

Influence of Social Networks on the Subjective Feelings of Loneliness in Adolescents and Youth

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ABSTRACT

Social networks have established themselves as a new way of communication, largely transforming the traditional interaction between people, shifting the focus from direct, live communication to the fast and convenient online analogue of social platforms. This, in turn, has led to several changes that are reflected in personal and social functioning. One of the phenomena that modern researchers are examining in this regard is the subjective feeling of loneliness in young people, which is a negative consequence of excessive social network use. This is precisely the motive for exploring this issue in this article – how social networks affect the subjective feeling of loneliness in adolescents and young people.

The present study underscores the complex relationship between social media usage and feelings of loneliness among young people. Adolescents were found to be more susceptible to the negative impacts of social networks, manifesting in higher levels of loneliness compared to young adults.

Keywords: *Social networks, Information channels, Loneliness, Adolescents, Young people.*

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INTRODUCTION

It is extremely noticeable how over the past few decades social networks have caused avalanche-like changes in all spheres of public life, affecting representatives of almost all age groups, especially children and adolescents. Social networks, as an already established communication channel, have led to changes in the way and quality of communication between people, access to information, and sharing of experience. They have lowered the boundaries of communication in terms of time, place, and language barrier, while at the same time allowing largely uncontrolled access to all kinds of information.

The development of social networks has been a long process, marked by the gradual rise of communications and technology. The first online platforms were created in the 1990s, allowing users to create personal profiles and communicate in real time in so-called "virtual chat rooms", sharing personal information and creating a friendly online community.

Social desirability is strongly present in human nature, expressed in the desire for a person to be liked and accepted by others in society. This tendency is especially characteristic of the period of adolescence, where the development of identity is at its most acute. Social networks provide an opportunity for a quick and measurable way of social status. Their fear, likes, and comments on publications validate this need and strengthen dependence on social networks. This is a digital analogue that determines the level of social value, having a direct and significant impact on the emotional state and self-esteem. Positive evaluation in social networks is not only a prerequisite for pleasant experiences, but also forms behavior that stimulates more frequent use of social networks (Sherman et al., 2016).

Another characteristic of social networks is that they allow for selective representation of the personality, which in most cases can lead to cognitive dissonance, i.e., to a blurring of the real and virtual image of the personality. This, in turn, can have its negative effects, expressed in tension, anxiety, and even depressive states. A study shows that adolescents who compulsively seek approval on social networks are at a much higher risk of developing anxiety and depression (Sherman *et al.*, 2016).

Excessive use of social networks has a rather negative impact, which is expressed in all spheres of people's lives, with the most vulnerable group being children, adolescents, and young people. Research suggests that daily use of social media, especially among young people, leads to higher levels of anxiety and depression (Heffer, Good, *et al.*, 2019; Twenge, Martin, & Campbell, 2018).

Excessive use of social media leads to so-called fragmented attention, which is the inability to maintain deep concentration due to constant switching between different stimuli, which in turn has an adverse effect on long-term memory and the ability to think critically. Studies in this regard show that frequent switching from one platform to another (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok) leads to a decrease in cognitive performance while at the same time increasing stress levels (Rosen *et al.*, 2013; Lin *et al.*, 2017). An interesting fact has also been established, in which even the mere presence of a technical device near a person reduces cognitive capacity, since the mere expectation of a notification "reserves" part of the attention (Ward *et al.*, 2017).

On the other hand, this so-called cognitive intolerance is associated with negative internal experiences and avoidance, which creates a real risk of psychological problems such as anxiety and depression. "Cognitive intolerance refers to a circumstance in which an individual experiences difficulty accepting their internal experiences, which leads to the avoidance or prevention of unpleasant thoughts, feelings, and emotions" (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2004, p. 163).

Cognitive intolerance can increase feelings of insecurity and isolation to avoid unpleasant thoughts and emotions associated with social media, such as fear of negative evaluation or comparison to others. This creates a vicious cycle in which social media becomes a source of stress and isolation rather than a means of connection and support.

Numerous studies have shown that excessive use of social media negatively affects cognitive functioning, resulting in decreased concentration, superficial processing of information, and increased levels of impulsivity. Social media generates constant exposure to short and fragmented content, which in turn hinders the ability to think deeply and critically. Social media not only transforms



memory and decision-making functions, but also restricts cognitive flexibility (Carr, 2010; Sparrow, Liu, & Wegner, 2011; Meshi, Tamir, & Heekeren, 2015; Ophir, Nass, & Wagner, 2009; Rosen, Carrier, & Cheever, 2013).

The constant overexposure of “idealized” images on social networks is also a predictor of low self-esteem and dissatisfaction in young people, who are exposed to psychological pressure from the networks to “meet” certain standards. The unrealistic body image thus instilled is internalized into an externally imposed ideal of a beautiful body, which the young person compulsively begins to strive to achieve (Appel *et al.*, 2016; Hadjiveva, 2023; Grogan, 2008; Zaccagni *et al.*, 2014).

Research conducted in this regard indicates that this process of external internalization is a major factor in the development of negative body image and is very often a predictor of the development of eating disorders (Thompson *et al.*, 1999).

Also, some other studies have found that constant digital pressure and the associated social comparisons significantly increase the risk of developing anorexia, bulimia, and other unhealthy eating behaviors (Homan & Tylka, 2014).

From this, we can conclude that the mental perception of the body, formed in the context of social networks, is often a real prerequisite for the development of eating disorders, combining psychological, social, and cultural factors.

Social networks are based on the principle of so-called unpredictable rewards, which is the main mechanism for the establishment of addictive behavior. This effect (operant conditioning) was described as far back as 1963 by Skinner (1963) as a result of his experiment (animals continue to press a lever, although the expected reward in the form of food is unpredictable) (Skinner, 1963). Compulsive interaction with social networks, in terms of notifications, likes, comments, etc., appears in the form of a reward, activating the release of dopamine and, accordingly, the experience of pleasure. This, in turn, leads to higher levels of impulsivity and low levels of concentration. In terms of platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, which have algorithms designed to encourage addictive behaviors like gambling, research suggests that these algorithms provide users with personalized content that leads to increased dopamine levels, similar to gambling and drug addiction (Andreassen *et al.*, 2012; Balcerowska *et al.*, 2020; Schultz, 2016; Volkow, Wise, & Baler, 2019).

Also, technology companies are deliberately designing the platforms themselves to prolong the time users spend on them. This excessive time creates another negative prerequisite that prevents young people from developing empathy and social resilience, as they avoid facing real conflicts, serious conversations, and deep emotional connections. Their focus is on the likes they generate under their posts, short reactions, and above all on the visual image, which at times is even compulsively pursued by adolescents. The constant need for external approval in adolescents leads to anxiety, low self-esteem, and a very strong need for feedback, especially positive feedback (Turkle, 2012; Zuboff, 2019; Alter, 2020).

Social networks and the feeling of loneliness

Loneliness among young people has been the subject of extensive research in recent years, with a particular focus on the role of social networks in this process. A number of studies have found that the level and quality of interactions in the digital environment can have both positive and negative effects on psycho-emotional well-being.

Initially, the purpose of social networks is to connect people, but despite this, research shows that excessive use of these platforms can cause feelings of loneliness and isolation. People who use social



networks excessively develop higher levels of loneliness and isolation. How adolescents form their identity also changes, as a result of which they feel lonelier. In this regard, the formation of the self during adolescence is a critical period during which young people acquire an understanding of themselves through interactions with others, verbal, and non-verbal communication. Communication of young people with older people is of key importance for the transmission of social experience. In social inheritance, young people acquire knowledge from experience, i.e., all the values acquired during the adult's life path. But in the online environment, the adolescent creates a selective profile for himself, which corresponds to the requirements of socially desirable acceptance, which is standardized on social platforms. The paradox observed in this regard, as deduced by Turkle, is “alone together”, i.e., people are physically alone, but digitally connected through social networks, which create an illusion of closeness, whose communication is fragmented, superficial, often devoid of content, and does not satisfy the original human need for emotional connection. And ultimately, high levels of loneliness are observed, despite a strong online presence (Gergov, 2010; Turkle, 2012).

The brief overview of communication as an initially significant and connecting process in real time, which develops personal and social skills necessary for the integration and adaptation of the personality in the dynamics of socio-economic processes. Communication is the cornerstone of social inheritance, which is a key factor in the transmission of experience from the older generation to the younger. Communication is, in principle, one of the basic human needs, which is originally associated with the emergence of man and is a key factor in the establishment and maintenance of psycho-physiological health. Communication is a major source of health, which creates conditions for social interaction, emotional support, and resilience (Adler, 2007). Naturally, on the other hand, the lack of effective communication and social connectedness leads to health problems and mental disorders.

The need for communication is inherently embedded in human nature. Social connectedness, based on effective communication in which the individual feels emotionally supported, is the basis for achieving optimal health and emotional satisfaction, which are initially predictors of higher success in one's overall life plan. Deficient social interactions, in turn, lead to isolation, which in turn creates a greater risk of developing anxiety and depressive disorders, as well as physical health problems (Baumeister & Leary, 2017; Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014).

A study conducted in this regard presents eloquent results indicating that social isolation and deficient communication lead to a higher risk of mortality in young people (Holt-Lunstad, Smith & Layton, 2010).

Another study conducted among adolescents during COVID-19 found that social isolation and limited verbal communication led to higher levels of depression and anxiety in adolescents. Therefore, social interactions are of utmost importance, even in conditions of distance, for maintaining mental health in young people (Loades *et al.*, 2020).

Also, regarding online communication, research shows that effective, satisfying, and supportive communication, albeit in the online space, leads to more objective, positive self-evaluation and a lower risk of mental health problems (Lerner, 2015).

According to Keles, McCrae, and Grealish (2020), social media has the potential to reduce feelings of loneliness by facilitating social interaction and maintaining connections, particularly for people who are physically restricted from social settings. However, research suggests that excessive use, especially when interactions are superficial and lack emotional depth, can have the opposite effect – contributing to higher levels of loneliness.



There has been a wealth of empirical research on the impact of social media on loneliness in adolescents and young adults, with most suggesting that the relationship is complex and often bidirectional. Excessive use of social media has been linked to a higher risk of feeling isolated and lonely among young people. Researchers argue that “when interactions become superficial and focus only on the quantity rather than the quality of communication, this leads to increased feelings of isolation, especially among adolescents who are still forming their social identities” (Keles *et al.*, 2020, p. 9).

Caplan's (2002) research suggests that social networking sites can cause feelings of loneliness when users use the platforms as a substitute for real-life social relationships. He argues that “when online interactions are superficial and do not lead to deep and satisfying contacts, this increases feelings of isolation” (Caplan, 2002, p. 70).

Another study conducted by Lee *et al.* (2016) found that adolescents who reported spending more time on social media reported greater feelings of loneliness and isolation. They emphasized that “this relationship was more pronounced among young people who used social media as a substitute for real-life interpersonal relationships, compensating for their need for emotional connection” (Lee *et al.*, 2016, p. 120).

Research conducted by Hoffman *et al.* (2017) also supports the idea that in youth and adolescents, time spent on social media is associated with higher levels of social anxiety and loneliness, often due to a lack of satisfying and authentic social connections. They note that “additional hours spent online, without the presence of deep communication, may activate neural pathways that reinforce feelings of isolation and alienation” (Hoffman *et al.*, 2017, p. 135).

Another study by Cacioppo and Patrick (2008) found that prolonged social isolation is associated with changes in motivational and emotional domains that increase feelings of loneliness. Their study emphasizes the importance of quality interpersonal relationships for mental health and the opposite effect when these relationships are absent or insufficient.

Overall, scientific data establishes that virtual social networks are a two-sided factor - with balanced use, they create a sense of belonging, but with excessive use and devoid of real emotional connections, they lead to an increased feeling of social isolation and loneliness.

MATERIALS & METHODS

Methodological tools were used to conduct this study: Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS) and the UCLA Loneliness Scale Test Scale.

The BSMAS was designed as a short, reliable, and valid tool for assessing social media addiction. It was developed by Andreassen *et al.* (2017) as part of broader research on digital addiction. Each question is rated on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1: “never/not yet” to 5: “every day/very often”).

Loneliness Scale is one of the most widely used and validated instruments for measuring feelings of loneliness. In its original development and subsequent studies, the internal reliability coefficient (α -coefficient) typically ranges between 0.85 and 0.91, indicating very good reliability and internal consistency of the scale (Russell, 1996).

The study was conducted in the period April - July, 2025. Its implementation was on a voluntary and anonymous basis, directly and through the online form of the questionnaires. 279 people participated, of whom 156 (51.7%) were women and 123 (48.3%) were men. In terms of age, the



respondents cover two adjacent age periods - adolescents (15-19 years) - 146 people (56.7%) and young people (20-30 years) - 133 people (43.3%).

The following hypotheses were raised:

1. It is assumed that there is a positive correlation between time spent on social networks and feelings of loneliness in adolescents and young adults.
2. It is assumed that adolescents are lonelier compared to young adults.
3. It is assumed that women are lonelier than men.

The data collected from the test methodologies were processed and analyzed using the statistical program SPSS 23. The statistical methods for processing the data that were applied were the T-test and correlation analysis.

RESULTS

Table 1. Age differences in mean loneliness scores.

Group	Mean	SD	t-value	df	p-value
15-19 (adolescents)	5.73	1.37	t=8.85	279	<0.001
20-30 (youth)	4.49	0.98			

Analysis of the results of the study shows that age has a significant impact on the feeling of loneliness ($t = 8.85, p < 0.001$). Adolescents (15–19 years) experience a greater feeling of loneliness ($M = 5.73$) compared to young people (20–30 years) $M = 4.49$. These results support the second hypothesis. Adolescents are more sensitive to social factors that can provoke a feeling of isolation and loneliness, due to the transient nature of this phase and significant social changes. This curve of social adaptation requires specific support strategies to prevent long-term negative impacts on mental health. According to research by Steinberg (2014), it is during adolescence that significant changes occur in perceptions of social support and feelings of isolation, and during this phase, it is necessary to introduce interventions to support emotional adaptation.

Table 2. Gender differences in mean loneliness scores

Group	Mean	SD	t-value	df	p-value
Women	6.14	2.38	t = 9.10	279	<0.001
Men	4.27	1.96			

The results of the T-test indicate statistically significant gender differences ($t = 9.10, p < 0.001$), with women feeling lonelier ($M = 6.14$) compared to men ($M = 4.27$). This supports the third hypothesis raised, that women are lonelier, probably due to their more emotional nature and tendency to withdraw into themselves. Traditionally, the fairer sex experiences events more deeply and

emotionally colors what is happening. This, in turn, suggests the need to provide psychological support to women as an effective measure to improve their mental well-being.

Table 3. Correlation between time spent on social networks and loneliness.

Group	Correlation coefficient (r)	Significance (p-value)
Teenagers (15-19 years old)	0.70	$p < 0.001$
Youth (20-30 years old)	0.45	$p < 0.01$

The analysis of the results of the correlation analysis shows a higher correlation coefficient ($r=0.70$) in adolescents, which means that there is a significant direct proportional relationship between the time spent on social networks and the feeling of loneliness. This suggests that in this age group, increasing time spent on social media has a strong, statistically significant relationship with increasing feelings of loneliness.

Young people also show a positive correlation, but it is weaker ($r=0.45$) compared to adolescents, but still significant.

These results support the first hypothesis, of a significant positive correlation between time spent on social media and feelings of loneliness. The trend is more pronounced among adolescents, which highlights the peculiarities of the perception and impact of social media at an earlier age.

The results of this study provide us with the opportunity and support for a more extensive and in-depth future study in this regard, which would be supported by a larger volume of empirical material and would explore more statistically significant patterns that would contribute to enriching the scientific fund on this current contemporary topic.

DISCUSSION

Consistent findings from recent research indicate that excessive use of social media platforms is linked to increased feelings of loneliness and social isolation among adolescents and young adults (Huang, 2017; Keles et al., 2020). Studies such as those conducted by Primack et al. (2017) suggest that the content users consume and produce online can amplify dissatisfaction and widen social gaps, thereby negatively impacting mental well-being.

Furthermore, research by Elhai et al. (2018) highlights that overuse of social networking sites can substitute real-life social interactions, leading to heightened loneliness and alienation. This issue is particularly critical during the formative years when social development and identity formation are at their peak. While these platforms offer valuable opportunities for connection, the risk of misuse and dependency remains a significant concern that calls for targeted prevention and educational strategies.

In light of these findings, it becomes clear that there is a pressing need for systematic interventions that promote balanced engagement with social media, along with skills to critically assess digital content and foster meaningful offline relationships. Future research should continue exploring these connections and seek effective approaches to improve mental health and social inclusion among youth.



In previous studies related to the current research, the results indicate that social isolation and feelings of loneliness are strongly connected, with social networks capable of both amplifying and reducing these feelings depending on how they are used (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018; Twenge et al., 2018). Additionally, higher activity on social networks is associated with greater feelings of loneliness and depression among adolescents (Keles et al., 2020; Laschinger & Fida, 2014).

Undoubtedly, existing scientific research confirms that excessive use of social networks is linked to increased feelings of loneliness and social isolation among adolescents and young people. These findings show that high levels of online social activity often lead to the opposite of the expected sense of connectedness and support, while simultaneously increasing feelings of abandonment and loneliness. Conversely, healthier and more balanced use of social media can reduce these negative effects and support social well-being. To mitigate these adverse impacts, it is necessary to develop effective educational programs and strategies for responsible use of digital platforms among young people.

CONCLUSION

The theoretical overview and empirical research conducted in this study confirm the significant influence of social networks on the mental functioning of adolescents and young people. Their impact is multifaceted, affecting not only social behavior and self-perception but also emotional well-being and cognitive functioning. The data obtained clearly show that loneliness is more pronounced in adolescents than in young adults, which is understandable given the transitional nature of adolescence and the heightened need for affiliation typical of this developmental stage. In this sensitive period, young people are simultaneously seeking autonomy and striving for social acceptance, making them more vulnerable to the negative effects of excessive online interaction.

The finding that women report higher levels of loneliness than men aligns with previous research, suggesting that gender-related differences in emotional processing, social expectations, and coping mechanisms play a decisive role. Women's stronger tendency toward emotional introspection and relational sensitivity may increase their susceptibility to feelings of isolation, especially in the absence of meaningful social support.

The strong positive correlation identified between the time spent on social networks and loneliness – particularly pronounced among adolescents – highlights the need for timely preventive strategies. These should not aim to demonize technology but rather to promote balanced, conscious, and purposeful use of digital platforms. Educational programs fostering media literacy, emotional resilience, and critical thinking about online content could mitigate the risk of substituting superficial digital connections for genuine interpersonal relationships.

From a broader perspective, the results underline the dual nature of social networks: while they offer unprecedented opportunities for connection, self-expression, and information exchange, their misuse can exacerbate emotional vulnerability, impair real-life social skills, and deepen feelings of alienation. Addressing this challenge requires a coordinated effort among educators, psychologists, policymakers, and families to encourage healthy digital habits, promote offline social engagement, and provide support systems that address the psychological needs of young people.

Future research should focus on longitudinal and cross-cultural studies to better understand the evolving relationship between social media use and loneliness in the context of rapidly changing



digital trends. Such studies could also examine the protective factors that enable some young people to use social networks without experiencing detrimental effects. By adopting a proactive and evidence-based approach, society can harness the positive potential of social networks while minimizing their risks, ultimately fostering healthier, more resilient, and socially connected generations.

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