

FACEBOOK BLUES: IS FACEBOOK MAKING YOU UNHAPPY?

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Science Literacy Warm Up

(1) Do you have Facebook? You most likely do, and if you don't, you have friends who do, and they probably think you're strange if you don't have it. Globally, there are almost 1.5 billion users of Facebook. For many of these people, Facebook isn't just something they check once a week, or even once a day. Many people compulsively check their Facebook multiple times a day. You might think of Facebook as harmless fun, but is it?

(2) Recent studies have shown that using Facebook can make many people feel worse. One 2013 study was conducted by Ethan Kross, a psychologist from the University of Michigan. He gathered 82 people and studied them over a period of two weeks. During that time, the subjects had to report in 5 times a day about their level of Facebook use and answer questions about their subjective well-being. Subjective well-being refers to how people rate and evaluate the quality of their own lives. This includes *affective* well-being, which involves their emotions and *cognitive* well-being, which involves mental judgements and includes how satisfied they feel about their lives.

(3) The results showed that, in general, the more often people use Facebook, the more they reported feeling worried, lonely and dissatisfied with their lives. Overall, frequent Facebook users reported being less happy. This data is supported by other studies that show similar results. Some studies also reveal that Facebook and other forms of social media can inspire feelings of envy, low self-worth and even anger.

(4) How is it possible that Facebook, whose initial intention was to increase social connectivity between people, ends up making people feel unhappy about themselves? One answer lies in the social comparison theory. This theory proposes that humans have a constant instinctive desire to evaluate their own opinions, abilities and status against those of their peers. We also tend to compare ourselves with those who are the most similar to us. For example, if you are a 14 year old girl living in a city, you are more likely to compare yourself to someone similar to you than to an 80 year old man living on a farm.



(4) Is there a purpose to all of this comparison? The process of evaluation allows us to gain a more accurate idea of our standing in a social group and helps us to define ourselves. On paper, this drive towards self-evaluation through comparison seems reasonable, however, a problem arises through the constant use and exposure to social media.

(5) Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other social media, allow us to curate, meaning selectively represent, our online persona. On social media, it is easy for people to choose how their ideas, experiences, and abilities appear to others. Most people curate their online images so that others don't see moments of failure, loneliness, sadness and mediocrity, all of which are aspects of everyone's life. Instead, people overemphasize moments of success, social triumph and happiness. Before social media, we had a greater tendency to compare ourselves to our peers face-to-face. We saw their pimples, saw the times they ate lunch by themselves and knew when they failed a test. Now this reality is overshadowed by social media images of friends having fun at a party to which you weren't invited. Very few people show images of themselves popping that zit before the party. On social media, everyone seems happier, more popular, more attractive and more successful than they really are. If we consume a lot of social media, this is bound to make us feel like we don't measure up. This is why studies on social media and well-being show a decline in happiness and self-worth the more you use it. If you suspect Facebook has this effect on you, why don't you stop using it or cut down?

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(6) One simple answer is that Facebook and other social media is addictive. Dr. Cecilie Andraessen of the University of Bergen in Norway developed the Bergen Facebook Addiction Scale which can measure your level of Facebook dependency. Through studies, Andraessen shows that symptoms of Facebook addiction closely resemble alcohol, drug and other forms of chemical addiction. For Facebook addicts, using Facebook triggers the same reward pathways in the brain as would be triggered by drug use. As well, social media addicts also exhibit a greater activation of their amygdala and striatum, which are regions of the brain associated with impulsive behaviors. This makes it more likely that they will log into

Facebook more often than they want. Like with many other addictions, the use of Facebook for addicts comes with feelings of anxiety, conflict as well as withdrawal when they are unable to use Facebook. Nir Eyal is the author of a book titled *Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products*. He says Facebook has been intentionally designed to have addictive qualities. These are the keys to how Facebook hooks users, "...a trigger, such as loneliness, boredom, or stress; an action, such as logging into Facebook; an unpredictable or variable reward, such as scrolling through a mix of juicy and boring tidbits in the newsfeed; and investment, which includes posting pictures or liking someone's status update." Does this sound familiar?

Article Questions

- 1) What is subjective well-being?
- 2) Summarize what Ethan Kross's study found about the amount of Facebook use and the level of subjective well-being people experience.
- 3) What does social comparison theory propose?
- 4) To whom are you most likely to compare yourself?
- 5) Why does social media distort your ability to compare yourself to others accurately?
- 6) What is Facebook addiction similar to?
- 7) Use the Bergen Facebook Addiction Scale to measure your level of Facebook addiction. For each statement answer: very rarely, rarely, sometimes, often or very often.
 - 1) You spend a lot of time thinking about Facebook or planning the use of Facebook.
 - 2) You feel the urge to use Facebook more and more.
 - 3) You use Facebook to forget about personal problems.
 - 4) You have tried to cut down on the use of Facebook without success.
 - 5) You become restless or troubled when you can't use Facebook.
 - 6) You use Facebook so much that it has a negative impact on your work or studies.

If you answer "often" or "very often" to at least four of the above statements, then you might have a Facebook Addiction.