

Envy key motivator behind many Facebook posts, but site hurts mental well-being

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Credit: Flickr

A new study by Sauder School of Business Professor Izak Benbasat and his collaborators shows that envy is a key motivator behind Facebook posts and that contributes to a decrease in mental well-being among users.

Creating a [vicious cycle](#) of jealousy and self-importance, the researchers say Facebook leads users to feel their lives are unfulfilling by comparison, and react by creating posts that portray their best selves.

"Social media participation has been linked to depression, anxiety and narcissistic behaviour, but the reasons haven't been well-explained," said Benbasat, Sauder's Distinguished Professor of Information Systems. "We found envy to be the missing link."

According to Benbasat, travel photos are a leading contributor to Facebook envy, pushing friends to post their most perfect pictures. He says the unrealistic portrayal of life is not motivated by the desire to make others jealous, but rather a need to compete and keep up appearances.

For the study, Benbasat and his co-authors surveyed 1,193 Facebook users at a German university. They asked students a series of questions about their Facebook habits and cross-referenced them with the feelings they reported when using the platform.

Benbasat says the functionality of social networks encourages [envy](#)-inducing behaviour, and that's unlikely to change.

"Sharing pictures and stories about the highlights of your life – that's so much of what Facebook is for, so you can't take that away," he said. "But I think it's important for people to know what impact it can have on their well-being. Parents and teachers should take note as young people can be particularly vulnerable to the dark side of social media."

The study, "Why Following Friends Can Hurt You: Empirical Investigation of the Effects of Envy on Social Networking Sites," was published in the latest issue of *Information Systems Research*, and is co-authored by Hanna Krasnova, Thomas Widjaja, Peter Buxmann and Helena Wenninger, along with Benbasat.

Provided by University of British Columbia

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