Eating or spending too much? Blame it on Facebook

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Participating in online social networks can have a detrimental effect on consumer well-being by lowering self-control among certain users, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

"Using online social networks can have a positive effect on self-esteem and well-being. However, these increased feelings of self-worth can have a detrimental effect on behavior. Because consumers care about the image they present to close friends, social network use enhances self-esteem in users who are focused on close friends while browsing their social network. This momentary increase in self-esteem leads them to display less self-control after browsing a social network," write authors Keith Wilcox (Columbia University) and Andrew T. Stephen (University of Pittsburgh).

Online social networks are having a fundamental impact on society. Facebook, the largest, has over one billion active users. Does using a social network impact the choices consumers make in their daily lives? If so, what effect does it have on consumer well-being?

A series of interesting studies showed that Facebook usage lowers self-control for consumers who focus on close friends while browsing their social network. Specifically, consumers focused on close friends are more likely to choose an unhealthy snack after browsing Facebook due to enhanced self-esteem. Greater Facebook use was associated with a higher body-mass index, increased binge eating, a lower credit score, and higher levels of credit card debt for consumers with many close friends

in their social network.

"These results are concerning given the increased time people spend using social networks, as well as the worldwide proliferation of access to social networks anywhere anytime via smartphones and other gadgets. Given that self-control is important for maintaining social order and personal well-being, this subtle effect could have widespread impact. This is particularly true for adolescents and young adults who are the heaviest users of social networks and have grown up using social networks as a normal part of their daily lives," the authors conclude.

More information: Keith Wilcox and Andrew T. Stephen. "Are Close Friends the Enemy? Online Social Networks, Self-Esteem, and Self-Control." Journal of Consumer Research: June 2013.

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