



# The role of Facebook use in mediating the relation between rumination and adjustment after a relationship breakup



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## ABSTRACT

Given the popularity of social networking sites, it is important to examine the impact of rumination while examining the rich content available, particularly after a stressful interpersonal event. This pilot study examined how individual differences in rumination are related to Facebook use following a breakup. Findings indicate that trait rumination was associated with the tendency to experience maladaptive thoughts while examining an ex's profile, as well as difficulties in adjustment following the breakup. Rumination on Facebook and the importance of Facebook in one's social world mediated the relation between trait rumination and subsequent perceived adjustment. Thus, for high ruminators, placing a high reliance on Facebook and ruminating while on the site may hold particularly negative emotional consequences following a stressor.

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## 1. Introduction

Theories of emotion regulation (ER) posit that how people regulate or respond to negative emotions is crucial for their adjustment to critical life events (e.g., Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991). The tendency to use strategies which fail to down-regulate negative emotions following onset, such as rumination, may lead to prolonged negative affect (John & Gross, 2004), resulting in the development of psychological disorders. Rumination has been defined as the process of “repetitively and passively focusing on symptoms of distress and the possible causes and consequences of these symptoms” (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991). The Response Styles Theory posits that rumination may prolong and exacerbate distress in response to stressful events, increasing the likelihood that initial depressive symptoms may turn into episodes of major depression (Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, & Lyubomirsky, 2008). Roberts, Gilboa, and Gotlib (1998) observed elevated levels of rumination not only in individuals with current dysphoria, but also in those with previous depressive episodes, regardless of current symptoms. These findings suggest that the tendency to ruminate may be a stable risk

factor that increases vulnerability to emotional disorders, rather than being merely a symptom of depression.

Rumination is frequently described as an automatic process that is difficult to control and is triggered by cues that remind the person of the negative event. While current research primarily focuses on the role of face-to-face interactions in triggering rumination, for those prone to engaging in this maladaptive form of ER, social networking sites (SNS) may serve as an additional means of eliciting and/or prolonging rumination. As such, individuals with a tendency to respond to negative events with rumination may do so in response to both offline, as well as online cues. Facebook, in particular, may play an important role in providing ripe material for rumination, thereby inhibiting recovery from negative life events. Several factors distinguish Facebook, including its prevalent use and easy accessibility of multimedia material (Valkenburg, 2011). It provides a means of obtaining rich, immediate information about one's social network without requiring face-to-face contact and in some cases, without active searching. Importantly, Facebook may provide additional reminders of a negative life event that one may not otherwise have had access to, holding significant implications for subsequent adjustment. Recent work indicates that social surveillance is the second most commonly reported motive for using Facebook (Joinson, 2008), and users spend more time observing than posting information on the site (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009). Thus, the tendency to use Facebook to gather information about one's social world, in combination with the vast amount of readily available information, suggest that for individuals prone to ruminate,

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Facebook use may be particularly detrimental following a negative event. With the increasingly prominent role that online social interaction, specifically SNS sites, play in people's everyday lives, it is crucial to consider their effects on psychological well-being.

Overall, the body of literature examining the relation between SNS and psychological well-being presents mixed findings (e.g., Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Sheldon, 2008). Whereas some work suggests positive outcomes, including increased socialization (O'Keeffe, Clarke-Pearson, and Council on Communications and Media, 2011) and decreased depression (Kang, 2007; Morgan & Cotton, 2003), others identify more negative consequences such as the reduction of face-to-face socialization (Kraut et al., 1998) and increased depression (Xiaoming, 2005). Most of these studies have focused primarily on time spent on Facebook in relation to psychological outcomes. However, individual differences in processing of Facebook material and regulation of the ensuing affect may hold important consequences for subsequent mental health. While Davila et al. (2012) found that the quality of one's Facebook interactions (i.e., positive or negative) was related to one's depressive symptoms, more work is needed to examine what factors potentially impact the quality of a user's interactions. Several factors, both internal and external, may play a role in determining this, such as the tendency to ruminate on material viewed and the importance of Facebook in one's social world.

Locatelli, Kluwe, and Bryant (2012) found that the tendency to ruminate on Facebook information mediated the impact of positive and negative status updates on well-being more so than the status updates themselves mediating the impact of rumination on well-being. These findings suggest that rumination on Facebook material play a key role in the subsequent emotional consequences, above and beyond the actual content viewed. Additional work by Feinstein et al. (2013) found that rumination mediated the relation between negative social comparison on Facebook and depressive symptoms. These findings suggest that emotion regulation processes may be one mechanism through which social networking use may impact mental health outcomes. Given the negative impact of rumination and the increasing prevalence of Facebook in users' everyday lives, it is important to examine the role of Facebook in impacting adjustment, particularly for high trait ruminators.

Given the tendency for rumination to be triggered by internal and external reminders of one's distress, we propose that high trait ruminators will be more active Facebook users driven by an increased need to learn more about their social sphere. Bevan, Pfyl, and Barclay (2012), for instance, found that individuals with a greater tendency to use Facebook to connect with existing social contacts, as well as those unfriended by someone they knew, displayed greater rumination and negative emotional responses. Accordingly, we predict that high trait ruminators will not only exhibit more rumination while using Facebook, but will also spend more time on Facebook, spend more time actively using the site, and show greater engagement in Facebook interactions (e.g., chatting, updating status), leading Facebook to play a larger role in their social lives. As such, current literature also suggests that the importance of Facebook in one's social world is an important factor to consider when understanding the relation between trait rumination, Facebook use, and subsequent psychological outcomes.

Several studies examining the importance of SNS in one's social world have found that users who are more dependent on online communication for their social connections may experience more negative consequences. LaRose, Eastin, and Gregg (2001), for example, found that users who felt that their online connections were their only source of social support were more likely to report increased levels of loneliness and depression. Further work indicates that adolescents who are socially successful offline (e.g.,

extraverted individuals) and merely use online communication to increase the quality of existing friendships benefit more than users who have less fulfilling relationships offline and use social networking sites as a means to create new connections (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). Together, these studies suggest that the importance of Facebook in one's social world (relative to their "offline" world) may have implications for emotional well-being and may act as a mediator between the stable tendency to ruminate (e.g., trait rumination) and emotional outcomes following a life stressor.

### 1.1. Current study

This current study examines the proposition that individuals with a stable tendency to ruminate will demonstrate greater Facebook use, as well as greater state rumination while on Facebook, consequently affecting emotional adjustment. Additionally, we propose that differences in the effects of rumination on psychological adjustment will be mediated by several factors. This pilot study will examine several propositions. First, we propose that trait rumination and adjustment will be mediated by state rumination while using Facebook. Also, given past research suggesting that Facebook use may result in more negative consequences for those who are less successful in "offline" relationships and thus, may place a higher value on their online social relationships, we propose that the high trait ruminators will place more emphasis on Facebook in their social world. We also predict that these factors will mediate the relation between the stable tendency to ruminate and emotional adjustment following a life stressor. To examine the relation between rumination on Facebook and emotional adjustment, this study recruited college students had experienced a recent breakup because such an experience has been shown to be a particularly prevalent and potent stressor for this specific population (Kato, 2005; Saffrey & Ehrenberg, 2007).

### 1.2. Hypotheses

- (1) Levels of trait rumination and rumination while using Facebook (i.e., state rumination) will be correlated. Both measures of trait and state rumination will be positively correlated with measures of Facebook use.
- (2) Increased levels of rumination (as measured by state rumination while on Facebook and trait rumination from the RRS) will be related to lower perceived emotional well-being following a relationship breakup.
- (3) Mediation hypotheses:
  - a. Trait rumination will be positively related to state rumination, and state rumination will mediate the relation between trait rumination and perceived adjustment following a breakup.
  - b. Trait rumination will be positively related to the importance of Facebook in one's social world (Facebook Importance), and Facebook Importance will mediate the relation between trait rumination and perceived adjustment following a breakup.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Thirty-seven undergraduate college students (24 female, 13 male) were recruited to participate in the study in exchange for course credit. All participants indicated a relationship breakup in the past three years with an ex-significant other with whom they were still friends on Facebook.

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