Is Facebook Bad for You? It Is for About 360 Million Users, Company Surveys Suggest

The app hurts sleep, work, relationships or parenting for about 12.5% of users, who reported they felt Facebook was more of a problem than other social media

By _Georgia Wells_ Follow , _Deepa Seetharaman_ Follow and _Jeff Horwitz_ Follow

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Facebook researchers have found that 1 in 8 of its users report engaging in compulsive use of social media that impacts their sleep, work, parenting or relationships, according to documents reviewed by The Wall Street Journal.

These patterns of what the company calls problematic use mirror what is popularly known as internet addiction. They were perceived by users to be worse on Facebook than any other major social-media platform, which all seek to keep users coming back, the documents show.

A Facebook team focused on user well-being suggested a range of fixes, and the company implemented some, building in optional features to encourage breaks

from social media and to dial back the notifications that can serve as a lure to bring people back to the platform.

Facebook shut down the team in late 2019.

A company spokeswoman said Facebook in recent months has begun formulating a new effort to address what it calls problematic use alongside other well-being concerns, such as body image and mental health.

The company has been public about its desire to address these problems, said Dani Lever, the spokeswoman, in a statement. Some people have struggles with other technologies, including television and smartphones, she said.

"We have a role to play, which is why we've built tools and controls to help people manage when and how they use our services," she said in the statement. "Furthermore, we have a dedicated team working across our platforms to better understand these issues and ensure people are using our apps in ways that are meaningful to them."

The Wall Street Journal's Facebook Files series has documented how Facebook knows the products and systems central to its business success routinely fail and cause harm. For some people, such as teen girls or human-trafficking victims, the risks can be significant. These documents highlight the company's research into possible negative impacts on a broader swath of users.

Facebook is owned by Meta Platforms Inc. A restructuring announced in late October highlights the company's focus on the so-called metaverse—an online world featuring extensive use of virtual reality—that goes beyond traditional social media.

The research into social-media use that may negatively affect people's day-to-day lives was launched several years ago with the goal of mitigating harmful behavior that the company was increasingly identifying on its platforms.

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The researchers on the well-being team said some users lack control over the time they spend on Facebook and have problems in their lives as a result. They wrote that they don't consider the behavior to be a clinical addiction because it doesn't affect the brain in the same way as gambling or substance abuse. In one document, they noted that "activities like shopping, sex and Facebook use, when repetitive and excessive, may cause problems for some people."

Current PU Experience

All problematic users were experiencing multiple life impacts.

Sleep disruption - (1) Delaying/reducing sleep hours due to loss of time control; (2) Waking up and checking FB prolonging a return to sleep; and (3) Sleep loss due to disturbing content, like politics or violence.

And a false sense of closeness created by seeing updates on FB, but fewer offline visits.

- **Parents neglecting their kids** – Parents focused more on FB than caring for or bonding with their children. Or refrained from reprimanding kids for risk of later "retaliation" on their own use.
- **Safety risks** – Loss of situational awareness around environmental dangers (moving vehicles, pickpockets).
- **Regretful purchases** – Spending money on things they didn't need.

I was late to my cousin's wedding because I was watching a video. He's my godfather so it was a shame. Why were you late? I was on Facebook; I forgot the time.

P3, 22 (f) Brazil

Sometimes I don't pay the attention I should to my son. I love to play with him, and the phone sometimes distracts me".

P7, 32 (m) Brazil

One day I was stepping out of the train. I should've been in the middle, but I was on the edge only. I was on my phone. A person kind of pushed me inside. I got saved! After that, I just sit and do it.

P4, 30 (m) India

Sometimes I lose sleep. If I have to wake up at 6am and I'm on FB at night, I look at the phone and it's 2am. Sometimes I'm so involved that I go on and it's hard to wake up the next morning.

P5, 20 (f) Brazil

Facebook App Research

Note: Third-party images have been pixelated.
Source: March 2020 internal Facebook report titled, 'Problematic Use of Facebook: User Journey, Personas & Opportunity Mapping'

Those problems, according to the documents, include a loss of productivity when people stop completing tasks in their lives to check Facebook frequently, a loss of sleep when they stay up late scrolling through the app and the degradation of in-person relationships when people replace time together with time online. In some cases, "parents focused more on FB than caring for or bonding with their children," the researchers wrote.
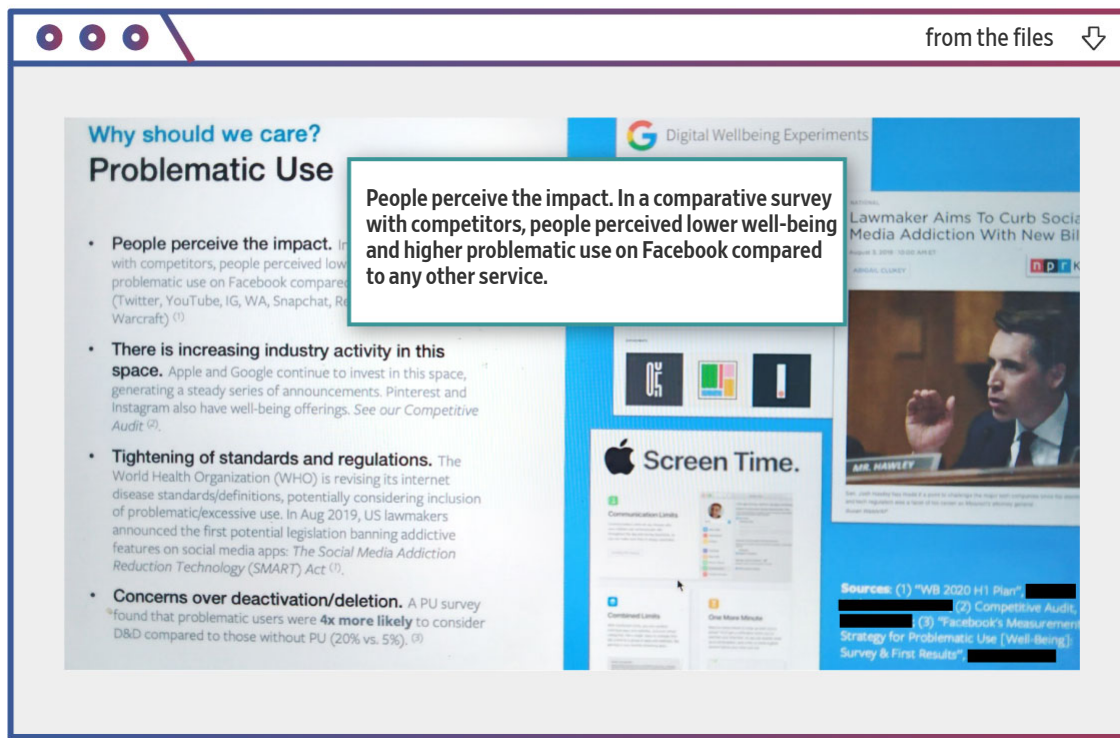
"I'm on Facebook every day, every moment. Literally, every moment; just not when I'm in the shower," a 22-year-old woman told the researchers. "I lose the notion of time."

In March 2020, several months after the well-being team was dissolved, researchers who had been on the team shared a slide deck internally with some of the findings and encouraged other teams to pick up the work.

The researchers estimated these issues affect about 12.5% of the flagship app's more than 2.9 billion users, or more than 360 million people. About 10% of users in the U.S., one of Facebook's most lucrative markets, exhibit this behavior. In the Philippines and in India, which is the company's largest market, the employees put the figure higher, at around 25%.

The researchers said in the documents that most of the people who use Facebook compulsively said they used multiple social-media apps, including Instagram and WhatsApp, which are also owned by Meta, Facebook's new corporate parent, along with Twitter and Snapchat. Some of the troublesome aspects for users on Facebook, such as feeling pressure to respond to messages and frequently checking for new content, are also widespread in smartphone use, the researchers noted.

"Why should we care?" the researchers wrote in the slide deck. "People perceive the impact. In a comparative study with competitors, people perceived lower well-being and higher problematic use on Facebook compared to any other service." The other services in the comparison also included YouTube, Reddit and the videogame "World of Warcraft."

Note: Some names have been redacted.
Source: March 2020 internal Facebook report titled, 'Problematic Use of Facebook: User Journey, Personas & Opportunity Mapping'

The researchers noted the results couldn't determine causality. They said they would need to conduct more studies to determine whether, for example, Facebook causes people to have problems sleeping, or if people who have trouble sleeping experience higher stress and turn to Facebook as a distraction.

"We welcome other teams to take on these opportunities," one of the researchers posted on Facebook's internal communications system. "Please get in touch if we can help."

Facebook's findings are consistent with what many external researchers have observed for years, said Brian Primack, a professor of public health and medicine

and dean of the College of Education and Health Professions at the University of Arkansas. He said there isn't a consensus on causality but that most of the evidence "should be concerning to people." His research group followed about a thousand people over six months in a nationally representative survey and found that the amount of social media that a person used was the No. 1 predictor of the variables they measured for who became depressed.

"Everything is pointing in a certain direction," he said. "There's only going to be a certain amount of time Facebook can say there is nothing causal out there."

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Use Facebook Compulsively? So Do 360 Million Other People.

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In late 2017, a Facebook executive and a researcher wrote a public blog post that outlined some of the issues with social-media addiction. According to the post, the company had found that while passive consumption of social media could make you feel worse, the opposite was true of more active social-media use.

"Actively interacting with people—especially sharing messages, posts and comments with close friends and reminiscing about past interactions—is linked to improvements in well-being," the company said.

Facebook then made a switch to more heavily weigh "meaningful social interactions" in its news feed as a way to combat passive consumption. One side

effect of that change, as outlined in a previous Journal article in The Facebook Files, was that the company's algorithms rewarded content that was angry or sensational, because those posts increased engagement from users.

Facebook said any algorithm can promote objectionable or harmful content and that the company is doing its best to mitigate the problem.

Laurin Manning Gandy, 40 years old, signed up for Facebook in late 2004, and the media strategist said the platform enabled her to reach people beyond her own immediate network.

Ms. Gandy said she would check her posts again and again, counting how many comments and likes had rolled in, often spending eight hours or more a day on the app.

"Every second that I wasn't occupied by something I had to do I was fooling around on my phone scrolling through Facebook," Ms. Gandy said. "Facebook took over my brain."

Ms. Gandy says she realized she had abandoned her creative pursuits, including drawing and painting, in exchange for a purely online existence. She increasingly came to see it as an addiction.

In April, she deleted Facebook from her phone, but she recently reinstalled it to order takeout from a barbecue restaurant. She said she is now making an effort not to post on Facebook.

'Facebook took over my brain,' Ms. Gandy said.

PHOTO: TRAVIS DOVE FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Part of Facebook's interest in addressing use of its app that causes problems in people's day-to-day lives is a business calculation related to users like Ms. Gandy. In 2017, an intern found that users who exhibited "twitchy" behavior of logging on frequently for short sessions were more likely than regular users to deactivate their accounts for the stated reason that "I spend too much time on Facebook."

In a 2018 study, researchers on Facebook's core data science team wrote that they were starting to read frequent articles about addiction to Facebook. "We take these issues seriously, and though Facebook use may not meet clinical standards for addiction, we want to fix the underlying design issues that lead to this concern," they wrote.

Apple and Google had started to roll out features to address device addiction, and the researchers predicted more companies would soon follow.
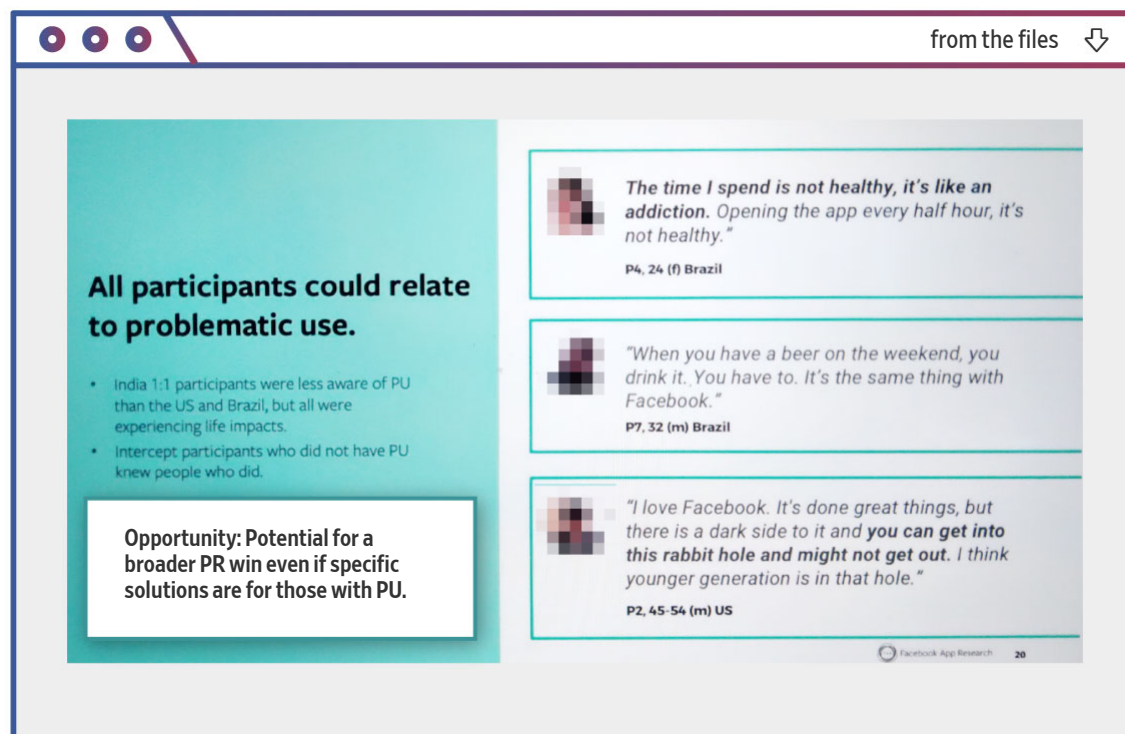
In 2018, Facebook added a time-management tool to the app. It includes a dashboard where users can see their total time on the app each day and set a daily reminder to give themselves an alert when they have reached the amount of time they want to spend on it.

Inside Facebook, the researchers registered concern about the direction of Facebook's focus on certain metrics, including the number of times a person logs into the app, which the company calls a session. "One of the worries with using sessions as a north star is we want to be extra careful not to game them by creating bad experiences for vulnerable populations," a researcher wrote, referring to elements designed to draw people back to Facebook frequently, such as push notifications.

In 2018, then Facebook board member Reed Hastings, who co-founded Netflix Inc., told top Facebook executives he wasn't sure why the company needed to apologize for being heavily used, according to three people familiar with the matter. Mr. Hastings added that he wouldn't apologize for allowing people to binge-watch shows on Netflix, the people said.

A spokeswoman for Mr. Hastings declined to comment.

The well-being team, according to people familiar with the matter, was reshuffled at least twice since late 2017 before it was disbanded, and could get only about half of the resources the team requested to do its work.

Note: Third-party images have been pixelated.
Source: March 2020 internal Facebook report titled, 'Problematic Use of Facebook: User Journey, Personas & Opportunity Mapping'

Chief Executive Officer Mark Zuckerberg has said the company continues to prioritize the issue. "We certainly do not want our products to be addictive," he said in a November 2020 Senate hearing in response to a question from Sen. Lindsey Graham. "I don't think the research has been conclusive, but it is an area that we care about and study," Mr. Zuckerberg said.

Ms. Lever, the spokeswoman, said the company also funds external research, such as with the Digital Wellness Lab run jointly by Harvard University and Boston Children's Hospital.

In 2018, Facebook's researchers surveyed 20,000 U.S. users and paired their answers with data about their behavior on Facebook. The researchers found about 3% of these users said they experienced "serious problems" in their sleep, work or relationships related to their time on Facebook that they found difficult to change. Some of the researchers' work was published in a 2019 paper.

According to that study, the researchers also said that a liberal interpretation of the results would be that 14% of respondents spent "a lot more time on Facebook than they want to," although they didn't label this group problematic users.

People who felt like they have a problem with the app were more likely to be men; either teens or in their 20s; have about 15 more sessions a day than the average user; and spend a greater portion of their time on the app at night. They also spent more time on Facebook overall—about 1 hour and 36 minutes a day, compared with 1 hour and 18 minutes a day for regular users. Some of the people, although they reported problems, also said the time they spend on Facebook is more valuable than people who don't report problems.

Tom Meitner said Facebook took too much of his energy and left him feeling crabby.

PHOTO: FÁBIO ERDOS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

In 2019, the researchers had come to a new figure: What they called problematic use affects 12.5% of people on Facebook, they said. This survey used a broader

definition for the issue, including users who reported negative results on key aspects of their life as well as feelings of guilt or a loss of control, according to the documents.
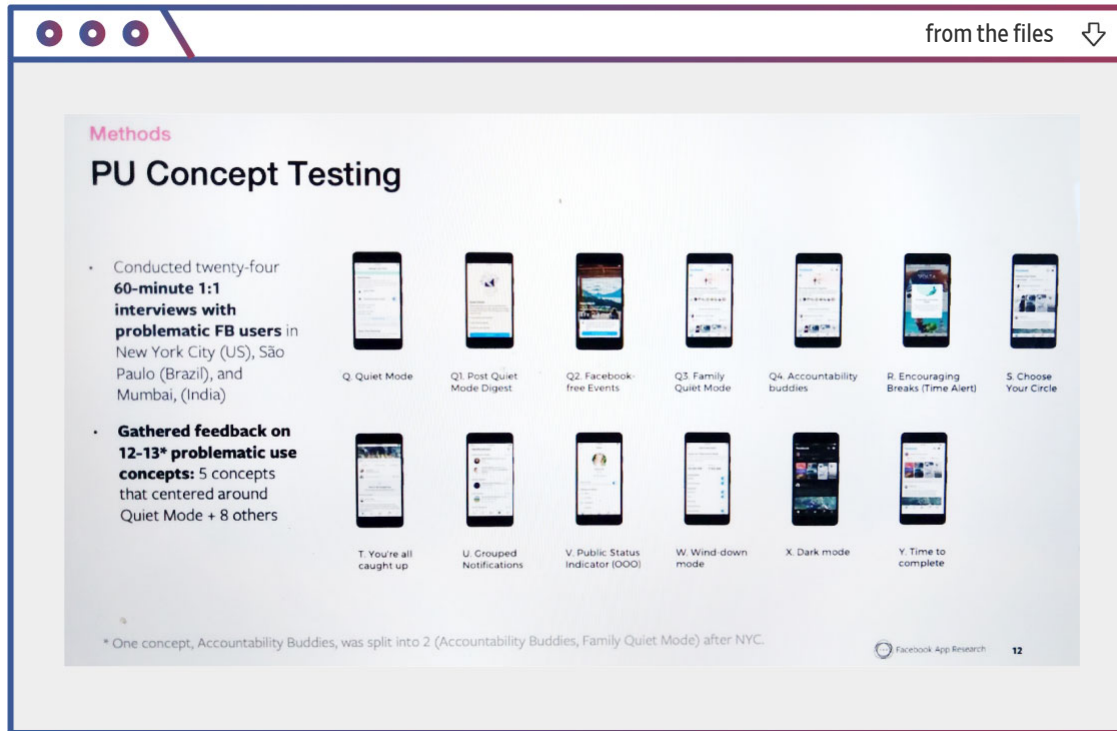
The researchers also wrote that they had a more detailed understanding of the aspects of Facebook that triggered the issues, which they said include getting too many notifications, videos that play automatically, uncertainty over whether they will see posts from the people they want to follow and ephemeral content that users felt compelled to watch before it disappeared, among others.

Facebook provided a related research document to the Journal that described the rationale for the broader metric. "There is no established or consistently used definition of internet addiction or problematic use in academic research or clinical practice," the researchers wrote, calling the work an effort to rethink industry approaches to problem behaviors.

In mid-2019, the researchers held a workshop to come up with ideas for ways to change aspects of Facebook to address the concerns of people who said their use of the app caused problems in their lives. Then they showed the designs to a couple dozen users in New York, São Paulo and Mumbai to gather feedback.

The most-liked fixes included alerts to remind users to take a break from Facebook, a way to dial back the notifications people receive and a wind-down

mode to tell Facebook to not show certain types of content before bed, such as politics.

Note: Concepts, top row, left to right: Q. Quiet Mode; Q1. Post Quiet Mode Digest; Q2. Facebook-free Events; Q3. Family Quiet Mode; Q4. Accountability Buddies; R. Encouraging Breaks (Time Alert); S. Choose Your Circle. Bottom row, left to right: T. You're all caught up; U. Grouped Notifications; V. Public Status Indicator (OOO); W. Wind-down mode; X. Dark mode; Y. Time to complete.
Source: March 2020 internal Facebook report titled, 'Problematic Use of Facebook: User Journey, Personas & Opportunity Mapping'

The researchers also asked Facebook users what aspects of Facebook triggered them most. The users said the app's many notifications sucked them in. "Red dots are toxic on the home screen," a male young adult in the U.S. told the researchers, referring to the symbol that alerts a user to new content.

Autoplay videos also made it hard for users to put the app down, especially before bedtime, the researchers said.

Ms. Lever, the company spokeswoman, said Facebook's settings offer users tools to limit notifications and allow users to turn off the autoplay of videos.

In March 2020, Facebook introduced quiet mode to allow users to mute most push notifications. But the researchers said the way Facebook buried the feature in the app's settings made it hard for users to find. They recommended Facebook add easy-to-find shortcuts to quiet mode.

One entrepreneur came up with his own solution to some of these issues. In 2016, software developer Louis Barclay manually unfollowed all the people, pages and groups he saw on Facebook in an attempt to be more deliberate about how he used technology. The process, which isn't the same as unfriending, took him days, but he was happy with the result: an empty newsfeed that no longer sucked him in for hours. He could still visit the profile pages of everyone he wanted to connect with on Facebook, but their content would no longer appear in the never-ending scroll of posts.

Thinking other people might benefit from a similar experience on Facebook, he built a tool that would enable anyone to automate the process. He created it as a piece of add-on software called a browser extension that anyone could download. He called it Unfollow Everything and made it available on Chrome's web store free of charge.

'Unfollowing everything allowed me to take stock of who is taking my energy, where does my brain power belong, and if I'm going to engage with certain people,' Mr. Meitner said.

PHOTO: FÁBIO ERDOS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Tom Meitner, a 36-year-old self-published crime novelist in Milwaukee, said before he used Unfollow Everything, Facebook took too much of his energy and left him feeling crabby. He has a wife and three young children, and said he aims to bring positive energy to his family life at the end of each day. But the more time he spent arguing with people on Facebook, the harder that became.

"I'd log on and it was just loaded with these ideas and opinions," he said. "It became a situation where I might post something in response to someone, and suddenly I'm having an argument with someone's uncle whom I'd never met."

Mr. Meitner said he considered quitting Facebook but was conflicted because he appreciated how the app connected him with friends and family who no longer lived in his area. And he sometimes used Facebook to advertise his novels. "Unfollowing everything allowed me to take stock of who is taking my energy,

where does my brain power belong, and if I'm going to engage with certain people," Mr. Meitner said.

In July, Facebook sent Mr. Barclay a cease-and-desist letter, which the inventor earlier wrote about for Slate, saying his tool was a breach of its terms of service for automating user interactions. It also permanently disabled Mr. Barclay's personal Facebook and Instagram accounts.

Ms. Lever, the company spokeswoman, said Mr. Barclay's extension could pose risks if abused, and said Facebook offers its own unfollow tool that allows users to manually unfollow accounts.

— John West contributed to this article.

—Design by Andrew Levinson.

Write to Georgia Wells at georgia.wells+1@wsj.com, Deepa Seetharaman at Deepa.Seetharaman@wsj.com and Jeff Horwitz at Jeff.Horwitz@wsj.com

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