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## Social comparison on Facebook: Its antecedents and psychological outcomes

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## ABSTRACT

Previous studies have investigated the role of social comparison on Facebook. The social comparison process occurring on Facebook and its impacts, however, has not been fully captured. Thus, the present study examined the associations among Facebook use, social comparison orientation on Facebook (SCOF), and psychological outcomes represented by perceived social support and mental health. Also, the role of self-esteem and impression management was explored as antecedents of SCOF. Using a sample of college students ( $N = 313$ ), the study found a positive association between Facebook use and SCOF. Facebook use was positively associated with perceived social support, yet it was not significantly associated with mental health. The study also found a negative association between SCOF and mental health. However, there was no significant association between SCOF and perceived social support. Finally, both self-esteem and impression management were positively associated with SCOF. Theoretical implications were discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Social networking sites (SNSs) have provided a convenient venue for sharing personal information with networked individuals. From expressing one's thoughts and feelings to presenting details of daily life, millions of SNS users share their life events on SNSs, and one's SNS use consequently involves viewing how or what others are doing. Overflowing information about others' life events presented on SNSs then raises a question about how people perceive and feel about it.

Related to such a question, one of the domains that draw recent scholarly attention is social comparison behavior on Facebook, which implies that viewing of others' life events on Facebook might negatively affect one's psychological well-being. Specifically, it is suggested that the environment of Facebook prompts social comparison with others who seem to be doing better (Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles, 2014). As a result, active Facebook users are more likely than non-active ones to perceive that others have happier and better lives and that life is unfair (Chou & Edge, 2012). Lee (2014) also showed that intensive Facebook use is associated

with frequent social comparison behaviors with Facebook friends. Further, Lee (2014) found that the more social comparison, the higher level of anxiety and depression. These intriguing findings provide a helpful view in exploring the ways in which Facebook use leads to negative psychological outcomes. To fully capture the social comparison process occurring on Facebook and its impacts, the present study seeks to extend previous research.

Past studies paid attention only to affective attributes resulted from social comparison on Facebook. Although depression or anxiety can be major outcomes that social comparison gives rise to, there could be another type of outcome. As a sense of similarity or difference with comparison targets can affect one's perception on availability of supportive others (Thoits, 1986), perceived social support is included as another psychological outcome of social comparison in the present study. Further, there can be specific personal characteristics that drive one to engage in social comparison more easily or frequently (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). Considering that not all people are engaged in social comparison with the same degree or frequency (Collins, 1996), exploring those characteristics will provide meaningful insights into investigating who is more vulnerable to negative psychological outcomes from Facebook use. The current study examines two factors, self-esteem and impression management, which possibly predict social comparison behavior.

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Taken together, the goal of the current study is to suggest a path model, which delineates the associations among Facebook use, social comparison, and psychological outcomes as represented by perceived social support and mental health. In addition, the role of self-esteem and impression management is explored as antecedents of social comparison on Facebook.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Social comparison on Facebook

The basic premise of the theory of social comparison processes is that one has “a drive to evaluate his opinions and his abilities” (Festinger, 1954, p. 117). In particular, the theory posits that, when evaluating, individuals prefer to make it accurate by using objective standards or information. If such objective criteria are unavailable, however, people evaluate their thoughts and behaviors by affiliating others (i.e., comparison targets) who are at a similar level in terms of characteristics or background (Festinger, 1954). Derived from Festinger’s theory, later research suggests that social comparison is unavoidable in everyday life and it takes place in a variety of occasions (Collins, 1996) “by means of competition, cooperation, discussion, or merely observing others” (Swallow & Kuiper, 1988, p. 59). Indeed, ample research shows that people compare themselves with others in a variety of dimensions such as personality, wealth, lifestyle (Wheeler & Miyake, 1992) as well as physical attractiveness (Cattarin, Thompson, Thomas, & Williams, 2000; Tiggemann & McGill, 2004).

Based upon the suggestions above, Vogel et al. (2014) claimed that Facebook is a venue that facilitates social comparison behavior with the following reasons. First, when using Facebook, one can easily see information about how others are doing. Abundant information about others’ lives can be an advantageous resource for people who seek out comparison targets for self-evaluation. Second, given that most Facebook friends tend to share similar backgrounds, comparison targets sought on Facebook are more likely to have similar attributes than those sought in other settings (Hargittai, 2007). In parallel, empirical findings demonstrate that people are often engaged in social comparison on Facebook by comparing body images (Haferkamp & Krämer, 2011; Lee, Lee, Choi, Kim, & Han, 2014a) or career achievements presented on Facebook profiles (Haferkamp & Krämer, 2011). Thus, if one frequently uses Facebook, she or he is more likely to encounter comparison targets and has opportunities to compare herself or himself with those targets. Then, it is expected that, as one uses Facebook more actively, she or he is more likely to engage in social comparison activities. In the present study, we employ social comparison orientation on Facebook (SCOF) as the variable of social comparison, which refers to the degree to which one engages in social comparison activity on Facebook.

**H1.** Facebook use is positively associated with SCOF.

### 2.2. Psychological outcomes from social comparison on Facebook

There are two directions of social comparison: downward comparison and upward comparison. Downward comparison refers to selecting comparison targets who are less capable or fortunate than oneself so as to feel better or relieved as a result of comparison (Wills, 1981). On the other hand, upward comparison is comparing oneself with those who are superior to or more capable than oneself as she or he has a drive for self-improvement (Collins, 1996). Festinger (1954) claimed that “there is a unidirectional drive upward” (p. 124). That is, as better performances are regarded desirable in most societies (Festinger, 1954), individuals are likely to

select comparison targets that show (slightly) better performances in the dimension they seek to compare (Wheeler, 1966).

Facebook prompts upward comparison as its users tend to present positive aspects of them (Vogel et al., 2014). Walther’s (1996) hyperpersonal model for computer-mediated communication suggests that individuals have a tendency to present their best face online as they intend to create favorable impressions to others. A large volume of research on SNSs and self-presentation demonstrates that individuals prefer to display their aspects of which they find desirable or feel proud (e.g., Gonzales & Hancock, 2011; Haferkamp, Eimler, Papadakis, & Kruck, 2012; Hancock & Toma, 2009). Then, viewers of the content are supposed to look at mostly positive aspects of others, and this may increase the possibility of upward comparison as one will reflect on others’ positive images to appraise her or his own.

The nature of Facebook facilitating upward comparison can generate a negative influence on viewers’ perceived social support. Social support is defined as exchange of informational-, instrumental-, or emotional support in a social network when one lies in an unfavorable situation so as to help her or him to cope with the adversity (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Thoits, 1986). Thus, perceived social support is one’s perception about availability of social networks that can offer supportive resources (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988). People can benefit from having comparison targets who are similar to them because advice or assistance sought from others who have gone through similar situations are the most helpful (Thoits, 1986). For example, facing similar problems or having similar background predicted credibility of support providers as well as satisfaction with the support provided in online support groups (Wright, 2000).

Conversely, if one believes that most friends are divergent from her or him, she or he might perceive that there are few people to offer support. This perception can be augmented by the nature of Facebook where upward comparison is prevalent (Vogel et al., 2014). In the context of upward comparison, one may experience a sense of competition (Festinger, 1954), and social networks can be seen as a source of stress, which threatens one’s perception of social support availability (Fiore, Becker, & Coppel, 1983). Further, if a sense of competition or stress is pronounced due to upward comparison, one may not be able to expect reassurance of self-worthiness that social support networks will offer (Thoits, 1985). After all, the tendency of upward comparison with others may lead to increases in competition and stress, which dampens the perception of social support availability. Therefore, individuals oriented to upward comparison on Facebook are less likely to perceive presence of support providers.

In addition, upward comparison processes occurring on Facebook can provoke negative psychological responses such as mental distress and anxiety (Gibbons, 1986; Gibbons & Gerrard, 1989), given that looking at superior others generates feelings of relative deprivation that one has fewer possessions or abilities than those people (Smith & Pettigrew, 2011). Or, one may feel pressures that she or he should catch up with the superior (Festinger, 1954). Research indicates that upward comparison with attractive body images displayed on SNSs increases depressive mood and anxiety about weight (Lee et al., 2014b). Also, people reported more distress when exposed to others’ Facebook profiles with successful career (Haferkamp & Krämer, 2011). With these reasons, it is presumable that as individuals are more oriented toward social comparison on Facebook, they are more likely to report a lower level of mental health.

**H2a.** SCOF is negatively associated with perceived social support.

**H2b.** SCOF is negatively associated with mental health.

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