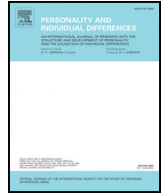




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## Facebook undermines the social belonging of first year students

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### ABSTRACT

We examined whether an online social networking technology (Facebook) influenced students' perceptions of their peers' social connections as well as their own feelings of belonging. In this experiment ( $N = 601$ ), students were assigned to view Facebook profiles with high or low social content. Students then estimated the number of friends their peers had and self-reported their own feelings of belonging and intentions to socialize with other students. Overall, there were no between-condition differences on these measures. However, first-year students responded differently than other students: they expressed reduced feelings of belonging after viewing the Facebook profile with high (vs. low) social content, whereas students from other years expressed marginally higher feelings of belonging after viewing the Facebook profile with high (vs. low) social content. These findings suggest that people who are new to a social network may be particularly susceptible to negative impacts of Facebook.

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### 1. Introduction

Facebook is the most commonly visited website worldwide, and on average, Americans spend 56 billion min on Facebook each month (Facebook Newsroom, 2016). Given the popularity of this social media platform, it is critically important to understand how this social networking site impacts social connection and social integration. In this paper, we examine the role of Facebook in shaping the belonging of students who are new to their social network.

Multiple studies have linked Facebook to users' experience of well-being and belonging. Interestingly, this growing body of research has found evidence that Facebook use has both positive (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Gonzales & Hancock, 2011; Hobbs, Burke, Christakis, & Fowler, 2016; Kim & Lee, 2011) and negative (Fardouly, Diedrichs, Vartanian, & Halliwell, 2015; Kross et al., 2013; Kramer, Guillory, & Hancock, 2014; Lin & Utz, 2015) associations with users' well-being.

Given these discrepant findings, research has started to shift its focus towards identifying the personal characteristics that explain whether and when Facebook use enhances versus undermines well-being (e.g., Simoncic, Kuhlman, Vargas, Houchins, & Lopez-Duran, 2014). For example, in a recent meta-analysis of thirty studies, researchers documented the role of depression in understanding the link between Facebook use and well-being. In this meta-analysis, there was a weak, positive

relationship between depression symptoms and Facebook use (Baker & Algorta, 2016). However, the authors of this paper also called for more research examining other potential moderators. Given that most of the research on this topic has been correlational, open questions remain about when and for whom Facebook use has causal downstream implications for subjective well-being.

Building on this emerging body of research, we conducted an experiment to examine the causal impact of Facebook consumption on users' perceptions of their peers' social networks, their own feelings of belonging, and their social intentions. We also examined whether the social and emotional effects of viewing other people's Facebook pages were contingent on the personal characteristics of the user. Specifically, we examined whether Facebook was more impactful for students' social perceptions and belonging when students were new to their social network.

We hypothesized that students who were new to university would be more impacted by peers' information on Facebook, given that they should be more likely to feel uncertain about their place in their new social network. Prior theorizing and research suggests that people who are faced with a new or uncertain situation are more likely to engage in social comparisons with their peers (Festinger, 1954; Taylor, Buunk, & Aspinwall, 1990; Garcia, Tor, & Schiff, 2013 for a review). Research also suggests in making the transition to college, many students feel uncertain about whether they belong in their new university setting, with negative implications for well-being and physical health (e.g., Walton & Cohen, 2011; Yeager, Romero, Paunesku, Hulleman, et al., 2016). Consequently, individuals who are new to their social network might be more likely to compare themselves with others in their network when

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passively viewing peers' Facebook profiles, which could negatively affect their feelings of belonging (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011).

To test these hypotheses, we conducted an experimental study with university students. In this study, we randomly assigned students to view either highly social Facebook profiles, or less social Facebook profiles from their peers at the same university. Students were then asked to estimate how many friends they thought their peers had on campus, how much time their peers spent socializing in an average week, and to report on their own belonging, and intentions to socialize. We predicted that any negative effect of viewing highly social Facebook profiles on belonging or intentions to socialize would be moderated by whether students were new to their social network. We also measured students' feelings of social self-efficacy and extraversion. We included these measures based on previous research suggesting that these variables may serve as moderators of the impact of Facebook use on well-being (Wei, Russell, & Zakalik, 2005; Williams, 2007).

The typical Facebook user spends most of his or her time on Facebook passively observing without posting or "lurking" (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009). It is therefore important to understand how these behaviors influence users' well-being. In a recent study, self-reported passive Facebook use was negatively related to well-being (W. Chen, Fan, Liu, Zhou, & Xie, 2016). However, this study did not identify the causal effects of passive Facebook use on well-being. Thus, in our study, we chose to focus on the role of passive Facebook consumption on users' well-being.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

Six-hundred-and-one undergraduate students (71.2% female;  $M_{age} = 19.92$ ,  $SD = 2.17$ ) at The University of British Columbia (UBC) volunteered to participate for course credit. Participants were recruited in the first semester of the year, thereby ensuring that the first-year students who participated were new to their social environment (Pittman & Richmond, 2008).

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Facebook profiles

To maximize external validity, we developed our stimuli using the actual profiles of two male and two female students who had provided consent for our team to use their Facebook profiles for this experiment. The students featured in these vignettes were second, third, and fourth year students from UBC (information about these students' upperclassman status was not presented to our study participants). To maximize internal validity, we edited the information that these students provided to us, selectively presenting elements of their Facebook profiles to control for the number of posts presented, the types of posts featured, and other social information such as the number of likes and comments that other students made on each post.

Each adapted Facebook profile consisted of a banner containing the student's profile photo, a cover photo, and four selected posts with the likes and comments removed. The Facebook profile stimuli and data for this study are available through the Open Science Framework ([osf.io/nxsnf](https://osf.io/nxsnf)). To control for the overall length of the Facebook profile and the amount of visual information available, all posts were photos or shared links. To control for content differences depending on who was responsible for making the post, each profile featured two posts that were uploaded by the profile owner and two posts that were uploaded to the wall by the participants' friends. To preserve confidentiality, any faces or names other than the profile owners' face were blurred out.

We created a high social content version and a low social content version of each individual profile (i.e., two versions were developed from each man or woman's original profile). High social content posts

were selected for the first version of the profile on the basis of (a) outlining a social activity and (b) having at least one friend tagged or portrayed. In contrast, low social content posts were selected for the second version of the profile on the basis of (a) minimizing the social content of the posts and (b) minimizing the number of friends tagged or portrayed. The direct contrast between these two types of Facebook profiles allowed us to draw causal conclusions about the effect of social Facebook content on students' social perceptions, intentions, and belonging. We chose to manipulate the content of the Facebook profiles (vs. number of friends) because this information is typically most salient to users when they are passively viewing others' profiles.

### 3.2. Procedure

Each participant completed the 30-minute study using a computer in a quiet laboratory room. Participants first completed several questions about their own social networks. Students were asked how many close friends they had at UBC, and how many social acquaintances they had at UBC. Students were also asked to report the percentage of time that they had spent socializing with UBC students, with non-UBC students, and alone over the last seven days. These questions were adapted from past research investigating first-year students' social perceptions and social habits (Whillans, Christie, Cheung, Jordan, & Chen, 2016). To control for students' overall feelings of belonging at UBC, participants completed two items adapted from the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, 1996). Specifically, participants reported their agreement with the items "I belong at UBC" and "People at UBC accept me" on a scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*). Reliability of this measure was acceptable ( $\alpha = 0.68$ ).

After completing these measures, participants were randomly assigned to the High Social or Low Social Facebook profile conditions. To reduce possible carryover effects, participants completed an unrelated reading comprehension filler task before and after viewing two of the four Facebook profiles. Participants were asked to take their time when viewing the profiles and were told that they would have to answer questions about these profiles. On average, students spent approx. 1.5 min viewing the Facebook profiles ( $M = 92.28$ ,  $SD = 32.51$ ).

After participants viewed the Facebook profiles, they completed a similar set of questions about their peers. Participants were asked to report how many close friends and how many social acquaintances they thought that the typical UBC student had at UBC. Students were also asked to estimate the percentage of time the typical UBC student spent socializing with UBC students, non-UBC students, and alone, over the last seven days. This set of questions was used to assess participants' perceptions of the social connectedness of their peers.

Next, participants completed validated measures to assess their belonging and intentions to socialize. First, participants reported their current feelings of belonging at UBC using the 8-item Sense of Community Scale (Davidson & Cotter, 1986). This scale was originally developed to assess community within a city. Consistent with past research (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014), we adapted this measure to assess students' belonging at UBC. Using this measure, participants rated their agreement with statements including "I feel like I belong here" on a scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*). Reliability was acceptable ( $\alpha = 0.72$ ).

Next, participants reported their intentions to socialize with other UBC students using a 12-item social intentions measure (Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, & Schaller, 2007). Participants completed a questionnaire about a student service that was being considered at [institution]. Participants read a short paragraph about the student service and reported the degree to which they would be interested in using this service to make new friends. Responses were recorded using scales ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 12 (*Strongly agree*). These items were averaged to create a composite measure of participants' desire to connect with other students. Reliability was excellent ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ).

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