

“They Are Happier and Having Better Lives than I Am”: The Impact of Using Facebook on Perceptions of Others’ Lives

Hui-Tzu Grace Chou, Ph.D., and Nicholas Edge, B.S.

Abstract

Facebook, as one of the most popular social networking sites among college students, provides a platform for people to manage others’ impressions of them. People tend to present themselves in a favorable way on their Facebook profile. This research examines the impact of using Facebook on people’s perceptions of others’ lives. It is argued that those with deeper involvement with Facebook will have different perceptions of others than those less involved due to two reasons. First, Facebook users tend to base judgment on examples easily recalled (the availability heuristic). Second, Facebook users tend to attribute the positive content presented on Facebook to others’ personality, rather than situational factors (correspondence bias), especially for those they do not know personally. Questionnaires, including items measuring years of using Facebook, time spent on Facebook each week, number of people listed as their Facebook “friends,” and perceptions about others’ lives, were completed by 425 undergraduate students taking classes across various academic disciplines at a state university in Utah. Surveys were collected during regular class period, except for two online classes where surveys were submitted online. The multivariate analysis indicated that those who have used Facebook longer agreed more that others were happier, and agreed less that life is fair, and those spending more time on Facebook each week agreed more that others were happier and had better lives. Furthermore, those that included more people whom they did not personally know as their Facebook “friends” agreed more that others had better lives.

Introduction and Literature Review

MOST PEOPLE ARE CONCERNED ABOUT others’ impressions of them and try to manage these impressions in a favorable way.¹⁻⁵ With the invention of computer-mediated communication, social interactions can take place beyond face-to-face. Computer-mediated communication differs from face-to-face communication in that it eliminates many of the subtle cues that people use to form their impressions of others. Without these subtle cues, will the impressions formed online differ from those formed through face-to-face interaction? This research aims to answer this question by examining some perceptions of Facebook users.

Previous research has found that users of computer-mediated communication can employ several techniques to optimize their self-presentation and promote desired relationships, such as spending more time with greater cognitive resources to edit the messages,⁶ carefully selecting photographs,⁷ highlighting their positive attributes,⁷ presenting an ideal self,⁷ having a deeper self-disclosure,⁸ managing the

styles of their language,^{6,7,9,10} or providing a set of links to other sites or associating themselves with certain people, symbols, and material objects.¹¹⁻¹³ Through these actions, users of computer-mediated communication can leave better impressions on others.

One feature of Facebook is that it enables users to present themselves in an online profile with pictures and life events that they would like to share with those listed as their Facebook friends. Although comments posted by others cannot be controlled, Facebook users can still select whom they will allow to be Facebook friends; thus they can indirectly control the comments. Previous research has found that Facebook has affected the lives of its users, as well as their self-perceptions. For example, it can help users maintain or create social capital,¹⁴⁻¹⁶ facilitate civic and political participation,¹⁷ motivate students and establish a higher-level affective learning classroom climate,¹⁸ and increase users’ self-esteem with positive comments posted by their Facebook friends.¹⁹ Research also has found some negative impacts of Facebook. For example, Facebook can cause jealousy issues in romantic

A previous version of this paper was presented at the Western Social Science Association Annual Meeting held in Salt Lake City, Utah, April 2011.

Department of Behavioral Science, Utah Valley University, Orem, Utah.

relationships²⁰ and decrease teachers' credibility,¹⁸ users' self-esteem might be negatively affected by including strangers on Facebook,²¹ or by receiving negative comments posted on their Facebook page.¹⁹ In addition, people's Facebook profiles affect others' impression toward them. Previous studies found that comments posted by users' Facebook friends,¹³ as well as the number of Facebook friends²² and the attractiveness of Facebook friends,¹³ affect others' impression of users' popularity or social attractiveness. Building on previous research that has examined the impact of Facebook on users' self-perceptions and others' perceptions toward them, this study fills a research gap by examining the impact of Facebook on users' perceptions toward others.

Theoretical Arguments and Hypotheses

It is argued here that Facebook users tend to employ some heuristics when they form impressions of others, especially those whom they do not know personally. First, Facebook deprives its users from observing their online partners' non-verbal expressions, thus compelling users to rely only on the information they can get online. Second, Facebook social networks grow faster than real-life social networks; therefore, it becomes nearly impossible for its users to interact closely with each of their network friends. **Previous research found that an average Facebook user has 217 network members,**²¹ while the average size of a real-life social network is expected to be around 125.²³ With the rapid expansion of their online social networks, especially of individuals whom they have never met before, online users tend to become cognitive misers.²⁴⁻²⁶

One possible way to manage the vast size of online social networks is to employ an *availability heuristic*; that is, individuals can base judgment on examples that they can easily recall.^{27,28} When forming impressions of others, it is easy for frequent Facebook users to recall the statements and pictures posted by their Facebook friends. Since people are motivated to make positive self-presentations, the information and images posted by Facebook friends tend to be socially desirable. Constantly reading others' reported positive life events, as well as frequently seeing others' pictures of happy moments, could give Facebook users an impression that others are happy and have good lives. In contrast to their own life events, which might not always be happy and positive, frequent Facebook users might perceive that life is not fair. **Although Facebook users are all prone to employ the availability heuristic, heavy Facebook users have more available examples from Facebook; thus they are more vulnerable to a distorted perception.**

When making judgments or forming impressions about others, one common attribution error is the *correspondence bias*; that is, the tendency to assume that others' actions and words reflect their personality or stable personal disposition, rather than being affected by situational factors.²⁹⁻³² When seeing others' happy pictures posted on Facebook, users might conclude that others are happy, while ignoring the circumstances or situations that made others happy. The correspondence bias is more likely to happen when Facebook users make attributions about people whom they have never met before. They assume that happiness is a stable characteristic of their temperaments and that they are constantly enjoying good lives. For those they do know personally, however, their past interactions with them help Facebook

users avoid the trap of correspondence bias and recognize the external factors at work: it is the occasions that make their friends happy. Based on the research and arguments above, the following two hypotheses are formulated:

H1: Those who are more involved with using Facebook are more likely to perceive that others are happier and are having better lives, and are less likely to agree that life is fair (availability heuristic).

H2: Those who include more strangers on their Facebook are more likely to perceive that others are happier and are having better lives, and are less likely to agree that life is fair (correspondence bias).

Data Collection

To test the hypotheses, a questionnaire that included the three perceptions—*others have a better life*, *others are happier*, and *life is fair*—was developed. The respondents were 425 undergraduate students taking classes at a large state university in Utah between the fall of 2010 and spring of 2011 across various academic disciplines, including sociology, psychology, mathematics, social work, family study, chemistry, criminal justice, graphic design, astronomy, accounting, and dance. The instructors of these randomly chosen classes were contacted first by e-mail. Appointments were then made to collect the surveys from their students during their class period, except for two online classes where surveys were collected online.

Dependent variables

Respondents were asked, "How much would you agree with the following statements? Many of my friends have a better life than me; many of my friends are happier than me; life is fair," with 1 indicating "strongly disagree" and 10 indicating "strongly agree." The means of the two statements were 3.86 and 3.89, while the mean of the third statement was 5.93. In other words, most respondents tended to disagree that others have better lives and others are happier, and tend to believe that life is fair, which is consistent with the better-than-average effect.^{33,34}

Independent variables

This research uses "years of using Facebook" and "number of hours spent on Facebook each week." "Years of using Facebook" can indicate the experiences users have with Facebook, whereas "number of hours spent on Facebook each week" can indicate the degree of current involvement with the Facebook. When respondents were asked, "Have you ever used Facebook?," about 95% of them (400 out of 425 respondents) answered yes, while 5% (22 out of 425 respondents) answered no. Among Facebook users, the average number of years using Facebook was 2.55, and the average number of hours spent on Facebook each week was 4.83. The means and standard deviations of all variables used in the multivariate analysis are presented in the Appendix.

Data Analysis

The results of the multiple regression analysis of the three perceptions *others have a better life*, *others are happier*, and *life is fair* are presented in Table 1. After controlling for religiosity, gender, and relationship status, the results show that those

TABLE 1. MULTIPLE REGRESSION ANALYSIS OF THREE PERCEPTIONS—(A) OTHERS HAVE A BETTER LIFE, (B) OTHERS ARE HAPPIER, (C) LIFE IS FAIR—ON SELECTED INDEPENDENT VARIABLES (STANDARDIZED COEFFICIENTS)

Independent variables	A Others have a better life	B Others are happier	C Life is fair
Years of using Facebook	0.07	0.16**	-0.12*
Number of hours spent on Facebook each week	0.11 ⁺	0.13*	-0.07
Number of people listed as Facebook friends	-0.07	-0.16*	0.17**
Number of Facebook friends not personally known	0.16**	0.05	0.04
Number of hours going out with friends each week	-0.16*	-0.14*	0.09
Religiosity	-0.11 ⁺	-0.11 ⁺	0.13*
Gender (male)	0.02	0.01	0.03
Single without a steady dating partner	0.21 ⁺	0.15	-0.10
Single with a steady dating partner	0.09	0.00	-0.02
Married	-0.08	-0.15	-0.04
R ²	0.12	0.12	0.07
F-value	4.38***	4.22***	2.36*
N	327	328	332

⁺*p*<0.10; **p*<0.05; ***p*<0.01; ****p*<0.001.

who spent more hours on Facebook each week ($\beta=0.11, p<0.10$) and those who included more people who they did not personally know as their Facebook friends ($\beta=0.16, p<0.01$) agreed more that others had better lives than themselves. Those who spent more time with their friends, however, agreed less that others had better lives than themselves ($\beta = -0.16, p<0.05$).

Number of years of using Facebook also had a significant impact on people's perceptions. Those who had used Facebook longer tended to perceive that others were happier than themselves ($\beta=0.16, p<0.01$) and had a lower degree of agreement with the statement that life is fair ($\beta = -0.12, p<0.05$). The more hours people spent on Facebook, the stronger was their agreement that others were happier. Those who had more friends on their Facebook agreed less with the statement that others were happier and agreed more with the view that life is fair. Those that were out frequently with their friends tended to disagree that others were happier than themselves.

Discussion and Conclusions

The results of this research support the argument that using Facebook affects people's perceptions of others. For those that have used Facebook longer, it is easier to remember positive messages and happy pictures posted on Facebook; these readily available examples give users an impression that others are happier. As expected in the first hypothesis, the results show that the longer people have used Facebook, the stronger was their belief that others were happier than themselves, and the less they agreed that life is fair. Furthermore, as predicted in the second hypothesis, this research found that the more "friends" people included on their Facebook whom they did not know personally, the stronger they believed that others had better lives than themselves. In other words, looking at happy pictures of others on Facebook gives people an impression that others are "always" happy and having good lives, as evident from these pictures of happy moments. In contrast to their own experiences of life events, which are not always positive, people are very likely to conclude that others have better lives than themselves and that life is not fair. The correspondence bias is more likely to occur when people make inferences about people whom they do not know well. They

tend to perceive that others are constantly happy, while paying little attention to the circumstances that affect others' behavior.

One could argue that frequent Facebook users shall know the tricks others use to manage the impression; therefore, experienced Facebook users could avoid the potential distorted perception. However, the results of the research suggest that frequent Facebook users tend to perceive that others are happier. In other words, they are more likely to be affected by the easily recalled content and tend to have the correspondence bias, whether consciously or unconsciously.

The problems of relying on an availability heuristic and having correspondence bias can be alleviated by having more balanced information, which can be gained through deeper interactions with others. The results of this research found that the more time people spent going out with their friends, the less they agreed that others have better lives and are happier. In other words, when people have more off-line interactions with their friends, knowing more stories about others' lives, both positive and negative, they are less persuaded that others are happier than themselves. In this way, they can avoid correspondence bias. Since becoming "Facebook friends" usually starts with two people knowing each other in person, it follows that those with more friends on their Facebook tend to have a more balanced view of others because they know more people in person. Therefore, they are more likely to agree that life is fair, and less likely to agree that others are happier, as the results of this research indicated.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the editor and anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback on previous drafts of the paper.

Disclosure Statement

No competing financial interests exist.

References

1. Goffman E. (1959) *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Anchor Books.

2. Jones EE, Pittman TS. (1982) Toward a general theory of strategic self-presentation. In Suls J. ed. *Psychological perspectives on the self*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, Vol. 1, pp. 231–62.
3. Schlenker BR. (1985) Identity and self-identification. In Schlenker BR, ed. *The self and social life*. New York: McGraw-Hill, pp. 65–99.
4. Schlenker BR, Pontari BA. (2000) The strategic control of information: Impression management and self-presentation in daily life. In Tesser A, Felson RB, Suls JM, eds. *Psychological perspectives on self and identity*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, pp. 199–232.
5. Snyder MR. Self-monitoring of expressive behavior. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology* 1974; 30:526–73.
6. Walther JB. Selective self-presentation in computer-mediated communication: Hyperpersonal dimensions of technology, language, and cognition. *Computers in Human Behavior* 2007; 23:2538–57.
7. Ellison N, Heino R, Gibbs J. Managing impressions online: Self-presentation processes in the online dating environment. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 2006; 11. <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol11/issue2/ellison.html> (accessed March 1, 2011).
8. Tidwell LC, Walther JB. Computer-mediated communication effects on disclosure, impressions, and interpersonal evaluations: Getting to know one another a bit at a time. *Human Communication Research* 2002; 28:317–48.
9. Adkins M, Brashers D. The power of language in computer-mediated groups. *Management Communication Quarterly* 1995; 8:289–322.
10. Lea M, Spears R. Paralanguage and social perception in computer-mediated communication. *Journal of Organizational Computing* 1992; 2:321–41.
11. Dominick J. Who do you think you are? Personal home pages and self-presentation on the World Wide Web. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 1999; 76:646–58.
12. Schau HJ, Gilly MC. We are what we post? Self-presentation in personal web space. *Journal of Consumer Research* 2003; 30:385–404.
13. Walther JB, Van Der Heide B, Kim S, et al. The role of friends' appearance and behavior: Are we known by the company we keep? *Human Communication Research* 2008; 3:28–49.
14. Ellison N, Steinfield C, Lampe C. The benefits of Facebook "Friends": Social capital and college students' use of online social network sites. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 2007; 12:1143–68.
15. Madge C, Meek J, Wellens J, et al. Facebook, social integration and informal learning at university: "It is more for socializing and talking to friends about work than for actually doing work." *Learning, Media & Technology* 2009; 34:141–55.
16. Steinfield C, Ellison NB, Lampe C. Social capital, self-esteem, and use of online social network sites: A longitudinal analysis. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 2008; 29:434–45.
17. Park N, Kee KF, Valenzuela S. Being immersed in social networking environment: Facebook groups, uses and gratifications, and social outcomes. *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 2009; 12:729–33.
18. Mazer JP, Murphy RE, Simonds CJ. I'll see you on Facebook: The effects of computer-mediated teacher self-disclosure on student motivation, affective learning, and classroom climate. *Communication Education* 2007; 56:1–17.
19. Valkenburg PM, Peter J, Schouten AP. Friend networking sites and their relationship to adolescents' well-being and social self-esteem. *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 2006; 9:584–90.
20. Muise A, Christofides E, Desmarais S. More information than you ever wanted: Does Facebook bring out the green-eyed monster of jealousy? *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 2009; 12:441–4.
21. Acar A. Antecedents and consequences of online social networking behavior: The case of Facebook. *Journal of Website Promotion* 2008; 3:62–83.
22. Tong ST, Van Der Heide B, Langwell L. Too much of a good thing? The relationship between number of friends and interpersonal impressions on Facebook. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 2008; 13:531–49.
23. Hill RA, Dunbar RIM. Social network size in humans. *Human Nature* 2003; 14:53–72.
24. Lea M, Spears R. (1995) Love at first byte? Building personal relationships over computer networks. In Wood JT, Duke S, eds. *Understudied relationships: Off the beaten track*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 197–233.
25. Spears R, Lea M. Panacea or panopticon? The hidden power in computer-mediated communication. *Communication Research* 1994; 21:427–59.
26. Wallace P. (1999) *The psychology of the Internet*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
27. MacLeod C, Campbell L. Memory accessibility and probability judgments: An experimental evaluation of the availability heuristic. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology* 1992; 63:890–902.
28. Tversky A, Kahneman D. Availability: A heuristic for judging frequency and probability. *Cognitive Psychology* 1973; 5:207–32.
29. Jones EE. The rocky road from acts to dispositions. *American Psychologist* 1979; 34:107–17.
30. Jones EE. (1990) *Interpersonal perception*. New York: Macmillan.
31. Jones EE, Harris VA. The attribution of attitudes. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 1967; 3:1–24.
32. Snyder M, Jones EE. Attitude attribution when behavior is constrained. *Journal of Experimental & Social Psychology* 1974; 10:585–600.
33. Alicke MD. Global self-evaluation as determined by the desirability and controllability of trait adjectives. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology* 1985; 3:1621–30.
34. Brown JD. Evaluations of self and others: Self-enhancement biases in social judgments. *Social Cognition* 1986; 4:353–76.

Address correspondence to:
 Hui-Tzu Grace Chou
 Utah Valley University
 800 W. University Parkway
 Orem, UT 84058

E-mail: chougr@uvu.edu

(Appendix follows →)

Appendix

APPENDIX TABLE A1. OPERATIONALIZATION OF VARIABLES, MEAN, AND STANDARD DEVIATION

	<i>Survey items and coding</i>	<i>Min.</i>	<i>Max.</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>S.D.</i>
1. Others are having a better life	How much would you agree with this statement? "Many of my friends have a better life than me" (1: strongly disagree; 10: strongly agree)	1	10	3.86	2.32
2. Others are happier	How much would you agree with this statement? "Many of my friends are happier than me" (1: strongly disagree; 10: strongly agree)	1	10	3.89	2.32
3. Life is fair	How much would you agree with this statement? "I believe that life is fair" (1: strongly disagree; 10: strongly agree)	1	10	5.93	2.78
4. Years of using Facebook	How many years have you been using Facebook?	0	8	2.55	1.36
5. Number of hours spent on Facebook each week	How many hours do you spend on Facebook each week?	0	80	4.83	7.77
6. Number of people listed as Facebook friends	Questions about your Facebook friends: "How many people do you currently have on your Facebook?"	3	1400	317.67	239.77
7. Number of Facebook friends not personally known	Questions about your Facebook friends: "How many people you do not personally know?"	0	700	46.53	105.87
8. Number of hours going out with friends each week	How many hours do you usually go out with friends each week? 1: Never; 2: 1-3 hours; 3: 4-6 hours; 4: 7 hours or more	1	4	2.62	1.01
9. Religiosity	How much do you agree with this statement? "I am a very religious person" (1: strongly disagree; 10: strongly agree)	1	10	7.02	3.13
10. Gender (male)	Your gender is: 1: male; 0: female	0	1	.43	.50
11. Single without a steady dating partner	Your current marital status is: 1: single without a steady dating partner; 0: other	0	1	.35	.48
12. Single with a steady dating partner	Your current marital status is: 1: single with a steady dating partner; 0: other	0	1	.20	.40
13. Married	Your current marital status is: 1: married; 0: other	0	1	.39	.49

Copyright of CyberPsychology, Behavior & Social Networking is the property of Mary Ann Liebert, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.