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Chapter 11

Psychological Benefits and Costs: A Self-Affirmation Framework for Understanding the Effects of Facebook Self-Presentation

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Self-presentation is a complex communicative process that involves selecting which aspects of self to disclose, which to conceal, and whether or not to use deception in the hopes of creating a desired impression in an audience.¹ In recent years, communication technologies have introduced new challenges and opportunities to the self-presentation process. In particular, social networking sites (SNS) invite users to construct self-presentations through online profiles—technological platforms with unique characteristics that affect the self-presentation process. For instance, SNS operate through articulating relationships between users and their "friends" within the system, thus demanding that users make "public displays of connection"; encourage, by design, the disclosure of vast arrays of personal information, ranging from politics and religion to favorite music and television shows; are accessible to large, and sometimes unknown audiences; are multimodal, allowing users to compose their personas through a multitude of tools, such as text, photographs, videos, and web links; and are recorded and archived, with self-presentational statements accruing over years of SNS use.² By bringing these new capabilities to the self-presentational process, SNS invite theoretical and

empirical questions such as (1) what is the nature of SNS self-presentation?, (2) in what way do technological affordances and limitations shape SNS self-presentations?, and (3) what are the effects of SNS self-presentation on users' self-concepts?

This chapter approaches these questions by introducing a novel theoretical framework, self-affirmation theory, that explicates both the kinds of self-presentations that are likely to be constructed on Facebook (a quintessential SNS), given technological and social affordances, and the psychological effects of engaging with the version of self encapsulated in a Facebook profile.³ In a nutshell, this chapter proposes that Facebook self-presentation, by virtue of being flattering, accurate, and indicative of meaningful aspects of self, such as social connectivity, represents an everyday venue for self-affirmation. As a self-affirming activity, Facebook profile self-presentation has considerable effects on how users view themselves and also on how they act in the world.

To support this line of argumentation, this chapter will proceed as follows. First, it will discuss the applicability of self-affirmation theory to Facebook self-presentation, by detailing how the latter fulfills the theoretical criteria for self-affirmation. Second, it will summarize empirical evidence from three studies that reveal the self-affirming properties of Facebook profiles on users' self-concept, self-esteem, and behavior. Finally, the chapter will discuss how the self-affirmation framework advances understanding of the causes and effects of Facebook use, and how it may be applicable to profile-based self-presentations beyond Facebook.

Facebook Self-Affirmation

One of the best documented findings in psychology is that people need to view themselves in a positive way, as "good" and "appropriate" individuals, although they are much more critical of others.⁴ In order to maintain this positive self-image, they engage in a variety of defense mechanisms, such as dismissing, distorting, or avoiding information that threatens their elevated self-view. An additional strategy for satisfying the need for a positive self-image is self-affirmation, or the simple act of bringing to awareness defining aspects of self, such as treasured characteristics, values, and meaningful relationships.⁵ According to self-affirmation theory, people are naturally drawn toward self-affirming information in the environment, seeking it because it reassures them of their positive qualities.

Additionally, people are particularly motivated to seek self-affirming information after their egos have been threatened in some way, such as by rejection, criticism, or failure, because they unconsciously try to repair their sense of self-worth. A related proposition of self-affirmation theory is that, after attending to self-affirming information, individuals' perception of self-worth is indeed enhanced, and they no longer need to protect themselves through other methods, such as defense mechanisms. Since affirmed individuals already feel secure in their self-worth, such defense tactics are superfluous.⁶

Let us now consider whether Facebook profile self-presentation is affirming, as per the dictates of self-affirmation theory. For information to be self-affirming, three criteria need to be met: the information needs to be personally meaningful, capturing defining aspects of self; it needs to be of a positive and flattering nature; and it needs to be accurate, because internal perceptions of self-worth cannot be boosted by information that the self-presenter knows to be untrue. In judging the applicability of these criteria to Facebook, special attention is paid to how the information Facebook profile self-presentation is affected by (1) technological factors, such as the design of the site and the ability to revise and record statements; and (2) social factors, such as the motivation to use the site, the presence of an audience and normative rules governing the site.

Consider first the criterion that Facebook self-presentation should revolve around personally meaningful aspects of self. Self-affirmation theory postulates that individuals' sense of self-worth is contingent on several key "domains" of self, namely social roles, personal relationships, treasured activities, values and beliefs.⁷ In particular, close personal relationships with friends and family have been shown to be the most potent and widely used resource for self-affirmation.⁸ An analysis of the design of Facebook profiles reveals that these key domains of self are prominently featured. First, personal relationships with "friends" are the *raison d'être* of Facebook. They are represented directly through lists of "friends" and links to family members and significant others, and indirectly through comments and "likes" posted by friends and visibly stored on the profiles. Second, users are prompted to reveal their social roles (i.e., friend, student) and membership into educational and local networks (e.g., University of Wisconsin-Madison; Madison, WI). These networks indicate belongingness in important, identity-defining groups. Third, users are prompted to explicitly state their values (i.e., religion,

apolitical beliefs) and to display their treasured characteristics and activities (e.g., traveling, spending time with friends) through status updates and photo albums. Notably, Facebook self-presenters have developed social norms that mandate high degrees of disclosure, with users posting rich repositories of information about themselves.⁹ To conclude, this analysis suggests that Facebook profile self-presentation is replete with personally meaningful information.

Importantly, technological affordances beyond the design of profiles enhance the value of this personally meaningful information. Specifically, recordability enables users to “collect” friends and tokens of friendships, such as wall postings, virtual gifts and photographs. These signals of connectivity accrue over time, and can act as powerful indicators of belongingness and close, meaningful relationships. This information is also tightly packaged and organized in an easily accessible online location. At the click of a button and hence with very little effort, users can enter a space where personally meaningful information abounds.

Let us now consider the second criterion for self-affirmation, namely that Facebook self-presentation is positive and flattering. Although no research has directly investigated this question to date, we may assume that Facebook self-presenters have both the motivation and the ability to compose flattering versions of themselves in their profiles. Research has established that publicness enhances self-presenters’ motivation to come across positively.¹⁰ Since Facebook profiles are highly public, with audiences often ranging in hundreds and even thousands of “friends,” profile owners’ motivation to create good impressions should be high. Additionally, many of these “friends” are consequential people (e.g., classmates, coworkers, supervisors) whom one is typically eager to impress. Facebook users should also be in the fortunate position of being able to create optimal self-presentations, thanks to a constellation of technological affordances inherent to SNS. *Asynchronicity* allows them all the time they need to craft self-presentational statements—unlike FtF communicators, who must present themselves spontaneously. *Editability* allows them to revise their statements until they are optimal, an affordance that is also missing from FtF communication. Importantly, editability allows Facebook self-presenters to monitor and control friends’ statements in addition to their own. Any undesirable postings (i.e., comments, photograph tags, events) left by friends can be easily removed. By the same token, friendship connections can be terminated (by removing friends) when they are no longer wanted. *The reallocation of cognitive resources* al-

lows Facebook self-presenters to dedicate the entirety of their mental focus on the self-presentational task at hand, rather than to other environmental distractions. Together, asynchronicity, editability, and the reallocation of cognitive resources enable online communicators to engage in *selective self-presentation*, a type of self-presentation that is more controllable and aligned with communicators’ goals than FtF self-presentation.¹¹ Selective self-presentation has been shown to operate in the cognate domain of online dating and it should similarly enable Facebook self-presenters to craft versions of self that are completely desirable and positive.¹²

Let us now consider the final criterion for self-affirming self-presentations: accuracy. As mentioned earlier, information that the self-presenters know to be false cannot boost their internal perceptions of self-worth. Online communication has great potential for deception, because it is disembodied (that is, it allows communicators to engage with each other without being physically present) and hence lacks the nonverbal cues that people usually employ to detect deception.¹³ Nevertheless, there are characteristics of online communication that promote honesty, and some of these are featured on Facebook profiles. One such constraint against deception, conceptualized as a *warrant*, is the ability to link online with offline selves.¹⁴ Warrants increase accuracy because they render online statements verifiable. For instance, research shows that online dating profiles are more accurate the more people from the online dater’s social circle know about the existence of the profile.¹⁵ In this case, these members of the dater’s social circle act as a warrant, capable of verifying the veracity of profile claims. On Facebook, an even more potent warrant exists: the presence of an audience of friends, many of whom have had long-term, deep, offline relations with the self-presenters, and thus know them well enough to be able to spot deceptions. Facebook self-presenters should then construct accurate profiles, lest they should be caught red-handed by consequential people in their lives. An additional constraint against deception on Facebook is more technological in nature: the design of certain self-presentational elements. Specifically, claiming membership on certain restricted networks, such as colleges and universities, is contingent upon owning an active email account associated with that network. Similarly, self-presenters cannot claim friendship with other users, unless the latter confirm friendship requests. According to signaling theory, these cues are difficult and

costly to fake, and hence they should be honest signals of social connectivity and group membership, respectively.¹⁶ Finally, it is worth noting that Facebook profiles are co-constructed by profile owners and their friends. Information contributed by friends should be difficult to manufacture, and hence should be reliable.

Several studies to date provide indications for the accuracy of online profiles. Back and colleagues found that Facebook profiles are realistic enough for observers to form accurate impressions of profile owners' personality.¹⁷ Additionally, as mentioned earlier, research on online dating, a similar SNS, found that deceptions are small and relatively benign.¹⁸

In conclusion, this theoretical analysis indicates that Facebook profiles self-presentation should indeed be self-affirming, by virtue of (1) their ability to capture meaningful aspects of self, (2) positivity, and (3) accuracy. The next section reviews a series of empirical studies testing this claim.

Overview of Empirical Studies

Three studies were conducted (currently under review at communication and psychology journals) to test the self-affirming properties of Facebook, and also illuminate how the self-affirming nature of Facebook may affect the causes and effects of Facebook use.

Study 1 asks the foundational question of whether Facebook profiles are self-affirming. In doing so, it employs a classic methodology, well-validated in the psychology literature, to establish whether a certain activity is self-affirming.¹⁹ This methodology is based on the following logic. Because people have a fundamental need to view themselves positively, they tend to respond defensively when faced with threats to their egos, such as criticism, negative feedback, or rejection. However, if they are self-affirmed prior to facing the ego threat, they should no longer need to protect themselves in this defensive fashion, because their need for an elevated self-worth is already satisfied by the self-affirmation activity. Research shows quite conclusively that, when it comes to their sense of self-worth, people are satisficers rather than maximizers, meaning that they are content with a good-enough view of self, and don't take any opportunity available to make themselves feel good about themselves.²⁰ Given this pattern of response to ego threats, researchers can

establish whether a certain activity is self-affirming by observing whether it elicits a decrease in defensiveness when interjected prior to the ego threat. If the activity produced less defensiveness, it means that it was able to satisfy people's need for self-worth in and of itself, rendering other defense tactics unnecessary. This reduced defensiveness is hence the hallmark of self-affirmation.

Implementing this defensiveness-reducing paradigm involves a three-step procedure: (1) participants are asked to engage in the activity believed to be self-affirming (in the treatment condition) or, for comparison purposes, to a control activity; (2) participants' egos are threatened; and (3) participants' defensive responses to the threat are measured. If defensive responses are lower in the experimental condition than in the control condition, it can be concluded that the activity in which participants engaged prior to the ego threat was self-affirming. Study 1 employed this methodology verbatim.

Study 2 built on Study 1 by testing a fundamental proposition of self-affirmation theory in the context of Facebook profile self-presentation. Specifically, self-affirmation theory posits that individuals unconsciously but predictably gravitate toward self-affirming venues after their egos had been threatened. Are Facebook users similarly attracted toward their profiles after suffering a blow to their egos? Do they tend to gravitate toward their Facebook profiles when they feel bad about themselves and need an ego boost? Hence, Study 2 had two important goals. First, it meant to establish not only whether Facebook profiles *can* act as venues for self-affirmation (when users are prompted to access them by an experimenter, as was the case in Study 1), but whether they *do* in fact act as such (when users access them of their own accord, without an experimental prompt). Second, Study 2 meant to illuminate some of the unconscious motivations of Facebook use—in other words, what *causes* users to spend time on Facebook.

Finally, the goal of Study 3 was to investigate the effects of Facebook profile self-presentation, through the lens of self-affirmation theory. How do users feel and act in the world after browsing their own Facebook profile self-presentation? Two categories of effects were considered: (1) intrapersonal effects on users' state self-esteem; and (2) behavioral effects on cognitive task performance (i.e., ability to perform well in a mental task). One important contribution of this study was its measurement of self-esteem, a construct that is highly susceptible to social

desirability biases (i.e., participants reporting higher self-esteem than they actually possess in order to conform to social norms, whereby high self-esteem is a very desirable attribute).²¹ To alleviate this concern, Study 3 used an implicit association test (IAT) procedure. IATs gauge unconsciously held attitudes, and has been applied to a wide range of attitudes where social desirability is a concern (e.g., religion, race, sex, politics). IATs operate by measuring the speed with which participants associate concepts with evaluative statements; the faster the association is made, the more strongly held the attitude. For the self-esteem IAT, the concepts are related to oneself, and the evaluative statements are “good” or “bad.” Participants who quickly associate words related to themselves with good evaluations, but have a hard time associating words related to themselves with bad evaluations, have high implicit self-esteem. Conversely, participants who quickly associate words related to themselves with bad evaluations, but take longer to associate them with good evaluations, have low implicit self-esteem.²²

Empirical Findings

Recall that the goal of Study 1 was to empirically establish whether Facebook profile self-presentation has self-affirmation value. Based on a theoretical analysis of the composition, valence, and accuracy of Facebook profile self-presentation, it was hypothesized that these profiles would be self-affirming in the sense of restoring users’ perception of their own self-worth and self-integrity.

The defensiveness-reducing paradigm of self-affirmation effects was employed to determine whether Facebook profiles constitute a venue for self-affirmation, as follows.²³ Because self-affirmation operates at an unconscious level, participants were given a cover story about the purpose of the study, involving the Distance Learning Education Center at Cornell University and its efforts to develop an online version of the popular public speaking course. Participants were asked to pilot the viability of such a course by preparing a five-minute speech and delivering it live via videoconferencing technology to an evaluator. All participants received generic negative feedback on their speech performance, which constituted the ego threat. After receiving the feedback, participants were given an opportunity to evaluate the fairness and accuracy of the feedback, as well as the appropriateness of using videoconferencing for a public speaking course. This constituted an opportunity for participants

to be defensive about the negative feedback they received, by either dismissing it as inaccurate, or dismissing the task as inappropriate.

The experimental manipulation was introduced prior to receiving the ego threat. In the treatment condition, the participants were asked to review their own Facebook profiles for five minutes, ostensibly as part of an unrelated study. In the control condition, participants were asked to review a stranger’s Facebook profile. The stranger was in fact a participant in the treatment condition, who had permitted the research team to access his or her Facebook profile. Each participant in the experimental condition browsed the profile of the corresponding participant in the treatment condition. This yoked procedure ensured that participants in the control condition, as a group, viewed the exact same profiles as participants in the treatment condition—except they were not their own, and hence they could not be self-affirming.

Additionally, to ensure the validity of the results, Study 1 also directly compared the self-affirming power of Facebook to that of a well-established self-affirming activity: ranking and writing about one’s most important values. This activity is the most widely used induction of self-affirmation in the literature and involves asking participants to rank a list of values (e.g., personal relationships, education, politics) in the order of personal importance and write a short essay about their highest ranked value and why it is important to them.²⁴

The results were consistent with the hypotheses. As expected, participants who had browsed their own carefully constructed Facebook profiles were significantly less defensive when given negative feedback on their speech performance compared to participants in the control condition. After being exposed to this ego-boosting version of themselves, participants were less likely to derogate the negative feedback they received (by claiming it was inaccurate, or by claiming that the evaluator was incompetent) or the task (by claiming that videoconferencing is an inappropriate tool for teaching public speaking classes). This secure, accepting, nondefensive attitude is the hallmark of self-affirmation, and provides conclusive proof that one’s own Facebook profile self-presentation is affirming. Additionally, participants who had been affirmed through their Facebook profiles were equally nondefensive as participants who had completed the classic values-essay self-affirmation induction, suggesting that Facebook self-affirmation is equally powerful as the most well-validated self-affirmation activity.

After spending time on their own Facebook profiles, participants also reported an increase in their positive affect compared to control participants. They felt more "loving," "joyful," "giving," "connected," "loved," "supported," "grateful," "proud," and "content." To summarize, Study 1 empirically demonstrated two categories of beneficial effects of attending to one's own flattering Facebook self-presentation: self-affirmation and a boost in positive affect.

Study 2 sought to determine whether Facebook users do in fact seek their profiles when their egos had been threatened, in an unconscious effort to restore their perceptions of self-worth and self-integrity. According to self-affirmation theory, people are expected to make use of self-affirming information in this manner, and if Facebook profiles are indeed self-affirming, they should be accessed more heavily in times of psychological need. To test this prediction, a similar methodology to Study 1 was employed. Participants were given the same cover story as in Study 1: They were requested to develop and deliver a short speech as a pilot test of the viability of a public speaking distance-education course. Half of the participants were given negative feedback on the speech and, for comparison purposes, the other half were given neutral feedback. Afterward, participants were invited to select another study out of ostensibly five different studies currently going on in the lab, in order to double their extra-credit compensation. These studies contained the self-affirming activity under investigation—browsing one's own Facebook profile, as well as four decoy activities designed to be as similar as possible to Facebook profile browsing, yet not self-affirming (i.e., listening to online music, playing online video games, watching videos on YouTube, and reading online news). Participants' selection of one of the five activities constituted the main dependent measure.

As predicted, participants in the control condition, whose egos were not threatened, selected the Facebook profile browsing activity at the same rate as would be expected by chance (30 percent). However, participants whose egos had been threatened by negative feedback gravitated toward Facebook at twice that rate (60 percent), and hence displayed a clear preference for Facebook profile browsing compared to all the other activities. Importantly, this pattern of preference emerged even when controlling for a host of variables that may have affected activity choice, such as level of familiarity with the activity, perceived effort in completing the activity, and how engaging and interesting participants perceived the activity to be. Hence, Study 2 shows that people do make use of Fa-

cebook in times of psychological need and, as will be discussed later, it illuminates an unconscious cause of Facebook use: replenishing one's reservoirs of self-worth.

Having established that Facebook profile self-presentation is self-affirming, Study 3 went on to investigate some of the effects of attending to this presentation. The self-affirmation literature has determined that self-affirming activities have a multitude of perceptual and behavioral effects. Two categories of effects were considered: on users' self-esteem, reliably measured through an implicit association test procedure, and on users' performance on a subsequent cognitive task. Participants were asked to examine their Facebook profile self-presentation for five minutes (in the treatment condition) or, following the yoking procedure employed in Study 1, a stranger's Facebook profile self-presentation (in the control condition). Immediately afterward, participants completed a computerized self-esteem IAT, and then a mental arithmetic task, involving rapid serial subtraction from a large number by intervals of seven. The serial subtraction task is a widely used measure of cognitive task performance.²⁵ Participants' task performance was operationalized in three ways: (1) the total number of subtractions they attempted; (2) the total number of correct subtractions they produced; and (3) their error rate, or the percentage of subtractions that were incorrectly performed out of the total number of attempted subtractions.

Results show that, after attending to the carefully crafted Facebook version of themselves, Facebook users experienced an increase in state self-esteem at a deep, unconscious level. This finding is consistent with the theoretical notion of selective self-presentation: If users do have the ability to compose highly flattering yet realistic self-presentations that can impress their audience, it stands to reason that attending to this version of themselves would boost their self-esteem. This psychological benefit was nevertheless accompanied by a psychological cost. After being self-affirmed through Facebook, participants' cognitive task performance deteriorated. They attempted fewer answers and produced fewer correct answers than participants in the control condition. Importantly, however, the error rate of affirmed participants was no different than that of control participants. This pattern of results suggests that self-affirmed participants' motivation, rather than ability, to perform well in the task was decreased. As such, results are consistent with self-affirmation theory. If participants' self-worth is already secured by the self-affirmation

exercise, they no longer need to prove themselves by performing well in an unpleasant task.

Discussion: Causes and Effects of Facebook Use

The purpose of this chapter was to examine the nature of Facebook profile self-presentation, as well as its effects, through the prism of self-affirmation theory.²⁶ Self-affirmation claims that people have a fundamental need to view themselves as valuable, worthy, and good, and that they unconsciously scour the environment in search of information that can reassure them of their own self-worth. The research reported in this chapter examined whether SNS, specifically Facebook, play a role in these self-worth maintenances processes. Does Facebook self-presentation, by virtue of being carefully and thoughtfully crafted, restore users' sense of self-worth and self-integrity? Does it then constitute an everyday venue of self-affirmation? If Facebook profiles do affirm their users, what are some of the perceptual and behavioral effects of becoming self-affirmed?

Results provide conclusive evidence that Facebook profile self-presentation is a self-affirming activity. After reviewing their own profile self-presentation, participants experienced a boost in their perceptions of self-worth, and this boost was of similar magnitude to the one provided by a well-established self-affirmation activity (Study 1). Furthermore, Facebook self-affirmation was actively, albeit unconsciously, sought after by users in times of psychological need (Study 2), indicating that Facebook profiles are used in everyday life as a comforting space, that can assuage feelings of distress. Consistent with the claims of self-affirmation theory, exposure to one's own Facebook profile also increases users' temporary self-esteem, and reduces their motivation to pursue other opportunities for self-affirmation, such as performing tasks where they can showcase their aptitudes (Study 3).

The fundamental premise underlying these findings, derived from the Hyperpersonal model of impression formation, is that Facebook profile self-presentation captures the self at its most desirable and socially attractive.²⁷ Indeed, according to the Hyperpersonal model, Facebook self-presenters have the ability to construct themselves in carefully orchestrated ways, and hence achieve their self-presentational goals, with more ease than FtF self-presenters. Additionally, the mission of SNS is to em-

bed users in a network of social connections, and this mission is accomplished through a constellation of design choices, such as the ability to amass "friends," to link to friends' profiles, and collect comments and other tokens of connectivity from friends. Together, selective self-presentation and the embeddedness in a network of meaningful relationships (which most people consider to be the most treasured aspect of their lives), render Facebook profiles self-affirming.

This set of findings on the self-affirming properties of Facebook profile self-presentation add theoretical and empirical heft to a growing body of research on the uses and effects of Facebook. Following abundant speculation, usually pessimistic, in the media and popular discourse, academic research has only begun to illuminate the cases and effects of SNS use.²⁸ For instance, Facebook use has been shown to correlate with a boost in social capital, life satisfaction, social trust, civic engagement, and political participation; and college student motivation, affective learning, and positive classroom climate.²⁹ Research has also shown that participants identify as their primary motivation for using Facebook a desire to maintain their existing relationships with friends and family members.³⁰

The studies reviewed in this chapter contribute to this literature by identifying a host of psychological effects and motivations for Facebook use. These studies are also some of the first experiments performed to examine Facebook uses and effects, and hence contribute increased confidence about causality to the correlational studies performed to date.

Consider first the psychological benefits that ensue from Facebook profile self-presentation. Following a brief exposure to this flattering and socially connected portrayal of self, participants experienced reduced defensiveness when confronted with an ego threat. Theoretically, this indicates that their perception of self-worth and self-integrity had been secured by the Facebook browsing activity. Facebook-induced self-affirmation produces an array of related psychological benefits, such as being more open-minded, secure, willing to take responsibility for failure in a task, and less likely to blame and derogate others. Although this idea was not directly tested in these studies, reduced defensiveness is an attitude that typically helps people to learn from their mistakes and to not ruminate about their failures.³¹ Future research is invited to directly test these claims.

Psychological benefits beyond self-affirmation also emerged. Facebook profile self-presentation increased positive affect, both directed at oneself (i.e., feeling loved, content, proud, supported, connected) and at others (i.e., feeling loving, giving), and it also increased users' temporary self-esteem—that is, it led them to view themselves more favorably at a deep, unconscious level. Recall that the IAT procedure employed to measure self-esteem ensures that participants didn't fake or incorrectly report their self-esteem, hence providing highly reliable findings. Together, these psychological benefits suggest that Facebook profiles are psychologically comforting spaces that elicit both positive self-evaluations and prosocial sentiments. At a theoretical level, these findings provide indirect support for the notion of selective self-presentation and the Hyperpersonal model. As previously mentioned, the Hyperpersonal model predicts that Facebook self-presentation should be positive, flattering, and veridical, although no study to date has directly tested these claims. This type of self-presentation should indeed elicit the interpersonal effects reported here. By observing the hypothesized effects, this study hence supports the contention of the Hyperpersonal model.

Precisely because Facebook profile self-presentation is psychologically rewarding, it was also hypothesized to be inviting and alluring to users. Study 2 provided support for this claim, with users becoming motivated to spend time on their Facebook profiles following a blog to the ego. This finding offers a new perspective on users' motivation to access SNS: Facebook use is seen as being prompted by unconscious goals and motivation (i.e., the need for self-worth) and by situational factors (threats to the ego that stem from sources external to the self). Viewing Facebook use as the product of unconscious needs and situational factors is a novel addition to the literature on motivations for SNS use, which has thus far relied on self-report methodologies to extract from users their conscious, explicit motivations.³²

The self-affirmation framework may also provide a previously unexplored explanation for the overwhelming popularity of Facebook. If seeking positive self-regard is a fundamental human need, and Facebook profiles have the capacity to fulfill this need, it stands to reason that users will feel compelled to access these profiles. In particular, it is worth noting that social connectivity with friends and family is the most sought after type of self-affirmation and that Facebook excels precisely in capturing and offering reminders of this connectivity.³³ From this perspec-

tive, Facebook's success can be at least partially accounted by its ability to capture the most meaningful, self-affirming aspects of users' selves.

Consider next the psychological costs produced by Facebook profile self-presentation. One arguably negative outcome of the increase in self-worth induced by Facebook profile exposure was a reduction in users' motivation to perform well in a cognitive task of moderate difficulty (i.e., the serial subtraction task). Consistent with claims that people are content with a good-enough vision of themselves, participants who were induced to feel good about themselves by Facebook profile exposure did not take advantage of additional opportunities to increase their self-worth, such as performing well in an academic task. These findings are relevant to recent research that has proposed that Facebook use, broadly construed, hinders students' academic performance, by lowering their GPA.³⁴ The present research takes a narrower view on Facebook effects, by considering only one Facebook activity—own profile browsing, and one simple academically related task, mental arithmetic. The decrement in performance observed here can be explained in motivational terms, with users trying less hard to perform well (rather than being less able to do so). Thus, under limited conditions, Facebook use may indeed take a toll on scholastic performance. Future research, encompassing more diverse Facebook activities and performance metrics, is necessary to more fully understand Facebook's effect on school performance.

The final question that needs to be addressed is whether all profile-based SNS are self-affirming, and whether the effects outlined previously apply to all of them equally. In accordance with self-affirmation theory, SNS should be affirming to the extent that they provide users with the affordances to put their best "face" forward in a veridical way, and to embed themselves in a network of meaningful personal relationships. Future research is needed to gauge the applicability of self-affirmation theory to other SNS.

Conclusion

Self-presentation is a complex communicative activity that is deeply affected by technological affordances. Asynchronicity, editability, recordability, and access to an audience shape the kinds of images self-presenters construct. The research reviewed here proposed that Facebook

self-presentation is typically flattering, veridical, and socially connected, as a result of these affordances. Once constructed, this unique version of oneself has profound intrapersonal and interpersonal effects that merit theoretical and empirical consideration.

Notes

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