How Many Likes Did You Get? – The Negative Effects of Facebook Through the Use of Social

Comparison Opportunities

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Abstract

It is well known that social media has a huge impact on self-esteem and that most often times, this impact turns out to be negative. Research often looks at social comparison with respect to social media and commonly finds self-esteem to be negatively impacted. As Facebook is a dominant outlet of social media, gestures such as liking, sharing, and commenting on photos may be a few of the ways in which social comparison opportunities are provided. Facebook also sets a fundamental foundation for self-discrepancy through the use of social comparison as it relates to reduced self-esteem. Gender differences exist in the nature of self-discrepancies. Both genders are affected in the same way, in that there is a discrepancy between the ideal self and the "ought" self; however, the nature of the discrepancy is fairly unique to each gender. It is important for Facebook users to be aware of the possible detriments to self-esteem since it may be in one's best interest to try to reduce or eliminate negative effects.

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It is well known that social media has a huge impact on self-esteem and that most often, this impact turns out to be negative. Research often looks at social comparison with respect to social media. In social comparison, individuals are actively aware of their own properties, and these properties are being compared to a standard (Wilcox & Laird, 2000). Generally, social comparison is noticeable in media outlets such as magazines, television series', and so forth. Social comparison may also be an issue in other outlets of social media, such as school websites, but may not be as apparent. Social comparison also often manifests through the use of social networking sites. In particular, the use of Facebook allows for social comparison opportunities through gestures such as liking, sharing, and commenting on photos (Chen & Lee, 2013). These are but only a few of the ways in which social comparison opportunities are provided.

Self-esteem can refer to the overall self; however, it also refers to specific aspects of the self, including how people feel about their social standing (Heatherton & Wyland, 2003). Through the use of Facebook, a user can either be provided reassurance or denied reassurance in relation to their social standing. In other words, an individual can be encouraged and feel confident in his or her status in society. Alternatively, an individual can also feel as though his or her status in society is threatened or destroyed. If individuals do not receive likes/comments on photos and informative posts, they often see this as a sign of rejection indicating a potential fall in their social standing (Heatherton & Wyland, 2003). In addition, competing with others can also impose negative detriments on self-esteem. This detrimental competition can be seen when individuals are forced to compete with others who appear to have ravishing lives and attractive appearances that are often highly difficult to attain.

Although Facebook may encourage some positive outcomes regarding self-esteem, it is evident that Facebook negatively impacts self-esteem and these negative impacts must be combatted in order to prevent severe detriments to one's overall well-being. Through selective self-presentation it becomes easier to set a foundation for social comparison resulting in reduced self-esteem (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011; Wilcox & Laird, 2000). Users can allow content and post pictures that best represent their ideal self so that viewers only see the things they would like them to see (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011). Based on this ability, Facebook users often experience feelings of inadequacy since the opportunity for social comparison is presented (Marsh & Parker, 1984; Morse & Gergen, 1970; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1985).

Self-Esteem and Social Media

Self-esteem is a crucial part of one's overall well-being (Heatherton & Wyland, 2003). As an important component of psychological health, it is essential to understand the definition of self-esteem in order to provide an appropriate evaluation of the construct. According to Coopersmith (1967), self-esteem may be defined as an evaluation made and maintained by an individual, expressing an attitude of approval. This attitude of approval indicates an individual's belief in his or her own capabilities, in addition to one's success, significance, and worth (Heatherton & Wyland, 2003). In simpler terms, self-esteem refers to confidence in personal ability and worthiness.

Many areas of life are impacted by self-esteem. Enjoyment of life is directly influenced by self-esteem regardless of any direct impact on objective outcome measurements (e.g., career success; Heatherton & Wyland, 2003). Self-attitudes grasped by an individual prove to be important since not only present issues, but also future outcomes, are greatly influenced by such attitudes (Heatherton & Wyland, 2003).

Self-esteem may take a turn in one of two directions; high self-esteem versus low self-esteem. Individuals fortunate enough to hold a high self-esteem live in a social world that is without fear of rejection. The belief for individuals with high self-esteem is one in which others value and respect them. On the contrary, individuals with a low self-esteem often view the world in a more negative manner. Having a low self-esteem paints negative perceptions of everything in the world around you (Heatherton & Wyland, 2003). This knowledge is valuable since the media can have a considerable impact on more than one aspect of an individual's life. Facebook may serve as the underlying destructive agent of self-esteem in modern day society.

Several theories regarding the sources of self-esteem have been debated throughout the years. Of these theories, three have direct relevance to social media and hold the potential to provide a possible explanation for the development of self-esteem. In 1890, William James suggested that self-esteem was the result of accumulative experiences in which outcomes exceeded goals (James, as cited in Heatherton & Wyland, 2003). With respect to Facebook in particular, receiving acknowledgement of accomplishments beyond what one had expected can result in an increased self-esteem. This is especially the case when acknowledgement occurs increasingly over time.

Almost half a century later, a second theory proposed by Meads (1934) suggested that one will internalize ideas and attitudes expressed by significant figures in one's life. Known as symbolic interactionism, the idea proposes that individuals will respond to themselves in a manner based on the perceptions of those around them. From this theory arises the notion that individuals value the opinions of others. Reactions to photos/posts on Facebook could potentially encourage or discourage individuals from continuing to engage in Facebook activity.

In other words, both perceived encouragement and discouragement could affect an individual's social networking activity, and consequently his or her self-esteem.

Lastly, the sociometer theory advocates that self-esteem is a function of the likelihood of social exclusion (Heatherton & Wyland, 2003). The sociometer theory proposes the idea that possible social exclusion could potentially result in reduced self-esteem. This theory may be reflected in Facebook activity in that individuals often perceive likes/comments as social acceptance and therefore is translated as a limited likelihood of social exclusion. Evidently, each of these theories relate to social media in that use of social media may or may not provide reassurance and acceptance of oneself based on elements such as physical appearance, success, and so forth.

Social comparison is most commonly explained as comparison with others who have positive characteristics, sometimes termed superior others (Willis, 1981; Wood, 1989). In modern society, social media plays a large role in the everyday lives of many individuals regardless of demographic characteristics. From magazines to television shows to social networking sites, social media targets individuals from all backgrounds and aims to create a "perfect" image. Constant exposure to these idealized images provides countless opportunities for social comparison. Images and portrayal of "perfectly" sized individuals with "perfect" lives instantly provokes viewers to make personal comparisons and to want to achieve this ideal on a personal level.

Facebook and Social Comparison

In 2012, it was reported that Facebook had over a billion users worldwide (Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles, 2014). Facebook allows people to maintain old relationships, create new

relationships, and express feelings all while hiding behind the safety of a computer screen (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). As a means of social contact, this social networking site allows individuals to create profiles which often contain information considered private. In addition to private information of one's life, individuals often supply an abundance of photos to accompany the written descriptions (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Individuals who use social networking sites generally do so in a cautious manner. This cautious manner is not in terms of being tentative or discreet about the things they choose to post online in fear of revealing too much information to the wrong population but is instead cautiousness in selective self-presentation. Users can allow content and post pictures that best represents their ideal self (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011). Facebook appears to be an attractive platform for setting up the ideal self since users can wisely construct an online persona that emphasizes only the most desirable traits, while discarding the not so desirable entities (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011).

Selective self-presentation through the use of Facebook provides a basis for social comparison opportunities (Festinger, 1954). Individuals often fail to acknowledge that Facebook users only provide the things they wish others to see, and these things are often enhanced. For example, pictures are often edited to reveal a more envied appearance. Actions such as this can drive others to engage in personal comparison (Schachter, 1959). Facebook suddenly becomes a source for competition.

Frequent Facebook users believe that other users are happier and more successful, especially in cases where other users are not familiar offline (Chou & Edge, 2012). It appears that individuals are comparing realistic offline selves to the idealized online selves of these other users (Chou & Edge, 2012). When a person's profile contains a high activity social network,

self-esteem is thought to be lower and self-comparison based on selective self-presentation causes feelings of inadequacy. In addition to these ideas, individuals often have poorer self-evaluations and experience negative affect (Marsh & Parker, 1984; Morse & Gergen, 1970; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1985).

In social comparison, individuals are actively aware of their own properties, and these properties are being compared to a standard (Wilcox & Laird, 2000). Magazines, television, and movies continuously advertise models that are extremely beautiful and increasingly slender. For the average individual, looking at these models lowers self-esteem via social comparison processes (Wilcox & Laird, 2000). In the case of a model in a magazine, the model provides a standard upon which social comparison is based and an average individual considers how he or she might compare with this individual. Similarly, Facebook provides a comparison basis. It is natural for individuals to feel a need to compete for acceptance and social standing. Though advertising in social media provides an unrealistic standard to compete with, many individuals come to terms and accept the fact that this is what it is, unrealistic. However, Facebook use also encourages, or allows for, competition with peers and acquaintances. This social comparison opportunity is more difficult to accept as being unrealistic since individuals are competing with those they know and associate with on a daily basis.

Frequent Facebook interaction is said to be associated with great distress for some individuals. This happens both directly and indirectly by way of a two-step pathway that (a) increases communication overload and, (b) reduces self-esteem (Chen & Lee, 2013). The existing relationship between Facebook and psychological well-being, in particular self-esteem, tends to be negative. Through sharing, liking, and commenting as a way of communicating

information and emotion, Facebook interaction can in turn lead to even greater psychological

distress and reduced self-esteem (Chen & Lee, 2013).

Liking, sharing, and commenting on information and photos may be positively influential

for some individuals since it can make them feel as though they are more greatly appreciated and

accepted. If people believe that others value and respect them, they will experience high social

self-esteem (Heatherton & Wyland, 2003). Despite this fact, actions such as these can actually

have an adverse effect. Low self-esteem is likely to result when key figures reject an individual

(Heatherton & Wyland, 2003). Rejecting, demeaning, ignoring, and devaluing a person all have

detrimental effects on self-esteem. It is essential to assess one's self-perceptions in how they

believe to be viewed by class mates, family members, and so forth (Heatherton & Wyland,

2003). The absence of likes and comments on Facebook posts may be perceived as rejection or

non-acceptance.

Self-Discrepancies and Facebook Use

Self-discrepancies can be defined as representations in one's self-concept in comparison

with the true self and are seen as ways in which one falls short of some important standard

(Moretti & Higgins, 1990). According to the self-discrepancy theory, self-concept is separated

into three distinct domains (Calogero & Watson, 2009). These three domains include the real

self, the ideal self, and the "ought" self. The real self refers to the characteristics in which an

individual believes he or she possesses. The ideal self may be described as the characteristics

one wishes to possess while the "ought" self is represented by the characteristics an individual

believes one should possess (Calogero & Watson, 2009).

Facebook fuels self-discrepancies by providing social comparison opportunities. High

levels of self-discrepancy have been linked to low self-esteem (Moretti & Higgins, 1990). There

appears to be gender differences in self-discrepancies and its relation to self-esteem between men

and women.

Self-discrepancy and Facebook use in female subjects. According to Heatherton

(2001), women tend to have a lower body image satisfaction in comparison with men; they are

reported more likely to evaluate specific body features negatively (as cited in Heatherton &

Wyland, 2003). One explanation for this observed gender difference relates to the particular

pressures faced by women since it is believed that women experience higher societal standards

than do men and are psychologically more invested in their appearance (Prentice & Carranza,

2002; Halliwell & Dittmar, 2006). In other words, women appear to be more intensely

influenced by ideals in society, especially when those ideals arise as competition in appearance.

Beginning in early adolescence, Heatherton (2001) suggests that young girls tend to

compare aspects of their body, such as shape and weight, with beliefs about cultural ideals

(Heatherton, as cited in Heatherton & Wyland, 2003). The media is overwhelmed by images of

ideal female bodies which are increasingly thin and beautiful. By internalizing the unachievable,

ultrathin ideal, both the ideal self and the "ought" self of many women are distorted.

Characteristics one wishes to possess, as well as those one believes she should possess are both

sculpted by the unrealistic media images. The main effects associated with self-discrepancy

suggest that women with high self-discrepancy related to body image have lower self-esteem

related to appearance (Bessenoff, 2006).

Facebook in particular is used as a foundation upon which individuals can portray their

"best self." With the ability to edit and monitor photos, as well as informative written posts,

numerous individuals with Facebook accounts become consumed with the idea that life is all about competition. Social comparison opportunities reinforce the belief that social acceptance may be based on physical appearance and that this acceptance is demonstrated through liking, sharing, and commenting. The absence of social acceptance imposes great detrimental effects on self-esteem and more often than not proves to be negative.

Self-discrepancy and Facebook use in male subjects. Despite the fact that women are the usual target when it comes to reduced self-esteem and self-discrepancy, there has recently been increasing interest in the ideal male body images presented in the media and among men themselves (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2006). Men are most commonly driven by physical strength and this is greatly influenced by the increasingly muscular male body that provides a cultural ideal of attractiveness (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2006).

In a similar manner to women, men are constantly exposed to ideal figures through the use of Facebook. Although men may not appear to be in as big a competition when it comes to sharing, liking, and commenting, competition does exist beneath the exterior. Excessive discussion and presentation of muscular males provides the opportunity for social comparison and self-discrepancy. Recognizing a strong, muscular body as that of the idealized man, many male subjects feel a competitive drive that arises from discrepancies in the ideal self as well as the "ought" self.

Facebook as a critical foundation and platform for social comparison contributes greatly to the negative effects that emerge from self-discrepancies. Low self-esteem as it relates to Facebook use originates in self- discrepancies that result from social comparison.

Combatting Reduced Self-Esteem in Facebook Users

The previous sections have established that self-esteem is negatively impacted due to social comparison by means of social media. Facebook gestures such as liking, sharing, and commenting on photos may be a few of the ways in which social comparison opportunities are provided (Chen & Lee, 2013). Facebook also sets a fundamental foundation for self-discrepancy through the use of social comparison as it relates to reduced self-esteem. High levels of self-discrepancy have been shown to be linked to low self-esteem (Moretti & Higgins, 1990). When using social networking sites, it is important to be mindful of the possible detriments to self-esteem since it may be in one's best interest to try to reduce or eliminate negative effects.

When considering tips and techniques to combat reduced self-esteem in Facebook users, it is crucial to recognize the reality of the situation. In combatting reduced self-esteem, one does not simply avoid the use of Facebook; instead, individuals may continue to engage in the use of social networking sites as long as they are not being naïve in the process. It is important to note that knowledge is the key when one is susceptible to possible detriments in overall psychological well-being.

Research has shown that exposure to common myths about images in the media may be helpful in promoting a healthier body image (Haas, Pawlow, Pettibone, & Segrist, 2012). It may be beneficial if popular social networking sites, Facebook in particular, provided a short video presentation or informative blurb before signing into an account. For example, showing how pictures can be edited and explaining that posts from other social media outlets may be shared can help prepare users for what may come about while using Facebook. Such a measure may help indicate the reality of Facebook and notify potential users of the possible negative effects that may arise.

Individuals are frequently vulnerable to unwanted social comparison information through exposure to idealized media images (Lennon, Lillethun, & Buckland, 1999). Comparison with idealized advertising images has been shown to result in elevated standards when thinking about personal attractiveness as well as reduced satisfaction with personal attractiveness (Richins, 1991). This comparison potentially leads to reduced self-esteem in numerous individuals (Wolf, 1991). Further eliminating advertisements on Facebook may diminish the social comparison opportunities provided by the social networking site. In doing so, individuals are no longer forced to compete with unrealistic, "ideal" models. Instead, competition is scaled down and only exists among friends and acquaintances.

Since self-esteem can be conceptualized as mostly a stable trait that develops over time, it is fair to say that adolescence is a critical time in the development of a positive platform for self-esteem (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991). With this knowledge, it may be useful for parents to play a role in preventing reduced self-esteem through the use of Facebook. Parents can play their part by ensuring a positive self-esteem through childhood (Harris, Gruenenfelder-Steiger, Ferrer, Donnellan, Allemand, Fend, … Trzesniewski, 2015). This can be done by providing consistent encouragement to children and praising their accomplishments while educating them on the realities of the world and social media. In doing so, individuals will continue to carry thoughts that were instilled in them as children and will not be ignorant when using Facebook in the future.

Another important tip to aid in eliminating negative self-esteem when using Facebook relates to the individual users themselves. Avoiding negative reactions to pictures and posts, while promoting positive reactions, may help to increase self-esteem of those around you.

Further, refrain from contributing to the negativities associated with social networking sites, as the traditional saying goes, "if you have nothing nice to say, then don't say anything at all."

Despite the various things that can be done in an attempt to combat reduced self-esteem, the most important thing to note when dealing with Facebook is that users must be aware of the implications of such use. By following the tips and techniques mentioned, users can continue to use Facebook while perhaps avoiding the negative repercussions that often accompany social networking sites. Future research should consider putting the suggested techniques into motion and measuring the outcomes to determine whether or not there are, in fact, plausible ways to avoid reduced self-esteem caused from Facebook use.

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