habitual behavior cannot fully explain problematic social media use. Fear of missing out, loneliness, social exclusion, digital stress, and difficulties regulating emotions may also influence usage patterns (Pi & Li, 2023; Li, 2026). Some people repeatedly check social media to avoid missing information, while others use it to relieve loneliness or temporarily escape stress. Still others repeat familiar actions whenever they feel bored. Several motivations may operate simultaneously, but effective behavioral change requires identifying the most relevant ones.

Problematic social media use should therefore be understood as a behavior influenced partly by habit formation rather than as a problem caused entirely by habit or insufficient self-control. Identifying the triggers, immediate functions, and actual consequences of behavior can help determine appropriate strategies for change.

3. Main Manifestations of Habitual Behavior in Problematic Social Media Use

3.1 Automatic Checking Triggered by Everyday Situations

Automatic checking is one of the most visible manifestations of habitual behavior. After waking up, while eating, waiting for someone, taking a break from studying, or preparing for sleep, individuals may naturally reach for their phones and open social media. Such behavior is not necessarily triggered by a new message or an actual need. It may occur simply because the situation has become associated with checking the phone.

This behavior is easy to overlook. Since each episode may last only a short time, individuals may regard it as a brief check and fail to notice how frequently they repeat the action throughout the day. When these short episodes occur repeatedly, time that could otherwise be used for rest, reflection, or completing tasks may be interrupted.

Automatic checking may also occur without an obvious external prompt. For example, when students encounter a difficult problem while doing homework, they may habitually pick up their phones. They may also open social media immediately after completing a task as a form of reward. Over time, studying and checking a phone can become closely associated, making the action increasingly likely to occur without a conscious decision.

3.2 Continuous Browsing Without a Clear Purpose

Continuous browsing occurs when individuals open social media without a specific information goal but continue switching between posts, viewing recommended content, or watching one video after another. The end of one browsing episode does not necessarily provide a clear stopping point, because new content encourages continued engagement.

This pattern differs from purposeful use. When searching for specific information, individuals can usually stop after obtaining what they need. Aimless browsing lacks a clear endpoint. Even after the original purpose has been fulfilled, individuals may continue using the application.

Continuous browsing can also affect time perception. Someone who initially intends to take a short break may discover that a considerable amount of time has passed after repeatedly switching between pieces of content. The problem is not merely underestimating the duration of a single session. It also involves the absence of a clear stopping condition.

When this pattern frequently occurs during study, work, or rest, continuous browsing may develop from an occasional leisure activity into a habit that interferes with daily routines.

3.3 Repeatedly Checking Messages and Social Feedback

Social media provides immediate social feedback through likes, comments, private messages, and other forms of interaction. Individuals may repeatedly check their message lists, refresh their feeds, or verify whether their posts have received responses. They may reopen an application several times within a short period even when no new feedback is available.

This behavior is closely related to social needs. Individuals may want to understand how others perceive them or worry about missing important messages and group activities. When these concerns become strong, checking behavior may be driven less by practical needs and more by anxiety.

Fear of missing out is closely associated with problematic social media use. Fear of missing out, self-esteem, and social media use are related among university students, while loneliness may be indirectly associated with problematic mobile social media use through fear of missing out (Wang et al., 2022; Pi & Li, 2023). These relationships suggest that repeated checking serves not only to obtain information but also to reduce concerns about missing information or losing social opportunities.

If individuals can obtain temporary reassurance only by checking social media, the behavior may recur whenever their concerns return. The temporary reassurance does not necessarily resolve

the underlying worry and may instead increase reliance on checking.

3.4 Using Social Media to Avoid Uncomfortable Emotions

Some individuals open social media when they feel anxious, lonely, frustrated, or overwhelmed by academic pressure. In these situations, the main function of social media use may not be to obtain specific information but to temporarily escape an uncomfortable real-life situation.

For example, individuals facing difficult tasks may watch short videos to distract themselves. Those experiencing interpersonal frustration may turn to online interactions for comfort. People who feel lonely during their free time may repeatedly browse other people's updates. These behaviors can temporarily redirect attention away from unpleasant feelings.

However, when social media becomes the primary method of emotional coping, individuals may have fewer opportunities to address real-life problems or develop alternative regulation strategies. Unfinished tasks remain unresolved, and interpersonal difficulties persist. When the same pressures return, individuals may repeat their previous patterns of use.

Maladaptive coping and fear of missing out are associated with problematic social media use, while experiential avoidance may contribute to the relationship between stress, negative social experiences, and problematic engagement (Fan, 2023; Liu et al., 2023). These relationships provide a basis for understanding emotionally avoidant use.

Although not every emotional difficulty leads to habitual social media use, the findings highlight an important behavioral pattern. When individuals primarily use social media to avoid discomfort rather than address its underlying causes, their usage behavior may continue to recur. Effective change therefore requires developing alternative coping strategies rather than simply removing an existing source of emotional relief.

3.5 Regret After Use Followed by Repeated Behavior

Habitual behavior may also involve a recurring cycle in which individuals begin using social media without a clear plan, struggle to stop, regret their behavior afterward, and then repeat it in a similar situation.

Individuals may know before opening an application that they still have assignments to complete. They may also understand that prolonged browsing before bed can interfere with sleep. Nevertheless, their actual behavior may conflict with their original intentions. Afterward, they may blame themselves or impose stricter restrictions without changing the environmental conditions that trigger the behavior.

When individuals experience regret without identifying specific triggers and behavioral patterns, self-criticism is unlikely to produce lasting change. The next time they feel bored, stressed, or prompted by a notification, the familiar response may occur again.

Assessment tools for problematic mobile social media use include dimensions such as feelings of guilt, increased habitual engagement, and cognitive failures. These dimensions suggest that subjective experiences may not always align with actual behavior (Jiang, 2018b). Behavioral change requires more than recognizing a problem. Individuals must also be able to take a different action at the moment when the habitual response is about to occur.

4. Mechanisms Underlying Habitual Behavior in Problematic Social Media Use

4.1 The Association Between Situational Cues and Repeated Behavior

Habitual behavior is closely related to the situations in which it occurs. When individuals repeatedly open social media in similar contexts, those contexts may gradually become cues for the behavior. Subsequently, they may be more likely to repeat the action even when no clear need exists.

For example, a person who opens a short-video application whenever a study task becomes difficult may initially do so to take a brief break. After repeated experiences, the difficulty itself, a pause in studying, or even sitting at a desk may become associated with checking the phone. Whenever a similar situation occurs, the individual becomes more likely to reach for the phone without first considering whether a break is necessary.

Inertia-related motivations in social media engagement offer a useful perspective for understanding this process (Zheng et al., 2017). When an action becomes a familiar coping response, individuals may engage in less deliberate decision-making, and the action becomes easier to initiate.

However, repetition alone does not fully determine the strength of a habit. Whether the behavior occurs in relatively stable contexts and whether individuals can respond to those situations without using social media may also affect its persistence. When changing a habit, identifying and modifying frequently encountered triggers may be more effective than simply demanding that individuals reduce their usage.

4.2 The Reinforcing Effects of Immediate Feedback

Social media provides a continuous supply of new information, entertainment, and social feedback. After opening an application, individuals may immediately encounter an interesting video, a new message, or a positive comment. These immediate outcomes can provide short-term satisfaction and reinforce checking behavior.

Importantly, feedback is not always consistent. Individuals may sometimes find interesting content or receive positive responses, while at other times they find nothing new. Even so, they may continue checking because the next session could provide something worthwhile. This uncertainty may encourage further engagement.

Motivations involving social interaction, self-presentation, and entertainment are associated with problematic social media use (Kircaburun et al., 2018). Individuals with problematic usage patterns may also show attentional biases toward social media-related stimuli and difficulty disengaging their attention from them (Jiang et al., 2019).

These findings suggest that social media content and feedback may influence not only whether individuals begin using an application but also whether they can stop once they have started. When attention is repeatedly drawn to new content, individuals may overlook their original goals and continue browsing.

Immediate feedback may also influence behavior after a session ends. Individuals may experience short-term satisfaction while browsing without fully recognizing the time they have spent. Over repeated episodes, the immediate appeal of social media may become more influential than its delayed negative consequences, making continued use more likely.

4.3 Short-Term Relief Through Emotional Avoidance

Habitual social media use may also be associated with how individuals regulate their emotions. When stress, loneliness, or anxiety arises, social media offers an easily accessible way to redirect attention. Individuals can temporarily avoid a difficult task or postpone dealing with a complicated interpersonal situation by opening their phones.

This short-term relief may reinforce the behavior. If individuals turn to social media whenever they feel uncomfortable, the behavior may gradually become associated with negative emotional states. The emotion acts as a trigger, browsing becomes the response, and temporary relief makes the same response more likely to occur again.

Digital stress is positively associated with problematic social media use, and experiential avoidance partially mediates this relationship (Li, 2026). School exclusion may also be associated with problematic social media use among adolescents through experiential avoidance (Liu et al., 2023).

These relationships do not mean that all emotional difficulties lead to problematic use. They do, however, suggest that when individuals rely primarily on social media to avoid discomfort, habitual engagement may become increasingly

persistent. In such cases, behavioral change needs to help individuals develop alternative coping methods rather than simply remove their existing means of emotional escape.

4.4 Fear of Missing Out and the Need for Social Connection

Social media information can change rapidly. Individuals may worry that they have not seen a message in time, have missed an activity involving friends, or do not understand what their social group is discussing. For those who place great importance on social connection or are particularly sensitive to interpersonal relationships, such concerns may lead to repeated checking.

Loneliness may also influence this process. Individuals who lack stable emotional connections in everyday life may turn to social media for companionship and responses from others. Online interactions can satisfy some social needs, but excessive reliance on online feedback may gradually make usage behavior more difficult to control.

Loneliness among university students may be indirectly associated with problematic mobile social media use through fear of missing out. Social media rumination and fear of missing out have also been examined in research on the mechanisms and intervention of problematic social media use among university students (Pi & Li, 2023; Chai, 2024).

Social media rumination may involve repeatedly thinking about one's own posts, closely monitoring other people's evaluations, or wondering whether a message indicates a change in an interpersonal relationship. These thoughts may encourage individuals to reopen applications to check for confirmation. Although checking may temporarily reduce uncertainty, it can also keep attention focused on social media.

Habitual behavior is therefore not always driven by entertainment. It may be intertwined with needs for social connection, information awareness, and self-evaluation. If behavioral change strategies ignore these needs, individuals may reduce the frequency of checking while continuing to experience the same underlying psychological processes.

4.5 Attention Control and Conflicts Between Usage and Personal Goals

Problematic social media use may also involve difficulties with attention control and self-regulation. Even when individuals recognize that they are browsing content unrelated to their current tasks, they may find it difficult to redirect their attention. Frequent switching between applications can interrupt tasks and make it more difficult to resume studying or working.

Attention-related difficulties among individuals with problematic social media use may be specific to certain stimuli. Such differences do not necessarily mean that these individuals lack attentional control in every situation (Wang, 2023). Instead, social media-related cues and feedback may be particularly attention-grabbing, and the resulting difficulties need to be understood in their specific behavioral contexts.

Fear of missing out and self-control have been examined as mediating factors linking digital-native characteristics with problematic social media use. Cognitive overload on social media is also associated with problematic use and online social anxiety (Kong et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2023).

When individuals receive large amounts of information while attempting to complete academic, professional, or personal tasks, frequent attentional shifts may consume resources that could otherwise be devoted to those tasks. If social media also provides easily accessible immediate rewards, individuals may become more likely to deviate from their original plans.

Self-control should therefore not be treated as an isolated personal quality. The usage environment, psychological state, task difficulty, and attractiveness of social media may all influence actual behavior. Relying entirely on willpower overlooks the conditions under which behavior occurs. A more practical approach is to reduce unnecessary triggers, establish clear usage goals, and create simple steps for stopping and returning to the original task.

5. Strategies for Changing Habitual Behavior in Problematic Social Media Use

5.1 Identifying Behavioral Triggers and Keeping Clear Usage Records

Understanding how a behavior occurs is the starting point for changing a habit. If individuals record only their total daily screen time, they may recognize that they use social media excessively without understanding why they repeatedly open applications. Keeping simple records of triggering situations, usage purposes, and behavioral consequences can help reveal recurring patterns.

The records do not need to be complicated. Individuals can choose a one-week observation period and briefly note the situation, emotional state, and subsequent behavior whenever they notice themselves opening social media without a clear purpose. They may be responding to a notification, encountering difficulty while studying, feeling bored, or worrying about missing a message. Records should also indicate whether actual behavior matches the original plan. Individuals can distinguish purposeful use from aimless browsing, note how long they initially intended to use an application, record when they actually stopped, and observe whether the session interfered with ongoing tasks. This process can help them identify which behaviors are useful and which need adjustment.

The assessment dimensions of problematic mobile social media use include increased habitual engagement, cognitive failures, fear of missing out, and feelings of guilt. These dimensions provide a useful reference, but everyday self-monitoring should not be treated as a diagnostic procedure (Jiang, 2018b). Individuals need to focus on the situations in which they tend to lose control and the actual consequences of their behavior.

The purpose of keeping records is not to make individuals constantly monitor themselves or increase self-blame. It is to make previously unnoticed behavioral patterns more visible. Once individuals can recognize the conditions under which a behavior occurs, they have a better opportunity to make a different choice before the habitual response takes place.

5.2 Modifying the Usage Environment to Reduce Automatic Checking

If a behavior is easily triggered by environmental cues, modifying the environment can reduce opportunities for unnecessary engagement. Compared with resisting the attraction of a phone every time it is nearby, reducing distractions in advance may be easier to maintain.

Phone notifications are a useful starting point. Individuals can disable nonessential push notifications for applications that do not require immediate responses, reducing interruptions caused by screen lighting, sounds, and notification badges. This does not mean avoiding social interaction. It simply prevents irrelevant prompts from repeatedly interrupting ongoing activities. Important messages can still be received and handled appropriately.

The placement of applications can also be adjusted. Individuals may remove applications that frequently trigger aimless browsing from the home screen, log out of unnecessary accounts, or place their phones somewhere less accessible while studying or working. These measures introduce additional steps before automatic checking and give individuals an opportunity to reconsider whether they actually need to use an application.

Relatively stable usage boundaries can also be established for different situations. For example, individuals can check social media only during planned breaks while studying, avoid continuous browsing during meals, or place their phones away from the bed before sleep. Such rules should fit actual needs. Excessively strict restrictions may interfere with necessary communication and become difficult to maintain.

The purpose of environmental modification is not to eliminate social media but to restore a stronger connection between use and clear intentions. Individuals can continue obtaining information and maintaining social relationships without

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responding immediately to every notification, every period of free time, or every emotional fluctuation.

5.3 Creating a Delay Between Triggers and Behavioral Responses

One characteristic of habitual behavior is the speed of the response. Individuals may open an application almost immediately after thinking about checking their phones, leaving little time for reflection or choice. Introducing a short delay can help change this process.

When individuals notice an urge to open social media, they can pause and ask three questions: What do I want to check? Does this need to be handled immediately? What would actually happen if I waited? These questions can help distinguish genuine needs from automatic responses.

If there is information that genuinely requires attention, individuals can complete the necessary action and then exit the application. If there is no clear purpose, they can put the phone away, return to the task at hand, or take a short break. The aim is not to prohibit checking permanently but to make it a deliberate action rather than an automatic reaction.

Individuals can also develop specific behavioral plans in advance. For example, they may decide, "If I want to open social media while studying, I will finish the current part of my task before deciding whether to check it," or "If I repeatedly refresh my feed because I am worried about missing a message, I will wait until my next scheduled checking time." Such plans translate the abstract demand for self-control into a specific response to a familiar situation.

Intentional self-regulation is associated with problematic social media use and offers a potential starting point for improving related behavior (Zhang & Wang, 2025). In practice, plans should be simple, clear, and consistent with everyday routines. Overly complicated plans may require too much effort each time a trigger occurs and become difficult to maintain.

Delaying a response should also be accompanied by acceptance of the urge itself. Individuals may feel uneasy when they do not check their phones or worry that they will miss information. Rather than trying to eliminate these feelings immediately, they can observe whether the feelings diminish over time. Repeated experiences may help them recognize that not every urge to check social media needs to be satisfied immediately.

5.4 Improving Emotion Regulation and Reducing Avoidance-Based Use

When social media is mainly used to relieve stress, loneliness, or anxiety, restricting access alone may not solve the problem. Individuals need alternative ways to meet the same psychological needs so that they can manage uncomfortable emotions without relying on continuous browsing.

If individuals usually open social media when they encounter difficulties while studying, they can replace this response with taking a short break away from their desks, drinking water, organizing the steps of a task, or asking someone for help. If their use is primarily triggered by loneliness, they can contact familiar friends, participate in offline activities, or arrange regular opportunities for social interaction. If they repeatedly browse other people's updates when feeling low, they can identify the source of their emotions rather than evaluate themselves through constant comparison with others.

Cognitive reappraisal can also help individuals reconsider thoughts associated with social media. Some may believe that failing to reply to a message immediately will damage a relationship or that not following every update will lead to social exclusion. They can examine whether these beliefs accurately reflect reality. Important relationships generally do not require constant online availability, and temporarily missing an update does not necessarily mean losing an important opportunity.

Group psychological interventions involving cognitive reappraisal have provided practical reference points for reducing problematic mobile social media use among adolescents (Jiang et al., 2024). For everyday users, cognitive reappraisal can begin with specific thoughts and situations rather

than treating every urge to check social media as a need that must be satisfied.

If individuals mainly use social media to avoid stress, emotional regulation should also be combined with practical problem-solving. They can divide demanding tasks into smaller steps, communicate directly or seek appropriate support when facing interpersonal conflict, and consider professional assistance when persistent anxiety or low mood is difficult to manage.

The goal is not to eliminate negative emotions but to increase the range of available coping strategies. When social media is no longer the only or easiest response to emotional discomfort, habitual use has a greater chance of diminishing.

5.5 Using Mindfulness and Attention Training to Improve Behavioral Awareness

Mindfulness involves consciously attending to present experiences without immediately reacting to them automatically. In social media use, mindfulness practices can help individuals notice when an urge to check their phones arises, what emotions accompany it, and how their behavior is affecting their current activities.

Everyday practice can be simple. Individuals can pause before opening an application and notice their physical state and emotions. They can also check periodically during a session to determine whether they are still pursuing their original purpose. If they realize that they have shifted from checking messages to aimless browsing, they can choose to exit the application rather than continue until they become tired of it.

Mindfulness does not require individuals to suppress every thought. When an urge to check a phone arises, they can acknowledge the urge without immediately acting on it. The value of this practice lies in creating space between awareness and action, allowing behavior to become a matter of choice again.

Higher levels of dispositional mindfulness have been associated with lower problematic social media use, and mindfulness training has been used to address problematic social media use and related bedtime procrastination (Chen et al., 2023; Ren, 2025). These findings provide a basis for considering mindfulness as one component of behavioral change.

However, mindfulness should not be treated as a substitute for every other intervention. When the environment continues to provide frequent distractions, or when usage is driven by strong social anxiety and emotional distress, awareness training alone may be insufficient. Combining mindfulness with environmental modification, emotion regulation, and specific behavioral plans may provide stronger support for lasting change.

5.6 Developing Alternative Activities and Social Support in Everyday Life

Reducing problematic social media use should involve more than decreasing a particular behavior. Individuals also need alternative ways to use their time and meet their psychological needs. If the time previously spent on social media is not organized in a meaningful way, familiar usage patterns may return during periods of free time.

Alternative activities should match the motivations underlying the original behavior. Individuals who mainly browse content for entertainment or to pass time can arrange exercise, reading, hobbies, or short outdoor activities. Those who use social media primarily to maintain relationships can increase face-to-face interactions or establish regular opportunities to communicate with friends. Individuals who use browsing to escape academic pressure can reduce avoidance by breaking tasks into manageable steps, taking planned breaks, and addressing practical problems.

Alternative activities do not necessarily need to be highly engaging. Requiring every alternative to be more entertaining than social media may discourage individuals from trying. It is more important to make activities easy to begin and sustainable over time. Short daily walks, regular participation in interest groups, and scheduled conversations with friends can gradually establish a different daily rhythm.

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Social support can also facilitate behavioral change. General social support is negatively associated with problematic social media use, whereas online social support is positively associated with it. This distinction suggests that the form and context of social support deserve attention (Huang et al., 2025). Online interaction is not inherently harmful, but excessive reliance on online feedback to satisfy social needs may contribute to problematic use.

Family members, friends, and peers can provide support by understanding an individual's difficulties, arranging activities together, and offering nonjudgmental feedback. Compared with simply criticizing excessive use, helping individuals identify behavioral triggers and supporting them as they try alternative responses may be more conducive to maintaining change.

5.7 Reinforcing Change Through Ongoing Feedback and Managing Behavioral Relapse

Habit change is rarely achieved through a single decision. Individuals may follow their plans carefully during the first few days but return to previous behaviors when facing examination pressure, emotional fluctuations, or social activities. If every recurrence is regarded as a failure, individuals may become self-critical and eventually abandon their efforts.

Ongoing feedback helps individuals monitor their progress. Records can include the number of times they open applications without a clear purpose, how frequently their studying is interrupted, whether they stop browsing as planned, and how their usage affects sleep and daily tasks. Compared with total daily screen time alone, these indicators may provide a clearer picture of changes in habitual behavior.

Feedback should guide adjustments rather than determine whether an individual is sufficiently disciplined. If individuals discover that they are most likely to browse continuously at night, they can reconsider their bedtime environment. If repeated checking mainly occurs when they encounter difficulties while studying, they can adjust their task arrangements and breaks. If checking is driven by fear of missing messages, they can establish scheduled times for handling notifications.

Behavioral change should also allow reasonable flexibility. Completely prohibiting social media may conflict with academic, professional, and interpersonal needs. A more appropriate goal is to reduce purposeless, difficult-to-control use that produces negative consequences while retaining necessary and beneficial activities.

When problematic use substantially affects learning, work, sleep, or offline relationships and remains difficult to change despite repeated attempts, individuals can seek psychological counseling or other professional support. If persistent anxiety, depression, or significant difficulties with emotional regulation are also present, these concerns deserve attention rather than focusing exclusively on phone use.

6. Key Considerations for Implementing Habit-Change Strategies

6.1 Focus on Specific Behaviors Rather Than Attributing the Problem to Insufficient Self-Control

Problematic social media use involves different behavioral patterns and psychological needs. Automatic checking, continuous browsing, repeated confirmation of social feedback, and emotional avoidance may all lead to excessive use, but their underlying causes differ. If users are simply instructed to reduce their screen time without identifying why they repeatedly engage in these behaviors, they may reduce usage during one period only to resume the same patterns in another situation.

Change strategies should match the primary function of the behavior. For automatic checking triggered by notifications and visual cues, environmental modification should be a priority. For continuous browsing without a clear purpose, individuals need explicit usage goals and stopping conditions. For repeated checking driven by fear of missing out, relevant beliefs and message-handling

practices require attention. For use primarily intended to escape stress, emotion regulation and practical problem-solving should be strengthened.

This distinction can reduce unnecessary restrictions and help individuals focus on the aspects of their behavior that most need to change. Behavioral change does not require abandoning social media entirely. Instead, it should help individuals reestablish a connection between their usage and actual needs.

6.2 Recognize Individual Differences During Behavioral Change

Individuals differ in their living environments, social relationships, and psychological states. The development of habitual behavior may therefore vary across individuals. For people who experience relatively little stress and mainly browse out of boredom, adjusting notifications, setting planned breaks, and arranging alternative activities may already produce improvements. Those experiencing stronger fear of missing out, loneliness, or experiential avoidance may need to devote more attention to the associated psychological factors.

Materialism, social media rumination, and fear of missing out have been examined in research on the mechanisms and interventions of problematic social media use among university students. Interventions based on mindfulness-based cognitive approaches and insight-oriented narrative methods have also been used to address related psychological experiences and usage behaviors (Chai, 2024). Maladaptive cognition is another important target in interventions for problematic social media use among adolescents (Shi, 2026). These studies suggest that behavioral interventions can be adapted to individuals' cognitive and emotional characteristics.

Individual differences also involve the availability of practical resources. Some people can obtain stable support through exercise, offline activities, and interpersonal interaction, while others face limitations related to time, academic pressure, or their social environment. Change plans should take these conditions into account and avoid setting requirements that are difficult to implement.

6.3 Turning Short-Term Adjustments Into Stable Daily Routines

Reducing social media use in the short term does not necessarily mean that a habit has changed. Individuals may control their behavior when receiving reminders or external supervision but return to familiar patterns when those conditions disappear. Sustained change requires integrating new responses into everyday life.

Scheduled times for checking messages, relatively stable bedtime routines, fewer phone distractions during study, and alternative responses to stress can all become new daily practices. These practices do not need to cover every possible situation. It is sufficient to maintain relatively stable rules that address frequent behavioral triggers.

Behavioral change should also involve periodic evaluation. Individuals can review the situations in which they have become better at stopping automatic checking, the circumstances in which continuous browsing remains likely, and whether existing strategies need adjustment. If a strategy proves difficult to follow over time, they should consider whether it is too restrictive or overlooks an important psychological need.

Effective change does not require individuals to remain constantly alert to whether they are using their phones. Instead, it gradually reduces their dependence on continuous self-reminders. When the environment triggers less purposeless use and individuals have alternative ways to meet their psychological needs, social media can return to a more appropriate place in everyday life.

7. Conclusion

Habitual behaviors associated with problematic social media use include automatic checking, aimless browsing, repeated monitoring of social feedback, and the use of social media to avoid uncomfortable emotions. These behaviors may be influenced by situational cues, immediate feedback, fear of missing out, experiential avoidance, and

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difficulties with attention control. Habit formation does not necessarily produce negative outcomes. However, when repeated behavior becomes disconnected from actual needs and persistently interferes with learning, work, sleep, and offline relationships, targeted changes are needed.

Behavioral change should not rely solely on reducing screen time or strengthening self-discipline. Identifying behavioral triggers, modifying the usage environment, delaying automatic responses, improving emotion regulation, developing alternative activities in everyday life, and reinforcing new routines through ongoing feedback can collectively support habit change. Individuals differ in their usage motivations and psychological needs, so intervention strategies should be adjusted to their specific circumstances. Shifting attention from screen time alone to the conditions and functions of behavior may help individuals gradually regain greater control over their social media use.

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