

Caught in the scroll?

Find yourself losing time scrolling through reels, content or posts, do you feel like your brain has been “hijacked”? You might be hooked, and you’re not alone.

Social media has become an integral part of daily life, initially designed for connecting with friends and family, it has now become a popular pastime across all age groups. Despite the lack of an official diagnosis for “social media addiction,” excessive use is common and can negatively impact physical and mental health.



How does a seemingly harmless pastime turn into an “addiction”?

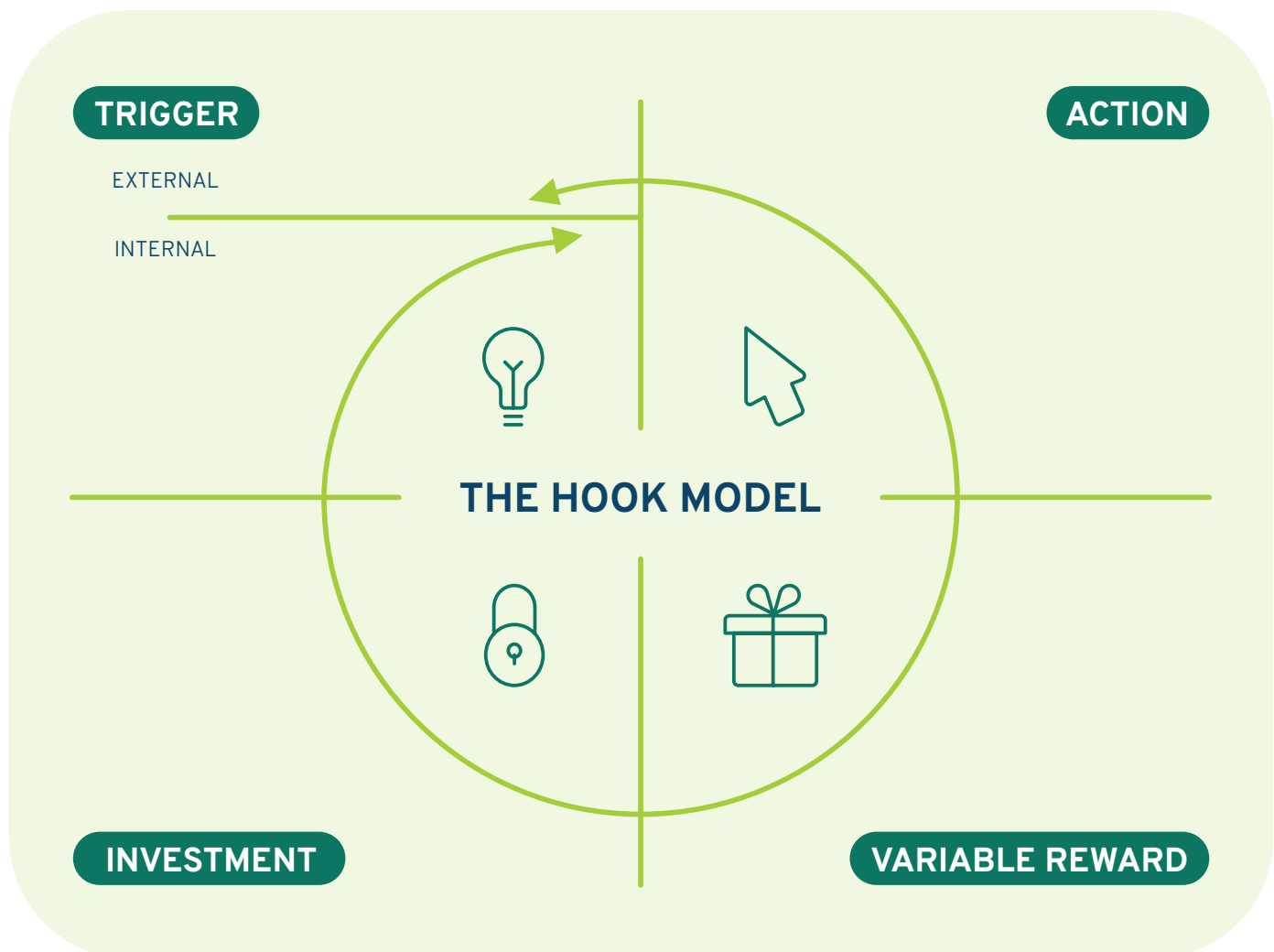
This can show up in different ways, such as:

- constantly checking notifications or messages
- ‘doomscrolling’ through news or distressing content
- comparing yourself to others online
- feeling increasingly worried, or obsessing on world events
- finding it difficult to switch off, particularly before bed or after a shift

The Hooked Model, developed by Nir Eyal, provides a powerful framework for understanding how social media triggers a dopamine response and becomes habit-forming. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter associated with pleasure and reward, which is released when we engage in activities we enjoy.



The Hooked Model outlines four key phases: Trigger, Action, Variable Reward, and Investment, each playing a crucial role in engaging users and forming habits.



Trigger:

Social media platforms are engineered to trigger rapid dopamine releases through features like notifications (likes, comments, shares), these prompt users to act. Effective triggers capture attention and initiate the habit loop.

Action:

This involves the behavior users perform in anticipation of a reward, such as opening a notification on their phone.

Variable Reward:

The action of opening the notification can lead to a positive reward, but only sometimes - variable rewards keep users engaged by tapping into the brain's craving for novelty and surprise, increasing the likelihood of return.

Investment:

Users invest their time, effort and data into social media, which increases their commitment and enhances future engagement as they become more integrated into the product's ecosystem.

Excessive social media use, fueled by the dopamine cycle, can negatively impact mental health, leading to anxiety, depression, and even sleep problems.



Frequent dopamine spikes from social media use can lead to dopamine dysregulation, where the brain becomes less sensitive to natural rewards and more reliant on digital stimuli.

To combat the effects of the dopamine cycle, users can limit screen time, engage in activities that promote natural dopamine release (exercise, spending time with loved ones), and seek professional help if needed.

Strategies for Managing Social Media Use

1. **Set Boundaries:** Establish specific times for social media use and stick to them. Use features like app timers to limit usage.
2. **Digital Detox:** Regularly take breaks from social media to reconnect with the physical world and engage in offline activities.
3. **Mindful Usage:** Be conscious of the time spent on social media and the content consumed. Focus on positive and meaningful interactions.
4. **Seek Support:** If social media use is impacting mental health, consider seeking support from mental health professionals or support groups.
5. **Cultivate Hobbies:** Engage in activities that do not involve screens, such as reading, board games, exercising, or spending time in nature.



How can you decrease social media use?

Whether you have social media addiction or are just on your apps more than you need to be, the good news is there are ways you can help decrease your overall use.

Consider the following tips to help you achieve a healthier balance with social media:



- Delete your social media apps from your smartphone. While you can still access them from your personal computer, keeping them off your phone may help decrease the amount of time spent on social media overall.
- Adjust the setting on each social media app so you can turn off certain notifications.
- Set aside a certain amount of time dedicated to social media per day. Turn on a timer to help keep you accountable.
- Leave your phone, tablet, and computer out of your bedroom.
- Take up a new hobby that's not technology-related. Examples include sports, art, cooking classes, and more.
- Make it a point to see your friends and family in person when possible.

It's also important to take regular breaks from social media altogether to help find some real-life grounding.

Depending on your needs, your break can last for 1 day per week, a whole month, or an entire season. Let yourself be in control, not your social media account.



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