

## Social Networking Sites Passive Use and its Effects on Sad-Happy Mood\*

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The social comparison theory explains some negative effect of social networking sites (SNSs) use. These Internet applications have made easier the online social comparison that in turn predicts depression and lower life satisfaction. Individuals prone to depression engage in greater levels of social comparison, particularly with others who are thought to be slightly better off, and experience a decrease in mood or self-esteem in the light of others' perceived happiness. The present study aimed at investigating the impact of the use of SNSs on the mood in an experimental design. In total, 120 university students were randomly assigned to one of two groups. In the experimental groups, the participants were instructed to access their Facebook and browse personal profiles for 20 minutes; while in the control, they read articles. For the participants with initial low mood using Facebook further lowered their mood whereas for the other participants did not have any effect. Furthermore, using Facebook lowered the mood of the participants not accustomed to use it frequently.

*Keywords:* social networking sites, well-being, social comparison, experimental design

### Highlights:

- Initially low mood is further lowered after using Facebook.
- If not accustomed to frequent Facebook use, there is a greater chance of lowered mood.
- Passive use of Facebook is unlikely to change the mood.

In the last twenty years, the spreading of Internet access allowed new forms of social interaction and communication among people. This was possible because of the evolution of social media, internet-based applications that made easier for everybody creating and exchanging user-generated content on

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the web. By means of social media, ordinary people have the opportunity to present themselves, their pictures, and their ideas, reaching a potentially huge audience (Krämer & Winter, 2008). Especially social networking sites (SNSs), like Facebook and Instagram, have become the principal spaces that allow individuals to manage a personal profile and the connections to others profiles (e.g., Wilson et al., 2012). In the last several years the number of Instagram users has been constantly growing, with 2.27 billion monthly active users as of the third quarter of 2018. Facebook is currently the most popular social network worldwide (Statista, 2018). Because of the large number of users, these two SNSs are the most investigated by the social sciences. Some studies suggested that frequent use of SNSs may be associated with depressive symptoms (e.g., Boer et al., 2021; Cudo et al., 2020; Marino et al., 2017), short-term declines in subjective wellbeing (Kross et al., 2013), and the belief that others are happier than oneself (Chou & Edge, 2012; Ozimek & Bierhoff, 2020). However, other studies have found opposite results, linking SNSs use to positive outcomes, such as increases in friendship quality (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009), satisfaction of ego needs (Toma & Hancock, 2013), and a greater subjective well-being (Kim & Lee, 2011). Moreover, one cross-cultural study showed that the relation between Facebook use and life satisfaction is not universal, but can differ between countries (Błachnio et al., 2019). Finally, a number of studies did not find an association between frequency of use of the online social networks and the wellbeing of individuals (Jelenchick et al., 2013; Kreski et al., 2020; Odgers & Jensen, 2020) highlighting that it is not possible to characterize general associations between SNSs use and psychological outcomes. Several scholars have suggested that it is not the quantity of time spent on SNSs that influences subjective well-being of individuals, rather the way people use these media, as well as their individual characteristics (Bergman et al., 2018; Coyne et al., 2020; Kross et al., 2021; Nesi & Prinstein, 2015; Tartaglia, 2016; Verduyn et al., 2015).

Festinger (1954) theorized social comparison as the need to compare oneself to others for acquiring information about the self, this process is considered a general tendency of human beings (Gilbert et al., 1995). The social comparison theory may explain some negative effect of SNSs use on subjective well-being indicators. The spread of these Internet applications have exposed people to a continual flow of information transferring many social relations from the private to the public sphere, (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008). Moreover, SNSs have made it easier for individuals to compare themselves with others looking to what they post on their profiles, the number of likes they receive, and the comments that people make to their posts. The online social comparison may predict depression, rumination, and lower life satisfaction (Feinstein et al., 2013; Nesi & Prinstein, 2015; Vogel et al., 2014). Anyway, these effects do not affect all the users of SNSs, the kind of usage and the individual characteristics may trigger or not the negative effects of the online social comparison (Yang, 2016).

With regard to the different activities people can do by means of SNSs, some authors have suggested that a significant differentiation is that between active and passive usage (Deters & Mehl, 2013; Verduyn et al., 2015; Verduyn et al., 2020). Active usage refers to activities that facilitate the direct exchanges with others, such as posting status updates and commenting on posts. The passive usage is the consumption of information without exchanges with others, for example browsing others' profiles and photos. Previous studies linked only a passive SNSs usage with reduced levels of subjective well-being (Liu et al., 2019; Verduyn et al., 2015). In fact, continually exposing oneself to positive information about others may make individuals vulnerable to negative comparisons with others, leading them to experience low mood or envy (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015; Ozimek & Bierhoff, 2020; Vogel et al., 2014).

Concerning the psychological characteristics of the users of SNSs, some scholars have suggested that depressed or depression-prone individuals may engage in greater levels of social comparison, particularly with others who are thought to be slightly better off, experiencing a decrease in mood and self-esteem in light of others' perceived happiness (e.g., Nesi & Prinstein, 2015). In contrast, when people feel good tend to compare themselves with others who are thought to be worse off (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007), so individuals with high mood do not probably experience a decrease in mood when are exposed to a continual stream of information about others on SNSs, rather they may be even happier with their lives. Moreover, individuals with low levels of self-esteem show more incongruence between the true self and the Facebook self as a function of increased vulnerable narcissism (Grieve et al., 2020).

Young people spend the majority of their time on SNSs looking at peers' profiles and photos, rather than posting or updating their own profiles (Przepiorka, & Blachnio, 2019), then they may be especially likely to engage in social comparisons online. Although there is a lot of research regarding the negative impact of SNSs on the psychological wellbeing of young people, cross-sectional studies were by far the most widely employed research design (Best et al., 2014; Chou & Edge, 2012; Yang & Robinson, 2018), limiting the evidence in support of the direction of the relationship between SNSs use and subjective well-being. The aim of the present study was to investigate the impact of the passive usage of SNSs on subjective well-being in an experimental study. We chose to investigate the use of Facebook because when we collected the data Facebook was the most used SNS in Italy. The dependent variable was the mood because other well-being indexes do not vary in a brief period of time (e.g., self-esteem, satisfaction with life). On the basis of the results of previous studies, we expected that: a) Making a passive use of Facebook would decrease sad-happy mood (Liu et al., 2015); b) We expected that the negative effect of the passive use of Facebook would be stronger for participants with initial sad mood because the effect of social comparison with other users may be different depending on the mood of the individual (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007; Nesi & Prinstein, 2015; Verduyn et al., 2020).

## Method

### Participants

The participants were selected among the students of two public universities in Turin, Italy. The participants were contacted in the classrooms before and after the lessons asking for their participation. To participate in the study, the students had to have a Facebook profile and a smartphone with active Internet connection. All were informed that participation was completely anonymous and voluntary. The research has been conducted following the ethical principles of the Italian Society of Community Psychology.

The research sample included 120 university students (44.5% males and 55.5% females), the mean age of participants was 22.61 years ( $SD = 3.13$ ). In total, 32.5% of the participants attended the Arts schools of the University of Turin, 37.5% the Sciences schools of University of Turin, and 29.2% the Engineering courses of the Politecnico of Turin. Of these, 25% of the participants were both students and workers, while 75% were full-time students.

### Procedure and Measures

Participants completed a brief self-report, which assessed their daily amount of time spent on Facebook and their initial mood. Then they were randomly assigned to one of two groups with different tasks.

In the experimental group, the participants were instructed to access their Facebook and to simply browse personal profiles for 20 minutes. Participants were asked to avoid any active use of Facebook (e.g., chatting, posting comments, playing games online, etc.).

In the control group, the participants had a task to read an article for 20 minutes. Participants randomly received one of two articles with a neutral content not linked to any of the variables investigated. Two articles of the National Geographic dealing with insects and reptiles were used.

Data were collected by two brief self-reports filled out before the experimental situation and afterwards. The following was assessed: 1) The amount of time a participant spends on Facebook: "Approximately, how many hours per day do you spend on Facebook?"; 2) Subjective mood: "In general, how do you feel?" Participants were requested to answer drawing a line on a bar that was 10 centimetres long; the extremes of the bar were labelled with "Sad" and "Happy". The distance from the left extreme and the line in millimetres was used as indicator of the mood ranging from 0 = *completely sad* to 100 = *completely happy*; 3) Socio-demographic data included gender, age, school attended, and if participant was a full-time student or both student and worker.

## Results

After the assignment of the participants to the two experimental conditions we obtained an experimental group of 61 subjects (59% females) and a control group of 59 subjects (52% females). We compared the gender composition of the groups using Chi-square test ( $\chi^2 = .706$ ;  $p = .401$ ). The groups did not differ significantly. Because the sample was small and the distribution of the age was not normal, we compared the means of age, daily hours spent on Facebook, and initial mood of the groups using the Mann-Whitney nonparametric test. The distribution of age ( $U = 1992.5$ ;  $p = .305$ ), daily hours spent on Facebook, ( $U =$

1635;  $p = .561$ ), and initial mood ( $U = 1708$ ;  $p = .631$ ) were the same in the two groups. In addition, levels of initial mood and daily hours spent on Facebook did not correlate ( $r = -.021$ ;  $p = .819$ ).

We compared the mean scores of the mood measured after the tasks. We used  $t$  test because the mood scores had normal distributions. The experimental group ( $M = 62.75$ ,  $SD = 23.23$ ) and the control group ( $M = 68.24$ ,  $SD = 19.82$ ) did not differ significantly ( $t = 1.39$ ;  $p = .17$ ). We compared the mood before the task ( $M = 63.46$ ,  $SD = 22.01$ ) and the mood after the task ( $M = 65.45$ ;  $SD = 21.70$ ) using the paired  $t$  test. They did not differ significantly ( $t = -1.44$ ;  $p = .15$ ).

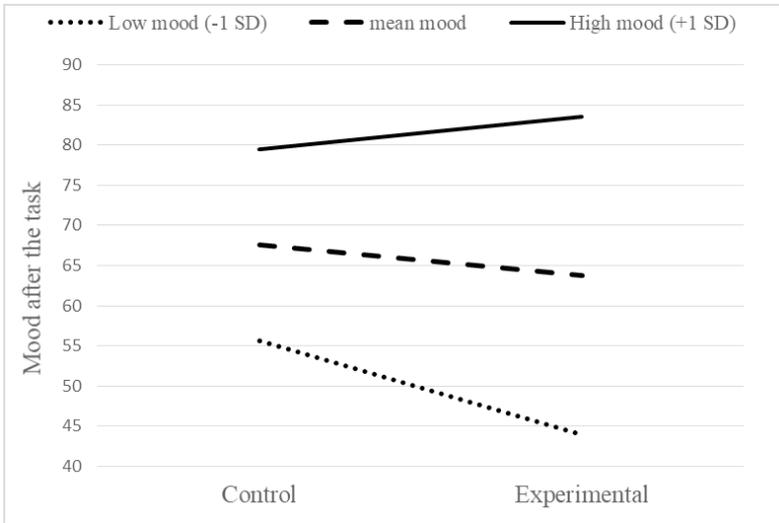
We hypothesised a moderation effect of the initial mood and to test this effect we performed a hierarchical regression analysis (see Table 1). The dependent variable was the mood after the experimental task. In the first step we entered as independent variables the group (1 = experimental) and the initial mood, after which we entered the daily hours spent on Facebook as control variable. In the second step, we entered the interaction between group and initial mood. In the third step, we entered the interaction between group and daily hours spent on Facebook. The mood after the task was influenced by the initial mood ( $\beta = .51$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The influence of the experimental task (passive use of Facebook;  $\beta = -.88$ ,  $p < .001$ ) was moderated by the initial mood ( $\beta = .63$ ,  $p = .001$ ) and by daily hours on Facebook ( $\beta = .40$ ,  $p = .001$ ). For the interpretation of the moderations, we plotted the significant interactions at the mean and one standard deviation above and below the mean of the moderator variables. We tested the simple slopes using Preacher's simple slopes calculator (Preacher, Curran, & Bauer, 2006). Concerning the interaction between initial mood and the experimental task (see Figure 1), the test of the slopes showed that the negative effect of the experimental task on the final mood was significant only for individuals with low initial mood ( $b = -11.72$ ,  $t = -3.27$ ,  $p < .01$ ) whereas was not significant for individuals with mean initial mood ( $b = -3.86$ ,  $t = -1.50$ ,  $p = .14$ ) and with high initial mood ( $b = 3.99$ ,  $t = 1.10$ ,  $p = .27$ ).

**Table 1**  
*Results of hierarchical linear regression*

Predictors	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Group (1 = Experimental)	-.08	-.62**	-.88**
Initial mood	.76**	.55**	.51**
Daily hours on Facebook	.01	-.01	-.28**
Group X Initial mood		.59**	.63**
Group X Daily hours on Facebook			.40**
R <sup>2</sup> (corrected)	.57	.61	.64

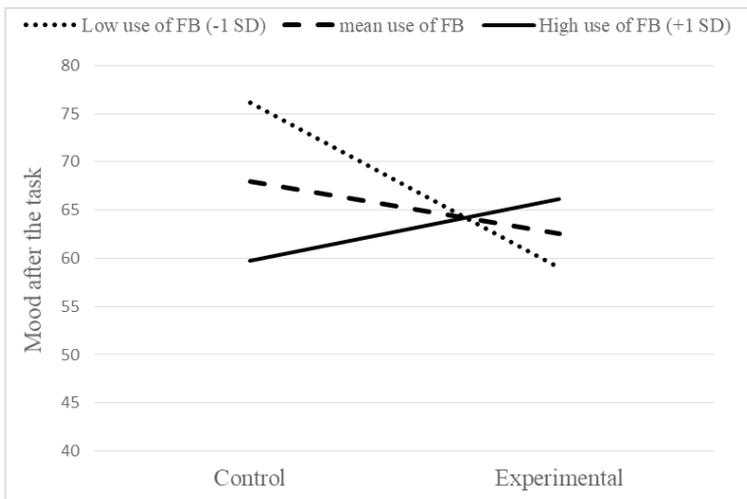
\*\*  $p < .01$ .

**Figure 1**  
Interaction of initial mood and experimental task on final mood



Concerning the moderation of daily hours spent on Facebook (see Figure 2), the test of the slopes showed that the negative effect of the experimental task was significant only for individuals with low frequency of use of Facebook ( $b = -17.15, t = -2.99, p < .01$ ) whereas was not significant for individuals with mean ( $b = -5.37, t = -1.37, p = .17$ ) and high frequency of use of Facebook ( $b = 6.42, t = 1.11, p = .27$ ).

**Figure 2**  
Interaction of daily hours on Facebook and experimental task on final mood



## Discussion

The aim of the study was to investigate the effect of the passive use of SNSs on the mood. On the basis of the research literature, we expected a negative impact of the SNSs use on the mood (Liu et al., 2015). We did not find a general effect of the passive use of Facebook on the mood, which suggests that individual factors might play a role in the relationship between the passive use of SNSs and well-being (Bergman et al., 2018; Verduyn, et al., 2015). Several studies found that individuals with sad mood and low self-esteem are more sensible to the negative effects of SNSs use (Cudo et al., 2020; Nesi & Prinstein, 2015; Tartaglia, 2016). We tested the moderation of the participants' mood before the experiment on the effect that using Facebook had on the mood itself. The analyses showed a significant moderation of the mood before the experimental manipulation. Namely, for the participants that had an initial low mood, using Facebook further lowered their low mood whereas for the participants with average and high initial mood the passive use of Facebook did not have any significant effect. A theoretical framework frequently used to interpret the negative effects of SNSs on well-being is the social comparison theory (Bergagna & Tartaglia, 2018; Vogel et al., 2014; Yang & Robinson, 2018). The social comparison may have very different effects depending on the term of the comparison. The downward comparison, like comparing with others who are thought to be worse off, may have positive effects making individuals feeling better about themselves. On the contrary, the upward comparison, like with others who are thought to be slightly better off, may have the opposite result on the feeling about themselves (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007; Lim & Yang, 2019). In this regard, individuals with low mood are prone to upward comparison whereas individuals feeling good are prone to downward comparison. SNSs emphasize this general process because make easier to compare with others browsing their personal profiles. Moreover, the information posted in the profiles are selected by the users in order to promote a positive image of themselves (Bareket-Bojmel et al., 2016; Islam et al., 2019) then looking at others profiles may foster the belief that they are better and happier than oneself (Chou & Edge, 2012; Ozimek & Bierhoff, 2020). Generally, Facebook users express more positive than negative emotions in their posts (Ziegele & Reinecke, 2017). In other words, in the online world the majority of the comparisons are perceived as upward (Alfasy, 2019), especially for depression-prone people (Nesi & Prinstein, 2015). In our study, the participants with low initial mood may had engaged in greater levels of social comparison experiencing a decrease in mood in the light of others perceived happiness.

We checked whether the familiarity of the online social network influenced the relation between SNSs use and wellbeing. We tested the interaction of the usual frequency of use of Facebook with the negative effect of the passive use of the SNS on the mood. We found a significant moderation effect. The participants having an average or high frequency of use of Facebook, i.e., the accustomed users, had no negative effect from the experimental task. On the contrary, using

Facebook passively lowered the mood of the participants not accustomed to use frequently this SNS. It is possible that the individuals usually spending little time on Facebook are more sensitive to the negative effects of the online social comparison because they are not used to it. The frequent viewing of others' profiles may reduce the belief that others are better than oneself. Anyway, further specific studies are needed to validate this interpretative hypothesis.

This study has some limitations that may be solved in future research. First, the participants were university students that are not representative of the whole young adult population; further research is needed using different samples in order to generalize the findings. Moreover, the experimental designs allow the study of the causal links but require a simplification that may limit the external validity of the results. In our study, we found a brief-term effect on the mood of a short passive use of Facebook (20 minutes); it would be relevant to test the long-term effects of the use of the SNSs by mean of longitudinal studies. The use of a single indicator for the mood is a limit of the present study, the concept of well-being is complex and it would be useful to investigate it by means of several indicators. The use of Facebook too should be investigated with more indicators because the way people interact is important in addition to the amount of time spent on the SNS. Finally, we investigated the effect on the mood of just one SNS. The different SNSs are similar but have specific characteristics too. Future research should investigate the effects of the use of various SNSs in order to evaluate if some specific affordance imply different effects. Finally, we may question whether surveys are appropriate to investigate the use of SNSs. These Internet applications record a huge amount of objective data concerning the users' activities and the use of these data may be more reliable compared to self-reported information. However, the majority of the data recorded by SNSs are not accessible to independent researchers. The big companies owning SNSs actually use the objective data of the users studying the individual online behaviours, unfortunately the results of these researches are neither public nor motivated by public utility (Zuboff, 2019).

### **Conclusion**

The study showed the negative effect of SNSs for individuals with low mood. The social relations are fundamental for the well-being of individuals, but sometimes the social comparison with friends and acquaintances may have depressionogenic effects on individuals unsatisfied with their living conditions. When individuals are in a bad mood, the others seem happier. The online social networks make social comparison easier and the passive use of SNSs limits the positive effects of the social interaction. The individuals low in self-esteem are prone to use SNSs to compensate for the unsatisfactory face-to-face relations and at the same time may experience greater unsatisfactory social comparison on the web. For these reasons, these individuals may continue using SNSs even if they suffer negative effects from the use entering a vicious circle keeping their wellbeing low. The study of these dynamics is important to promote a conscious use of these very popular internet apps.

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## **Efekat pasivne upotrebe društvenih mreža na tužno i srećno raspoloženje**

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Teorija socijalnog poređenja ukazuje na neke negativne efekte upotrebe društvenih mreža (eng. social networking sites – SNS, prim. prev.). Ove Internet aplikacije su onlajn socijalno poređenje učinile lakšim što sa svoje strane može predviđati depresiju i niže zadovoljstvo životom. Osobe koje su sklone depresiji se više porede sa drugima, naročito sa onima za koje

misle da nešto bolje prolaze u životu, te stoga, u kontekstu opažnja tuđe sreće, doživljavaju pad u raspoloženju ili samopoštovanju. Cilj ove eksperimentalne studije je bio da ispita uticaj upotrebe društvenih mreža na raspoloženje. 120 studenata je slučajno raspoređeno u jednu od dve grupe (eksperimentalnu i kontrolnu, prim. prev.). Učesnicima eksperimentalne grupe je rečeno da posete svoj Fejsbuk nalog i pretražuju lične profile (na Fejsbuku, prim. prev.) na 20 minuta, dok su učesnici kontrolne grupe čitali članke. Za učesnike koji su inicijalno imali niže raspoloženje, upotreba Fejsbuka je dovela do još većeg pada u raspoloženju, dok na ostale učesnike nije imala efekta. Takođe, upotreba Fejsbuka dovela je do pada raspoloženja kod osoba koje ga ne koriste često.

*Ključne reči:* društvene mreže, blagostanje, socijalno poređenje, eksperimentalni nacrt

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