

Study links Facebook use to depressive symptoms

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Credit: University of Houston

The social media site, Facebook, can be an effective tool for connecting with new and old friends. However, some users may find themselves spending quite a bit of time viewing Facebook and may inevitably begin comparing what's happening in their lives to the activities and accomplishments of their friends.

According to University of Houston (UH) researcher Mai-Ly Steers, this kind of social comparison paired with the amount of time spent on Facebook may be linked to depressive symptoms. Steers' research on the topic is presented in the article, "Seeing Everyone Else's Highlight Reels: How Facebook Usage is Linked to Depressive Symptoms" published in the *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*.

"Although social comparison processes have been examined at length in traditional contexts, the literature is only beginning to explore [social comparisons](#) in online social networking settings," said Steers, a doctoral candidate in social psychology at UH.

Steers conducted two studies to investigate how social comparison to peers on Facebook might impact users' psychological health. Both studies provide evidence that Facebook users felt depressed when comparing themselves to others.

"It doesn't mean Facebook causes depression, but that depressed feelings and lots of time on Facebook and comparing oneself to others tend to go hand in hand," said Steers.

The first study found an association between time spent on Facebook and depressive symptoms for both genders. However, the results demonstrated that making Facebook social comparisons mediated the link between time spent on Facebook and depressive symptoms for men only. Similarly, the second study found a relationship between the amount of time spent on Facebook and depressive symptoms was mediated by social comparisons on Facebook. Unlike the first study, gender did not moderate these associations.

The concept of social comparison is not new. In fact, it has been studied in face-to-face contexts since the 1950's. However, engaging in social comparisons on online social media sites may make people feel even worse.

"One danger is that Facebook often gives us information about our friends that we are not normally privy to, which gives us even more opportunities to socially compare," Steers said. "You can't really control the impulse to compare because you never know what your friends are going to post. In addition, most of our Facebook friends tend to post about the good things that occur in their lives, while leaving out the bad. If we're comparing ourselves to our friends' 'highlight reels,' this may lead us to think their lives are better than they actually are and conversely, make us feel worse about our own lives."

Steers said that people afflicted with emotional

difficulties may be particularly susceptible to [depressive symptoms](#) due to Facebook social comparison after spending more time on medium. For already distressed individuals, this distorted view of their [friends'](#) lives may make them feel alone in their internal struggles, which may compound their feelings of loneliness and isolation.

"This research and previous research indicates the act of socially comparing oneself to others is related to long-term destructive emotions. Any benefit gained from making social comparisons is temporary and engaging in frequent social comparison of any kind may be linked to lower well-being," said Steers.

Steers hopes the results of these studies will help people understand that technological advances often possess both intended and unintended consequences. Further, she hopes her research will help guide future interventions that target the reduction of Facebook use among those at risk for depression.

More information: Seeing Everyone Else's Highlight Reels: How Facebook Usage is Linked to Depressive Symptoms, guilfordjournals.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15327019.2014.938701

Provided by University of Houston

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