Facebook walls boost self-esteem, finds study

March 2 2011, By Stacey Shackford

(PhysOrg.com) -- "Mirror, mirror on the wall/Who in the land is fairest of all?" But unlike Snow White's Queen, many people don't feel better after gazing at their wall mirror. Facebook walls, on the other hand, can have a positive influence on the self-esteem of college students, report social media researchers at Cornell.

This is probably because Facebook allows them to put their best face forward, says Jeffrey Hancock, associate professor of communication; users can choose what they reveal about themselves and filter anything that might reflect badly.

Feedback from friends posted publicly on people's profiles also tend to be overwhelmingly positive, which can further boost self-esteem, said Hancock, who co-authored a paper published Feb. 24 in the journal *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and* Social Networking.

"Unlike a mirror, which reminds us of who we really are and may have a negative effect on self-esteem if that image does not match with our ideal, Facebook can show a positive version of ourselves," Hancock said. "We're not saying that it's a deceptive version of self, but it's a positive one."

It may be one of the reasons why Facebook has 500 million users, who spend more than 700 billion minutes per month communicating with their friends via photos, links and status updates.

"For many people, there's an automatic assumption that the Internet is

bad. This is one of the first studies to show that there's a psychological benefit of Facebook," Hancock said.

In the study, 63 Cornell students were left alone in the university's Social Media Lab; they were seated either at computers that showed their Facebook profiles or at computers that were turned off. Some of the off computers had mirror propped against the screen; others had no mirror.

Those on Facebook were allowed to spend three minutes on the page, exploring only their own profiles and associated tabs. They were then given a questionnaire designed to measure their self-esteem.

Those in the mirror and control groups were given the same questionnaire. While their reports showed no elevation in self-esteem, those who had used Facebook gave much more positive feedback about themselves. Those who had edited their Facebook profiles during the exercise had the highest self-esteem.

Lead author Amy Gonzales, Ph.D. '10, conceived the study as a way to test two conflicting communication theories: Objective Self-Awareness (OSA) and the Hyperpersonal Model.

The traditional OSA theory suggests that focusing attention on ourselves can have negative effects on self-esteem because it makes us aware of our limitations and shortcomings, while the more modern Hyperpersonal Model posits that self-selection of the information we choose to represent ourselves can lead to positive effects on self-esteem.

The study ended up supporting the latter theory, and contributed to a better understanding of how media can alter social processes, Gonzales said.

"There are not a lot of theories that have been tested within the computer-

mediated communications field compared to other communications subfields, so this was exciting from a theoretical perspective," said Gonzales, now a Robert Wood Johnson Health and Society scholar at the University of Pennsylvania.

"By providing multiple opportunities for selective self-presentation -- through photos, personal details and witty comments -- social-networking sites exemplify how modern technology sometimes forces us to reconsider previously understood psychological processes," she added.

Hancock now is trying to dissect what it is about Facebook that engenders such positive reactions, whether it be the social interaction, flattering photos or friendly comments.

Provided by Cornell University