

WHEN FRIENDS SHOW OFF: FACEBOOK AND WELL-BEING

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Keywords: Subjective Well-being, Facebook, Envy, Social Networking Sites, Social Comparison

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research Question

In recent years however, the rules of interaction have changed quickly with the increasing use of social networking sites (SNS) which refer to “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semipublic profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (Boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 211). With Facebook permeating the daily lives of a billion people worldwide (“Facebook Newsroom,” 2012), social networking is a phenomenon that has cast its spell on people everywhere. As a consequence, the phenomenon of accumulating an extensive online friend network has gained even more importance. Something hitherto inconceivable, like having a network of thousands of friends and being constantly informed about their activities, has been rendered not just possible, but normal. But is this connectivity positive for people’s well-being? Or can too many friends on social networking sites be detrimental to people’s well-being? As such, the conventional wisdom that more friends translate to a better life needs to be questioned

Method and Data

For Study 1, participants (238 Facebook users) were recruited online on *Mturk* and randomly assigned to one of three conditions: (1) building relations (i.e. adding friends), (2) maintaining relations (i.e., viewing updates), or control. In the building relations condition (i.e., add-friends), participants were asked to go to their Facebook page and view the name of the last friend they had added or accepted on Facebook. In the maintaining relations condition (i.e. view-updates), participants were asked to go to their home page and list five most recent updates posted by their friends. The control participants only completed the main dependent variable: which was *Satisfaction with Life Scale*, and *Social comparison orientation* scale (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999).

Since one of the dominant consequences of social comparison that yields in one feeling poorly about themselves is envy (Smith & Kim, 2007), we further hypothesize that people feel less satisfied with their lives after reading others' ostentatious posts because they feel *envious* of their Facebook friends (Salovey, 1991).

All 245 Participants were *Mturk* workers. The *Mturkers* were led to believe they were reading updates by people in a social network composed of *MTurkers*

We used a 2 (number of friends: high vs. low) X 2 (ostentatious updates: high vs. low) design. After the cover story task participants were assigned to a number of friends (high vs. low) condition. Participants in the high (low) number-of-friends condition were told that 320 (40) *Mturkers* from the US had agreed to update their status as they would on Facebook and this would be presented to them in the subsequent screens. The participants were then assigned to one of the two ostentatious updates conditions (high, low). Participants in the high (low) ostentatious updates condition were presented with

15 updates out of which 8 (2) were ostentatious in nature. Following the manipulations, respondents completed the following scales:

Envy scale (Van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Goslinga, Nieweg, & Gallucci, 2006), which served as our main dependent variables and *Satisfaction with Life Scale* (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985).

Summary of Findings

A regression and spotlight analysis (Aiken & West, 1991; Irwin & McClelland, 2001; McClelland & Irwin, 2003) was conducted to compare the effect of strong ties -viewing updates- (vs. control) on participants' life satisfaction with a large number (one *SD* above the mean) and small number (one *SD* below the mean) of Facebook friends. When the number of Facebook friends was small, viewing-updates did not have an impact on life satisfaction ($\beta = -0.002; t(229) = -.006; ns$). When the number of friends (given the sample) increases to 160 and beyond we start to notice a decrease in life satisfaction. We found a significant main effect of adding friends ($t(229) = 2.024; p < .05$). When people viewed the recently acquired friend on Facebook, they reported an increase in life satisfaction irrespective of the number of friends they had in the SNS.

For the second study, we tested if the manipulations' impact on life satisfaction was mediated by envy using a bootstrapping procedure (Preacher & Hayes, 2004; Zhao, Lynch, & Chen, 2010). An indirect effect of ostentatious updates on satisfaction with life via envy was obtained (CI95% = [-.351, - 0.028]), providing evidence for a full mediation. First, there was a significant effect of ostentatious updates on envy ($\beta = 0.82; t(242) = 5.33; p < .01$). Second, there was a significant main effect of envy on satisfaction with life ($\beta = -0.20; t(241) = -2.59; p < .05$; See Figure 2). These results

provide strong support for our hypothesis, suggesting that amount of ostentatious information posted in SNS leads to feelings of envy and this is the key intervening mechanism that explains the significant decrease in life satisfaction while viewing online updates.

Key Contributions

Taken together, the results of our studies establish an important and previously undocumented phenomenon—that maintaining social capital online reduces life satisfaction because of feelings of envy associated with the ostentatious information shared in SNS. As more and more of our Facebook friends show off, our happiness levels drop. In contrast, building social capital on SNS can have positive effects on well-being. When people add new friends on Facebook, they feel more satisfied with their lives. Thus, we show an intriguing well-being paradox of SNS – people are prompted to increase their online friend count in the first place as they experience an increase in their subjective well-being however, as the number of Facebook friends increases and as people try to keep up with their connections, they tend to experience a decrease in life satisfaction when reading their friends' updates because of the ostentatious information they see.

The results of these studies can help guide Facebook users towards emotional regulation they may need to engage in on experiencing envy. An experience of envy and reduced life satisfaction on viewing ostentatious content on Facebook might help people become self aware and conscious towards their priorities and needs. So even though there might be a down side to increasing ones friend count on Facebook and viewing ostentatious content, it may actually enable people to come to terms with particular life domains that warrant their attention.

References are available on request.