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## Research report

## The interpersonal effects of Facebook reassurance seeking

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Social networking sites like Facebook represent a potentially valuable means for individuals with low self-esteem or interpersonal difficulties to connect with others; however, recent research indicates that individuals who are most in need of social benefits from Facebook may be ineffective in their communication strategies, and thereby sabotage their potential to benefit interpersonally. The current study tested whether reassurance seeking via Facebook negatively influenced self-esteem, and whether this change in self-esteem mediated the relationship between Facebook reassurance seeking and greater thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness.

**Method:** Participants completed measures online at two time-points approximately 24 days apart.

**Results:** Results provided evidence that Facebook reassurance seeking predicted lower levels of self-esteem, which in turn predicted increased feelings that one does not belong and that one is a burden.

**Limitations:** Key limitations to this study include our use of a predominantly young, female, Caucasian sample, a novel reassurance seeking measure, and only evaluating two time points.

**Conclusions:** These results suggest that Facebook usage has the potential for negative and far-reaching influences on one's interpersonal functioning.

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## 1. Introduction

The official mission of Facebook is “to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected” (Facebook, 2012). With over one billion users as of October 2012 (Smith, 2012), it is clear that Facebook has indeed revolutionized the ways in which people interact (Cohen, 2012).

The possibilities to share information, gain support, build friendships, and maintain relationships via social networking sites like Facebook are vast. Given this potential, researchers and media figures have speculated that the benefits of Facebook may be particularly pronounced for individuals who struggle with interpersonal relationships (Dailey, 2009; Rosenwald, 2011). Following from this idea, the present study focused specifically on the association between Facebook usage and self-esteem, given that individuals with low self-esteem tend to have a difficult time forming meaningful, stable relationships in spite of their strong desire to do so (Leary and Macdonald, 2003; Wood et al., 2009).

Recent research suggests that for individuals who struggle interpersonally, communication via the Internet may provide one valuable means to become more connected and engaged with

others. For instance, Bonetti et al., 2010 found that children and adolescents who reported that they were lonely (compared to those who were not) were significantly more likely to report using the Internet to communicate about personal or intimate topics. According to authors, communication via the Internet allowed these children and adolescents to “fulfill critical needs of social interactions, self-disclosure, and identity exploration” (p. 279). There is also research demonstrating that using social networking sites may have a direct, positive impact on self-esteem and other correlates of mental health. For example, experimental research demonstrated that when compared to a control group, individuals who focused for significantly longer on their Facebook page had higher general levels of self-esteem (Gentile et al., 2012; see also Gonzales and Hancock, 2011). Other research has demonstrated that the frequency with which people use social networking sites is positively associated with levels of well-being and social self-esteem (Valkenburg et al., 2006). Finally, Shaw and Gant (2002) investigated an unselected sample of undergraduate participants as they “talked” to an anonymous partner across five chat sessions. Again, results indicated that Internet usage was associated with increases in self-esteem and perceived social support.

On the surface, it would seem that social networking sites are a panacea for individuals who struggle with self-esteem and other psychosocial difficulties. Unfortunately, however, some recent research indicates that individuals with interpersonal problems may use Facebook in a way that sabotages its potential to enrich

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their lives or relationships. Specifically, [Forest and Wood \(2012\)](#) found that while individuals with lower levels of self-esteem consider Facebook to be an attractive means of disclosing personal information, their disclosures are characterized by fewer positive and greater negative status updates. Moreover, the low positivity and high negativity of their status updates may make these individuals less well-liked. As reflected by [Forest and Wood \(p. 295\)](#): “Individuals with low self-esteem recognize but do not reap the benefits of self-disclosure on Facebook.” In other words, Facebook has the *potential* to lead to positive outcomes for those who struggle interpersonally. However, when used ineffectively, Facebook usage may confer a negative long-term vulnerability.

In the current study, we built upon previous research investigating the valence of self-disclosure to evaluate another factor that may decrease one's ability to fully benefit from social networking sites: excessive reassurance seeking. Drawing from previous conceptualizations of excessive reassurance seeking (e.g., [Joiner et al., 1992, 1999b; Starr and Davila, 2008](#)), we specifically evaluated the extent to which individuals (a) utilize their Facebook status updates to receive comments and feedback from others, including negative comments about the self and (b) place importance on receiving this feedback (see [Section 2](#) for more detail).

To the best of our knowledge, reassurance seeking in the context of social networking has not been systematically evaluated; however, it is clear that excessively seeking reassurance in other contexts can be problematic (for reviews, see [Hames et al., 2013; Evraire and Dozois, 2011; Starr and Davila, 2008](#)). In their comprehensive meta-analysis, [Evraire and Dozois \(2011\)](#) concluded that the combination of excessive reassurance seeking and negative feedback seeking is especially aversive to the maintenance of healthy interpersonal relationships. Further, [Joiner et al. \(1999a\)](#) found that reassurance seeking behavior is associated with lower self-esteem. Extrapolating from this “off-line” research, it seems likely that using Facebook to excessively seek reassurance will have a negative impact on constructs relevant for interpersonal functioning, including self-esteem.

Importantly, self-esteem is a construct that is broadly implicated across a variety of facets relevant for mental health functioning ([Leary et al., 1995a, 1995b](#)). For instance, lower levels of self-esteem are associated with heightened symptoms of anxiety ([Rosenberg, 1962](#)), depression ([Sowislo and Ulrich 2013](#)), and disordered eating ([Silverstone, 1990](#)). Thus, to investigate the potential ramifications of Facebook reassurance seeking on self-esteem, we also explored the relationship between Facebook reassurance seeking, self-esteem, and two other constructs heavily implicated in interpersonal functioning: thwarted belongingness (e.g., “I am alone”) and perceived burdensomeness (e.g., “I am a burden”) ([Van Orden et al., 2010, p. 576](#)). The combination of thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness has the potential to be incredibly damaging; specifically, when experienced conjointly, they may produce the desire for suicide ([Joiner, 2005; Van Orden et al., 2010](#)). Not surprisingly, evidence indicates that low self-esteem contributes to perceived burdensomeness, and that it is also an indication of exclusion (i.e., thwarted belongingness; e.g., [Leary et al., 1995a, 1995b](#)). Hence, if Facebook usage negatively impacts self-esteem, this may have broad and negative implications for other interpersonal constructs.

In sum, the current study sought to address three inter-related questions: (1) Does reassurance seeking on Facebook predict lower levels of self-esteem?; (2) Does reassurance seeking on Facebook predict thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness?; and (3) Does self-esteem mediate the relationship between Facebook reassurance seeking, thwarted belongingness, and perceived burdensomeness? Contrary to Facebook's mission of promoting connectedness, when users employ Facebook to excessively seek reassurance, we hypothesize that Facebook usage will negatively

influence self-esteem, which in turn will predict thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness.

## 2. Method

In return for course credits, undergraduate students participated in a two-part study requiring them to fill out questionnaires on two separate occasions separated by two to four weeks (average time between Time 1 and 2 was 24 days). Participants completed Time 1 and 2 questionnaires online via a secure website. All procedures were approved by the university's Institutional Review Board, and all participants consented to participate.

### 2.1. Participants

There were 319 participants from a large southeastern university; the majority (72.7%) of the sample was female. Participants who failed to participate at both time points ( $n=16$ ) were removed from the analyses.<sup>1</sup> The sample was predominantly Caucasian (78.9%); the remainder of the sample reported their race as follows: 9.6% African American, 2.9% Asian, 0.6% Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, and 8% other. Participants' age ranged from 17 to 35 ( $M=18.66$ ,  $SD=1.46$ ).

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Facebook reassurance seeking scale [Smith et al., 2013](#)

This 5-item questionnaire was created by the authors to assess online reassurance seeking conducted via Facebook. A longer version of this scale has been used in a previous study and demonstrated adequate reliability and good test-retest reliability ([Smith et al., 2013](#)). The scale was abbreviated in the current study to specifically assess Facebook reassurance seeking, or the extent to which individuals utilize and place importance upon their Facebook status updates to receive feedback from others. Example questions include: “When I update my status, I expect others to comment on it,” “When I update my status and no one comments on it, I tend to be disappointed,” “When I update my status, it does not affect me if no one comments on it” (reverse scored). This scale demonstrated adequate reliability at Time 1 and Time 2 (average  $\alpha=.66$ ). The moderate and significant correlations ( $r$ 's between .31 and .33 for Time 1 and Time 2,  $p < .01$ ) with an existing measure of reassurance seeking, the Depressive Interpersonal Relationship Inventory—Reassurance Seeking Subscale (described below), provide additional validity evidence for this scale.

#### 2.2.2. Depressive interpersonal relationship inventory—reassurance seeking subscale (DIRI-RS; [Joiner et al., 1992](#))

The DIRI-RS is a four-item measure of reassurance seeking, defined as a tendency to excessively seek reassurance from others as to whether they truly care. The scale demonstrated excellent reliability in the current sample ( $\alpha=.90$ ). The DIRI-RS was included as a covariate in our analyses to demonstrate the specificity of our predictor, Facebook reassurance seeking.

#### 2.2.3. Interpersonal Needs questionnaire (INQ; [Van Orden et al., 2012](#))

The INQ is a 25-item self-report questionnaire that measures current beliefs about the extent to which the respondent feels connected to others (i.e., thwarted belongingness) and the extent to which he or she feels like a burden on the people in their lives

<sup>1</sup> A one-way ANOVA revealed no significant differences between individuals included in the analyses (vs. those who were excluded) on any of the variables used in the analyses (all  $p$ 's  $> 0.10$ ).

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