

Social Science's 10 Findings on Facebook by Katherine Thorson

Social science is just beginning to understand how Facebook has changed our social lives since it was born ten years ago.

Over the past ten years, Facebook has added a new dimension to the social lives of over a billion people—and together with other social media like Twitter and Instagram, it has created an entirely new category of social ties. Given their popularity, social media have become the topic of a growing body of research in the social sciences. For Facebook's tenth birthday, I collected ten discoveries this research has yielded. If you're on Facebook, then these studies apply to you!

1. Facebook might increase dissatisfaction with your life. The authors of one study text-messaged people five times per day for two weeks and asked people about their Facebook use and their well-being. The more people used Facebook at one time, the worse they felt the next time they were text-messaged. In addition, over the two weeks of the study, the more people used Facebook, the more their life satisfaction decreased.

The GGSC's Emiliana Simon-Thomas discusses her work with improving the emotional intelligence of Facebook interactions at the second compassion research day.
Jeffrey Gerson/Facebook

2. But being more giving on Facebook can help. If you want to use Facebook without experiencing these deficits in subjective well-being, try being a more giving user when you are on the site. One study documented that active interactions, like leaving wall posts or "liking" friends' content, predicted less loneliness and more social capital. Consuming content more passively, such as browsing through other people's profiles, however, was associated with more loneliness and less social capital.

3. Your profile can betray social anxiety. Research has documented that certain objective measures of profiles are related to users' self-reported personality. For example, the amount of information people list on their profiles, like number of favorite TV shows or music interests, is positively correlated with their social anxiety.

4. It can also make you look narcissistic. Another personality trait that is frequently associated with social media is narcissism. In a study where people rated the profiles of strangers, researchers found certain elements of a profile that contributed to impressions of narcissism. For example, the more attractive people were in their profile photos, the more others rated them as narcissistic. In addition, the more social interactions (measured as number of friends and wall posts) people had on Facebook, the more others rated them as narcissistic.

5. You are your profile. If someone saw your Facebook profile, would they form a similar impression of you as if they met you in person? Research suggests yes: if you are liked on the basis of your profile, you are also liked on the basis of face-to-face interactions. One criterion people use to make these judgments is social expressivity. The more socially expressive people were in person and online, the more people who viewed their web page or talked with them liked them.

6. Don't like the "likes" too much. When you post a status update, how disappointed are you if no one likes it or comments on it? One study showed that the importance people placed on receiving comments about their status updates predicted lower levels of self-esteem, which then predicted lower feelings of belongingness.

More on Social Connections

How healthy are your social networks? Take the quiz!

Learn how weak ties and strong ties work together to build our social capital.

Learn how social media can build social capital.

Learn about the GGSC's efforts to improve conflict resolution on Facebook and expand its range of emotional expressions.

7. Too much negativity can hurt your social standing. Although people with low self-esteem are often hesitant to disclose information about themselves to others and thereby form social bonds, research suggests they see Facebook as a safe and desirable outlet for disclosure. Unfortunately, though, low-self esteem people tend to post updates that are more negative than people high in self-esteem. This type of disclosure then backfires—instead of creating social connections, it causes other individuals to like them

less.

8. Comparisons with friends hurt happiness. A Facebook friend may not always be a friend you have met in person. In addition to the privacy and safety concerns this raises, research suggests this may also affect how we see ourselves in comparison to others. Spending time on Facebook can be associated with thinking that other people are living happier and better lives you, and this is especially true for those who include people they have not met personally among their Facebook friends.

9. Facebook influences your behavior through your friends. If you logged on to Facebook in the U.S. on November 2, 2010, and were 18 or older at the time, you were part of an experiment on social influence. On this U.S. congressional election day, Facebook showed some users a news feed message that encouraged them to vote, along with pictures of their Facebook friends who voted. Other users saw the message but without pictures of their friends. People who saw the message along with pictures of their friends were significantly more likely to vote than people who saw the message without pictures of their friends.

10. People who quit Facebook struggle with addiction and privacy. Though Facebook is still increasing in number of users, some people have quit Facebook altogether. Who are the people who “commit virtual identity suicide,” as one paper called it? The international study of Facebook quitters revealed that they felt more addicted to the internet, meaning it affected their daily routine, social life, productivity, sleeping pattern, and feelings, more than current Facebook users. They were also significantly more cautious about their privacy, with 48 percent of them citing privacy concerns as their primary reason for closing their accounts.