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Who compares and despairs? The effect of social comparison orientation on social media use and its outcomes

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ABSTRACT

People vary in their tendencies to compare themselves to others, an individual difference variable called social comparison orientation (SCO). Social networking sites provide information about others that can be used for social comparison. The goal of the present set of studies was to explore the relationship between SCO, Facebook use, and negative psychological outcomes. Studies 1a and 1b used correlational approaches and showed that participants high (vs. low) in SCO exhibited heavier Facebook use. Study 2 used an experimental approach and revealed that participants high in SCO had poorer self-perceptions, lower self-esteem, and more negative affect balance than their low-SCO counterparts after engaging in brief social comparisons on Facebook. SCO did not have as strong or consistent effects for participants engaging in control tasks. Results are discussed in the context of extant literature and the impact of social media use on well-being.

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1. Introduction

In their daily interactions, people are afforded many opportunities to learn about others' opinions, abilities, and lives. Such social comparative information can be useful for a multitude of purposes, including self-evaluation (Festinger, 1954), self-enhancement (Gruder, 1971; Wills, 1981), and self-improvement (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; for reviews see Buunk & Gibbons, 2007; Corcoran, Crusius, & Mussweiler, 2011; Wood, 1989). Importantly, people differ in their tendencies to engage in social comparison and in the psychological consequences incurred. Social comparison orientation (SCO) is a trait that reflects these individual differences (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). Individuals high in SCO have a chronic sensitivity to and awareness of others, and experience more uncertainty and instability regarding their self-concepts (Buunk & Gibbons, 2006; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). For the current research, we suggest that social media offers a novel medium in which social comparison can take place—and that people high in SCO might be more drawn to social media and more affected by the comparisons made therein.

1.1. Social media and social comparison opportunities

Social media use has become ubiquitous in many societies, with popular social network sites (SNSs) such as Facebook.com having 1.4 billion active users worldwide (Facebook, 2015). SNSs not only allow users to maintain friendships, form new relationships, and connect with others (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Manago, Taylor, & Greenfield, 2012), but also allow people to construct their own personal profiles and present a rich set of information about themselves (e.g., accomplishments, attitudes, activities, personalities, relationship status, daily habits, routines). Based on the rich information we can learn about others and the expansive network of people from which we can learn it (Acar, 2008), SNSs offer up an ideal platform for social comparison to take place. Indeed, it appears that people are quite interested in learning about others on SNSs, as most networking activity consists of browsing others' profiles without initiating social interaction (Joinson, 2008; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009). Moreover, people have indicated that they use SNSs for the purpose of making social comparisons, specifically while viewing others' posts and photos (Lee, 2014).

1.2. Consequences of social comparison on social media

It is clear that people use SNSs for the purpose of making social comparisons. But what differential consequences might online vs. offline social comparisons have for mental health and well-being? Critically, some research has found that online interactions and relationships on social media are different from those created offline (Ivcevic & Ambady, 2012). This may be attributed, in part, to the fact that people are better able to present themselves in a positive light online (Chou & Edge, 2012; Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Gonzales & Hancock, 2011). Indeed, there is a growing body of evidence to suggest that

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personal SNS profiles tend to present the self in a favorable light (e.g., Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012; Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011). Importantly, if people selectively self-present positive aspects of their lives on social media, then social comparisons that are made using that biased information should differ from in-person social comparisons and involve mostly upward social comparisons to those who are better off on some dimension (Feinstein et al., 2013; Haferkamp & Kramer, 2011; Lee, 2014; Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles, 2014). Moreover, the consequences of exposure to upward comparisons should be quite negative. Indeed, empirical evidence suggests that both chronic and temporary upward social comparisons on social media have been associated with negative consequences, including changes in depression (Feinstein et al., 2013), self-esteem (Kalpidou, Costin, & Morris, 2011; Lee, 2014; Vogel et al., 2014), self-evaluations (Haferkamp & Kramer, 2011), and well-being (Kross et al., 2013).

1.3. Current research

In sum, we have two main points about the interface between social comparison and social media. First, because of the rich and varied information posted about others on social media, people should be quite interested in using social media for the purpose of social comparison. Second, because social comparison information tends to be upward (positive) on social media, it produces negative consequences for well-being and self-evaluation. Based on their strong sensitivity to and interest in others (Buunk & Gibbons, 2006; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999), we suggest that people high (vs. low) in social comparison orientation (SCO) should, 1) be more drawn to using social media because it offers abundant social comparison opportunities, and 2) be more negatively affected by the upward social comparisons made on social media. Consistent with both ideas, Lee (2014) found that high-SCO participants reported making more social comparisons on Facebook than low-SCO users. Although consistent with our general hypotheses, the results of the Lee (2014) study have limited applicability. First, Lee's result suggests that, once on social media, high-SCO participants report making more social comparisons; however, that study did not provide any evidence to suggest that high- and low-SCO participants differ in terms of how much and intensely they tend to use social media. Second, Lee did not document whether high- and low-SCO participants suffer differential consequences as a result of making social comparisons on social media. Our research addresses each of these issues directly and builds on the research by Lee (2014).

Study 1 addressed the first research question involving the relationship between SCO and social media use. College student participants were asked about their social comparison orientation (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999) and general social media use. We hypothesized that higher SCO scores would be associated with greater social media use (e.g., frequency, intensity, and involvement). Consistent with the finding of Lee (2014) that high-SCO participants report comparing more once on social media, we reasoned that those who chronically compare themselves to others are more likely to recognize the value of SNSs for social comparison and therefore use it more heavily.

Study 2 addressed the second research question by examining the differential effects of social comparison occurring on social media for people high and low in SCO. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions in which they either browsed an acquaintance's social media profile (presumably engaging in social comparison) or performed control tasks. Afterwards, participants provided self-evaluations and rated their momentary self-esteem and affect. We hypothesized that, because information about others on social media tends to be positive, participants browsing an acquaintance's profile would have poorer self-evaluations, self-esteem, and affect than those participants in control conditions. However, most critically for our purposes, this was expected to be particularly true for participants high in SCO due to their sensitivity to comparison information.

2. Study 1

2.1. Overview

The main purpose of Study 1 was to examine the association between social comparison orientation and social media use. Facebook was chosen because it is the most popular and researched SNS, and most theoretically relevant to social comparison. College student participants were surveyed about their social comparison orientation and their social networking attitudes and habits. We conducted two studies (Studies 1a and 1b) in order to replicate our results across two distinct samples.

3. Study 1a

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants

Participants were 145 undergraduates (106 female) from a Midwestern university in the United States who received course credit for participating (M age = 19.65, SD = 2.87). The sample was 64.1% White, 22.8% Black, 4.1% Asian, 1.4% American Indian or Alaskan Native, 4.8% mixed race, and 2.8% unknown race(s).

3.1.2. Procedure and measures

Participants completed a series of questionnaires as part of a larger study involving social media use in college students.[1] All portions of the study were completed on computers in the lab using MediaLab software (Jarvis, 2008). After completing the questionnaires, participants were thanked and debriefed. Relevant measures for the present manuscript are described below.

3.1.3. Facebook use

To measure Facebook use, we assessed two related constructs: frequency of use and psychological involvement. First, to assess frequency of Facebook use, participants answered the following questions (derived from Rouis, Limayem, & Salehi-Sangari, 2011): "How often do you use Facebook?" (1 = *never*, 5 = *very often*), "How often do you update your Facebook status?" and "How often do you comment on others' Facebook profiles?" (1 = *never or almost never*, 2 = *once a year*, 3 = *once a month*, 4 = *once a week*, 5 = *once a day*, 6 = *multiple times a day*), and "Approximately how many hours per week do you spend on Facebook?" (open-ended response). After standardization and upon confirmation that the items loaded onto a single factor, a "Frequency of Facebook Use" index was computed ($\alpha = .85$). Second, to measure psychological involvement in Facebook, participants completed a 6-item measure (Andreassen, Torsheim, Brunborg, & Pallesen, 2012) designed to assess the extent to which Facebook use interferes with everyday life. Participants indicated their agreement with the items using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Sample items include "You spend a lot of time thinking about Facebook or planning how to use it" and "You use Facebook in order to forget about your personal problems" ($M = 1.94$, $SD = .83$, $\alpha = .86$). The measures of frequency and involvement were strongly correlated ($r = .65$, $p < .01$) and showed strong reliability ($\alpha = .89$). Therefore, they were standardized and combined into a composite Facebook use score.

3.1.4. Iowa–Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999)

To assess individual differences in SCO, we used the Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM). Participants indicated their agreement with 11 statements on a 5-point Likert-type

[1] The data used in Study 1a were part of a larger study on social media use in college students. A portion of this data has been used elsewhere in a separate paper with different aims than the current paper: (Vogel et al., 2014).

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