The Two Faces of Social Media

Marija Lukic

Social networking sites can either help or harm your mental health, depending on what you do when you're online.

Is social media good or bad for your mental health? In today's hyper-connected digital world, this is a controversial question. Using social media excessively is associated with many mental health issues including anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and poor body image. But this seemingly bleak picture does not tell the whole story: Could using social media ever be a positive activity with profound benefits for mental health? Research suggests that the answer is yes.

While it's true that social media users are more likely to report feeling depressed and socially isolated, we don't know why that is. Social networking sites could be causing mental health issues, but it's also possible that individuals with poor mental health are more drawn to social media in the first place. Furthermore, studies in the field of social media and mental health suggest that social networks can be a healthy tool for identity construction, a way to seek support for mental health challenges, a place to make new friends and strengthen existing relationships.

The reach of social networking sites has never been wider and their popularity is growing. 1.8 billion people worldwide use at least one form of social media. Facebook alone has over 1 billion daily active users. In North America, the average person reports spending 61 minutes every day logged onto social media and checking favorites sites 30 times per week. Social media is becoming a part of everyday life. The research on social media and mental health is split: Social media can be a minefield for mental health, but it can also be a powerful force for good if used carefully and strategically. Interacting with others through social media presents new challenges, but also new possibilities for relating to ourselves and to the world.

Social Comparisons

Imagine this: A young woman browses her Facebook feed to see her friends' updates. She is greeted by a parade of good news: Amy just got engaged, Blair was promoted, and, the icing on the online cake, Brian just posted pictures of a fun night out three days after their breakup. Meanwhile, she sits at home on a rainy Saturday, the third such night in a row, and wonders why her life isn't as good as theirs. But maybe she's wrong. Selective self-presentation is the double-edged sword of

social media, and can contribute to either depression or empowerment.

People often present idealized versions of themselves online. U.S. adults surveyed about their social media habits admit that they prioritize positivity over accuracy in their online self-presentation. The logical conclusion is that online, everyone looks happier and more successful than they really are. This situation creates a breeding ground for comparing the self to others--and coming up short. Upward social comparisons (comparing ourselves to others who we feel are better than us) both online and in "real life" have been associated with poor mental health. Online comparisons can be especially damaging because of the 24/7 artificial window social networks provide into others' lives. Unlike in the physical world, which only affords the opportunity to envy what is, the digital world lets social media users feel jealous of a carefully constructed image of what might be.

Compounding the problem, the highly visual nature of social media can impact body image. Unrealistic portrayals of physical appearance are common online. Estimates for the percentage of social media users who post photos that have been digitally altered range from 10 to 70%, with North American young adults and women in particular being the most common culprits. Editing aside, anyone can post the 1 photo out of 100 that makes them look thinner, younger, and more attractive. Everyone not only looks happier online, they look better too.

The empowering flip side is that actively controlling one's self-presentation and constructing a positive online identity boosts self-esteem, at least for the person doing it. The Hyperpersonal Model of Behavior theorizes that social media gives users the time and opportunity to pick, choose, and ultimately optimize how they present themselves to others in a way that they wouldn't be able to do in a face-to-face interaction. This self-construction of social identity often leads to enhanced self-esteem. Survey respondents report feeling that social media is a way to authentically express who they are and share it with the world, which at first seems contradictory to the self-enhancement that we know goes on, but is it really?

Maybe these positive self-portrayals are how people really see themselves, and sharing that positive self-perception can raise self-esteem. More evidence for the benefits of using social media in an empowering way comes from a recent University of California-Irvine study. Students who took smiling selfies every day for four weeks and shared those selfies with researchers reported feeling both happier and more self-confident than they were before. The positive change could be attributed to adopting a different view of the self (as someone who is happy and smiling) and to sharing this happy image of the self with others. Presenting oneself positively, controlling the construction of one's own social narrative, and sharing the good things in life with others can benefit mental health for the person sharing.

Social Communities

Social media can benefit mental health, but there is another side to the coin. How can you be lonely when you can connect to hundreds of people in seconds with the click of a button? Social isolation is a problem that affects people all over the world, and perceived social isolation has been shown to increase with frequent social media use. Young adults who use social media for two to three hours per day are twice as likely to feel alone as those who were online for less than half an hour daily. Checking social media fifty-eight times or more per week is also linked to perceived social isolation, while checking social sites nine times per week or less--the equivalent of just over once a day—seems to be much less detrimental.

The core of the super-connected loneliness paradox may be that more time spent online often means less time fostering offline friendships. Excessive online interaction distracts from IRL (In Real Life) relationships. It is unlikely that having hundreds of friends on social media can replace two or three close, deep friendships with people that we see in person. In fact, one study shows that in teenagers, larger Facebook network size is associated with higher levels of stress. Many online friendships are, by necessity, shallow—as humans we only have the capacity to maintain so many meaningful friendships at a time. Feelings of exclusion can also add to loneliness. Social networks make users privy to their friends' social lives, making it glaringly evident when someone has been left out of a gathering. Another potential source of stress is the ever-present temptation to ruminate over how many people have "liked" a recently shared photo or post.

On the other hand, social networks can be used as a positive tool to strengthen existing friendships. Teenagers that reported acting in supportive ways such as liking friends' posts or making encouraging posts on friends' pages had decreased levels of cortisol, indicating that those activities reduced stress. Young adults who used social media to keep in touch with friends also experienced higher levels of well-being compared to those who didn't. Another piece of evidence comes from the selfie study: individuals who took and shared "groupies" (photos of a group of people, usually friends) got the same benefits of happiness and improved self-esteem as those who posted smiling selfies. The implication seems to be that social networking activities that strengthen offline friendships can benefit mental health.

Online connections also have merit in their own right. Shy individuals are one group who can especially profit from social media's distance and anonymity.

Social networks facilitate connections for those who have a harder time interacting in person, which can elevate mood. Social media's power to connect isn't limited to the young; the elderly can also benefit. Research from the University of Sweden links social media participation in seniors to healthier aging. Seniors who participated in an intervention designed to promote engagement in daily meaningful Internet-based activities (including social media) reported increased feelings of involvement in society, stronger social networks, and reduced loneliness. Social media can be a helpful way to connect for groups of people who are more likely to be socially isolated.

Social media can also prove an important resource for individuals who are struggling with mental health challenges. Apart from traditional social networking sites, a number of online forums exist that are oriented around mental health and offer support and the ability to find and connect with others who are going through similar situations in a safe way. Using social media as a support for mental health can be a delicate balancing act though; for instance, in the case of pro-anorexia forums, online communities can actually propagate the illness by preventing meaningful recovery. Social media can be a valuable way to connect, but one that should be used with care and caution, especially by those who are more vulnerable to mental health issues.

Social Conduct

Active social media use seems to be better for mental health than its passive counterpart. "Lurking", a phenomenon that involves viewing others' online activity without contributing or engaging with them, is tied to various negative mental health outcomes. Lurking comes in many forms: looking at friends' photos and posts, perusing the content of complete strangers, or even cyber-stalking. Active behavior, like making positive posts, in other words, controlling the

narrative, is not associated with any of these negative outcomes and can actually help mental health.

Specific actions on social media are associated with worse mental health. Some of the online behaviors that are consistently found to be detrimental online are: wasting time on meaningless and unproductive activities ("killing time" online), engaging in negative or upward comparisons, envying others, ruminating on one's perceived shortcomings, and friending or accepting friend requests from ex-partners.

Moderation seems to be key to mental health on social media. Individuals who spend a lot of time online are more likely to experience consequences with regard to their mental health, as are those that check frequently. The moral of the story: social media itself is not the problem, rather excessive use of social media is. In the modern world, completely avoiding social networks may not even be feasible, but using them in a limited and strategic manner definitely is. Setting limits on how frequently to check Facebook each week, sticking to a daily time quota, or both, could be effective and healthy ways to make sure that social media use helps rather than harms.

Social media use has been associated with many mental health issues. It is easy to paint this pervasive part of modern life a villain. Saying that we should avoid social media is the easy answer, and the impractical one. It is almost impossible to function in society without a computer. Employers regularly check employees' social footprint before hiring, busy professionals are meeting through online dating more and more, and younger generations can't even imagine a world before online was a "thing". In this context, the minefield of social media can't be ignored, but instead has to be navigated. Using social media smartly, actively, in moderation, and taking breaks when necessary are ways to maneuver

through the online world in a healthy way. Avoiding harmful behaviors and engaging in positive ones is the best way to engage in this important aspect of the social life of the future—whatever new gifts and challenges online communication may bring.

Baker, D. A., & Algorta, G. P. (2016). The relationship between online social networking and depression: A systematic review of quantitative studies. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 19*(11), 638–648.

Burke, M., & Kraut, R. E. (2016). The relationship between Facebook use and well-being depends on communication type and tie strength. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 21*(4), 265–281.

Chen, Y., Mark, G., & Ali, S. (2016). Promoting positive affect through smartphone photography. *Psychology of Well-Being, 6* (1).

Gonzales, A. L., & Hancock, J. T. (2011). Mirror, mirror on my Facebook wall: Effects of exposure to Facebook on self-esteem. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 14*(1-2), 79–83.

Guest, E. (2016). Photo editing: Enhancing social media images to reflect appearance ideals. *Journal of Aesthetic Nursing, 5*(9), 444–446.

Larsson, E. (2016). *Promoting social activities and participation among seniors: Exploring and evaluating social and Internet-based occupational therapy interventions* (Doctoral dissertation). Umeå. Retrieved from: http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:umu:diva-11443

Lin, L. Y., Sidani, J. E., Shensa, A., Radovic, A., Miller, E., Colditz, . . . Primack, B. A. (2016). Association between social media use and depression among U.S. young adults. *Depression and anxiety, 33*(4), 323–331.

Morin-Major, J. K., Marin, M. F., Durand, N., Wan, N., Juster, R. P., & Lupien, S. J. (2016). Facebook behaviors associated with diurnal cortisol in adolescents: Is befriending stressful? *Psychoneuroendocrinology, 63*, 238–246.

Pantic, I. (2014). Online social networking and mental health. *Cyberpsychology, Behaviour, and Social Networking, 17*(10), 652–657.

Primack, B. A., Shensa, A., Sidani, J. E., Whaite, E. O., Lin, L. Y., Rosen, D., . . . Miller, E. (2017). Social media use and

perceived social isolation among young adults in the U.S. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, *53*(1), 1–8. doi: 10.1016/j.amepre.2017.01.010

Rosenthal, S. R., Buka, S. L., Marshall, B. D. L., Carey, K. B, & Clark, M. A. (2016). Negative experiences on Facebook and depressive symptoms among young adults. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *59*(5), 510–516.

Sidani, J. E., Shensa, A., Hoffman, B., Hanmer, J., & Primack, B. A. (2016). The association between social media use and eating concerns among US young adults. *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, *116*(9), 1465–1472.

Wang, R., Yang, F., & Haigh, M. M. (2016). Let me take a selfie: Exploring the psychological effects of posting and viewing selfies and groupies on social media. *Telematics and Informatics*, *34*(4), 274–283.