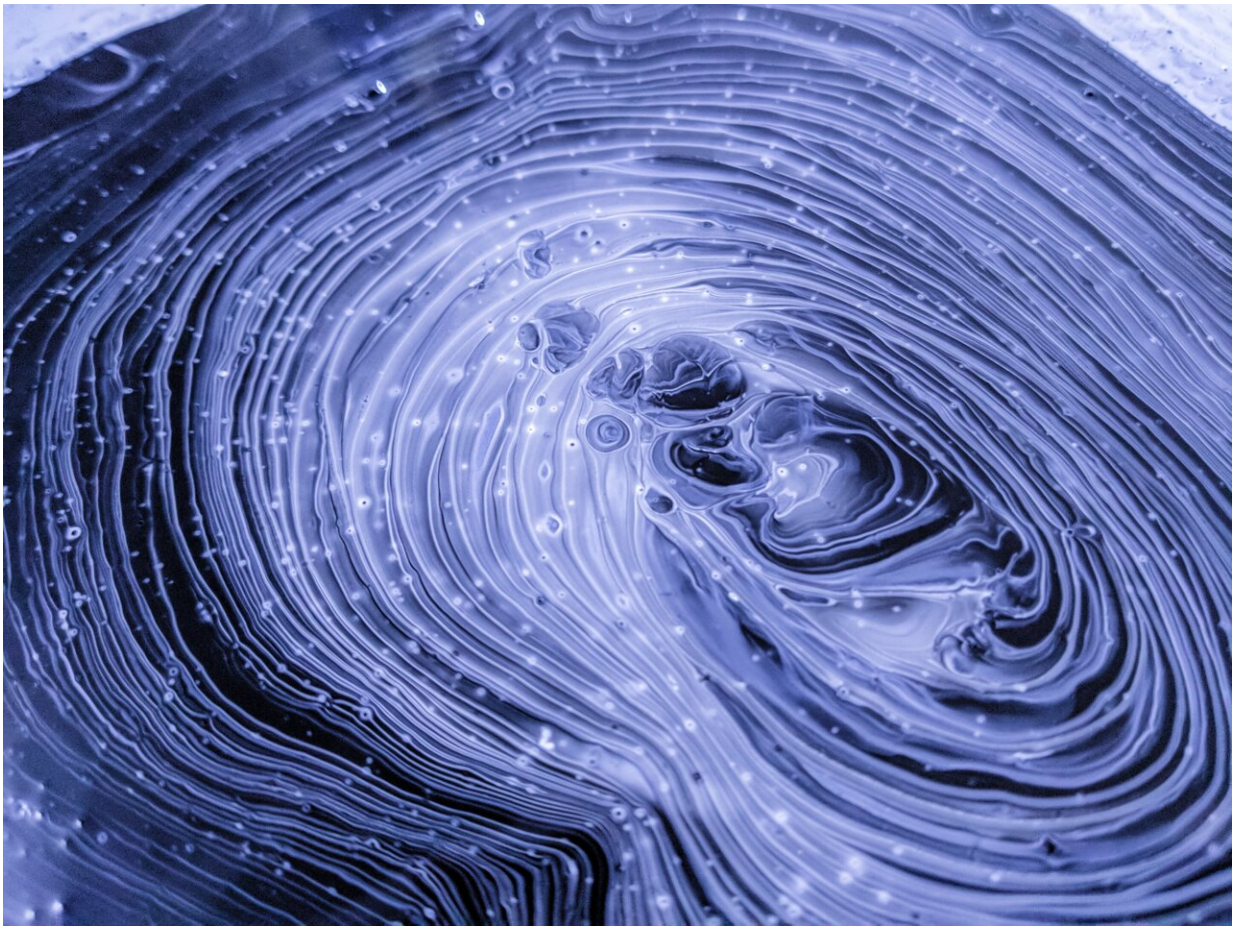
Esteem issues determine how people put their best Facebook forward

September 6 2013, by Matthew Swayne



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How social media users create and monitor their online personas may

hint at their feelings of self-esteem and self-determination, according to an international team of researchers.

"The types of actions users take and the kinds of information they are adding to their Facebook walls and profiles are a refection of their identities," said S. Shyam Sundar, Distinguished Professor of Communications and co-director of the Media Effects Research Laboratory, Penn State. "You are your Facebook, basically, and despite all its socialness, Facebook is a deeply personal medium."

People with lower self-esteem tend to be much more concerned with what others post about them on Facebook, while users with higher self-esteem spend more effort on adding information to their personal profiles on the social network, said Sundar.

The researchers, who report their findings today (Sept. 5) at INTERACT 2013 in Cape Town, South Africa, said that people with both high and low self-esteem spend time crafting their online personas on Facebook, but choose different paths in that construction. Individuals with higher self-esteem have a greater sense of agency and spend more time adding information about their family, education and work experience to their profiles, according to the researchers.

Users who have lower self-esteem continuously monitor their wall and delete unwanted posts from other users, according to the researchers.

The findings may also lead to alternative ways to make money for online social networks, said Sundar, who worked with Jiaqi Nie, a graduate student in interaction science, Sungkyunkwan University, South Korea.

"The more you get connected to Facebook, the stronger you feel that the items you post—the pictures, for example—are part of your identity and the more likely you are going to view these as your virtual possessions,"

said Sundar.

Because both groups of high self-esteem and low self-esteem Facebook users see the social network as an extension of their self-identity, they may be willing to pay for features on social networks, said Sundar. For example, social media and social media app developers may be able to attract paying customers with more customizable walls and profile pages.

The researchers studied how 225 students from a South Korean university filled in their Facebook profiles and how the students edited material that friends linked to or posted on their walls.

Participants answered a series of questions about whether they added information to 33 categories of personal data, including details about their family, work and relationships. The participants also reported on how frequently they updated and changed information on their walls.

To measure self-esteem and self-monitoring, the researchers asked the participants to answer questions, including ones on self-worth and how they choose to present themselves in public.

The researchers suggest that future studies may investigate how users of different psychological backgrounds take part in other social networking behaviors, such as how often they update photos and how they set privacy settings.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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