How Facebook Can Amplify Low Self-Esteem/Narcissism/Anxiety

Social media such as Facebook can magnify negative psychological problems.

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Much has been written about the positive and negative impacts of social media, with particular reference to Facebook, which now has over 1 billion users. Research on the negative aspects of frequent Facebook use has focused on the possible relationships with negative psychological states and behavior such as anxiety, low self-esteem and narcissism.

For my previous articles in PT on the topic of Facebook’s psychological impact go here and here.

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 reflection of their identities," said one of the researchers S. Shyam Sundar, Distinguished Professor of Communications and co-director of the Media Effects Research Laboratory at Penn State.

Sundar contends that people with lower self-esteem are more concerned with what other people post about them on Facebook. In contrast, users with higher self-esteem spend more effort adding personal information about their family, education and their work. Low self-esteem users continuously monitor their Facebook wall and delete unwanted posts from other users.

"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.

Sundar’s research is consistent with previous research studies.
A study conducted by The University of Gothenburg in Sweden surveyed 335 men and 676 women (average age 32) to help determine the link between self-esteem and Facebook usage. A significant negative relationship between the two was uncovered (as Facebook interaction increased, self-esteem decreased), though the main difference was between genders. Women who used Facebook were apt to feel less happy and content with their lives.

One previous study from the University of Georgia finds that social networks play on our self-esteem and to some extent on more narcissistic tendencies. “Despite the name ‘social networks,’ much user activity on networking sites is self-focused,” said Brittany Gentile, a UGA doctoral candidate who looked at the effects of social networks on self-esteem and narcissism. The study, published in the journal Computers in Human Behavior, suggests that most people who log on to Facebook every day may be boosting their self-esteem in the process.

In theory, the social networking website Facebook could be great for people with low self-esteem. Sharing is important for improving friendships. But in practice, people with low self-esteem seem to behave counterproductively, bombarding their friends with negative tidbits about their lives and making themselves less likeable, according to a study published in Psychological Science.

"We had this idea that Facebook could be a really fantastic place for people to strengthen their relationships," says Amanda Forest, at the University of Waterloo with her advisor at the time, Joanne Wood. The two are generally interested in self-esteem, and how self-esteem affects the kinds of emotions people express. People with low self-esteem are often uncomfortable sharing face-to-face, but Facebook makes it possible to share remotely.

In one of their studies, Forest and Wood asked students how they feel about Facebook. People with low self-esteem were more likely to think that Facebook provided an opportunity to connect with other people, and to perceive it as a safe place that reduces the risk of awkward social situations.

The researchers also investigated what students actually wrote on Facebook. They asked the students for their last 10 status updates, sentences like, "[Name] is lucky to have such terrific friends and is looking forward to a great day tomorrow!" and "[Name] is upset b/c her phone got stolen :@." These are visible to their Facebook friends, the people in their network.

Each set of status updates was rated for how positive or negative it was. For each set of statements, a coder - an undergraduate Facebook user - rated how much they liked the person who wrote them.

People with low self-esteem were more negative than people with high self-esteem - and the coders liked them less. The coders were strangers, but that's realistic, Forest says. In earlier research, Wood and Forest found that nearly half of Facebook friends are actually strangers or acquaintances, not close friends.

Forest and Wood also found that people with low self-esteem get more responses from their real Facebook friends when they post highly positive updates, compared to less positive ones. People with
high self-esteem, on the other hand, get more responses when they post negative items, perhaps because these are rarer for them.

So people with low self-esteem may feel safe making personal disclosures on Facebook - but they may not be helping themselves. "If you're talking to somebody in person and you say something, you might get some indication that they don't like it, that they're sick of hearing your negativity," Forest says. But when people have a negative reaction to a post on Facebook, they seem to keep it to themselves. "On Facebook, you don't see most of the reactions."

Researchers Elliot Panek, Ph.D., Yioryos Nardis and Sara Konrath, Ph.D., explored the hypothesis that social media reflects and amplifies growing levels of narcissism within our culture. In a study published online in *Computers in Human Behavior*, the authors believe Facebook is a mirror and Twitter is a megaphone for the cultural obsession with self.

In another study, Christopher Carpenter, an assistant professor of communication at Western Illinois University, posits that Facebook has a dark side. Narcissism is defined in this study as "a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration and an exaggerated sense of self-importance," Carpenter said. He believes Facebook provides an ideal forum for the average narcissist. Study results confirmed Carpenter's hypothesis that grandiose exhibitionism is associated with self-promotion and that entitlement/exploitativeness correlates with anti-social behaviors on Facebook.

What about anxiety?

A research study emphasizing the less desirable outcomes of Facebook activity was conducted by Scottish scientists at Edinburgh Napier University, by lead researcher Dr. Kathy Charles. Her research, concluded among other things:

- 12% of the users studied said their Facebook site made them anxious;
- 30% said they felt guilty about rejecting friend requests;
- Many said they felt pressure to come up with inventive status updates;
- Many did not like the different rules of online etiquette for different friends.

The obvious question arises, then, in reference to this research, if users felt stress and anxiety why do they keep using Facebook? Dr. Charles contends that the overwhelming majority of participants in her study wanted to use Facebook to keep in contact with friends and not miss out on something important. This generates pressure, Charles argues, keeping users in a state of "neurotic limbo," similar to gambling—staying in the game waiting for the next good thing to happen.

So it appears that despite its widespread use and well-publicized benefits, a social media site such as Facebook can have some negative effects.

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