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Facebook use depending on age: The influence of social comparisons[☆]Phillip Ozimek^{*}, Hans-Werner Bierhoff

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ABSTRACT

Facebook use is analyzed depending on age and occurrence of social comparisons. The hypotheses state that age is negatively associated with Facebook use and that this association is mediated by social comparison orientation. Data collection was realized via the Internet. The online-questionnaire included information on Facebook use on the basis of a behavioral report (cf., McAndrew & Jeong, 2012), an inventory for measuring social comparison orientation by Gibbons and Buunk (1999), and demographic questions. Results are based on 335 participants. They confirm both the negative association between age and frequency of Facebook activities and the mediation of this association by comparison orientation. These results are interpreted on the basis of evolutionary theory. This study offers new insights on the mediating role of social comparisons in the relationship between age and Facebook use. In the discussion suggestions for further routes of research on the link between age, comparison orientation, and Facebook use are outlined.

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1. Introduction

Facebook, which has existed since 2004, has become the biggest social online platform. It offers millions of users a platform for daily communication and interaction including uploading pictures, sharing contributions and commenting on them, interacting within “Facebook groups”, or chatting with other users. Facebook provides new research opportunities for social scientists. We focus on two research questions that were suggested by Wilson, Gosling, and Graham (2012): who is using Facebook and why do people use Facebook?

Research shows that self-esteem is enhanced by considering and editing one's own profile (compared with a condition of objective self-awareness; Gonzales & Hancock, 2011) although negative mood effects on readers of Facebook profiles also occur (Lee, 2014). In addition, people scoring highly on narcissism questionnaires may use Facebook as a medium for their self-aggrandizement because they are provided with the opportunity to present an ideal profile of themselves to others (Brailovskaia & Bierhoff, 2016; Mehdizadeh, 2010). People who score highly on

narcissism - compared with moderate and low scorers - reveal more intimate and more detailed information including more self-promotion in status updates (Winter et al., 2014). Finally, frequency of Facebook use is positively related to social comparison frequency (Lee, 2014). Therefore, the conclusion is justified that social comparison constitutes an important motive for Facebook use.

Another focus of research is on description in terms of demographic variables of Facebook users including age and gender. For example, Stefanone, Lackaff, and Rosen (2011) found that women participate in larger social networks than men. In this study we focus on the age variable and on the activities of Facebook users. Specifically, we investigate differences in Facebook activity intensity between older and younger users. Previous research indicates that age and Facebook use intensity are negatively related (McAndrew & Jeong, 2012). In the same vein, younger participants report that they disclose more personal information on Facebook than older participants (Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2012).

This study is not only planned as a replication of results which indicate that Facebook use intensity decreases with age, but also as a test of a plausible explanation of this inverse association which is based on interest in social comparison. We assume the existence of a trajectory from age via interest in social comparison to Facebook use intensity. The major theoretical perspective on which the explanation of the age effect on Facebook use is based is evolutionary psychology (cf. Buss, 2004; Miller, 2000). In the discussion section we will mention practical implications of the results of our research.

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1.1. Behavior = $f(\text{Age})$

The age variable serves as a proxy of developmental change. In addition, it is very popular in developmental and experimental psychology because it is highly visible, easy to measure, and because it accounts of substantial amounts of variance in many dependent variables (Wohlwill, 1970, 1973). These are some of the reasons why age is important to study.

The basic paradigm $\text{Behavior} = f(\text{Age})$ encourages research which typically is descriptive rather than hypothesis testing. But the distinction between description and explanation vanishes if underlying variables which may cause the developmental change observed are taken into account. Because studies that employ the paradigm $\text{Behavior} = f(\text{Age})$ tend to be descriptive it is important to identify intervening variables which mediate the variation of behavior with age (Wohlwill, 1970).

From their overview of research on Facebook use Wilson et al. (2012) derive the suggestion that Facebook use decreases with age and that younger users have much more Facebook friends than older users. This review was based on publications including the year 2010. In correspondence with their suggestion McAndrew and Jeong's (2012) research revealed an inverse relationship between age and the amount of Facebook activity. In addition, they contributed to a more comprehensive description of Facebook use by distinguishing nine different Facebook activities (e.g., "seeking personal information about others", "photo impression management", and "linking") and by developing a questionnaire for the assessment of the frequency of these different activities. In correspondence with the $\text{Behavior} = f(\text{Age})$ paradigm they obtained behavioral reports about the occurrence of these activities.

1.2. Social comparison processes

Social comparisons are based on the observation of others. They frequently occur in the domains of achievement, interpersonal relationships, and health. They serve the reduction of subjective uncertainty with respect to achievements, opinions, values, and problems (Lee, 2014). Social comparison theory which originally was developed by Festinger (1954) assumes that similarity of the comparison person constitutes an important criterion for the information value which is derived from social comparisons (cf., Bierhoff & Frey, 2011; Goethals & Darley, 1977; Mussweiler & Strack, 2000). In addition, social comparisons elicit repercussions on self-evaluation (Collins, 1996) and may be associated with either positive or negative feelings. For example, Lee (2014) reported a positive correlation between frequency of social comparison on Facebook and the elicitation of negative feelings. More specifically, people who often compare with others on Facebook tend to come to the conclusion that they are relatively worse than the comparison person. This effect is, among other things, due to the fact that Facebook users mainly emphasize their positive traits on their profile pages (cf., Gonzales & Hancock, 2011). Recipients may infer from the comparison with other Facebook users that they are less 'perfect' than the other users who serve as comparison persons.

Facebook provides users a platform for self-presentation (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011). On social network sites people track how others present themselves, what they do, and how they interact with others (Lee, 2014). In this context it is likely that social comparison processes are elicited. This assumption corresponds with the suggestion of Mussweiler, Rüter, and Epstude (2006) that social comparison processes are always triggered when people are confronted with information about other people (see also Mussweiler & Strack, 2000). Therefore, Facebook is likely to elicit many social comparisons, because users constantly receive personal information, status updates, photos and news of their friends.

The aim of this study is to replicate the inverse relationship between age and amount of Facebook activity. In addition, based on the assumption that interest in social comparisons decreases with age the proposition is examined that interest in social comparisons mediates the negative correlation between age and amount of Facebook activity.

1.3. Evolutionary psychology

Evolutionary psychology is based on Charles Darwin's hypotheses about natural and sexual selection (Darwin, 1871), which were developed further by biologists and psychologists like David Buss, William Hamilton, Robert Trivers and Edward Wilson (cf., Buss, 2004, 2007). Principles of evolutionary psychology were applied to many real life problems. For example, the spread of gossip may be explained with propositions which are derived from evolutionary psychology (McAndrew, Bell, & Garcia, 2007).

Furthermore, Piazza and Bering (2009) applied the theoretical framework of evolutionary psychology to internet behavior. They concluded that evolutionary thinking is relevant in four internet domains: mating and sexual competition, kinship, social exchange, and personal information management. All of these domains are covered by behavior on online social network sites.

The fact that evolutionary psychology refers to genetic determinants of behavior does not mean that environmental influences are ignored or considered as less important because evolutionary adaptations always take place in response to environmental challenges. In addition, what an individual does in a specific environment is not pre-programmed by genes but the result of a complex interplay of the shared human genetic makeup, individual traits, social learning, and perception of the immediate social circumstances (cf., Buss, 2004).

McAndrew and Jeong (2012) assumed that social comparison processes have an evolutionary basis because it might be valuable for social actors to collect information about competitors. Because mating takes place in the context of sexual competition, it is important to fulfill expectations of potential mates and to infer information about own standing relative to competitors on dimensions, which are favorably evaluated by potential mates. This reasoning is in accordance with Darwin's sexual selection theory (Darwin, 1871; Miller, 2000), which focuses on adaptations, which serve successful mating. Darwin's theory of sexual selection identifies two selection processes: intrasexual competition and intersexual selection (Buss, 2007). The first process refers to rivalry among mates of the same gender, whereas the second process refers to choice preferences: preferential mate choices, which are based on consensus of members of the opposite gender regarding desired traits, enhance the reproduction success of mates whose traits correspond with the preferences of the opposite gender (Buss, 2007). We assume that individuals who focus on social comparison have a mate advantage in the process of sexual selection because they have better chances to win the intrasexual competition and to attract choices of the opposite gender (intersexual selection).

In addition, we assume that adolescents and young adults experience more sexual competition and selection pressures than older adults. In correspondence with this reasoning, Miller (2007) suggests that the cognitive processing behind mating mechanisms peak in young adulthood although some mental fitness indicators peak later.

In accordance with this theorizing, McAndrew and Jeong (2012) interpreted the negative correlation between age and amount of Facebook activity on the basis of evolutionary psychology by assuming that a decrease in evolutionary pressure, which is presumably caused by sexual competition, leads to less interest in

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