

# The interplay between Facebook use, social comparison, envy, and depression

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In their Facebook profiles, users communicate abundant social comparison information conveying mainly positive self-portrayals. Thereby, social networking sites like Facebook provide a fertile ground for envy. This has been proposed as a mechanism for the potential negative effects of Facebook use on well-being and depression. This article reviews research on this process. Studies show that (especially passive) Facebook use indeed predicts different measures of social comparison as well as envy. In several studies social comparison or envy mediate a positive association between Facebook use and undesirable affective outcomes such as depression. However, causal relationships have not yet been sufficiently established. Methodological and conceptual variety across studies limits their comparability, but reveals viable ideas for future research.

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Current Opinion in Psychology 2016, 9:44–49

This review comes from a themed issue on **Social media and applications to health behavior**

Edited by **Melissa A Lewis** and **Clayton Neighbors**

For a complete overview see the [Issue](#) and the [Editorial](#)

Available online 9th October 2015

[doi:10.1016/j.copsyc.2015.10.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2015.10.006)

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## Introduction

The term ‘Facebook Depression’ has become a mass media headline [1] suggesting detrimental effects of social networking sites (SNSs). The available empirical evidence is equivocal however, sometimes suggesting a positive [2–5], a non-existent [6], or even a negative [7–9] relationship between Facebook use and depression. Given that sites such as Facebook serve a diversity of purposes [10,11], treating them as a one-dimensional construct is likely an oversimplification [4,5] resulting in conceptual imprecision (for an overview, see [12••]). Investigating the specific processes at work may disentangle these disparate findings. Recently, social comparison and envy have been suggested

to be relevant in the association between Facebook and depressed mood. Here, we review the evidence, consider methodological issues, and discuss open questions.

## Comparison and envy in an SNS context

Social comparison is a fundamental psychological process governing how people think about themselves or others [13]. In SNSs, social comparison is ubiquitous because comparison information (e.g., friend count) is more salient than offline [14,15]. SNS self-presentation is frequently motivated by impression management [16] and the presented information is positively skewed [17,18]. Consequently, the probability of unflattering social comparisons increases [12••]. Negative social comparisons are at the core of envy [19], so the chance for envy to thrive is high [20•]. Additionally, users mainly interact with friends and peers on Facebook [7,21]. This implies both similarity to comparison standards and high personal relevance, two factors fueling social comparisons and envy alike [19]. Indeed, painful social comparison and envy are among the most often reported stressors [22] and sources of frustration on Facebook [23].

Most SNS-related studies conceptualize envy or negative social comparisons as causal factors of depression [e.g., 24,25•,26•]. Indeed, envy and depression have been linked outside of Facebook research [27–29], but the causal relationship is far from clear [19]. Arguably, the lack of self-esteem [30] and the tendency to compare themselves negatively with others [31] might make depressed individuals also particularly prone to envy. This should be kept in mind when drawing conclusions from the studies reviewed below.

## Cross-sectional studies

Cross-sectional evidence demonstrates a positive correlation between the amount of Facebook use and the frequency of social comparisons on Facebook [15,24,32,33•]. A similar pattern emerges for the impression of being inferior [34] and ‘Facebook envy’ [20•,23]. Some of these studies [20•,23,24,32] have documented an association between social comparison or envy and negative affective outcomes. In three studies, envy and social comparison, respectively, mediated the relationship between Facebook use and depression-related outcomes [15,20•,23].

Because of the cross-sectional designs, no claims can be made about causal relations. While it is tacitly assumed that SNS envy causes depressed mood, the reverse pathway of depression causing envy is equally plausible [26•].

In addition, the assessment of both Facebook use and social comparison has mostly relied on unvalidated, retrospective self-report measures, sometimes based on only one item [24]. The fact that these measures do not differentiate between specific Facebook activities and are susceptible to recall biases calls them further into question (e.g. [2\*\*,12\*\*]).

### Prospective studies

Prospective studies investigated the predictive value of SNS social comparison for depression. In a sample of high school students, the tendency to socially compare oneself in SNSs predicted changes in depressive symptomatology one year later [25\*]. Similarly, the tendency to compare oneself unfavorably to others on Facebook, but not the general habit to socially compare oneself, predicted depressive symptoms at three weeks follow-up in a study by Feinstein and colleagues [26\*]. In both studies, the reverse pathway was not investigated.

### Diary and experience sampling (ES) studies

Diary studies address several weaknesses associated with retrospective self-reports. For example, over a 2-week period Steers and colleagues [32] asked participants about their daily Facebook experiences. Any type of social comparison, including favorable comparison, mediated a positive correlation between frequent Facebook use and depressed mood. Depression, in contrast, did not predict Facebook use. However, analyses of correlations were not lagged. Thus, a causal influence of depression on negative Facebook comparison is still conceivable, as are other constellations.

In an ES study by Verduyn and colleagues [35\*\*], participants reported their Facebook use, envy, and well-being 5 times per day for 6 days. Lagged analyses revealed that passive (e.g., viewing others' profiles), but not active Facebook use (e.g., posting) predicted subsequent declines in well-being, which was fully mediated by envy. The results were not influenced by baseline depression or life-satisfaction and life-satisfaction was unrelated to Facebook-use. The finding that passive Facebook use predicted changes in well-being over time while the opposite pathway was not significant supports a causal chain from passive Facebook use through envy to depression. However, variables confounded with Facebook use might still have contributed to the effect. For example, people potentially log into Facebook more often when they are bored [36]. The findings demonstrate that depressiveness is associated with higher levels of envy, especially when comparison standards are high.

### Experimental studies

Causal relationships between Facebook use, social comparison, envy, and depression have also been established experimentally. For example, in a study about women's

body image [37], women instructed to spend ten minutes looking at their Facebook page rated their mood lower than those looking at control websites. Furthermore, participants in the Facebook condition who had a strong tendency to compare their attractiveness to others were less satisfied with their physical appearance, providing indirect support for the role of social comparison processes.

Similar results were obtained by Vogel and colleagues [33\*]. Mood, self-esteem, and positive self-views of individuals with a strong social comparison orientation dropped significantly after briefly looking at a casual friend's Facebook profile compared to participants seeing their own profile or those visiting a non-social website. Mediation by social comparison was not tested.

Haferkamp and Krämer [14] found that constructed SNS profiles representing highly attractive comparison standards caused worse mood and less satisfaction with one's appearance compared to unattractive standards. Note that social comparison was not directly measured, yielding only indirect evidence for comparative processes. Moreover, personal relevance, a prerequisite for social comparison and envy [19], was likely limited because profiles were not realistic-looking and featured unfamiliar owners. Finally, the lack of a neutral control group makes it possible that low comparison standards led to better outcomes instead of high standards having a negative impact.

Focusing on self-esteem, Vogel and colleagues [15] presented constructed SNS profiles depicting comparison targets high or low in healthiness or popularity, respectively. The results suggested detrimental effects of being confronted with high standards, but were not clear-cut. On some measures, participants' self-evaluation was lower after seeing the popular compared to the unpopular target, other measures were affected by the healthiness-manipulation.

Appel and colleagues [38\*] also used constructed, but realistic-looking and gender-matched Facebook profiles. Depressed and non-depressed participants saw one of two profiles conveying either a highly desirable or an undesirable life of the profile owner. Compared to unattractive profiles, attractive profiles caused participants to perceive themselves as inferior and to feel more envy, with inferiority predicting envy. Depressed participants felt more inferior and envious than controls, especially in the high standard condition.

Finally, Verduyn and colleagues [35\*\*] conducted an experiment explicitly investigating the complete causal chain of Facebook use on well-being mediated by social comparison. Participants who browsed their own Facebook feed passively for ten minutes reported lower well-being

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