The dark side of social networking sites: An exploration of the relational and psychological stressors associated with Facebook use and affordances

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ABSTRACT

Research on social media typically focuses on its benefits; considerably less is known about the dark side of social networking sites. Focus groups of adult Facebook users ($N = 44$) uncovered narratives surrounding individuals' negative psychological and relational experiences tied to the social networking site and its affordances (e.g., connectivity, visibility, accessibility, persistence, and social feedback). Thematic analysis rendered five themes regarding Facebook stressors: *managing inappropriate or annoying content*, *being tethered*, *lack of privacy and control*, *social comparison and jealousy*, and *relationship tension and conflict*. Results demonstrate that although Facebook users often experience negative emotions, they feel pressured to access the site frequently due to the fear of missing out and to keep up with relationship maintenance demands. Some participants reported privacy violations due to Facebook's visibility, connectivity, and persistence. These features also afforded constant social comparison to other network members, which triggered jealousy, anxiety, and other negative emotions. Relational turbulence occurred due to the public nature of conflict on Facebook. Many participants' responses revealed overarching contradictions: initially they claimed Facebook was inconsequential, yet later recounted significant stressful or hurtful events associated with Facebook. Our findings indicate some methods may not uncover the actual nature or scope of users' experiences.

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1. Introduction

Social networking websites (SNSs) have become an integral medium for communicating within and about interpersonal relationships. Facebook is the most dominant SNS in the U.S. and over one billion people worldwide possess an active Facebook account (Facebook, 2014). Over two-thirds of U.S. Facebook users visit the site at least once per day and are connected to an average of 338 friends (Pew Research Center, 2014).

One reason Facebook is the most popular social networking site is the scope of affordances it provides for users. The ability to connect with one's offline network online—as well as make new connections online—allows users to communicate easily with network members. Through the posting and sharing functions, social information is easily distributed and stored among members; users can also provide feedback to this information in the form of com-

ments and "likes." Facebook also offers the convenience of network-wide, group, and private communication channels through one interface. Further, Facebook has a mobile application, ensuring that users can access the site easily from their devices. Collectively, these affordances explain why Facebook has grown and maintained a devoted user base globally.

Although considerable research has focused on the benefits of using SNSs such as increased social capital, social support, and relationship maintenance (e.g., Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; McEwan, 2013; Nabi, Prestin, & So, 2013), fewer studies have examined the nature of negative outcomes for adult users. Given that users expect positive outcomes and often visit SNSs for relaxation, entertainment, or social connection (Ku, Chu, & Tseng, 2013; Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009), users may not anticipate negative experiences or interactions, making them more potent or hurtful.

At this time, some survey-based research has identified links between Facebook use and diminished well-being (e.g., Chen & Lee, 2013; Chou & Edge, 2012; Kross et al., 2013), as well as negative experiences based on unfriending and romantic relationship dissolution (Bevan, Ang, & Fearns, 2014; Fox, Jones, & Lookadoo, 2013; Marshall, 2012; Tokunaga, 2014). Further, a recent content

analysis showed a prevalence of negative content posted to Facebook (Shelton & Skalski, 2014). What is lacking is a deeper investigation into how and why users have negative experiences on Facebook, particularly given users' tendency to proclaim, "it's just Facebook," and thus does not affect them substantially (Fox, Warber, & Makstaller, 2013). As Mao (2014) noted, qualitative methods are necessary to elaborate on quantitative studies about technology and gain more insight into the breadth and depth of users' changing experiences. It is important to determine the scope of these experiences so users and scholars are aware of both the benefits and drawbacks to participating in SNSs and can learn to manage or guide the management of negative Facebook experiences in a psychologically and relationally healthy manner. To this end, we designed an exploratory study to investigate the rich narratives surrounding users' negative emotional experiences with Facebook, rooting our study in the context of dark side interpersonal communication.

2. Experiences with social networking sites

2.1. The light side of Facebook

Several benefits have been ascribed to SNS use. Relationships on Facebook bring *social capital*, the benefits users receive from their associations with other people (Ellison et al., 2007; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2008). Facebook affords the ability to strengthen weak ties, maintain existing relationships, and define otherwise ambiguous relationships (McEwan, 2013; Valenzuela et al., 2008). Facebook's connectivity enables users to promote group identity and in-group relationships, particularly for users in ethnoracial, gender identity, or sexual orientation minority groups (Fox & Warber, in press; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008).

In addition to promoting social relationships, SNS use may have individual psychological benefits for users. Several studies have identified boosts in self-esteem from interacting with or modifying one's own Facebook profile (Gentile, Twenge, Freeman, & Campbell, 2012; Gonzales & Hancock, 2011; Toma & Hancock, 2013) as well as from general Facebook use (Gonzales, 2014). Research has also determined that connectivity on SNSs may promote perceptions of social support for some users, which in turn facilitates well-being offline (Nabi et al., 2013). Thus, Facebook and other SNSs have demonstrated the potential to provide considerable social and psychological benefits to users.

2.2. The dark side of Facebook

Although Facebook may provide a variety of benefits, SNSs also manifest a dark side and can have deleterious consequences for users. A survey by Bevan, Gomez, and Sparks (2014) revealed the more time spent on SNSs and the more SNSs a person used, the lower their quality of life. Chen and Lee (2013) found that Facebook interaction is associated with reduced self-esteem, cognitive overload, and feelings of distress. Kross et al. (2013) examined Facebook use over time and found higher levels of Facebook use were associated with a significant decrease in well-being. At its worst, Facebook is used as a conduit for cyberbullying, stalking, and online harassment (Fox, in press; Kwan & Skoric, 2013).

Because of the visibility of other network members' experiences, habits, and preferences, social comparison is a common activity on Facebook. Several studies have indicated that social comparisons made on SNSs can be detrimental (Feinstein et al., 2013; Johnson & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014; Lee, 2014). Chou and Edge (2012) found those who have used Facebook longer expressed they believed other people were happier and had better lives than they did. Haferkamp and Krämer (2011) found that after looking at attractive users' profiles on Facebook, participants felt worse about their bodies than participants exposed to less attractive profiles. Male participants who viewed profiles of successful males demonstrated a greater perceived discrepancy between their current career status and their ideal career status when compared to males who viewed the profiles of less successful people (Haferkamp & Krämer, 2011).

Facebook can also have a negative impact on romantic relationships. Research has shown that Facebook can promote romantic jealousy (Utz & Beukeboom, 2011), which may explain why it is a commonly cited source of relational conflict (Fox, Osborn, & Warber, 2014; Fox, Warber et al., 2013). Furthermore, after relationships terminate, Facebook can enable unhealthy surveillance of the ex-partner and delay emotional recovery (Fox, Jones et al., 2013; Fox & Warber, 2014; Marshall, 2012).

To date, survey-based research demonstrates that adult Facebook users can feel worse after using the site. Experimental researchers have manipulated specific content, such as the attractiveness or success of other users, and determined that Facebook has the potential to promote negative affect. What is missing from the literature is an exploration into the variety and scope of negative experiences resulting from Facebook use. Thus, we ask:

RQ1: What kind of negative psychological experiences do users have with Facebook?
RQ2: What kind of negative relational experiences do users have with Facebook?

2.3. Facebook affordances

Social networking sites are defined by users' ability to maintain a profile, connect with other users, and trace the networks of connected users (boyd & Ellison, 2008). On Facebook, users are normatively associated with their real (or chosen) name and identifying information. Thus, Facebook's primary purpose is to provide access to users' offline networks—and the social information they provide—online (Reich, Subrahmanyam, & Espinoza, 2012). As a result, the site has distinct social implications and functionality compared to other social media.

Facebook's social functionality is tied to its specific set of affordances (Fox, in press; Treem & Leonardi, 2012). Affordances can influence users' positive and negative experiences with technology (e.g., Mao, 2014). Perhaps the most notable affordance of SNSs is *connectivity* or *association*, which enables network members to recognize each other's presence and often view each other's profile content through a direct connection or a common node (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). On Facebook, these nodes are referred to as "friends." Although this connectivity enables convenient access to one's entire network and may expand the network by identifying second degree connections, it may also reveal associations that promote stress (e.g., seeing that a romantic partner is still friends with an ex-partner).

Visibility concerns the public or private nature of information presented online. Although social information or artifacts may not be easily accessible or publicized offline, Facebook enables easy and immediate sharing among the network (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). One drawback is that such information may be negatively skewed (e.g., an unflattering or inappropriate picture of oneself posted by a friend). Visibility also enables the monitoring of others' content without their awareness; for example, Facebook does not inform a user who has viewed their page. Thus, users can information seek surreptitiously.

Social feedback is the ability for others to interact directly with shared information and subsequently respond to the user (Sutcliffe, Gonzalez, Binder, & Nevarez, 2011). Facebook allows users to comment, share, and "like" posts, all of which let the user