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Why too much Facebook can leave you feeling down

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“Comparison is the thief of joy”, said former US president Theodore Roosevelt. Spoken more than a century ago, Roosevelt’s words highlight a fundamental truth that is just as relevant today.

In the 1950s, the acclaimed social psychologist, Leon Festinger, devised the [social comparison theory](#) to help explain the psychological processes behind why we compare ourselves to others. Festinger proposed that individuals have an innate desire to see how they measure up with their peers on dimensions they deem personally important in order to evaluate how well they are doing.

This tendency hasn’t gone away, and in fact, through social media websites like Facebook we may be engaging in more social comparison than ever before. Such social comparisons can convey important information: are we measuring up in terms of our progress or achievements, or are we falling behind and need to put in the effort to catch up?

Of course, comparing ourselves too much to our peers can leave us feeling bad about ourselves. When looking at social media, we are often inundated with a constant stream of information and photos about family members, friends, and acquaintances. There may be times when this is too much, and [we’d be better off not knowing the details](#) that we learn, or imply, from these sites.

For example, a couple of years ago my little sister decided not to go to a big school dance because she didn’t have a date. She told me she was devastated about it. The next day, her friends’ pictures from the dance started to appear on her Facebook news feed. She said it made her feel even worse. Although I didn’t want to pry into why she felt this way, I began to think that this might be a common occurrence. Perhaps, all those smiling, happy photos of her girlfriends blissfully dancing the night away with their respective beaus made her feel that she was not attractive or popular enough to garner a date.

Her experience inadvertently inspired the basis of [research](#) I developed with colleagues from the universities of Houston and Palo Alto. We conducted two studies using a sample of over

300 American university students (98 men and 236 women), who were primarily in their early twenties.

We conducted two studies, one on a single day and a second across 14 days. Participants reported their daily Facebook use, Facebook social comparisons, and daily depressive symptoms. Overall, we found that people (of both genders) who spent more time on Facebook reported higher depressive symptoms due to Facebook social comparisons.

Although previous studies have found a link between Facebook use and depressive symptoms, our research demonstrates that the underlying cause or reason for why people feel blue after spending a lot of time on Facebook may be this urge to compare ourselves to others.

Unfortunately, when we compare ourselves to others we do so automatically, an impulse often beyond our control. Nor can we predict, short of not logging in, when we will compare ourselves to Facebook friends (and possible frenemies) because we never know what material we'll stumble across.

People often try to [present themselves in a positive light](#) on Facebook – that is, they filter out bad aspects of their lives and accentuate the good. So if we're comparing ourselves to others' "highlight reels" we may feel our lives are more mundane or less glamorous compared to theirs. But if we bear in mind that we're comparing ourselves to a [carefully crafted, positively distorted](#) version of their lives we might take a different view.

Facebook or other social media sites such as Twitter or Instagram aren't innately good or bad. They were created to fulfil a particular purpose, to entertain and to connect us to our friends – essentially positive experiences. So if you find yourself feeling increasingly glum after viewing your friends' exotic vacation photos, ecstatic engagement announcements, photos of happy babies (so many babies), or posts about their latest promotion – maybe it's time to step away from the keyboard.