



# Facebook and self-perception: Individual susceptibility to negative social comparison on Facebook



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## ABSTRACT

Social network sites such as Facebook give off the impression that others are doing better than we are. As a result, the use of these sites may lead to negative social comparison (i.e., feeling like others are doing better than oneself). According to social comparison theory, such negative social comparisons are detrimental to perceptions about the self. The current study therefore investigated the indirect relationship between Facebook use and self-perceptions through negative social comparison. Because happier people process social information differently than unhappier people, we also investigated whether the relationship between Facebook use and social comparison and, as a result, self-perception, differs depending on the degree of happiness of the emerging adult. A survey among 231 emerging adults (age 18–25) showed that Facebook use was related to a greater degree of negative social comparison, which was in turn related negatively to self-perceived social competence and physical attractiveness. The indirect relationship between Facebook use and self-perception through negative social comparison was attenuated among happier individuals, as the relationship between Facebook use and negative social comparison was weaker among happier individuals. SNS use was thus negatively related to self-perception through negative social comparison, especially among unhappy individuals.

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## 1. Introduction

Social network sites (SNSs), such as Facebook, are notorious for giving off the impression that other people are living better lives than we are (Chou & Edge, 2012). People generally present themselves and their lives positively on SNSs (Dorethy, Fiebert, & Warren, 2014) for example by posting pictures in which they look their best (Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008) and are having a good time with their friends (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). The vast majority of time spent on SNSs consists of viewing these idealized SNS profiles, pictures, and status updates of others (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009). Such information about how others are doing may impact how people see themselves, that is, their self-perceptions because people base their self-perceptions at least partly on how they are doing in comparison to others (Festinger, 1954). These potential effects of SNS use on self-perceptions through social comparison are the focus of the current study.

Previous research on the effects of SNSs on self-perceptions has focused predominantly on the implications of social interactions on these websites (e.g., feedback from others) (Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006) or due to editing and viewing content about the self on SNS (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011). However, the potential impact of SNS use on self-perception resulting from passively browsing others'

profiles has received less attention. This is surprising, given that viewing others' profiles is the most prevalent SNS activity (Pempek et al., 2009) and the social information encountered in this way may impact self-perceptions through social comparison (Festinger, 1954). The current study therefore investigates the potential effects of SNS use on self-perception through social comparison. In addition, we test whether and how these indirect effects of SNS use on self-perception are subject to individual differences. More specifically, we investigate if the degree of happiness of the individual moderates the indirect effect of SNS use on self-perception. We focus on individual differences in happiness because social information affects the self-perceptions of happier people differently than the self-perceptions of unhappier people (Cummins & Nistico, 2002).

The current study focuses on individual differences in the effects of the use of "Facebook" on self-perceptions among emerging adults for several reasons. Facebook is currently the most popular SNS worldwide (Statista, 2014) among emerging adults. Emerging adulthood is of special interest because this age group uses social media intensively (Coyne, Padilla-Walker, & Howard, 2013) and because the formation of self-perceptions is a central task in this developmental period (Arnett, 2000). Furthermore, self-perceptions are related to well-being (Diener & Diener, 1995; Orth, Robins, & Roberts, 2008; Swann, Chang-Schneider, & Larsen McClarty, 2007). Negative self-perceptions predict depressive symptoms (Orth et al., 2008) whereas more positive self-perceptions are strongly and positively related to subjective well-being (Diener & Diener, 1995). Therefore, uncovering the effects of

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SNS use on self-perception, understanding which processes underlie this relationship, and identifying which emerging adults are especially vulnerable to negative effects is crucial for the prevention of negative effects of SNS use on well-being. At the same time, the study answers the call for a stronger focus on psychological mechanisms and individual differences in media effects research (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013) and hence contributes to the development of our theoretical understanding of (social) media effects.

### 1.1. Social network sites, social comparison, and self-perception

According to social comparison theory, we base our self-perceptions at least partly on how we think we are doing in comparison to others (Festinger, 1954). Perceiving the self as doing worse than others leads to less favorable self-perceptions (Festinger, 1954). Importantly, evidence has emerged that among emerging adults more intense Facebook use is related to more frequent social comparison (Lee, 2014). This social comparison is predominantly negative, that is, it is associated with the feeling that other Facebook users are better off (Lee, 2014). Furthermore, people who use Facebook more intensely are more inclined to believe that others are having better lives than they are (Chou & Edge, 2012). These findings are not surprising given the idealized self-presentation that occurs on Facebook (Manago et al., 2008).

According to social comparison theory, negative social comparison, that is, the feeling that others are better off, will specifically impact self-perceptions in the domains in which the individual sees other people doing better than he or she is doing (Festinger, 1954). In line with this notion, experimental research has shown that viewing the Facebook profile of a peer who is physically attractive or has a successful career can have a negative impact on self-perceived attractiveness and self-perceived career success (Haferkamp & Krämer, 2011). Because emerging adults' Facebook posts and pictures frequently display the user as popular (Zhao et al., 2008) and physically attractive (Manago et al., 2008), negative social comparison on Facebook likely influences self-perceptions in the domains of social competence and physical appearance. We therefore hypothesized:

**H1.** Among emerging adults a) more intense Facebook use is related to a greater degree of negative social comparison on Facebook (i.e., more frequently thinking that others are better off when looking at Facebook posts of others), which b) is in turn related to lower self-perceived social competence and physical attractiveness. Therefore, c) Facebook use is negatively related to self-perceptions of social competence and physical attractiveness through negative social comparison.

### 1.2. The protective role of happiness

The hypothesized threat that Facebook use poses to self-perceptions (H1) may be attenuated among people who select and interpret the social information on Facebook in ways that are less detrimental to self-perceptions. First, individuals who select comparison targets who are not doing better than they are avoid negative effects on their self-perceptions (Cummins & Nistico, 2002). On Facebook, users may thus protect their self-perceptions by selectively diverting their attention from updates about others' accomplishments and positive experiences. Second, people can interpret social information in ways that evoke more positive self-perceptions (Suls, Martin, & Wheeler, 2002). Facebook posts about others' positive experiences and accomplishments can for instance be interpreted as "I will experience/achieve similar things" instead of "other people are doing better than I am" (i.e., negative social comparison). As a result, individuals can process social information on Facebook in ways that do not give rise to negative social comparison and therefore do not result in more negative self-perceptions.

The way social information is processed is subject to individual differences. One trait that predicts how individuals process social

information is their degree of happiness, also referred to as subjective well-being (Cummins & Nistico, 2002; Lyubomirsky & Ross, 1997). For example, being outperformed by a peer leads to decreased self-rated abilities among unhappy people, but does not influence happy people (Lyubomirsky & Ross, 1997). In a similar vein, the vast amounts of social information encountered on Facebook may be processed in less negative ways by happier people. Happier people may engage in less negative social comparison on Facebook, and, as a result, be less vulnerable to negative effects on self-perception.

Happiness consists of affective/emotional and cognitive-judgmental components and can be domain specific or global (Pavot & Diener, 2004). How persons process social information on Facebook may be associated in particular with a global cognitive-judgmental component of happiness: life satisfaction. Life satisfaction is one's general satisfaction with life (Pavot & Diener, 2004) and is a relatively stable trait (Schimmack, Diener, & Oishi, 2002). Individuals who report greater satisfaction with life are characterized by more positive processing of self-relevant information including social comparison information (Cummins & Nistico, 2002). Life satisfaction may therefore also moderate the way social comparison information is processed on Facebook. We hypothesized:

**H2.** a) The relationship between more intense Facebook use and more negative social comparison on Facebook is weaker among emerging adults who are happier (H1a). Therefore, b) the hypothesized indirect negative relationship between Facebook use and self-perceived social competence and self-perceived physical attractiveness through negative social comparison (H1c) is attenuated among emerging adults who report greater satisfaction with life. All hypotheses are summarized in Fig. 1.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Sample and procedure

An online survey was conducted in April and May 2014. Two students from the University of Amsterdam recruited participants through their (online) social networks. Recruitment yielded 340 respondents, 257 of whom completed the survey (76%). Twenty participants were excluded because they did not meet inclusion criteria for age (18–25). Another six participants were excluded because they did not use Facebook and could thus not complete measures regarding Facebook use and social comparison on Facebook. The total sample thus consisted of 231 participants (69% female) age 18–25 ( $M = 22.3$ ,  $SD = 2.2$ ). The participants differed in their countries of residence and nationalities. The most common nationalities were Bulgarian (78%) and Dutch (16%). The remaining 6% was mostly European, but also Indian, Mexican, and Chinese. Ethical approval was obtained from the University where the study was conducted. Participants were first provided with written information about the study and asked for their consent. After this they completed the measures reported below and some additional questions regarding social media use.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Facebook use

We assessed intensity of Facebook use with the six closed-ended items of the Facebook Intensity Scale (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). The scale goes beyond frequency and duration of use, as it incorporates emotional attachment to the site (e.g., "I would be sorry if Facebook shut down") and the role Facebook plays in users' daily lives (e.g., "Facebook has become part of my everyday activity") (Ellison et al., 2007). Participants rated the degree to which they agreed with statements on a scale ranging from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 5 (*totally agree*). The six items were summed to create a total score with higher

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