



Loneliness Predicts Perceptions and Use of Social Networking Sites

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Introduction

Background:

- Social networking sites (SNSs), such as MySpace and Facebook, are heavily used by university students (Ellison, Steinfeld, & Lampe, 2007).
 - Existing research on SNS use most frequently addresses privacy concerns and identity presentation, rather than motivation for use of SNSs.
 - University students, particularly those in their first year, are likely to experience significant loneliness as they adjust to their new environment (Cutrona, 1982).
 - Loneliness is emerging as a major threat to physical health and psychological well-being (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008).
 - Prior research indicates that loneliness affects the pattern rather than the probability of interpersonal behaviors.
- Our Question:**
Is the extent of loneliness experienced by college students related to their patterns of use and perceptions of SNSs?

Method

Participants

151 Undergraduates
52.3% Male; 47.7% Female
79.2% First or Second Years
57% On-campus; 43% Off-campus



Materials

UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, 1996)

Survey constructed by the experimenters:

- ✓ Participation on social networking sites (time spent, functions used, use of cell phone to access site, etc.)
- ✓ Demographics about social engagement (number of confidantes, participation in committed relationships, living arrangements, participation in organized religion and campus clubs, location of campus relative to family home, etc.)
- ✓ Perception of the reputation of social networking sites held by the participant and others.

Procedure

Questionnaires were administered in class.
No incentives were provided for participating.

Results

- Nearly all participants reported using MySpace, Facebook or both (95.3% Yes and 4.7% No)
- Users of SNSs did not differ from non-users on Loneliness.
- Students in committed relationships were less lonely than students who were not ($t = -2.199$, $p < .05$).
- Loneliness scores were negatively correlated with students' reported number of confidantes ($r = -.260$, $p < .01$).
- Loneliness scores were negatively correlated with students' reported number of SNS friends ($r = -.195$, $p < .05$).
- A one-way ANOVA found a significant effect of loneliness on ratings of SNS users $F(2, 143) = 5.09$, $p < .01$. Post hoc analyses found a significant difference between high and medium loneliness groups ($p < .01$).

Figures

UCLA Loneliness Scores

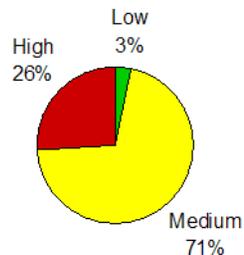


Figure 1. Results of the UCLA Loneliness Scale. Test scores can range from 20-80, and our sample scores ranged from 25-63. High scores are 46 and above, Medium scores are 29-45, and Low scores are 20-28. The mean score was 39.6 with an S.D. of 9.35. The median was 39 and the mode was 34. Our participants' scores were very similar to those reported by Russell (1996).

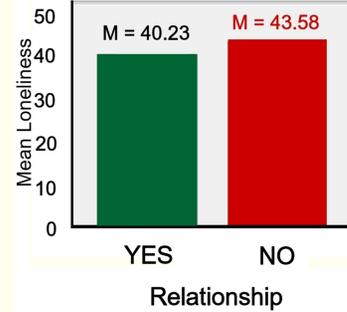


Figure 2. Committed Relationships and Loneliness. Students reporting being in a committed relationship had lower Loneliness scores than those who did not.

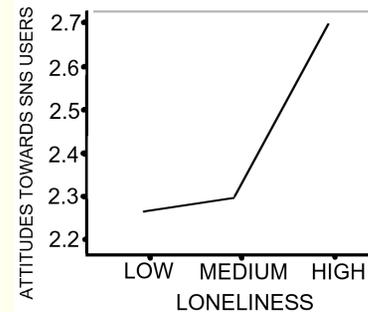


Figure 3. Attitudes Towards SNS Users as a Function of Loneliness. Participants with high loneliness scores rated users of SNSs more negatively than participants with medium scores (1=mostly positive; 5=mostly negative).

Conclusions

- Our experiment confirmed a number of previous observations.
 - Our students' loneliness scores were similar to those reported by Russell (1996).
 - Students in committed relationships are less lonely than other students.
- Although previous research suggests a link between loneliness and a person's number of confidantes (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008), our study is the first to report a negative correlation between loneliness scores and self-reported numbers of confidantes.
- Loneliness scores were negatively correlated with self-reported numbers of SNS friends. In contrast to suggestions that lonely individuals might want to present an idealized image online, it appears that online social relationships may reflect face-to-face connectivity.
- Lonely students rated SNS users (which in most cases included themselves) more negatively than students with low or medium loneliness scores. Like children picked last for a softball team, lonely students might be devaluing an activity in which they feel rejection or exclusion.
- Social networking might buffer individuals from loneliness by providing the ability to form and maintain "social capital" (Ellison, Steinfeld, & Lampe, 2007), but the present research suggests some of the obstacles to feeling connected in everyday life exist in virtual environments as well.

References

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