Facebook tacking online conflicts with compassionate touch

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Facebook wants to grow more heart. The social media giant copes with a flood of complaints about objectionable photos, bullying hateful comments and other postings.

The company doesn't release data on complaints, but it is a "huge volume" said Travis Bright, a product manager for site integrity.

The online social network that counts more than 800 million online users worldwide wants to put the brakes on conflicts and promote positive exchanges.

"We want you to have real friendships, and build real community," Bright said.

Last week Facebook invited to its Palo Alto, Calif., campus national experts to share the science behind compassion and altruism. In the audience, engineers listened intently to ideas about humanizing interactions.

Humans are hard-wired for compassionate behavior, and get physiological boosts from feel-good neurotransmitters such as oxytocin and dopamine when they deploy their better nature, said researchers from a Stanford University compassion institute and the University of California-Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center.

It's that science behind the benefits of good behavior that caught the

attention of Arturo Bejar, director of engineering at Facebook.

This year Facebook piloted one project based in part on consultations with Stanford's Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education.

After the talks, the company improved its "social reporting" tool to convey emotion, which helps connect people. Now, the tool lets users click on a link to send a pre-written message saying, "Hey, I didn't like this photo. Please remove it."

With the new tool, Bejar said 75 percent of those who posted an objectionable photo removed it. "They feel more empowered and the friend becomes more mindful," he said."Everyone learns from this."

Users could have sent a direct message to the person posting the offensive photo, but they rarely did so, Bejar said. Struggling to find the right words was part of the reluctance, he said, and it's also a multi-step process. Compassion and altruism researchers have labored in relative obscurity in universities and institutes, although Bejar said Facebook is looking for ways to support that academic research.

Facebook's interest in a scientific approach to cordiality means "a huge opportunity" to enhance social and emotional skills on a mass scale, which is especially needed among younger users, said one expert at the event.

"How many sixth-graders could name three emotions and strategies for regulating them?" asked Marc Brackett, deputy director of Yale University's Health, Emotion and Behavior Laboratory.

"One," he said. "My son."

Brackett has an idea for Facebook: For users younger than 18, build into their Facebook sites tips on developing emotional and social skills. One example is teaching children to take a deep breath before responding to a post, photos or other interaction on Facebook.

That's one facet of his lab's "RULER" approach - recognizing, understanding, labeling, expressing and regulating emotions - that Brackett is discussing with Facebook.

"It's possible" such a design could become reality, Bejar said, although he emphasized the company is only exploring ideas. But a few pilot projects are likely to launch in the next month, he said.

There's an urgent need to teach younger students social and emotional management skills, as bullying and hurtful Facebook posts are distressing schools, Brackett said.

"I'd say 80 percent of schools are saying that," Brackett said. It's disrupting academic performance, he said.

Improving online social skills promises academic benefits as well. More than 200 studies show that students taught how to manage social interactions and emotions performed significantly better in school and in standardized tests than those without the training, according to the Yale lab.

[Facebook](link) knows it can't engineer its way out of online friction. "A lot of times the solution is not in the code, but in the interactions," Bright said.

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