

## Social Media Is Attention Alcohol

A fun product has the same downsides as booze. Instagram's own internal research makes the case better than any critic.

By [Derek Thompson](#)

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Last year, researchers at Instagram published disturbing findings from an internal study on the app's effect on young women. "Thirty-two percent of teen girls said that when they felt bad about their bodies, Instagram made them feel worse," the authors wrote in a presentation obtained by [The Wall Street Journal](#). "They often feel 'addicted' and know that what they're seeing is bad for their mental health but feel unable to stop themselves."

This was not a new revelation. For years, Facebook, which owns Instagram, [has investigated](#) the app's effects on its users, and it kept getting the same result. "We make body image issues worse for one in three teen girls," said one slide from a 2019 presentation. "Teens who struggle with mental health say Instagram makes it worse."

The findings weren't all negative. Although many teenagers reported that Instagram was compulsive but depressing, most teenagers who acknowledged this dark side said they still thought the app was enjoyable and useful.

So a fair summary of Instagram according to Instagram might go like this: Here is a fun product that millions of people seem to love; that is unwholesome in large doses; that makes a sizable minority feel more anxious, more depressed, and worse about their bodies; and that many people struggle to use in moderation.

What does that sound like to you? To me, it sounds like alcohol—a social lubricant that can be delightful but also depressing, a popular experience that blends short-term euphoria with long-term regret, a product that leads to painful and even addictive behavior among a significant minority. Like booze, social media seems to offer an intoxicating cocktail of dopamine, disorientation, and, for some, dependency. Call it "attention alcohol."

I personally don't spend much time on Instagram, but on reflection I love Twitter quite like the way I love wine and whiskey. Other analogies fall short; some people liken social media to junk food, but ultra-processed snacks have few redeemable health qualities compared with just about every natural alternative. I have a more complicated relationship with Twitter. It makes my life better and more interesting. It connects me with writers and thinkers whom I would never otherwise reach. But some days, my attention will get caught in the slipstream of gotchas, dunks, and nonsense controversies, and I'll feel deeply regretful about the way I spent my time ... only to open the app again, several minutes later, when the pinch of regret has relaxed and my thumb reaches, without thought, toward a familiar blue icon on my phone.

For the past decade, writers have been trying to jam Facebook into [various analogical boxes](#). Facebook is like a global railroad; or, no, it's like a town square; or, perhaps, it's like a transnational government; or, rather, it's an electric grid, or a newspaper, or cable TV.

Each of these gets at something real. Facebook's ability to connect previously unconnected groups of people to information and commerce really does make it like a 21st-century railroad. The fact that hundreds of millions of people get their news from Facebook makes it very much like a global newspaper. But none of these metaphors completely captures the full berserk mosaic of Facebook or other social-media platforms. In particular, none of them touches on what social media does to the minds of the young people who use it the most.

"People compare social media to nicotine," Andrew Bosworth, a longtime Facebook executive, [wrote in an extensive 2019 memo](#) on the company's internal network. "I find that wildly offensive, not to me but to addicts." He went on:

I have seen family members struggle with alcoholism and classmates struggle with opioids. I know there is a battle for the terminology of addiction but I side firmly with the neuroscientists. Still, while Facebook may not be nicotine I think it is probably like sugar. Sugar is delicious and for most of us there is a special place for it in our lives. But like all things it benefits from moderation.

But in 2020, Facebook critics weren't the ones comparing its offerings to addiction-forming chemicals. *The company's own users* told its research team that its products were akin to a mildly addictive depressant.

If you disbelieve these self-reports, perhaps you'll be persuaded by the prodigious amounts of outside research suggesting the same conclusion. In June, researchers from NYU, Stanford, and Microsoft published a paper with a title that made their position on the matter unambiguous: "[Digital Addiction](#)." In closing, they reported that "self-control problems cause 31 percent of social media use." Think about that: About one in three minutes spent on social media is time we neither hoped to use beforehand nor feel good about in retrospect.

Facebook acknowledges these problems. In a response to the *Wall Street Journal* exposé published on Tuesday, Karina Newton, the head of public policy at Instagram, [stood by the company's research](#). "Many find it helpful one day, and problematic the next," she wrote. "Many said Instagram makes things better or has no effect, but some, particularly those who were already feeling down, said Instagram may make things worse." But this self-knowledge hasn't translated into sufficient reform.

Thinking of social media as attention alcohol can guide reform efforts. We have a kind of social infrastructure around alcohol, which we don't have yet for social media. The need to limit consumption is evident in our marketing: Beer ads encourage people to drink responsibly. It's in our institutions: Established organizations such as Alcoholics Anonymous are devoted to fighting addiction and abuse. It's in our regulatory and economic policy: Alcohol is taxed at higher rates than other food and drink, and its interstate distribution has separate rules. There is also a legal age limit. (Instagram requires its users to be 13 years old, although, as it goes with buying alcohol, many users of the photo-sharing app are surely lying about their age.)

Perhaps most important, people have developed a common vocabulary around alcohol use: "Who's driving tonight?"; "He needs to be cut off"; "She needs some water"; "I went too hard this weekend"; "I

might need help.” These phrases are so familiar that it can take a second to recognize that they communicate actual knowledge about what alcohol is and what it does to our bodies. We’ve been consuming booze for several thousand years and have studied the compound’s specific chemical effects on the liver and bloodstream. Social media, by contrast, has been around for less than two decades, and we’re still trying to understand exactly what it’s doing, to whom, and by what mechanism.

We might be getting closer to an answer. A [124-page literature review](#) compiled by Jonathan Haidt, an NYU professor, and Jean Twenge, a San Diego State University professor, finds that the negative effects of social media are highly concentrated among young people, and teen girls in particular. [Development research tells us](#) that teenagers are exquisitely sensitive to social influence, or to the opinions of other teens. One thing that social media might do is hijack this keen peer sensitivity and drive obsessive thinking about body image, status, and popularity. Instagram seems to create, for some teenage girls, a suffocating prestige economy that pays people in kudos for their appearance and presentation. The negative externality is dangerously high rates of anxiety.

How do we fix it? We should learn from alcohol, which is studied, labeled, taxed, and restricted. Similar strictures would discourage social-media abuse among teenagers. We should continue to study exactly how and for whom these apps are psychologically ruinous and respond directly to the consensus reached by that research. Governments should urge or require companies to build more in-app tools to discourage overuse. Instagram and other app makers should strongly consider raising their minimum age for getting an account and preventing young users from presenting fake birthdates. Finally, and most broadly, parents, teens, and the press should continue to build a common vocabulary and set of rules around the dangers of excess social media for its most vulnerable users.

[Digital sabbaths](#) are currently the subject of [columns and confessionals](#). That’s a good start, but this stuff should be sewn into our everyday language: “No apps this weekend”; “I need to be cut off”; “I love you, but I think you need to take a break”; “Can you help me stay offline?” These reforms should begin with Facebook. But with social media, as with every other legal, compulsive product, the responsibility of moderation ends with the users.

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