

Your Facebook friends don't mean it, but they're likely hurting you daily: study

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Social media sites often present users with social exclusion information that may actually inhibit intelligent thought, according to the co-author of a University at Buffalo study that takes a critical look not just at Facebook and other similar platforms, but at the peculiarities of the systems on which these sites operate.

The short-term effects of these posts create [negative emotions](#) in the users who read them, and may affect thought processes in ways that make users more susceptible to advertising messages.

What's particularly alarming is that the social [exclusion](#) present in these posts is not intentional. Users are not callously sharing exclusion information with their friends. Social media sites, nevertheless, by design make most information available from one [friend](#) to another and the consequences resulting from the interpretation of these messages are significant.

"These findings are compelling," says Michael Stefanone, an associate professor in UB's Department of Communication and an expert in computer-mediated communication and social networks. "We're using these technologies daily and they're pushing information to users about their networks, which is what the sites are designed to do, but in the end there's negative effect on people's well-being."

The results of the study with lead author Jessica Covert, a graduate student in UB's Department of Communication, appear in the journal *Social Science Computer Review*.

"These findings are not only significant because we are talking about individuals' emotions here, but it also raises questions about how exposure to these interactions affect one's day-to-day functioning," says Covert. "Offline research suggests that social exclusion evokes various physical and psychological consequences such as reduced complex cognitive thought.

"Considering the amount of time individuals spend online, it is important to investigate the effects of online social exclusion."

At a glance, the posts at the center of the study seem harmless. Users

open Facebook to see exchanges among friends which unintentionally excluded them.

It happens all the time. Right?

"Yes," says Stefanone. "It happened to me the other night. I see my friends are doing something while I'm sitting at home. It's not devastating, but there's that moment when I felt badly."

The point, says Stefanone, is the messages can be interpreted in a way that people feel left out. And that feeling, as innocuous as it might seem, is not easily dismissed.

"Social exclusion, even something that might seem trivial, is one of the most powerful sanctions people can use on others and it can have damaging psychological effects," says Stefanone. "When users see these exclusion signals from friends—who haven't really excluded them, but interpret it that way—they start to feel badly."

It's at this point that the brain's self-regulating function should take over, according to Stefanone.

That self-regulation quickly moderates the negative feelings that can result from the interpretation, but self-regulation consumes [mental resources](#) that inhibit intelligent thought.

"If users are busy self-regulating because of what they read on Facebook there's evidence that doing so reduces a level of intelligent thought, which can make them more open to persuasive messaging."

"Facebook's entire business model is built on advertising. It's nothing but an advertising machine," says Stefanone. "Given Facebook's annual ad revenue, I think it's a conversation worth having, that regular, benign and

common use of this platform can lead to short-term inhibition of intelligent thought."

For the study, Covert and Stefanone created scenarios designed to mirror typical interactions on Facebook, and 194 individuals participated in an experiment ensuring exposure to social exclusion. The researchers presented one group with a scenario involving two good friends, where one of those friends had shared information that excluded the participant. The other group saw a feed that presented no social exclusion information.

Results indicated that individuals exposed to [social exclusion](#) information involving their close friends experienced greater negative emotions than the control group. They also had a tendency to devote more mental resources toward understanding their social networks, making them particularly sensitive to stimuli such as advertising.

Stefanone says plans for the future include replicating the current experiment and then measuring changes in intelligent thought using standardized test questions.

"I think the most important thing we all have to remember is to think carefully about our relationship with these corporations and these [social networking](#) platforms," says Stefanone. "They do not have our best interests in mind."

More information: Jessica M. Covert et al, Does Rejection Still Hurt? Examining the Effects of Network Attention and Exposure to Online Social Exclusion, *Social Science Computer Review* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/0894439318795128](#)

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