





SOCIAL MEDIA, LONELINESS, AND IDENTITY

THE MODERN PARADOX

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*Social media is a powerful tool – it may have even guided you to this article. Yet the digital age and the growth of social media platforms, under the guise of keeping us all connected, have given birth to a brand new paradox. From children to adults, a loneliness epidemic is growing, and social media may not be a quick fix but an instigator. **THINK** explores the relationship between social media use and the feeling of loneliness. ➔*

Many factors are contributing to the loneliness epidemic. Fast-paced lives organised around long work weeks, lack of support for family care, even difficulty in accessing leisure spaces – loneliness is a multi-factor problem that affects 24% of people over the age of 15 around the world.

THINK has previously reported extensively on loneliness at the university level, for the elderly during COVID-19, and even in dating with disabilities. As we explain in 'Only the Lonely', loneliness has long-term effects on our mental and physical health, relating to depression, high blood pressure, and the risk of stroke and heart disease.

In this article, we ask: how does loneliness relate to the digital world, and specifically, social media? On these platforms, the user is the product. Companies capitalise on your attention to sell you their products, and the platforms are designed to keep you focused, engaged, and addicted to the screen.

IT STARTED WITH FACEBOOK

When Christine Spiteri was an undergrad in psychology, Facebook was the new big thing. Quickly, Spiteri started looking at her class material through the lens of the digital world and developed a keen interest in the contrast between online and physical identities.

While smartphones were becoming ubiquitous, Spiteri was in the Netherlands studying media-mediated cultural changes. And while COVID-19 was in full swing, Spiteri started questioning how social media could be impacting isolation and loneliness during lockdown. It was with these experiences in mind that she started her doctoral studies in Psychology at UM under the supervision of Prof. Mary Anne Lauri.

Spiteri's research starts with an observation: 'There is a lot of talk about the effect of social media on mental wellbeing, but the relationship may not necessarily be a linear one – there are other factors that may affect how social media impacts people.' One factor Spiteri wants to test is personality. She focuses on the Five-Factor model of personality, which focuses on the Big Five traits: Openness (to experience new things and accept new

ideas), Conscientiousness (persistence and organisation), Extraversion (enjoying outside stimuli, especially with other people), Agreeableness (prioritising other's needs), and Neuroticism (the tendency to respond to stress with negative emotions). According to Truity, the Big Five measure personality through these key dimensions, which are independent of each other and drive our behaviour. Spiteri uses this model to contextualise how people's predispositions affect their perception of loneliness while using social media.

The researcher also distinguishes between types of screen time in her research. Our daily life demands that we use our phones and computers all the time, yet using a calculator app is different from doom scrolling on Instagram. These different applications are likely to have different effects on our mental health. Aside from this, Spiteri warns that we should consider how 'our perception of screen time is usually lower than the actual time we spend on our devices.' As such, her research distinguishes between routine social media use (how much social media is integrated into our routines) and emotional use (the emotional investment in social media use, like feeling upset or disconnected when not online).

Finally, Spiteri hopes to see how social media impacts different age groups, specifically how younger generations interact and connect both in real life and through digital media. This becomes particularly urgent when we consider that Gen Z and younger generations have been exposed to social media platforms from an early (and very formative) age.

A QUICK GUIDE TO STUDYING LONELINESS

Spiteri's research uses what is called a mixed-methods approach. It includes quantitative (statistics-based) and qualitative (interpretation of answers and testimonies) data to create a narrative and reach conclusions about loneliness and social media use.

Spiteri first tackled the quantitative aspect of the research during the spring of 2022. She collected 591 answers to a questionnaire, which she spent the last year analysing. Her questionnaire uses standardised scales (definitive scales that accurately quantify behavioural, cognitive, or emotional processes) to prod on the



Christine Spiteri

respondents' feelings of loneliness, typical social media use, and their personality traits.

As the research is still ongoing, the next stage is the qualitative aspect. By analysing the quantitative data, Spiteri will have a better grasp of the impact of social media use on loneliness. This will form the base for the qualitative analysis, which will complement the statistics with concrete stories about the impacts of social media use. In the qualitative stage of the research, Spiteri hopes to understand what makes people feel connected, what that means to them, and how social media shapes those perceptions.

SOCIAL MEDIA'S IMPACT CHANGES WITH PERSONALITY AND AGE

So far, the research has shown that there is a cyclical relationship between social media use and loneliness, and personality is an important factor. An anxious, fearful, or depressed person will likely have an increased perception of loneliness from frequent social media use. In contrast, people with a high score in extraversion or conscientiousness are less likely to report loneliness.

With regards to the type of screen time, productive time is usually correlated with better mental wellbeing. Additionally, people who report emotional use of social media have a higher ranking on loneliness.

Curiously, the data paints a different picture for elderly generations. According to one CNN article, 'only 17% of people aged 65 and older reported feeling lonely,' and Spiteri's research hints that social media use among older individuals may decrease loneliness. The elderly are also less emotionally invested in social media use and

simultaneously may be more comfortable being alone since they didn't grow up with these technologies.

Why does social media seem to be increasing the feeling of loneliness, especially for people with high neuroticism? Spiteri believes this may be related to personality traits. Someone who is shy and introverted or is already feeling lonely may need more intimacy and have higher expectations for the level of connectedness they want to experience. Because social media cannot fully replace the intimacy of face-to-face conversation, these individuals may end up disappointed by social media use, which increases the previous feeling of loneliness.

HOW TO SURVIVE SOCIAL MEDIA

As such, it is important to find a balance between online and physical life, to think about the type of content we interact with, its purpose, and whether it meets our needs. Self-awareness and expectation management are key for health in the digital age. Spiteri hopes that her research will motivate people to better manage their social media usage and be mindful of its potential to affect their wellbeing.

Despite the impacts established in the literature and the results unveiled so far by Spiteri's research, she warns that it is incorrect to blame social media for all our loneliness issues. 'The fact that children don't have the freedom to play outside, elderly don't have space to talk with their neighbours. All of this could play into loneliness,' Spiteri points out. We need a systemic change that prioritises accessibility to community-centred outdoor spaces and unstructured time for children to play, be away from screens, and even have the chance to get bored. 