

# Communication studies expert attacks myths about harms of social media

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Australia just banned social media for those under 16.

Before U.S. or any other lawmakers try to ban social media for any

group of people, a University of Kansas professor of communication studies who has studied the issue deeply has busted some of the most egregious myths about the supposed harms of its use.

In "[Ten Myths About the Effect of Social Media Use on Well-Being](#)," published in the 25th anniversary edition of the *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, Jeffrey Hall sets out 10 of the most commonly heard claims about the harms of social media—including its supposed toxicity and trigger for depression—then reviews the latest social scientific research to knock them down.

He likens social media use less to tobacco use and more to eating a doughnut: not alone a healthy diet, but not inherently harmful and with some nutritional value.

Hall spent a yearlong fellowship at the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University Law School combing through the latest research on the association between well-being and social media use. Hall writes that he approaches the subject of well-being from a broad perspective, considering both its deepest level—"meaning, connection and life purpose"—as well as transitory states like "pleasure, enjoyment and entertainment."

In recent years, Hall has gained acclaim for his research on social media and directs KU's Relationships and Technology Lab.

In the new paper, he points to studies showing no harm, or, in some cases, mixed effects from social media use, and he examines problems with measurement and methodology in other studies—for example, on so-called social media addiction.

"Internet addiction is a great example where the methods are flawed," Hall said. "There is no conclusion among researchers that existing

measures are meaningful indicators of addiction. It is very difficult to say that harms are caused by media use. Instead, social media use is probably either a coping mechanism or a manifestation of underlying issues that are leading to the compulsive use."

Nor, Hall writes, is there evidence that bans do any good in ameliorating the supposed harms. "Studies that require participants to abstain from social media for a week or more report no changes in daily loneliness, affective well-being and positive or [negative affect](#)," he writes.

He cautions against social media bans, noting that many people get their real-life needs met online.

"There are many positive attributes about social media use, but the claims and the discussion that we are having, broadly speaking, are almost all about its most negative effects," Hall said.

"Social media are used in a range of ways. You see some stuff that makes you feel sad and upset and stressed and frustrated, and then you also see things that make you feel uplifted and more connected to humanity. Social media are used to keep in touch with friends and family and to share experiences. So to say that it's undeniably toxic or that it absolutely will cause depression or harm, it's just not consistent with the literature."

Yet the goal of the paper is not to let social media off the hook, Hall said. In the place of each myth, he offers a research-warranted claim.

"It's not to deny that, for some users, [social media use](#) is associated with negative outcomes," he said. "It's not to say that social media is an effective way to cope with a preexisting problem. What I'm saying is that the claims about social media tend to be more exaggerated and less based on research than they should be in order to have a quality public debate

about their effects."

Rather than likening social media to tobacco use, Hall said, "Perhaps social media functions like a social snack, temporarily redirecting or distracting users from negative effect or loneliness, but failing to fully satisfy their needs."

"In the big picture, consuming a doughnut is not going to really change the direction of your life. But eating doughnuts to try to solve life's problems is going to create new problems."

The last myth Hall busts is that no more research is needed on social media, that proof of their alleged harms is definitive and certain. On the contrary, he writes, social media is ever-changing, and so should be the research that seeks to understand the effects of its use.

**More information:** Jeffrey A Hall, Ten Myths About the Effect of Social Media Use on Well-Being, *Journal of Medical Internet Research* (2024). [DOI: 10.2196/59585](https://doi.org/10.2196/59585)

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