

Why it's so hard to #DeleteFacebook—constant psychological boosts keep you hooked

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Credit: Andres Ayrton from Pexels

Here we go again: another Facebook controversy, yet again violating our sense of privacy by letting others harvest our personal information. This flareup is a big one to be sure, leading some people to consider leaving Facebook altogether, but the company and most of its [over 2 billion users](#) will reconcile. The vast majority will return to Facebook, just like

they did [the last time](#) and the [many times before that](#). As in all abusive relationships, users have a psychological dependence that keeps them hooked despite knowing that, at some level, it's not good for them.

Decades of research has shown that our relationship with all media, whether movies, television or radio, is symbiotic: People like them because of the [gratifications they get from consuming them](#) – benefits like escapism, relaxation and companionship. The more people use them, the more gratifications they seek and obtain.

With online media, however, a consumer's use provides data to media companies so they can serve up [exactly what would gratify her most](#), as they mine her behavior patterns to tailor her online experiences and appeal to her individual psychological needs.

Aside from providing content for our consumption, Facebook, Twitter, Google – indeed all interactive media – [provide us with new possibilities for interaction on the platform](#) that can satisfy some of our innate human cravings.

Interactive tools in Facebook provide simplified ways to engage your curiosity, broadcast your thoughts, promote your image, maintain relationships and fulfill the yearning for external validation. Social media take advantage of common psychological traits and tendencies to keep you clicking – and revealing more of yourself. Here's why it's so hard, as a social network user, to pull the plug once and for all.

Buoying your 'friend'ships

The more you click, the [stronger your online relationships](#). Hitting the 'Like' button, commenting on photos of friends, sending birthday wishes and tagging others are just some of the ways in which Facebook allows you to engage in "[social grooming](#)." All these tiny, fleeting contacts help

users maintain relationships with large numbers of people with relative ease.

Molding the image you want to project

The more you reveal, the greater your chances of successful self-presentation. Studies have shown that [strategic self-presentation is a key feature of Facebook use](#). Users shape their online identity by revealing which concert they went to and with whom, which causes they support, which rallies they attend and so on. In this way, you can curate your online self and manage others' [impressions of you](#), something that would be impossible to do in real life with such regularity and precision. Online, you get to project the [ideal version of yourself](#) all the time.

Snooping through an open window

The more you click, the more you can keep an eye on others. This kind of social searching and surveillance are [among the most important gratifications obtained from Facebook](#). Most people take pleasure in looking up others on [social media](#), often surreptitiously. The psychological need to monitor your environment is deep-rooted and drives you to keep up with news of the day – and fall victim to [FOMO, the fear of missing out](#). Even privacy-minded senior citizens, loathe to reveal too much about themselves, are known to use Facebook to [snoop on others](#).

Enhancing your social resources

The more you reveal, the greater your social net worth. Being more forthcoming [can get you a job via LinkedIn](#). It can also help an old classmate find you and [reconnect](#). Studies have shown that active use of Facebook can enhance your [social capital](#), whether you're a college

student or a senior citizen wanting to [bond with family members or rekindle ties](#) with long-lost friends. Being active on social media is associated with increases in [self-esteem and subjective well-being](#).

Enlarging your tribe

The more you click, the bigger and better the bandwagon. When you click to share a news story on social media or express approval of a product or service, you're contributing to the creation of a bandwagon of support. Metrics conveying strong bandwagon support, just like five stars for a product on Amazon, are [quite persuasive](#), in part because they represent a consensus among many opinions. In this way, you get to be a part of online communities that form around ideas, events, movements, stories and products – which can ultimately enhance your [sense of belonging](#).

Expressing yourself and being validated

The more you reveal, the greater your agency. Whether it's a tweet, a status update or a detailed blog post, you get to [express yourself](#) and help shape the discourse on social media. This self-expression by itself can be quite empowering. And metrics indicating bandwagon support for your posts – all those "likes" and smiley faces – can profoundly enhance your sense of self worth by appealing to your ingrained psychological need for [external validation](#).

In all these ways, social media's features provide us too many important gratifications to forego easily. If you think most users will give all this up in the off chance that illegally obtained data from their Facebook profiles and activities may be used to influence their votes, think again.

Algorithms that never let you go

While most people may be squeamish about algorithms mining their [personal information](#), there's an implicit understanding that sharing personal data is a necessary evil that helps [enhance their experience](#). The algorithms that collect your information are also the algorithms that nudge you to be social, based on your interests, behaviors and networks of friends. Without Facebook egging you on, you probably wouldn't be quite as social. Facebook is a major social lubricant of our time, often recommending friends to add to your circle and notifying you when a [friend](#) has said or done something potentially of interest.

Consider how many notifications Facebook sends about events alone. When presented with a nudge about an event, you may at least consider going, probably even visit the event page, maybe indicate that you're "Interested" and even decide to attend the event. None of these decisions would be possible without first receiving the nudge.

What if Facebook never nudged you? What if algorithms never gave you recommendations or suggestions? Would you still perform those actions? According to [nudge theory](#), you'd be far less likely to take action if you're not encouraged to do so. If Facebook never nudged you to attend events, add friends, view others' posts or wish friends Happy Birthday, it's unlikely you would do it, thereby diminishing your social life and social circles.

Facebook knows this very well. Just try deleting your Facebook account and you will be made to realize what a massive repository it is of your private and public memory. When one of us tried deactivating her account, she was told how huge the loss would be – profile disabled, all the memories evaporating, losing touch with over 500 friends. On the top of the page were profile photos of five friends, including the [lead author](#) of this article, with the line "S. Shyam will miss you."

This is like asking if you would like to purposely and permanently cut

off ties with all your friends. Now, who would want to do that?

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