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## **How Can Self Love Lead to Spying on Ex-Partners on Facebook? -The Effects of Ego Factors on Facebook Surveillance -**

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### ***Abstract***

*In this study, we attempted to identify the personality traits that influence one's likelihood to stalk an ex-partner on Facebook. Specifically, we focused on self-concept-related traits, given that the motivations for using social network sites (SNS) are highly associated with the concept of self. These include self-esteem, narcissism, and self-efficacy. To assess these factors, we controlled for extraneous variables while assessing the predictive power of personality traits, such as Facebook usage, length of the relationship, and time since the break-up. The results of a self-administered, web-based survey (N=207) showed that self-esteem, narcissism, and self-efficacy are all traits that can predict the stalking of an ex-partner on Facebook. More specifically, we showed a negative association between self-esteem and one's likelihood to stalk an ex-partner on Facebook, while it showed positive relationships between Facebook stalking and both narcissism and self-efficacy.*

**Keywords:** *Social Network Sites, Surveillance, Romantic Relationship, Self-esteem*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Facebook's wide reach and multiple communication functions have made it the dominant social networking site (SNS) [1]. It makes individuals' lives visible to others, but also introduces unwanted types of visibility. For example, a survey on Facebook usage showed that 83% of Facebook users regularly monitor their ex-partner's Facebook profiles and 74% of them had check the profiles of their exes' new romantic partners [2]. Another study showed that 18% of Facebook users attempted to publicly harass their ex-partners on Facebook [3]. By looking at photos, wall posts, status updates, and videos of their ex-partners or mutual friends on Facebook, users can gather significant amounts of information about their ex-partners. While people examine their ex-partners' social media profiles to better understand how their relationships ended, such surveillance behaviors are often severe enough to cause personal fear, given that individuals who engage in online stalking are more likely to engage in offline stalking [3]. Such behaviors also significantly delay individuals' breakup recoveries and increase break-up-related emotional distress [4].

As such, obsessively monitoring and harassing other people on Facebook—commonly referred to “Facebook stalking”—has become a significant concern among Facebook users, and warnings regarding

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Facebook stalking after romantic relationships end are abundant [3]. While Facebook stalking has received increasing attention among users, the personality traits that might explain how people engage in Facebook stalking after terminating romantic relationships remain under-examined.

We, therefore, aimed to identify predictive personality traits that will explain why someone is more or less likely to stalk an ex-partner on Facebook. It focused particularly on self-concept-related traits, given that the motivations for using social network sites (SNS) are highly associated with self-concept [5,6]. These motivations include self-esteem, narcissism, and self-efficacy. Furthermore, to effectively assess the predictive power of these factors, the analysis considered control variables drawn from both social psychology and SNS literature. The findings of this study will advance our understanding of the predictive power of personality traits in explaining Facebook surveillance of former romantic partners.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT**

### **2.1. Stalking on Facebook**

While a number of studies have attempted to document individuals' use of Facebook to meet partners or to develop and maintain romantic relationships, personality traits and how they affect behaviors during the stages of relationship termination or "break-ups" have not been extensively studied. When individuals seek to better understand how their relationships ended or desire information about their former partners' behaviors or potential new romantic interests, they have good reason to seek reassurance by examining their friends and ex-partners' social media communications. Past research has shown that most surveillance behaviors occur in passive manners, but a small number of cases have been reported as severe or harassing in nature [3]. Furthermore, research has shown that individuals who engage in severe online behaviors are more likely to transition from cyber harassment to offline stalking behaviors [7]. Thus, examining the personality traits that may influence surveillance behaviors on SNS is worthwhile.

### **2.2. Self-esteem**

Self-esteem is an attitude about the self and is related to personal beliefs about skills, abilities, social relationships, and future outcomes [8]. Those who have high self-esteem are presumed to be psychologically happy and healthy [9], whereas those with low self-esteem are believed to be psychologically distressed and perhaps even depressed [10]. Individuals with high self-esteem feel good about themselves, so they are able to cope effectively with challenges and negative feedback, and they live in social worlds in which they believe that people value and respect them [8]. On the other hand, people with low self-esteem see the world through more negative filters, and their general dislike for themselves affects everything around them; indeed, research has linked low self-esteem to depression, shyness, loneliness, and alienation [8].

Kramer [11] stated that all humans have a vital need to maintain or boost their self-esteem. Therefore, individuals can be expected to work to cultivate positive self-images both online and offline. People with low self-esteem are also likely to be more eager to engage in online activities that may raise their self-esteem [5]. Based on previous research about self-esteem, we identified self-esteem as a factor that could predict Facebook stalking. For example, Darvell et al. [12] demonstrated that people with low self-esteem are more suspicious of their current partners and therefore more likely to monitor their partners' activities during their relationships. Furthermore, Mehdizadeh [5] found a correlation between lower ratings on the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale and greater amounts of time spent on Facebook per session, and greater numbers of Facebook logins per day. Thus, it was hypothesized that low self-esteem would lead to more surveillance of former romantic partners on Facebook.

**Hypothesis 1:** Low self-esteem individuals (vs. high) will be more likely to engage in stalking behaviors of their ex-partners on Facebook.

### 2.3. Narcissism

Another important self-concept-related factor is narcissism. Narcissism is one of the key factors that explain the proliferation of SNSs, because SNSs are useful and convenient platforms for self-promotion for users who display inflated self-concepts [13]. People who display the traits of narcissism reflect ideals that are referred to as grand and often act in aggressive and dominating ways [14]. Given the characteristics of narcissism, it was expected that narcissism could influence Facebook stalking-related behaviors. It was predicted that narcissists would be more likely to stalk ex-partners on Facebook because highly narcissistic people tend to be more vigilant and sensitive about their ex-partners' behaviors after break-ups. Research has also showed that individuals with high narcissism scores are highly invested in promoting their self-perceived superiority and are hypervigilant in their efforts to detect and diffuse potential threats to their self-perceptions [15]. For example, narcissistic individuals enjoy direct competition with others and often respond with self-protective behaviors, such as derogation or devaluation, when threatened by comparison with better performing others [16]. Taken as a whole, these findings suggest that narcissistic people would be more vigilant and sensitive about their ex-partners' behaviors. Therefore, the following hypothesis was proposed:

**Hypothesis 2:** Highly narcissistic individuals (vs. low) will be more likely to engage in stalking behaviors of their ex-partners on Facebook.

### 2.4. Self-efficacy

In this study, self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief that he or she has the ability to achieve the goal of reconciling with the end of his or her relationship. Research has indicated that self-efficacy is a predictor of persistence in reconciliation attempts in romantic relationships. For example, Cupach et al. [17] showed that self-efficacy is a predictor of persistence in reconciliation attempts in romantic relationships. Merton [18] described the belief in luck as a defensive behavior that is used as a means of attempting to serve the psychological functioning of enabling people to preserve their self-esteem in the face of failures. On the contrary, individuals with high self-efficacy will believe that they can achieve reconciliation in their relationships, and not depend on luck. It has been argued that individuals with high self-efficacy believe that they have sufficient power and skills to reconcile terminated relationships, resulting in obsessive relational intrusion (e.g., stalking a former partner). In line with research documenting links between greater self-efficacy and pursuit of unwanted relationship, individuals with stronger beliefs in their competence in romantic relationships are presumably more likely to stalk former partners on Facebook than those with less strong beliefs in their abilities to reconcile terminated relationships. Therefore, we proposed the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 3:** High self-efficacy individuals (vs. low) will be more likely to engage in stalking behaviors of their ex-partners on Facebook.

### 2.5. Control variables

In addition to the aforementioned factors, we considered factors that previous studies have identified as significant predictors as covariates. These included break-up/relationship characteristics (i.e., Relationship Length & Time since Break-Up) [17] and Facebook usage.

## 3. METHOD

A self-administered, web-based survey was distributed to a large public university in the United States where students received extra credit for participating. A total of 209 students participated in the study (Females = 57.4%,  $M_{age} = 19.9$  years)

Self-esteem was measured with the ten-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale [19]. Items were measured using a seven-point Likert scale. Narcissism was measured using 16 items adopted from Ames et al. [20]. Self-efficacy was measured using eight items derived from Cupach et al. [17]. As for Facebook stalking behaviors, three items were adopted and modified from previous measures of unwanted relational pursuit behaviors [17]. Regarding control variables, information about time since break-up was collected and Facebook usage was also measured using Cohen et al.'s social media diet [21].

#### 4. RESULTS

To test the hypotheses, a step-wise regression was conducted. Facebook stalking was the dependent variable for the analysis while Facebook use, relationship length, and time since break-up remained constant.

**Table 1. Multiple Regression Step-Wise Method Analysis**

Variables	Step 1	$\beta$	Step 2	$\beta$
Facebook Diet	.123		.118	
Relationship Length	.180**		.150*	
Time Since Breakup	.140*		.173**	
Self Esteem			-.231**	
Narcissism			.179**	
Self-Efficacy			.245**	
	$R^2 = .063$		$\Delta R^2 = .142$	
	$F(3,205) = 4.567,$ $p < .01$		$F(6,202) = 8.665,$ $p < .001$	

Note: \* =  $p < .05$ , \*\* =  $p < .01$  or greater.

In step-one,  $r^2 = .063$ . Once self-esteem, narcissism, and self-efficacy were added in step-two,  $r^2 = .205$ , accounting for a  $\Delta r^2 = .142$ . Thus, adding the control variables increased the predictability of Facebook stalking. As Table 1 shows, self-esteem was a significant predictor of the likelihood of Facebook stalking of an ex-partner ( $\beta = -.231, p < .01$ ). Furthermore, as Table 2 shows, self-esteem was also negatively correlated with Facebook stalking ( $r = -.199, p < .01$ ). Therefore, the analysis supported Hypothesis 1.

**Table 2. Correlations of Variables**

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Self-Esteem	-				
2. Narcissism	.115	-			
3. Self-Efficacy	-.007	.092	-		
4. Facebook Diet	-.006	.087	-.042	-	
5. Facebook Stalking	-.199**	.217**	.242**	.134	-

Meanwhile, narcissism also appeared to be a significant predictor of the likelihood of Facebook stalking of an ex-partner ( $\beta = .179, p < .01$ ), and it had a positive correlation with the dependent variable, supporting Hypothesis 2 ( $r = .217, p < .01$ ). Finally, the analysis also showed self-efficacy to be a significant predictor of

the likelihood of Facebook stalking an ex-partner ( $\beta = .245, p < .01$ ) and had a positive correlation with the dependent variable ( $r = .217, p < .01$ ), supporting Hypothesis 3.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The results of the study indicated that self-esteem, narcissism, and self-efficacy are predictive factors for the stalking an ex-partner on Facebook. The results of this study were also influenced by control variables, including the duration of the relationship and the time since the break-up. More specifically, we found that self-esteem was a significant predictor of Facebook stalking. Decreases in self-esteem often occur after break-ups due to relationship uncertainty and jealousy, and individuals with low self-esteem are more eager to engage in online activities that may raise their self-esteem [5].

We also showed that narcissism was a significant predictor of Facebook stalking of ex-partners. This result implies that more narcissistic individuals try to gain self-worth via external validation [14]. Thus, they tend to seek reassurance regarding the reasons their relationships end by monitoring their ex-partners behaviors, or attempt to reconcile broken relationships by persistently contacting their ex-partners. Therefore individuals with narcissistic tendencies could be looking for information on their ex-partners' Facebook pages to validate their feelings about why their ex-partners are not good enough for them with the aim of protecting their self-images. Furthermore, they could be searching to validate the idea that they are better than their exes' new partners by searching for information that reveals the new partners' flaws and ultimately makes them feel superior. The results of the analysis showed that self-efficacy was a significant predictor of Facebook stalking of an ex-partner. Individuals with high self-efficacy believe that it is within their reach to reconcile their relationship with their ex-partners; thus, Facebook stalking could serve as a means of obtaining information that will help them achieve their goals. It is suggested that relationships can be viewed as goals, and when individuals are prevented from achieving relational goals, they experience strong negative reactions and become obsessed with the relationships [17].

Although we advance SNS and romantic relationship literature by offering theoretical insights, some limitations should be considered when interpreting the results. First, we analyzed self-reported behaviors, but did not track the actual behaviors of Facebook users. Therefore, while it serves as a starting point to better understand the potential causes of certain behaviors on Facebook, further analyses should be undertaken to understand Facebook users' actual behaviors. Second, the generalizability of this study is limited by the fact that it sampled only collegiate subjects who use Facebook. Therefore, future studies with larger samples, containing a balanced mix of all age groups, with participants who use various forms of SNS such as Instagram and Twitter, and that are derived via random sampling will be needed to make the results generalizable. To extend the literature on the topic and further understand motivations behind Facebook stalking, more control variables, such as who initiated the break-ups, should be considered in future analyses. Furthermore, additional personality disorders found in offline stalkers should be examined to see if they are also present in Facebook stalkers. Meloy [22] established that antisocial, borderline, and historic personality disorders were present in the majority of offline stalking offenders, in addition to narcissistic personality disorders. Additional research should be done to examine whether other personality disorders associated with offline stalking are also associated with Facebook stalking.

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