

Let's not panic about our teens just yet



The benefits of research can be lost if we amplify only one argument in a nuanced, complex topic. How youth interact with social media is as complex as it gets. **Dr Velislava Hillman**, director and senior researcher at Data, Media, and Society Research Centre, Malta, writes.

The COVID-19 pandemic kept many children and teenagers at home, with parents struggling to recreate routine. Yet with or without public health risks, teenagers' social media use was shrouded in moral panic and gloom.

Mainstream media headlines do not help; take *'Social Media Creates 'Instant Loneliness' for teenagers'* and *'Loneliness: An Epidemic In The Making?'*. All too often research and policy looks at risks separately from opportunities.

In Malta, this division happens often. Run-of-the-mill surveys bring out numbers without context. Left in the hands of hungry news writers, these numbers can lead to uncontrolled and wild interpretations that raise unnecessary fear in readers. The truth is that there is no clear evidence of any causal relationship between loneliness and social media use. Young people – and many adults too – do feel social or emotional loneliness, but the real reasons remain elusive. To give a more balanced approach to social-media-induced loneliness among teenagers, here are five questions to ask before allowing any concern to seep in.

Firstly, what's the evidence? Comparing the findings of a quantitative study on loneliness carried out by the faculty of Social Wellbeing at University of Malta and its coverage in the mainstream media, the gap is striking. There is no solid proof that teenagers suffer 'instant' loneliness, let

alone that social media causes it. The study found that loneliness tends to particularly affect older people with lower education, unemployed and retired individuals, and those living alone (a bit of a giveaway), among other factors. A person's risk of loneliness, the study summarises, 'is reduced if they: form part of a younger age group; are highly educated; are in employment; are of a single marital status; live with their parent(s) or guardian(s)...' etc.

A third of the teenagers (ages 11–19) who took part in this survey said they experienced some sort of loneliness (with no connection to social media whatsoever). The survey (a method that has its own limitations) included 115 teenagers in total. While the research instrument has a unidimensional overall loneliness measure, it prevents researchers from understanding why the survey participants responded as they did – which may be a result of temporary bias (e.g. unique life events, having a stomach ache, or responding right after a fight with a friend).

The second question is: who is interpreting the results (researchers, journalists, parents, NGOs who need funding to carry out their work)? Mainstream media covered similar studies in the past (e.g. studies on youth and online gaming), as they make a compelling read even when evidence is inconclusive. But while the intention may be to create awareness, inflicting moral panics will not provide the support that is necessary in these situations. ➔



Dr Velislava Hillman

The third question to consider: when does feeling lonely become problematic? A headline such as ‘Loneliness: An Epidemic in the Making?’ sounds as though feeling lonely is somehow wrong. The referenced study by the Faculty for Social Wellbeing highlights that it is OK to feel lonely. And while presenting the number of people who said they feel ‘moderately lonely’, the findings do not make claims about the cause or length of such a feeling. Fourthly, are social media users seen as passive consumers or as complex individuals? Scary headlines of media articles (as quoted above) or books (like Jean Twenge’s *iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy* or Adam Alter’s *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked*) create a dangerous bandwagon. The media has been heavily criticised for construing children and young people as a passive audience of media messages, carried away by content that adults somehow seem immune to. However, children have their own moral compass; they detect liars like no other device can, and show resilience when faced with an adversary. Examples galore: from Pocahontas to Malala and Taylor Swift (with her support for LGBTQ rights and speaking up against sexual harassment).

Of course, accepting youth as ‘tech savvy’ is another extreme to avoid. The point is to not segregate audiences, grouping them as ‘addicted’ or ‘digital natives’ or ‘lonely’,

but to reveal all evidence with its accompanying limitations and drawbacks and to emphasise the nuances that exist among usage patterns, perspectives, and individuals.

Finally, what’s the point of creating moral panics? NGOs and mainstream media make every effort to create awareness, to help raise awareness of existing problems, and to make improvements in society. This is great. However, such work also relies on external funding – for selling shrinking newspapers, running educational and support programs, for conducting further research. Amplifying complex issues that are far from being clear-cut builds upon that same dangerous bandwagon. Generalising and turning survey responses into sensationalised headlines is never productive.

An average family will never spend a whole day reading academic work to understand what exactly has been discovered. All institutional actors, media, and stakeholders concerned about young people’s wellbeing should ensure a full display of the existing evidence and interpret it in a balanced way. And again, there is no causal relationship between loneliness and social media – the tool is not inherently harmful. [T](#)

Further reading:

Azzopardi, A. (2019). Loneliness: an epidemic in the making?. Malta Independent.

Clark, M., Azzopardi, A., & Bonnici, J. (2019). The Prevalence of Loneliness in Malta: A nationally representative study of the Maltese population. The Faculty for Social Wellbeing, University of Malta.

Conneely, V. (2020). Social media creating 'instant loneliness' for teenagers. Times Of Malta.

Malala Fund | Working for a world where all girls can learn and lead. Malala.org. (2013).

Pocahontas: Beyond the Myth. Smithsonian Channel. (2020).

Zacharek, S., Dockterman, E., & Edwards, H. (2017). TIME Person of the Year 2017: The Silence Breakers. Time.com.

What should we do in these unprecedented times?

'Isolation, physical distancing, the closure of schools and workplaces are challenges that affect us, and it is natural to feel stress, anxiety, fear and loneliness at this time,' pointed out Hans Kluge, an important World Health Organisation expert. Instead of adding to the anxiety and fears about screen time, let's use this COVID-19 pandemic to explore the beneficial use of social and digital media.

Some tips:



Enable discussions with young ones; learn together about the access to and spread of misinformation (misleading information) and disinformation (wrongfully given information with the intention to mislead and harm).

Find strategies for fact-checking and finding good quality information.



Connect with others and provide space for children and youths to enjoy their usual friendships, albeit digitally.

Listen to them with less judgement and critique. Instead, learn how they feel and what they use their digital technologies for.

