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'It's complicated': Facebook's relationship with the need to belong and depression

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'Facebook depression' findings have been mixed. One reason for the conflicting results may be Facebook's complex relationship with relatedness needs and depressive symptoms. Thus, this article reviewed the existing literature to better elucidate these associations. Facebook use appears to be motivated by *both* connection and disconnection (and vice versa), which in turn, has implications for users' mental health. Additionally, Facebook engagement promoting connection (e.g., dialog with friends) seems to improve well-being whereas disconnecting activities (e.g., evaluative social comparisons) may lead to negative consequences. A key to understanding 'Facebook depression' may be to explore Facebook's built-in features, which may be provoking and proliferating users' negative affect. This article identifies established theories related to these mechanisms, in order to guide future research.

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In a little over a decade, Facebook has become *the* most powerful and pervasive social networking site in the world. With 936 million users accessing Facebook daily [1], Facebook has revolutionized and redefined day-to-day social interactions. Moreover, being part of this cyber 'global village' may be appealing since it offers the prospect of fulfilling relatedness needs 'on demand'. Self-determination theory postulates that meeting one's relatedness needs (e.g., belongingness, connectedness, and intimacy) is an essential element to well-being [2]. Therefore, a few basic questions seem to underlie much of the current literature: Does Facebook make users feel more connected or more disconnected from others? Moreover, what implications does Facebook use have on users' affective well-being (e.g., depressive symptoms levels)?

I will delve into how the research addresses both of these questions. Specifically, this article navigates and elucidates some conflicting results surrounding 'Facebook depression' research. Moreover, I propose that one of the keys to understanding how Facebook influences users' well-being may be to examine built-in features, which might contribute to fostering and even perpetuating depressive symptomatology. That is, what is it about Facebook's virtual landscape which might predispose some users to experience depressive symptoms? Thus, the latter half of this article is dedicated to (1) identifying some of Facebook's integral mechanisms which might contribute to the etiology of 'Facebook depression' and (2) suggesting concrete, conceptually based theories which may help to explain how these specific Facebook mechanisms might provoke depressive symptoms.

Facebook use and relatedness needs

Research demonstrates that Facebook use may fuel *both* connection and disconnection (and vice versa). For instance, Facebook use not only appears to facilitate socially skilled individuals (e.g., extroverts) in communicating more frequently with others [3] but also aids those less socially adept (e.g., shy) in improving their friendship quality [4]. In addition, Facebook may be a useful platform to cultivate social capital [5]. Relatedly, Facebook engagement has been found to be positively associated with greater perceived social support [6]. Furthermore, posting about one's romantic relationship on Facebook has been associated with increased connectedness [7,8] and greater commitment [9]. Conversely, studies have also demonstrated dystopic, interpersonal effects related to Facebook use. For example, cyberbullies have used Facebook as a conduit to perpetrate victimization of Facebook 'friends' [10]. Furthermore, other studies have demonstrated that Facebook may increase conflict in romantic relationships; thus, Facebook usage has been linked to greater jealousy [11], increased relationship dissatisfaction [12], and other negative, relationship-oriented consequences (e.g., cheating) [13].

Positive and negative affective states and Facebook use

Similarly, Facebook use has been associated with *both* positive and negative mental and affective states. For instance, greater Facebook engagement has been linked to mature coping and higher possibility for self-actualization [14]. Additionally, viewing one's own Facebook profile has been associated with increased self-esteem [15,16]. Moreover, a study measuring psychophysiological

data among 30 regular Facebook users found that participants exhibited physiological indicators of positive valence and high arousal while perusing Facebook. Hence, the authors concluded that people may feel compelled to use Facebook because they anticipate experiencing positive emotions [17**].

Conversely, Facebook use has also been linked to negative psychological outcomes. For instance, increased use has been found to be positively correlated with loneliness [18], and high social anxiety [19]. Additionally, high negative affect has been shown to be positively related to use. In an experiment, participants were exposed to potentially jealousy-inducing Facebook wall posts and were asked to imagine how they would feel if this type of post was displayed on their romantic partner's wall. A message which might be construed as flirtatious (e.g., 'It was great to see you last night') in combination with a face-wink emoticon elicited the greatest self-reported, negative emotions as compared to other conditions (e.g., text only) [20].

The 'Facebook depression' phenomenon

The term 'Facebook depression' was defined in a clinical report as depressive symptomatology which occurs after spending too much time on Facebook [21]. However, as previously mentioned, the literature on the relationship between Facebook and depressive symptoms has been somewhat contradictory. A majority of studies seem to provide evidence for 'Facebook depression' [(e.g., 22,23)]. As a result, Facebook use and declines in well-being have been often studied in the context of possible co-occurring factors, such as envy [24], rumination [22,25,26], and social comparison [22,27,28].

However, a number of studies have failed to find a relationship between Facebook activity and depressive symptoms. For instance, a study found that, although increased internet engagement and level of internet addiction were positively associated with depressive symptoms, time spent on Facebook was found to be unrelated [29]. Moreover, a study failed to evidence a relationship between use of social networking sites and depressive symptoms among adolescents [30].

Perhaps, the reason for these mixed results is because the question as to whether Facebook fulfills or fails to fulfill core relatedness needs is more sophisticated than an 'either/or' proposition. Low levels of relatedness are negatively associated with well-being [2]; and thus, may be positively related to depressive symptoms. Sheldon and colleagues [31**] conducted a series of studies and found relatedness needs to be both a motive for and outcome of Facebook use. Thus, the authors proposed a two-process view of Facebook use and relatedness in which connectedness increases likelihood of Facebook engagement due to positive experiences/reinforcement

whereas disconnection also drives Facebook use, perhaps, due to coping motives.

Along these lines, people who are low on relatedness (e.g. lonely, anxious, or depressed individuals) may feel compelled to use Facebook because they believe that engagement will increase their social support or improve their mood. However, routine, obsessive engagement may lead to Facebook addiction [32]. Sagioglou and Greitemeyer [33*] proposed that one reason for why people fail to discontinue use despite experiencing negative consequences is that they may be committing an affective forecasting error (e.g., users fail to accurately predict the negative emotions they will experience following Facebook use).

Taken together, the research indicates that users may be engaging in increased Facebook use because they believe it will satisfy their relatedness needs, which in turn, will result in greater well-being. However, increased engagement may in fact prompt a downward spiral in which users feel more disconnected and consequently, experience a decline in well-being (e.g., greater depressive symptoms). Ironically, these negative feelings may trigger even greater Facebook engagement in order to compensate for the lack of fulfillment on relatedness needs. In essence, this creates a self-perpetuating, continual feedback loop, which may possibly lead to Facebook addiction. However, while existing literature explicates the processes behind 'Facebook depression,' there is a paucity of existing research investigating the features of the Facebook environment which might allow this phenomenon to occur. Therefore, the remainder of this article attempts to bridge this gap in the literature.

Facebook mechanisms associated with relatedness and depression

Facebook possesses many built-in mechanisms; however, due to the brevity of this review, I will only examine a handful of important, salient features and related theories, which might help to explain the 'Facebook depression' phenomenon. First and foremost, status updates serve as the primary mode of communication among Facebook users. They provide the user with the opportunity to notify their friends about current life events or talk about self-relevant issues, interests, or musings and are streamed on others' news feeds (the first page users see after logging on). Furthermore, they can take the form of text, photos, videos, links to other webpages, or a combination of factors (e.g., text accompanying a photo). In turn, Facebook friends have the opportunity to acknowledge and approve of a status update through 'likes' (represented by a thumbs up symbol). Moreover, comments posted to a status update potentially open up a dialog about its content.

Nadkarni and Hofmann [34**] proposed a dual process model of Facebook use which identified two primary

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