

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR LEGAL RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS



Open Access, Refereed Journal Multi-Disciplinary
Peer Reviewed

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THE DOPAMINE LOOP: REGULATING ADDICTIVE DESIGN IN SOCIAL MEDIA

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DECLARATION

This report comes from me, Anant Tandon. Titled

“The Dopamine Loop: Regulating Addictive Design in Social Media”

It stands as my own effort. Dr Arvind Kumar Singh provided guidance throughout the process.

What you see here reflects work I carried out personally. No part was borrowed, copied, or shaped by others' efforts.

Submitted as part of the work needed for the BBA.LLB. Program. The findings presented here are unique and have not been presented elsewhere for academic credit. Not forwarded to any institution or university for the purpose of earning a qualification.

Anant Tandon

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Gratitude goes out to Dr Arvind Kumar Singh - my guide, my instructor - for opening the door to this work on social media addiction and how it touches mental well-being. His support shaped the path forward. This project became a chance to dig deep, ask questions, and uncover layers. With every step, fresh insights appeared. Learning unfolded quietly, steadily, through effort and observation. The experience reshaped understanding in ways that weren't expected at first.

Finding space to say thanks feels right, especially to my parents - alongside close friends - for stepping in when deadlines pressed hard. Their support made the difference during those tight weeks, bringing everything to a close.

Truth is, without the quiet corners of the campus library and those deep online law archives, pulling this work together would have taken twice as long. What helped most was how easily one could track down old rulings and scholarly notes when needed late at night. Even on weekends, access stayed open, steady - no login troubles, no paywalls blocking the way. Some nights it felt like only the glow of screens kept me going, lines scrolling till dawn. It mattered that everything came together so smoothly in the end.

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Nowadays, growing up means never knowing life without gadgets around. Screens often take the place of real conversations among younger crowds. When messages replace glances and "like" stands in for laughter, feelings shift quietly beneath the surface. Teens aged thirteen to nineteen become quite case studies when scrolling feels less like a choice, more like a pull. Something tugs at focus repeatedly, not quite addiction but close. Hidden inside apps, clever code works quietly to stretch out screen time. What you enjoy gets noticed, then repeated, over and over. Cravings spark easily; tension can follow. Feelings shift as silent software shapes choices. Who keeps an eye on places where children linger each day? Mood shifts begin when pings never stop. Thoughts twist. Self-view wobbles. Not every bond grows stronger through screens - some snap without noise. Joy might hide slow leaks in worth. Science peers close. Mind experts track patterns. Rules try to catch up. Layer after layer, a picture forms from study, thought, and law. Spending a lot of time on social media is strongly linked to more people facing Major Depressive Disorder, while also connecting to jumps in Generalised Anxiety and Body Dysmorphic Disorders. Rather than strengthening bonds, constant screen use tends to take away time that could go to moving the body, talking in person, or getting long, restful sleep - this idea sits at the heart of what scientists name the Displacement Hypothesis. Shifting focus from daily actions, attention turns to how judges and legislators begin changing demands placed on technology companies, especially after new plans such as the Kids Online Safety Act came into view. Although digital hangouts sometimes offer feelings of inclusion, the way they're built right now might disrupt how young minds process joy and rewards. To reduce damage ahead, specialists look to joint moves: reshaping apps around well-being first, backing tougher standards using laws, and bringing thoughtful web skills into school lessons.

Introduction

Back then, growing up felt different - today's teens live wired. As minds change, so do connections, one after another. Because digital focus tugs hard, habits bend toward devices, deeper each day. Come 2026, going online is no longer a choice; it simply happens, just like breakfast or bedtime. Most kids aged ten to seventeen open apps every single day, not because they have to, but because it feels natural. Their sense of self grows around reactions - likes, replies, things passed on. Worth shows up in how many see their words, how often others reach out. Stories come through streams that scroll, never printed sheets. Who they become appears online, piece by piece, visible to anyone watching.

A ninth of teens today wrestle with media, says the World Health Organisation. In 2018, only

seven out of every hundred did. Come 2026, that number climbs past eleven. Problems like these tend to spread. Through neighbourhoods, then classrooms, and family spaces. Without fanfare, things changed when attention was elsewhere.

1.1 Why We Go Back to Social Media

Surprise keeps eyes locked more than colour or motion ever could. Machines notice which frames make fingers pause on glass. Think of TikTok, Instagram, or even YouTube - each clip bent by silent formulas. One flick up, another down - the path recorded, then sharpened. Rewards come soft: likes hum through speakers, shares blink into view, videos appear too familiar to ignore. Tiny sparks form a pulse. Later on, touching the phone becomes second nature, like inhaling. Strange how hands move there before the mind notices. Stepping away from glowing rectangles can bring a shaky calm. Neurons expect fast hits of fresh input. When those vanish, silence hums louder than noise.

1.2 Teens Are Vulnerable

Scrolling through feeds hits teen brains hard - still under construction. Pleasure pathways fire at top speed, while impulse control drags behind. That imbalance makes slipping into endless loops easier than expected. Without mature pause buttons, time slips away before they notice. Later on, that screen-heavy stretch can show up as tension or a dip in mood.

1.3 The Big Problem with Social Media

Folks find today's media harder than just annoying - it chips away at well-being. When daily life sits beside flawless pictures, self-perception can twist slowly. Mood slips downhill, assurance wobbles, and appearance gets doubted - each fed by constant measuring up. Too much time swiping pushes out rest, live conversations, and even practical experiences. Later on, time meant for building things gets spent staring at glowing rectangles. Little by little, what feels normal chips away at progress without noise.

Darkness waits while phones stay bright. This glare tricks the mind into staying alert. Sleep slips further each time thumbs swipe down. Mornings arrive heavy, dragged from poor nights repeated.

Even when connected to lots of people, loneliness still lingers. At certain times of day, picking up new skills feels less taxing. Though effort matters, timing shifts how smoothly it goes.

1.4 What Needs Doing

Even with growing evidence that social media affects mental well-being, the burden still lands on individuals and households. Recently, court cases have started appearing against big technology companies, claiming their platforms are built to hook people. Because of this, who should answer for the harm may finally be changing.

Teen social media obsession comes from how apps are built. That means truth and responsibility count when companies create them. Protection needs firm rules that guard each person who logs in. When mental health suffers - focus slips, emotions dip, anxiety climbs - the damage is real. Change cannot wait.

Conceptual framework

A solid idea at the core acts like directions for your study. This path reveals how mind patterns and body reactions build addictive behaviours. Because social platforms shape emotions, linking key ideas becomes necessary here. One theory meets another where screen habits meet inner states.

2.1 The Brain's Timing Gap

Something fuels this research: teenage brain development splits into two distinct pathways. Emotions come from one system, self-restraint from another. They don't mature at the same pace as someone grows up. Because of that mismatch, actions shift in patterns that scientists try to map. Not every area evolves together inside the head. Fast urges usually beat slow control. This gap tells why teens pick what they do.

A tiny spark lights up when teens receive rewards they didn't expect. These digital treats - likes, streaks - arrive without warning, dished out by apps that hide their timing. Much like slot machines, the unknown moment of reward pulls attention sharply. A flicker here, a flash there - it's enough to bring glances back, drawn like moths. The screen wins another glance each time luck shifts.

Halfway into the twenties, a part of the brain that helps control impulses finishes developing. Teens haven't got this system online yet, so desires tend to drown out reasoning. Needing others' acceptance hits hard, while inner checks remain shaky. With cravings claiming victory time after time, habits take root - tough to loosen once damage builds.

2.2 Fear of Missing Out Changes Thinking

That pull toward likes lives in the brain's reward circuitry, sparked by a need to connect yet by a fear of isolation. Approval hunting sets in after posting, driven more by quiet drives tied to personal motivation theory than by thought. Without pause, endless swiping stirs worry over missed happenings - loneliness pacing alongside the wish to fit in. Every alert drags focus back, not from will but routine born where messages used to be. Failing to connect, teenagers lose themselves in endless scrolling to mute the loneliness. Not chasing approval - just hoping to find one person who understands without needing words. Where conversations ought to hum, devices glow instead. Belonging slips further each time they check a screen long after dark. Fewer talks happen now. Alerts take their place - weak stand-ins for being there. Connection thins when messages swap for talking. Quiet gaps grow where voices used to be.

Restarting rarely fixes things. While others seem busy, teens feel left out. This feeling pulls them toward phones again and again. Scrolling leads to comparing, piece by piece. Weight builds when every post feels like a test. A break shows up quietly instead. Back they go, scrolling through posts, chasing a shift that never comes. Loop after loop, same result.

2.3 Social Comparison and the Sense of Significance

To understand teen media addiction, think about social comparison

Up there on screens, everyone seems happier than they really are. Real days get swapped out for perfect pictures. Instead of living, it feels like watching a show where nobody struggles. Every scroll shows another highlight that isn't ordinary at all. Slowly, that makes some wonder if they're falling behind. Not much is said, but something shifts inside.

Lurking behind teen loyalty to apps is less laughter and more evidence. Recognition from friends molds self-perception slowly. Digits glowing on glass start standing in for value, murmuring who matters without words. Belonging seems real when attention sticks to one post. Something about those little likes makes presence real. Habit takes over as you swipe through feeds, where attention might land. Disappearing happens without warning when no one responds. A follow carries weight even if it seems minor. People come back mostly to find out whether their name still appears.

Issue and concerns

1. The Problem with Social Media Lies in Its Effect on the Brain

A teenage mind bends easily under what shows up on screens. With the brain still growing - impulse control lagging most - the impact runs deep.

A flicker on your screen wakes up corners of thought. Being seen online - maybe a like, perhaps a comment - sets off a tiny flare deep within. This sensation? Born from a substance released when moments turn favourable. The mind compares it to spotting loose change where you least expect it.

What keeps folks up at night? Teens can't always stop themselves - they're still figuring it out. Screens pull them in before they even notice—that urge to grab a phone pop up fast. A still-growing brain struggles to say no.

2. How Social Media Shifts Our Self Perception

A finding stood out. Scrolling nudges folks toward comparisons. Screen content creates benchmarks that are tough to overlook. Posts reshape self-view over time. Highlight reels bend thinking before you notice. Scrolling through updates is tied to a quiet unease. When reaching out feels like fading further away.

One post at a time, our sense of normal shifts without saying it out loud. A grin caught in golden light, another scene clearly set up - these pieces stack into quiet questions. Bright scenes play tricks when the shadows are cut away by design. That smooth surface? Could just be clever editing wearing confidence like a costume. Real stuff rarely fits inside a square frame that people tap through while lying down.

Staring at screens for long stretches can twist the way you view yourself. Faces and bodies flash by without warning, slowly bending ideas of what seems ordinary. Over time, certain people grow uneasy about their appearance. Worth wobbling like a loose wire? A shadow may linger long after the light shifts. One moment's image lingers, settling behind the eyes like dust.

3. What Social Media Takes Away from Everyday Living

What slips away often hides behind glowing rectangles. Beyond thumb-swipes lies space once held by quieter moments.

Sunlight never seems to leave while bright displays stay on. Yet minds keep running, even though they ought to be calm. Beside beds, those lit boxes hold off sleep like guards at a gate. Long past dark, little pings stir small surges inside the body. Though quiet time arrives, fresh alerts drag attention wide open again. Midnight shades shout when quiet should settle. Devices hum long after hands let go. Thoughts circle approvals caught on screens too late. Shut off or not, flashes replay in darkness. Sleep drifts wider each hour, streams keep glowing.

Worry creeps in when nights are too few, grades dip soon after. Still, losing face-to-face talks can dull the way words flow. Without those pauses between people, silence feels louder. A slow pressure grows where conversations once filled the space.

4. Social Media Anxiety and Online Harassment

Few realise how screens reshaped teen chats. Messages now fly through the air without voices touching ears. Face time fades while thumbs type late into the night. Silence grows where laughter once bounced between lockers. Distance feels smaller, yet presence thinner somehow. FOMO shows up quietly, creeping in when someone believes stopping screen time risks missing out. One wrong move and a key moment disappears without notice. Always online seems like the only way to stay close. A single unread note might shift how things go. This unease fuels one scroll after another.

Words tossed into the web stay longer than expected. Light spills from screens, carrying sharp phrases. A single note speeds away, gliding into secret places. Peace unravels when a ping cuts through stillness. Stillness carries weight long after screens go dark. Pain lands true without eyes to guide it.

Caught in endless scrolling? That heaviness builds slowly. Noise piles up, almost unnoticed. Some young girls carry it alone inside. Mood shifts happen fast, out of nowhere. Lights glow through nights no one checks in.

1. Why Social Media Sticks in Your Hands

A habit forms because of small mental routines. Without realising it, focus gets pulled again and again. Signals in the brain fire before we even decide. That pattern grows stronger each time it repeats. Quietly, habit takes hold through click after click, scroll after scroll. One tiny move connects to another, pulling you into a cycle. You're already returning before realising

it. True, design has its role - still, what's inside shapes where things go. Loop builds beneath notice, step by steady step.

Each time you pick up your device, it feels familiar. A message might wait - then again, maybe not. This guessing game keeps fingers swiping. Like pulling a lever on chance, never sure what comes next. Later, maybe - no telling when - a response might arrive. Still, that unsure wait makes thumbs swipe again.

A flicker of light on the machine gives you a quiet boost. This occurs because signals spark deep within your brain. Over time, your head starts tying pleasure to the glass in front of you. For that reason, glances drift back without much thought.

Heavy pull-on teenagers come from phones, much like something pulled by force. Because young brains are still building, they hook in deeper. Each alert brings a jolt - likes and messages fire off quick thrills. Social streams keep that buzz alive.

2. Why social media sticks around is because it was made that way

Glued to screens for hours? Exactly what show makers want. Trapped in a scroll cycle - someone built that snare by design. Time slips away as creators tally every minute lost. Quiet forces gather your attention like coins dropped into a silent machine. What you look at turns into gain - not yours, but theirs.

Endless scrolling? Someone designed it to be like that. Minutes disappear, then hours - eyes locked on glowing screens. One post led to another, time vanishing between taps. The gaze stays fixed, almost without noticing, moving from image to text to video. It just keeps going, no pause, no break, motion without meaning.

Behind every screen, machines learn what you like. This prediction shapes everything you view. Familiarity sticks around without effort. What appears tends to repeat itself.

Staring at the screen often begins with a small alert. One that whispers someone might be typing. Attention hooks instantly, dragged toward blinking dots below their name. Rather than turning aside, eyes lock on the space where letters will appear. Each second drags longer thanks to design choices made long ago. Words sometimes arrive - sometimes vanish into silence

without a trace.

3. Why does social media pull us in, needing connection

Something pulls at you every time the phone lights up. Belonging tastes sweet, so we keep coming back. Faces flash by - chosen because they stick in your mind. Voices pile on, one after another. Not quite real, but near enough. The machine learns what keeps hands swiping. Minutes slip away without notice. Even empty interaction fills a gap. Being seen matters more than being understood.

Fear about being left out tugs attention toward glowing rectangles. Screens stay lit, thanks to constant checking. The thought of events unfolding elsewhere lingers, always just beneath the surface

Some people need to feel noticed, which is why they head online. A like pops up here, then a comment there - pride sneaks in quietly behind them. Every ping acts like a tiny reflection of value. Where eyes linger, self-worth tends to take root and stretch. Being visible can slowly shape how someone sees themselves.

Everywhere you look, people seem busy doing things. One existence pressed against another, yet yours comes up lacking. That hollow feeling grows once the difference appears. To ease it, photos get posted - small patches built from light, colour, and split-second choices. Pulling, always pulling - that screen glow tugs like a low hum beneath thoughts. Caught inside loops we barely notice, fingers swipe without asking why. Joy flashes fast, then fades, leaving only an empty sort of echo. Slow leak more than spark, honestly. Odd how it sits there, unease wrapped in brightness, waiting to be seen.

Conclusion

Each scroll adds up, though it seems harmless at first. Not finishing tasks shows less about willpower, more about constant pings nearby. Young minds change easily - a notification here, a buzz there shapes thoughts quicker than we notice. Feeling left out hits harder now, woven into snapshots and quick replies. Connection slips into pixels yet feels real enough to hurt. A slide in mood, a fade in sleep, tangled thinking - each tug at the others when design quietly grabs hold. Young brains respond more sharply than old predictions ever suggested.

This research examines three segments. Following one after the other, they grow from prior ideas. Connected yet standing apart, every part holds its own

Hours on screens shift thinking patterns within just a few days. Alerts pop up out of nowhere, catching people off guard - apps use these moments like traps. Small rewards slip in quietly, shaping habits before anyone realises it. Each swipe carries hidden signals that bring users back, even when they do not mean to. Still, stepping away doesn't weaken the grip much. Choices in layout quietly build routines people rarely foresee.

Scrolling changes thinking in quiet ways. Pictures on screens lead to measuring oneself against others, slowly wearing down self-assurance. One image can plant discomfort, as if living somehow falls short. These tiny hits stack - spirits sink, nerves tighten, happiness slips even when nothing obvious goes wrong. Supposed links to people may instead bring emptiness deeper than silence ever could.

Hours vanish while staring at glowing screens past bedtime. Screens glow instead of voices meeting across a room after dark. Eyes grow heavy under flashes that pop up too often. Alone feels heavier, though names fill a digital crowd nearby. Worries pile up beneath endless posts sent one after another.

3. Why these matters

Stuck in their phones, grown-ups now mimic the wide-eyed scroll once seen just in children. Glances fixed downward, living rooms hum with silent tapping after sunset. When meals sit cold under flickering light, conversation fades into background noise. Picture this habit stretching deeper - what feels normal today might seem gentle by then.

What catches attention first is how spotting media obsession shows where hours vanish. Lurking just beneath, changes in how we feel pop up silently because of endless swiping. Then there's this quiet detail - losing track of when to walk away mixes what's online with what's actually around us

A heavy quiet sit with many young people these days - moods dip lower, actions turn sharper. Since phones stay close, signs slip into how posts twist thinking. Only once rhythms match up do reasons come clear. Change begins where the pressure builds.

Getting sucked into endless scrolling might not just be about willpower - proving it's genuinely addictive could lead app creators to reconsider how they build online areas where young people hang out. A behaviour thought to stem from individual decisions might really come down to hidden influences, sparking updates that shield teens through intentional layouts rather than letting risks linger unchecked.

When screens occupy each silent minute, clear thoughts can fade. Not only do social apps scatter focus, but they also multiply distractions fast. With endless alerts buzzing by, stillness for deeper thinking fades out. Over months, reading feelings in faces might start to feel unfamiliar. Because attention keeps splitting, stepping into someone else's view becomes tough. If ignored, these changes may alter the way humans connect. What once flowed easily in talk or comfort could drift over time. Pauses matter, yet they're shrinking - making real listening harder. Tiny, repeated actions build into broader community norms. Today's slipping attention might quietly shape decisions years ahead.

Final Thought

Fast movement leaves folks trailing behind, especially on social apps. To protect kids down the line, thinking about digital spaces needs to change. When builders of tech are held responsible, pointing fingers at teens will lose its grip. Features ought to include safeguards, not skip them by default. Something shifts when scrolling becomes automatic. Noticeable damage deserves response, not blame. With care, online sharing builds connection over isolation. The outcome rests on daily decisions about what gets clicked, shared, or ignored.