

Facebook users' wishful thinking: Cyberbullying, depression won't happen to me

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Facebook users with so-called optimistic bias think they're less likely than other users to experience cyberbullying, depression and other negative social and psychological effects from using the site, a Dartmouth-Cornell study finds.

The study suggests that optimistic bias, or an intrinsic tendency to imagine future events in a favorable light that enhances positive self-regard - in other words, wishful thinking - leaves those Facebook users vulnerable to the negative realities of social media.

The findings appear in the journal *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*. A PDF is available on request.

"Our findings demonstrate important and novel discrepancies in how people perceive themselves and others concerning the positive and negative outcomes of Facebook use," says lead author Sunny Jung Kim, a postdoctoral research associate in the Psychiatric Research Center and the Center for Technology and Behavioral Health at the Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth. "A growing number of studies report possible benefits and risks of using Facebook and other social media, ranging from effects on self-esteem to cyberbullying. But little is known about how people perceive themselves to be likely to experience these mixed outcomes and what the implications of having these perceptions are."

In the new study, the researchers surveyed 237 active Facebook users between ages 18 and 37. The participants were asked to assess their own and other people's likelihood of experiencing positive and negative outcomes on Facebook. They also were asked to rate their likelihood of supporting Internet regulations, their personal Facebook involvement and their attitudes toward Facebook use. The results show that Facebook users with optimistic bias tend to show strong support for Internet regulations to protect other users from social ostracizing, although not from psychologically negative effects, including depression and loneliness. The lack of support regarding psychological harms may be because mental health effects are perceived as less amenable to regulation or because their importance is underestimated, the researchers say.

The results also show that Facebook users who view the site negatively or who use it infrequently think other people are more likely than themselves to have positive experiences on the site, a reversed optimistic bias that is new and intriguing. "When ostensibly positive outcomes, such as receiving social support from Facebook friends, are perceived to be unusual and irrelevant for themselves, the direction of the optimistic bias for these objectively positive outcomes can be dampened or even reversed," Kim says. Co-author Cornell Professor Jeffrey Hancock adds:

"It's fascinating that well-established, third-person effects are also seen on Facebook, but the reversal shows how [social media](#) is not identical to mass media."

"Although some might argue that it is still premature to claim that Facebook use is a direct predictor of extreme events such as clinical depression and suicidal attempts, a growing line of research indicates that negative events such as Facebook cyberbullying can result in detrimental consequences, including depression and substance use problems," Kim says. "Without adequate protections, the damage of these critical events can be severe. This is especially the case for those in a vulnerable health condition, in which this optimistic bias for risk events can leave them unprepared without adequate health protective behaviors. We argue that Facebook may serve as a source of emotional support between users and as a platform to disseminate protective health messages to prevent negative psychological consequences of Facebook use. Given that negative personal and health news such as stressful events and depressive symptoms are frequently shared on Facebook, it may be an important site for observing negative psychological states of users."

More information: Kim Sunny Jung and Hancock Jeffrey T.. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*. April 2015, 18(4): 214-220. [DOI: 10.1089/cyber.2014.0656](https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2014.0656).

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