



The Social Media Sharing Disease

The dark side of all our good news

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It's a stark contrast indeed. A joyful mother who boasts a Facebook page full

of her daughter's photogenic hugs and giggles also stands accused of disposing her toddler's body on a Massachusetts shoreline.

The Jekyll and Hyde façade was maintained by Rachelle Bond over her daughter Bella, the 2-year-old whose story rocked the nation when her remains were found this spring in a trash bag on Deer Island. After a months-long countrywide search to identify the girl, Bond, 40, and her ex-boyfriend, Michael McCarthy, were arrested in September in connection with her death.

Bond is accused of helping McCarthy dispose of the body — a far cry from the double life she led with snuggle pics and proud mama updates online.

“Social media can definitely have a dark side,” said Amy Morin, a licensed clinical social worker, psychotherapist and author of the best-selling book "13 Things Mentally Strong People Don't Do." “People's portrayal of the idealized versions of themselves can go beyond just showing their happiest moments. Sometimes, people with serious psychopathology create online lives that meet society's expectations of appropriate. In real life, they may be engaging in anti-social activities.”

For most of the 75 million daily users on Instagram and those 1.55 billion on Facebook monthly, 316 million on Twitter, and 230 million on Tumblr, this online masquerade thankfully limits itself to casting a harmless glossy glow over our lives. Think fabulous parties, weight-loss goals attained, expensive trips to Turks and Caicos.

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“Social media is like a highlight reel. You get to choose what you want to show,” said Morin. “While you could choose to share your financial issues or marital troubles, most people don’t want to do that.”

Similar to the 10-minute elevator pitch we might give an old classmate during a high school reunion, it’s all about highlighting accomplishments, not downfalls.

Since social media replaces the occasional face-to-face with 24/7 status update potential, you can share everything no matter how trite, from healthy lunches (minus the après-meal milkshake) to marital bliss (ignoring your next couples therapy date).

“Posting vacation photos or telling everyone you’re buying a new home is one way to try and gain favor in the eyes of others,” Morin said. “For some, advertising their idealized version of their lives becomes a way to gain popularity or admiration from others.”

Advertising your idealized version of life "becomes a way to gain popularity or admiration from others."

This temporary boost to your self-esteem is measured by how many likes or comments you receive on your posts.

“Sometimes, people’s self-worth becomes tied to their social media activity,”

she said.



But in reality, that constant flow of positive can produce a negative — resentment, self-pity, and even depression. It's all understandable when you're up against the perfect selfies along with Pinterest projects your friends “easily” master on Instagram.

The Happiness Research Institute in Copenhagen, Denmark, recently released its Facebook Experiment, during which half of 1,095 participants had one job: stay off the social media site for one week. After seven days, both groups were asked to evaluate their life satisfaction. The treatment group had a

significantly higher level of overall happiness with life. On the last day of the experiment, even their mood was different from their counterparts, with 88 percent reporting true happiness against the control group's 81 percent.

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Worry and anger also reared their ugly heads, with 54 percent and 20 percent of the control group feeling these emotions, respectively, as compared to 41 percent and 12 percent of the other group. And not surprisingly, there was an increase in envy, as Facebook users turned green with envy when surrounded by the supposed amazing lives of their social media community.

Subjects turned green with envy when surrounded by the supposed amazing lives of their social media community.

“Showing off the best parts of your life, and perhaps embellishing a bit, is all often about keeping up with the Joneses,” Morin said. “When you see your friends talking about exotic trips, nice cars, and beautiful family adventures, it can be tempting to try and show you have those things in your life.”

“It’s an opportunity to construct a perfect image,” agreed Meik Wiking, chief executive officer at the Happiness Institute's think tank. “We seldom have so much control over how people see us in the real world.”

Apparently having all that control makes us happy. Or does it?

It’s a false sense of happiness people put on Facebook and Twitter, Wiking said.

“I think Essena O'Neill is a powerful story about that,” he said.

The 19-year-old Australian model and Instagram superstar made headlines when she admitted she didn’t wake up looking like she does.

After supplying an endless stream of perfect selfies, her decision to abandon her 600,000-plus followers by leaving Instagram, SnapChat, Facebook, and YouTube was pre-empted by a video explaining how it’s all a fake version of reality. London model Stina Sanders recently followed suit by posting photos of the "regular" instead of the remarkable, such as a facial hair treatment and a colonic. By opening the proverbial door into her "real life," thousands of followers walked out.

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Lesson learned. Social media might be fake, but we like it that way. As it turns out, social media users can be quite a sadistic bunch, craving the very outlet that makes them feel unworthy.

“A lot of research shows that looking at Facebook causes us to feel worse. When we see all the impressive things other people are doing, we lose sight of the fact that people are only sharing the best parts of their lives,” Morin said. “It’s easy to become envious and even resentful.”

Yet we're hardly giving it up.

“It’s an interesting phenomenon. Social media makes our moods worse, yet we keep going back for more,” he said. “So many people miss out on real life opportunities because they’e scrolling through social media accounts looking at what other people are doing.”

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