



# Disclosures about important life events on Facebook: Relationships with stress and quality of life



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## ABSTRACT

The current study examined the relationship between general perceived levels of stress, quality of life, social networking usage, and disclosing important life events on Facebook in order to better understand the complex relationship between online disclosure and individual well-being. An online survey was completed by adult Facebook users aged 18–70. Results indicate that the more time spent on and the more social network memberships, the higher stress and lower quality of life; Facebook-specific usage was unrelated to either well-being variable. Together, these findings suggest that the current increase in social media variety and usage may be detrimental to user well-being. Users who shared important, bad health news on Facebook had higher stress and lower quality of life than those who did not, with no significant differences for sharing good health news. The more that users did not share important news on Facebook for self-protection and friend unresponsiveness reasons, the greater their stress. The self-protection reason was also negatively related to quality of life. These inconsistent findings can likely be partially explained by the nature of the information that is shared. These findings are discussed in light of disclosure and relationship patterns on social networks.

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## 1. Introduction

Computer mediated communication (CMC) is now an integral part of personal relationship maintenance: 62% of adults in the United States use the Internet to communicate with family and friends either on a daily or weekly basis (Greene & Magsamen-Conrad, 2010). A predominant form of CMC is being a user of social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook. Facebook has become one of the most prominent SNSs since its creation in 2004, and is the second most visited website in the United States and the world (Alexa, 2013), with an estimated 1.23 billion active users as of December 2013 (Facebook Key Facts, 2014). Facebook also accounts for approximately 75% of time spent on social networking sites and one in every seven minutes spent online (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Nabi, Prestin, & So, 2013). Facebook users engage in this SNS to foster a sense of community and connectedness (Sheldon, 2008), which reflects the site's mission of connecting and opening the world by giving users the "power to share" (Facebook Key Facts, 2014, para. 1).

Facebook's "power to share" mission is of particular interest to this study, and also to much of the extant Facebook research that has also centered on social network sites (SNSs) users' understanding of issues related to maintaining and negotiating disclosures and privacy (see Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2009; Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012). What is less understood, however, is the extent to which disclosing, and not disclosing, information about important life events on Facebook is related to users' general well-being. Thus, this will explore the relationships between information sharing on Facebook in relation to general perceived levels of stress and quality of life, focusing on whether or not information about significant health events is shared and the reasons why individuals choose not to disclose news about important life events on Facebook.

## 2. Facebook and well-being

As Facebook has continued to grow in size and reach, CMC and SNS researchers have accordingly become interested in how Facebook use is related to individual well-being. While research has found associations between aspects of Facebook usage and maintenance or creation of social capital (Ellison et al., 2007), increased self-esteem (Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006), and a more

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positive view of one's physical appearance (Rutledge, Gillmor, & Gillen, 2013), other findings also indicate that there are potential negative consequences. For example, spending a great deal of time on Facebook was negatively related to self-esteem (Kalpidou, Costin, & Morris, 2011) and was positively correlated with depression (Wright et al., 2013). Furthermore, Kross et al. (2013) examined subjective well-being, a useful predictor of mental and physical health consequences, in relation to Facebook use. Specifically, the more people used Facebook at one time point, the worse they felt, and the more their life satisfaction levels declined over time (Kross et al., 2013). Direct social interaction, on the other hand, led study participants to feel better over time (Kross et al., 2013). As such, research yields increasingly contradictory results about the association between Facebook use and well-being. To begin to untangle these research findings, we turn now to stress and quality of life, two concepts that have been examined in previous SNS research and that offer a general assessment of individual well-being, in relation to sharing important life events on Facebook.

### 2.1. Stress

Stress is defined as a group of events consisting of a stimulus (i.e., a stressor) that triggers a reaction in a person's brain about whether or not there are resources necessary to meet the demands placed on them by the stimulus, which then sparks a physiological fight-or-flight response (Campisi et al., 2012; Nabi et al., 2013). Physical and psychological well-being have both been inversely associated with stress (Nabi et al., 2013). Zhang, He, and Sang (2013) argued that by providing emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support, social networks can influence a person's health, which could then help improve that person's ability to cope with stressful health challenges. From this idea that social support can abate stress, then, using SNSs such as Facebook should be associated with decreased stress levels.

However, as the amount of research on this topic continues to accrue, so do contradictory findings. On one hand, stress relief was one reason why undergraduates used Facebook (Stevens, Humphrey, Wheatley, & Galliher, 2011). In addition, Nabi et al. (2013) found that number of Facebook friends was associated with greater perceived social support, which then was associated with reduced stress, and, in turn, reduced physical illness and greater psychological well-being. Further, Mauri, Cipresso, Balgera, Villamira, and Riva (2011) found that greater Facebook use evoked high arousal and high positive valence. Studies have also reported negative associations between Facebook usage and symptoms of anxiety, depression, dysthymia, and schizoid disorder (Grieve, Indian, Witteveen, Tolan, & Marrington, 2013; Rosen, Whaling, Rab, Carrier, & Cheever, 2013). In addition, amount of SNS usage was unrelated to self-reported depression in Jelenchick, Eickhoff, and Moreno's (2013) research, leading these authors to contest the "Facebook depression" phenomenon that had been suggested.

On the other hand, Facebook-induced stress was experienced by a majority of college student respondents, according to Campisi et al. (2012). More frequent Facebook interaction (including sharing photos and news stories, liking, and commenting, but not disclosures via status updates) was also positively related to psychological distress (Chen & Lee, 2013). Relatedly, anxiousness was positively related to Facebook intensity and use of Facebook to connect with others, and greater Facebook intensity was also linked to increased alcohol use, but decreased marijuana use, in college students (Clayton, Osborne, Miller, & Oberle, 2013). Those with greater Facebook network diversity and size were also more likely to have symptoms of upper respiratory illness over a 10-week period (Campisi et al., 2012). Finally, a variety of Facebook usage variables were also positively linked to symptoms of narcis-

istic, histrionic, and antisocial personality disorders, and bipolar mania disorder (Rosen et al., 2013; Ryan & Xenos, 2011).

### 2.2. Quality of life

Quality of life refers to the overall well-being of individuals and includes both physical and mental health; it is an individual's subjective belief about how they feel and how satisfied they are with their lives (Kross et al., 2013). There is a positive association between life satisfaction and Facebook use (Ellison et al., 2007; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009) and Facebook social connectedness (Grieve et al., 2013). Manago, Taylor, and Greenfield (2012) found that having larger social networks predicted higher levels of life satisfaction and perceived social support on Facebook. Research also indicates that an individual's self-esteem and well-being are positively influenced by SNS usage and the ability to selectively self-present on these sites (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011; Valkenburg et al., 2006). Further, in a recent study by Asbury and Hall (2013), Facebook users who were more heavily engaged in the site reported having higher perceived mental health and well-being compared to low engaged users.

As is evident by the above findings, research connecting elements of well-being to SNS usage has thus far focused almost exclusively on Facebook, which Asbury and Hall (2013) note is a limitation to this research area. However, overall SNS usage by American adults who go online has exponentially increased from 8% in 2005 to 73% in 2013, with 42% of these adults now belonging to multiple social networking sites (Duggan & Smith, 2013). For example, Twitter is now used by 18% of online U.S. adults, a 10% increase since 2010 (Brenner & Smith, 2013), and Instagram is used by 17% of online adults, up from 13% in 2012 (Duggan & Smith, 2013). This SNS growth and diversification suggests that expanding our understanding of how social networking usage beyond and including Facebook is linked to stress and quality of life is an important next research step that reflects these changing social networking trends. As such, to explore this new area and reflect previous inconsistent findings, research question one inquires:

**RQ1:** Which social network usage variables are related to (a) stress and (b) quality of life?

## 3. Information sharing on Facebook

Greene and Magsamen-Conrad (2010) found that motives for information disclosure via CMC channels include immediacy, convenience and efficiency, and ease and comfort. Despite unique channel-related challenges such as reduction of subtle nonverbal cues (Chou & Edge, 2012), self-disclosure is an important way to communicate on Facebook (Ledbetter et al., 2011), although the authenticity of these disclosures is often in doubt (Greene & Magsamen-Conrad, 2010). On Facebook, for example, users tend to strategically present themselves in a favorable light via their selections of flattering photographs and thoughtful wording and editing of posts and messages.

On a typical day, 15% of American Facebook users update their status, 22% comment on a friend's status, and 26% "like" a friend's content (Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011). Facebook users post status updates an average of nine times a month (Hampton, Goulet, Marlow, & Rainie, 2012), primarily to emotionally disclose to others (Manago et al., 2012). In fact, users are more likely to disclose personal information on Facebook than via face-to-face channels (Christofides et al., 2009). Indeed, Livingstone (2008) argues that the standards for sharing information have changed; for example, personal information now shared by teenagers on SNSs would have been regarded as private by their parents, who are members of a previous generation.

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