Two-Faced Facebook: We Like It, but It Doesn't Make Us Happy

By Alexandra Sifferlin, Aug. 15, 2013

The more we use Facebook, the worse we feel.

That's what social psychologists at the University of Michigan report after tracking how 82 young adults used their Facebook accounts over a two-week period. When the participants started the study, they rated how satisfied they were with their lives. During the following two weeks, the researchers texted them at two-hour intervals five times a day to ask about how they felt about themselves, as well as how much time they had spent on Facebook since the last time they were texted. The more time people spent on Facebook during a single two-hour period, the worse they reported feeling.

The same correlation emerged when the researchers compared the individuals' average use over two weeks with how satisfied they felt with their lives.

- "My hunch is that there are likely a variety of factors that may be driving this effect," says lead study author Ethan Kross, a social psychologist at the University of Michigan, who published his results in the journal *PLOS One*. "Maybe when you're looking at Facebook you're engaging in a lot of social comparisons. Maybe when you're on Facebook you're not engaging in other kinds of activities that may be good for you, like getting outside, exercising and interacting with people in daily life."
- 15 While it might seem that engaging with a social network, albeit in a digital way, would make people feel more supported and important to others, social media can have an isolating effect. Earlier research from the Institute of Information Systems at Berlin's Humboldt University, for example, also found that Facebook was making people feel bad about themselves. Based on the responses from the participants, the scientists speculated that the Facebook users were comparing themselves with their peers, and many were feeling inferior as a result. Users also reported frustration and a "lack of attention" from having fewer comments, likes and feedback compared with their Facebook friends.
- So why do so many people say they enjoy Facebook and what about the well-done studies that find that Facebook actually increases a person's self-esteem? That may have to do with the selected selves that people present in their profiles. Keith Wilcox of Columbia University and his team reported through five experiments, for example, that Facebook both lowers a person's self-control and boosts self-esteem; people feel less inhibited about presenting the most positive version of themselves online, and receive positive and reinforcing feedback through interactions with friends. "Most people are presenting information about their actual selves on Facebook, but they are filtering it so they are only presenting the most positive information," says Wilcox. "There are good benefits and bad benefits. Let's face it, it makes you feel good about yourself, which is not necessarily a bad thing. But there is [also] a lot of boasting as a result."

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That boasting and self-esteem by some, however, can mean negative feelings for others. And the effects of those less positive outcomes are showing up in therapists' offices. "It comes up in sessions all the time," says Dr. Guy Winch, a New York psychologist and author of *Emotional First Aid*. "Patients feel really bad: they went online and liked their friends' vacation photos, but their friend didn't like theirs. In the throes of a nasty breakup, their ex wrote something really bad about them and blasted it all over. I hear this literally all the time. People have huge emotional experiences on social media, especially Facebook, and they bring it into sessions."

According to therapists, however, Facebook's effect on the human psyche doesn't have to always be negative. While Winch acknowledges that social media may exacerbate loneliness among those with isolation issues, it could also have the ability to expand a person's social circle and serve as a conduit for curing that loneliness — if used in the right way. Even Kross, author of the new study, acknowledges that Facebook can help people. "It is very possible that there are ways of interacting with Facebook and other social networks that may serve to optimize and enhance well-being. It's one of our goals to figure out what those ways are," he says.

One factor that can determine whether the site can add to a person's sense of well-being or take from it, depends on whether that person is actually engaging with online contacts or simply scrolling and behaving as an inactive bystander.

- "One thing I recommend to my patients all the time is, be active," says Winch. "Reach out to people. I ask, how many Facebook friends do you have? How many are nearby? Why not reach out to them one by one and ask to meet for coffee? I think it is a great tool for dealing with things like loneliness and even relationships." According to Winch, people don't just present a positive version of themselves online, they tend to do it for their face-to-face relationships as well, since they try to live up to the profile they post online.
- Dr. Pamela Rutledge, director of the Media Psychology Research Center, agrees that active participation can be therapeutic. During the *Twilight* craze, she joined a Facebook forum for older women who loved the books and movies just for research. "I had gone in kind of critical, and I was totally humbled by the good will of these women," says Rutledge. "It allows people to connect with people who have shared interests. Especially those who are house-bound or have issues with social avoidance. There is a very large population of disabled people on Second Life. They are sharing with people who share their point of view."

Exactly how such interactions can heal will require more research, but Rutledge believes those studies will be worth conducting. With millions of people interacting via social media, teasing apart the varying ways that these relationships can influence people's well-being — whether in the short term or long term — can better inform experts on how to advise people about when to turn to Facebook — and when to just say no.