

Instagram making you sad? Blame the Kardashians

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Shira Hecht keeps up with all her friends on Instagram, but she still hasn't met most of the 896 people she follows.

You might recognize some: January Jones, Lindsay Lohan, Nicki Minaj, Justin Timberlake, Gisele Bundchen, James Franco, Azealia Banks, Lena Dunham, Kendrick Lamar, Mindy Kaling, Reese Witherspoon, Channing Tatum, Scarlett Johansson, Giorgio Moroder, Taylor Swift and Robert Downey Jr.

"And all the Kardashians, obviously," Hecht said. "I guess that's kind of the point of Instagram."

It could also be making some of its 300 million users sad, according to a recent psychological study that examined the emotional toll of obsessing over the photo-sharing social network and following too many strangers.

"There is growing evidence that following strangers on (social networks) and comparing oneself to others have important implications for well-being," said the study published in the May edition of *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking*.

As more people spend their time on Internet [social media networks](#), micro-blogs and text-messaging platforms, "there's a real surge of studies trying to understand the impacts," said study co-author Leora Trub, an assistant professor of psychology at Pace University, in an interview.

Much of that research has probed Facebook, finding both positive and negative effects. The network can increase social contact and self-esteem, especially for people who actively participate by updating their own profiles, but others - especially passive observers - can feel social overload, stress, lower self-esteem, loneliness and depression from the constant barrage of vacation photos and wedding announcements.

Facebook bought Instagram for \$1 billion in 2012, but has allowed it to thrive on its own as a distinct platform with a user base that skews younger.

Are its emotional effects similar? That's what Trub's study - the first ever to survey Instagrammers - set to find out.

Trub explored the question of whether Instagram is even more prone to [social comparison](#) and envy because unlike Facebook, [friends](#) are less inclined to share both negative and positive news - emphasizing only positive images artificially enhanced using Instagram's two dozen filters that adjust for brightness, contrast, saturation and "warmth."

Trub, also a clinical psychologist, is not the first to suggest that dwelling on the airbrushed lives of beautiful, jet-setting strangers can be detrimental to your health. Slate magazine sounded the alarm about Instagram's "sad lurker" qualities in an article two years ago.

"Each time you swipe through more images of people's meals and soirees and renovation projects and holiday sunsets, you are potentially blurring the boundary between stranger-you-haven't-met and sleazy voyeur skulking around the cabana with an iPhone," Slate's Jessica Winter wrote at the time.

Trub asked 117 Instagram users ranging in age from 18 to 29 to answer questions about their use of the platform, including how confident,

attractive, desirable or inferior they felt compared to other Instagrammers, as well as how they felt on a commonly used depression scale.

The result: "More Instagram use is related to greater depressive symptoms only for those at the highest level of strangers followed." For those who just followed a closer-knit group of friends, there was no correlation between Instagram and depression.

One theory, she wrote, is that "browsing the enhanced photos of celebrities or other strangers on Instagram may trigger assumptions that these photos are indicative of how the people in them actually live. Such conclusions make people more vulnerable to judging themselves in relation to the assumed (but often unrealistic) lives of others, which can trigger feelings of distress."

Hecht, who participated in the survey, doesn't believe Instagram is affecting her in this way. The 27-year-old restaurant worker in Austin, Texas, said she and her peers are becoming a "little more conscious" of the emotional impacts of being barraged with other people's supposedly glamorous lives.

"Maybe it actually feels bad a little less because you know it happens," she said.

Her own feed is a stream of small pleasures: food at a backyard party, jewelry, concerts, three friends displaying painted toenails at the beach, a pair of clinking glasses of sangria with the hashtag #lifeisonelongweekend. She carefully selects, filters and posts photos - including the occasional selfie - just a few times a week, but checks her stream constantly when she's not working, especially to see how many friends or strangers clicked the heart icon that shows they liked her post.

"It's kind of a way of turning your brain off," she said. "It's like reading comics in newspapers. It's useful to have something you can just stare at for a second ... and I don't feel like I have to catch up."

She already quit one micro-blogging platform, Tumblr, because she felt like it was a wasteful addiction, but she plans to stick with Instagram - though perhaps pare down the list of people she follows.

In doing so, she will be fighting against a trend of Internet users increasingly adding distant acquaintances and strangers to their online social circle. The size of the average person's Facebook network has grown in the past decade from fewer than 200 connections to nearly 700, according to market research group Statista.

Trub hopes that raising awareness about the psychological effects will help protect users and allow them to navigate their Internet networks without triggering bad feelings.

Hecht said she'll keep scrolling her iPhone in search of "nice-looking pretty things" posted by friends and, yes, the Kardashians. In defending Instagram, she cites another one of the celebrities she follows: Ezra Koenig, frontman for the rock band Vampire Weekend.

"I could Google image search 'the sky' and I would probably see beautiful images to knock my socks off," Koenig told Rolling Stone magazine in 2013. "But I can't Google, you know, 'What does my friend look like today?' For you to be able to take a picture of yourself that you feel good enough about to share with the world - I think that's a great thing."

Added Hecht: "It's a way to be connected to people. And sometimes it's a way to kill time, which I don't think is a bad thing either."

SOCIAL MEDIA TIPS

Science is still trying to figure out how the social media platforms that have crept into our daily lives are affecting our well-being. Early research shows mixed results, with negative and positive effects largely dependent on who is using social media and how.

Based on that early research, "some good tips might be that if you're already feeling down or vulnerable, mindlessly perusing people's photos and posts on [social networking sites](#) may make you feel worse," said Leora Trub, a [clinical psychologist](#) and psychology professor at Pace University in New York. "This may be hard to resist, because many people turn to the phone as a distraction or escape from unpleasant feelings."

Can using [social media](#) also be beneficial? Yes, she said, "especially when used to communicate with friends and family. However, these benefits may be more associated with active posting and communication rather than passively perusing people's posts."

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