



## Who wants to be “friend-rich”? Social compensatory friending on Facebook and the moderating role of public self-consciousness

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### ABSTRACT

The present research aims to provide insight into social compensatory friending on social network sites by investigating the effects of self-esteem and self-consciousness on number of friends in the context of Facebook use. It was hypothesized that Facebook users low in self-esteem, when compared with high-self-esteem individuals, would engage in friending more actively and thereby accumulate a large number of friends as a way to compensate for the deficiency in self-esteem. We also hypothesized that the relationship between self-esteem and number of Facebook friends would vary depending on the levels of public self-consciousness. Data were collected from a college student sample in the United States ( $N = 234$ ) based on an online cross-sectional survey. The results supported the hypothesis on social compensatory friending, demonstrating a negative association between self-esteem and number of Facebook friends. Furthermore, the data yielded support for the hypothesized moderating role of public self-consciousness in social compensatory friending: the negative association between self-esteem and number of Facebook friends was significant only for Facebook users who are high in public self-consciousness but not for those who are low in public self-consciousness. Implications for understanding social network site users' friending behavior in light of social compensation motives are discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

The word “friend,” which has primarily been used as a noun in modern English, is increasingly being used as a verb meaning “to add someone as a friend on a social network site” (Angwin, 2009). Particularly on *Facebook*—the world's most popular social network site (SNS) and second most trafficked website next to *Google* (Alexa, 2011), friending constitutes one of the core activities performed by the users (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007), providing a foundation for the remarkable growth of the website as an SNS with more than 800 million active members as of December 2011 (Facebook, 2011).

Number of Facebook friends, which reflects the size of a user's Facebook-based social connections, provides important insight into the phenomenon of SNS friending. The number, which is automatically displayed by the system on its user's profile page (Antonius & Schouten, 2011), has received a significant amount of scholarly attention. Some researchers, in their investigation of the role played by Facebook in development of social capital, have examined number of Facebook friends as a key component of SNS

use intensity (e.g., Ellison et al., 2007; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). Others have demonstrated that number of Facebook friends delivers important sociometric cues that determine how people make social judgments about Facebook profile owners (e.g., Kleck, Reese, Behnken, & Sundar, 2007; Tong, Van Der Heide, Langwell, & Walther, 2008).

Despite the increasing interest in number of Facebook friends and its possible role in delivering sociometric cues, the potential “utility” of friending behavior as a strategic means of self-presentation has largely been overlooked. Noting the lack of research in this area, we investigate the role of self-esteem and self-consciousness in predicting number of Facebook friends. In particular, inspired by the social compensation hypothesis on SNS use (Valkenburg, Schouten, & Peter, 2005; Zywick & Danowski, 2008), we examine a behavioral tendency which we term *social compensatory friending* – the act of expanding one's SNS friend connections as a means to compensate for deficiencies in self-worth. The social compensation hypothesis on SNS use, in particular, has provided important insight into the relationship between SNS users' sense of self-worth and SNS activity levels (Valkenburg et al., 2005; Zywick & Danowski, 2008). Guided by the sociometer theory of self-esteem (Leary & Baumeister, 2000), which views self-esteem as a psychological monitor that assesses the extent to which the

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self is valued/devalued as a social being, the present research investigates whether the social compensation motives associated with self-presentation are at work in Facebook users' friending and how self-consciousness shapes such behavior.

### 1.1. Friending on Facebook

Friends have traditionally been defined as peers who provide mutual companionship and social support (Santrock, 1987). The notion of Facebook friends, however, differs greatly from the traditional notion of friends in that the former expands much more quickly and broadly through the simple friending process in which a friend relationship becomes established when a user sends a friend request to an individual by clicking the "add" button and the other party accepts the request (Tong et al., 2008). When it comes to the traditional notion of *friends*—"people we know personally, whom we can trust, whom we feel some emotional affinity for," some argue that the maximum possible number of social connections one can have is no more than 150 (Dunbar, 2010, p. 4). Contrastingly, on Facebook where the "friend" relationship may be more loose and superficial the number of friends often goes well beyond hundreds or even thousands (Dunbar, 2011; Tong et al., 2008). Such a trend leads us to question what drives some people to become friend-rich.

Although the number of Facebook friends is included in one's profile in the form of "system-generated" (Antheunis & Schouten, 2011, p. 395) or "machine-rendered" (Tong et al., 2008, p. 534) information, it is important to note that the number, as a "behavioral residue of the way one accrues one's associations online" (Tong et al., 2008, p. 537), reflects how actively the profile owner engages in friending. For a "friend" relationship on Facebook to be established and the number of friends to increase, a friend request should be made *and* be accepted. This system of friending on Facebook allows profile owners to strategically increase the number of Facebook friends by making a large number of friend requests and/or by accepting friend requests from others whenever possible.

Another important aspect to note about number of Facebook friends is the "public" nature of the information. One of the key characteristics of Facebook as an SNS, as noted in the definition of SNSs developed by boyd and Ellison (2007), is that the system allows its users "to articulate and make *visible* [italics added] their social networks" (p. 211). As a "quick summary" representing the status of one's social connections on Facebook, the number is displayed and is constantly updated on one's profile page, being made visible not only to the profile owner him/herself but also to others who can access the profile. This "public" nature of the number points to the possibility that strategic friending behavior may involve self-presentational concerns. And when we consider that the desire to enhance self-esteem constitutes a key motivation driving people to engage in self-presentation (Leary & Kowalski, 1990), the social compensation motive behind Facebook friending is particularly intriguing to examine.

### 1.2. Self-esteem and friending for social compensation

The pursuit of self-esteem based on "the desire to believe that one is worthy" (Crocker & Park, 2004, p. 392) exerts critical influence on how people present themselves to others (Baumeister, 1982). With respect to how people develop and expand online social connections as part of strategic self-presentation, research examining the social compensation hypothesis (Valkenburg et al., 2005) sheds light on the role of self-esteem. The hypothesis, which reflects the view that individuals with low self-esteem have the desire to compensate for their lack of self-esteem (Tice, 1993), posits that people who have low esteem for their offline self or low satisfaction with

their existing offline social relationships may actively engage in online activities in order to compensate for the deficiency in self-esteem (Valkenburg et al., 2005; Zywicki & Danowski, 2008).

Research has rendered support for the social compensation hypothesis with respect to SNS use. Zywicki and Danowski (2008) demonstrated that a subset of college student Facebook users with low self-esteem tended to reveal more information about themselves and strive to look popular on Facebook. Similarly, Mehdi-zadeh (2010) found that Facebook users' self-esteem had a significant negative correlation with frequency of Facebook visits as well as with length of time spent on Facebook. These behavioral patterns shown by individuals with low trait self-esteem are consistent with the sociometer theory of self-esteem (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). The sociometer theory of self-esteem, while recognizing that people strive to fulfill the basic need for self-esteem, asserts that the self-esteem system operates as an internal monitor that constantly appraises "one's relational value in general" and serves to "motivate behaviors to increase inclusion and forestall rejection" (p. 24). Based on this theory, it may be predicted that number of Facebook friends, as a possible indicator of sociometric popularity on Facebook (Tong et al., 2008), could strategically be used for social compensation among those who are low in self-esteem. In particular, individuals with low self-esteem may strive to increase the number of Facebook friends to feel a greater sense of belonging and to increase the likelihood of being perceived as popular so that they could compensate for their deficiency in self-esteem. We thus hypothesize:

**H1.** Self-esteem will have a negative association with number of Facebook friends.

### 1.3. The role of self-consciousness (SC): Private vs. public

Another personality variable relevant to understanding self-presentation behaviors in the context of SNS use is self-consciousness (Shim, Lee, & Park, 2008). While self-esteem concerns evaluation of the self, self-consciousness (SC) entails regulation of the self (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975). More specifically, it has been noted that self-consciousness plays an important role in regulating strategic self-presentational behaviors (Doherty & Schlenker, 1991).

There are two types of self-consciousness: private vs. public. When one's self-relevant awareness is centered on "covert aspects of the self that are not directly observable by others" (Doherty & Schlenker, 1991, p. 3), such introspection-oriented self-awareness is labeled as private SC (Carducci, 2009). Individuals high in private SC tend to regulate their behavior based on beliefs, values, feelings, and inner convictions privately held by the self (Fenigstein et al., 1975; Scheier, Buss, & Buss, 1978). As such, these individuals are more likely to resist social pressure and behave consistently with their own privately held attitudes/beliefs than those who are low in private SC. In contrast, public SC refers to self-attention centered on "matters of public display" of the self (Scheier & Carver, 1985, p. 687) and how one is viewed by others (Greenwald, Bellezza, & Banaji, 1988); individuals high in public SC tend to conform to the norm and are more attuned to how they are viewed by others when compared with those who are low in public SC.

Little empirical research has been conducted as to the relationship between the two types of self-consciousness and SNS friending. However, Doherty and Schlenker (1991) provide important insight for predicting patterns of the relationship. Doherty and Schlenker (1991) note that the two types of self-consciousness are personality variables which play an important role in determining strategic self-presentation behaviors. More specifically, their work demonstrated that people in high public SC were more

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