

Usage of Social Media to Reduce Feelings of Loneliness in Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

Humans have reaped the endless benefits of living in groups. Collective living has increased survival chances and helped exchange emotional and social information, which creates a sense of belongingness. The study aims to examine the impact of social media and the internet on feelings of loneliness in young adults of the Indian population. A Google form was created to collect the data from the participants from the age group of 18 to 27 years. The UCLA loneliness scale and a few qualitative questions were asked to make the study more valuable. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used, and 120 participants passed the inclusion criteria. The collected data was analysed by using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). An Independent sample t-test was employed to find the gender difference in social media usage durations, and a significant difference was found ($t(119) = 2.265, p < 0.05$ two-tailed), where females ($M = 4.80$ hrs, $SD = 2.265$) outperformed males ($M = 4$ hrs, $SD = 1.803$). Pearson's correlations were administered to find the correlation between loneliness levels and the time duration of social media usage. The results of the study indicated no significant correlation between loneliness levels and the time duration of social media usage ($r = 0.084$). The results thus show that merely considering the time used for consuming social media does not correlate with loneliness levels. The researchers call for future research that focuses more on the nuanced connection between social media usage and its impacts on loneliness levels.

Keywords: *Social media, Loneliness, UCLA Loneliness Scale*

Humans have reaped the endless benefits of living in groups. Groups have provided man with a significant evolutionary advantage. Collective living increased our survival chances by increasing protection, and the quantity of food one could get through hunting. It also helped exchange emotional and social information that eventually made people experience the feeling of belongingness. Living with others increases the chances of helping others as well. The person who received the help reciprocated it back to the helper. This prosocial behavioural exchange added value to human survival. These are just a few ways through which living in groups helped us. Evolutionary psychology can account for many more explanations regarding the same. We modern humans are not

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exceptions to social living. We still contain impulses that make us improve our image and status in society to appeal to potential partners.

The COVID-19 pandemic can be seen as a perfect experiment that tested humans' ability to avoid face-to-face social interactions. To contain the spread of the virus, governments-imposed legislation that prevented people from heading outside their homes. Many research studies point out the surge in the feelings of loneliness in people during the lockdown.

Nevertheless, people resorted to using social media platforms and other internet materials to keep them socially connected and occupied. To satisfy the needs for social interactions, curiosity and exploration, humans have clung to reading, watching shows, texting or video-calling. People have developed an increased dependency on the internet to satisfy their needs.

The impact of social isolation can vary between cultures. Collectivistic cultures are more likely to be impacted strongly by social isolation rules. A multilevel analysis of 12 European societies found that levels of loneliness were higher in collectivistic cultures than in individualistic ones. The study added that loneliness levels in collectivistic cultures depend highly on social bonds and interactions.

On the other hand, loneliness in individualistic cultures depends on having friends and confidants (Lykes & Kemmelemeier, 2013). As a highly collectivistic country, India could have been prey for increased loneliness concerns in people due to the absence of the possibility of having regular interactions with their social networks during the pandemic. The study's objective was to explore the extent of the success of social media and internet usage in reducing feelings of isolation in the Indian population.

The study examines the impact of social media and the internet on feelings of loneliness. Social media platforms provide channels to connect to broader social groups. They also help in sharing information, viewpoints, opinion, etc. Social media accounts also allow people to share photos and videos of themselves.

Loneliness is an unpleasant emotion characterized by sadness and social isolation. Loneliness levels have increased during the COVID-19 pandemic (Jenny et al. et al., 2020). Loneliness can also be defined as an emotional state characterized by an inconsistency between one's desired and perceived levels of social connectedness (Heinrich, L. M., & Gullone, E. 2006).

Many people have reported experiencing loneliness, their relationships are becoming meaningless, and they find themselves isolated. It can also impact our bodily functioning, leading to cardiovascular disorders and obesity (Javier Yanguas et al., 2018). Loneliness can also lead to a pessimistic outlook on life, predisposing people toward Major Depressive Disorder and Personality Disorders (Raheel Mushtaq et al., 2014).

Researchers are divided into two perspectives on how social media usage can impact feelings of loneliness. One says that Internet use for social communication (or social media) reduces community participation and, at the same time, increases feelings of loneliness and depression due to the reduction in the quality of relationships (R Kraut et al., 1998). This is termed the "Displacement Hypothesis". Another perspective considers spending time online

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as a means of establishing new social relationships, eventually reducing feelings of loneliness (Shaw & Gant, 2004). This is termed the “Stimulation Hypothesis”.

Social media posts and statuses of other people can aggravate feelings of loneliness as they portray only the good side of life, and people tend to compare their lives with others (Blease 2015). Especially during the pandemic, various states had COVID mandates that differed from others. In addition to that, some families were more liberal about going out and meeting people despite the pandemic. On the other hand, some families were stricter, which involved refraining from moving out of the house for non-essential reasons. This difference could have impacted social media usage and loneliness levels. Statuses of “liberals” touring places could have aggravated feelings of isolation and loneliness in those who remained at home always.

The United Nations reported that the pandemic triggered a 25% increase in the prevalence of anxiety and depression worldwide. They cited the underlying reasons as loneliness/social isolation, fear of infection, financial worries and grief over the death of loved ones among other stressors that can result in mental health concerns. Consequently, the UN also called for stepping up investment in the mental health sector to improve the readiness to address these growing concerns. The pandemic resulted in the migration of people; the young adults were being disturbed in their education, career-building, etc. these young adults are at a higher risk of mental health problems, including depression and anxiety (Christine M. Lee et al. 2020).

The pandemic has significantly affected the economic, political and psycho-social aspects. Billions of individuals are being isolated at home; many countries have implemented social distancing to reduce the spread of the virus. The affected are being separated, which leads to chronic loneliness and boredom and affects individuals' physical and mental well-being (Debanjan Banerjee and Mayank Rai, 2020).

A review published in the journal *Neuropsychopharmacology* pointed out how loneliness is also reflected in the brain as abnormal activity in various regions like- the insula, amygdala, hippocampus, and medial and dorsolateral prefrontal cortex. It also suggests that loneliness can be related to the presence of biological markers for Alzheimer's disease in the form of beta-amyloid and tau proteins. In addition, the review says that loneliness can be strongly associated with mortality. This can be interpreted as a psychoneuroimmunology link between loneliness and how it negatively impacts our immune system, predisposing people to diseases and eventually death (Jeffrey A. Lam et al., 2021).

According to the Yellow Social Media Report (2018), 80% of online consumers use social media platforms. In addition, a third of the consumers access social media sites at least five times a day. It is important to note that the report only addresses the Australian population. A large portion of Indian youngsters use social media daily. According to forecasts, social network users significantly increased to 336.18 million in 2021 from 292.43 million in 2020. The researchers said that the number would rise to 370.77 million in 2020 (Nasir et al., 2018). A study indicated that almost 88% of 18 to 29-year-olds use social media to some extent (Smith, 2015; Smith & Anderson, 2018). Understanding the extent to which such usage influences feelings of loneliness, especially in the Indian context, would be valuable to make informed decisions about how much social media can be utilized to improve our mental status without having to experience detrimental effects of the same. In addition,

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surveying the possible reasons people use social media would give us an insight into people's expectations of the same.

METHODOLOGY

Sample: A total of 120 participants were part of the study. An age group of 18 to 27 years should be citizens of India. The Google form was circulated to people across a few places in India. There were a total of 143 potential participants contacted. Out of the 143, 120 passed the inclusion criteria, with 60 males and 60 females recruited to fill out the form. After the exclusion criteria, there was an equal ratio of male and female participants in the study. A convenience sampling method was used that involved circulating the form on social media sites

Instruments

The UCLA Loneliness Scale, initially developed by Russell, Peplau, and Ferguson in 1978, is a 20-item self-report measure designed to assess subjective feelings of loneliness and social isolation. Respondents rate items based on frequency, with options ranging from "I often feel this way" to "I never feel this way." The scale has undergone revisions to mitigate response bias and simplify wording, enhancing reliability and validity. The third version of the scale demonstrates high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values between .89 and .94, and strong test-retest reliability over a one-year period ($r = .73$). Convergent validity is evidenced by significant correlations with other loneliness measures, while relationships with interpersonal adequacy and overall health and well-being support construct validity. Confirmatory factor analyses affirm the scale's robust factor structure, indicating a well-fitting model that includes a global loneliness factor alongside method factors based on item wording direction

Procedure

The study received its ethical approval from the Centre for Research. In this study, we wanted to understand the relationship between social media usage and feelings of loneliness in young adults (aged 18-27 years) from the Indian population. Informed consent was obtained from the participants, and the data was collected through Google Forms. Demographic details of the participants were collected. The UCLA loneliness scale was used to measure the levels of loneliness. A few questions that probed participants' time on social media and the reasons behind the usage were added.

RESULTS

Table No. 1 Average Loneliness levels and Social Media Usage

	Male		Female	
	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation	p-value
Social media	1.803	4.80	2.056	0.05
Loneliness	11.070	29.83	11.328	0.05

Table No. 2 Correlation between Loneliness levels and Social Media Usage

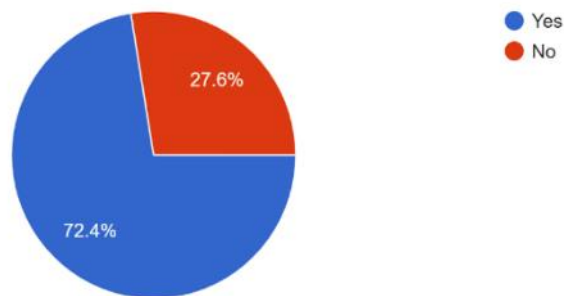
		Social media	Loneliness
Social media	Pearson Correlation	1	.084
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.362
	N	120	120
Loneliness	Pearson Correlation	.084	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.362	
	N	120	120

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Figure 1 Exploring Self-Evaluation of Participants' Social Media Usage

I think the usage of Social Media and Internet serves my purpose of actually using them?

156 responses



Note. As the pie chart indicates, 27.6% of the respondents said that using social media and the internet does not serve their purpose of using the same.

Figure 2 Average Time Spent on the Usage of Social Media and Internet

The average time that I spend on Social Media and Internet is?

156 responses

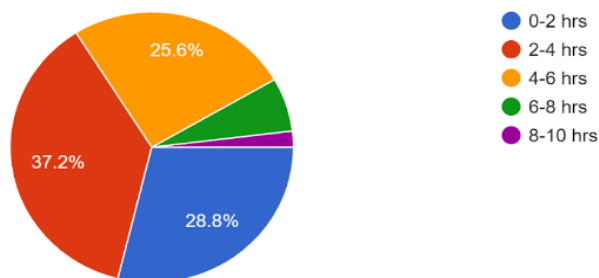
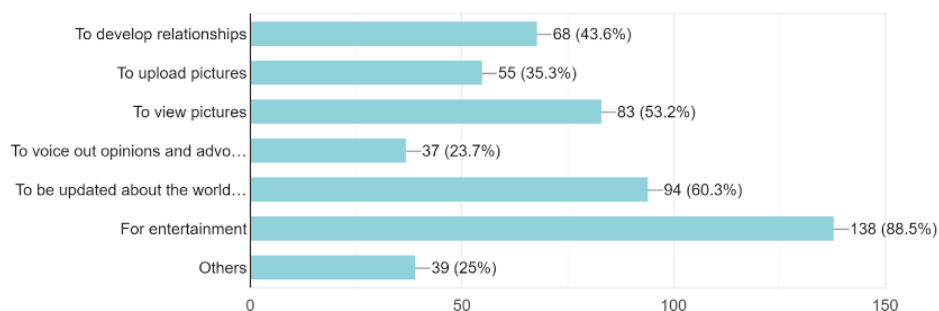


Figure 3 Reasons for Social Media Usage

I use social media (You can choose more than 1 option)

156 responses



When asked about the number of hours of usage of social media and the internet, 37% of the sample reported using them for an average of 2-4 hours, 28% reported using them for 0-2 hours, 25% said that they use them for 4-6 hours, 6.4% reported using them for 6-8 hours, and finally, 1.9% reported using them for 8-10 hours.

The data was collected and analyzed by using the SPSS software. The mean time spent on social media was 4 hours ($SD=1.803$) for males and 4.8 hours ($SD=2.056$) for females, respectively. The mean score on the UCLA loneliness scale was 29.53 ($SD=11.070$) and 29.83 ($SD=11.328$) for males and females, respectively.

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An independent samples t-test was conducted for both variables to check how they varied between males and females. There was a significant difference in social media and internet usage between males and females. The t-test value for social media was 2.265, which is greater than the critical t-value of 1.96, thereby succeeding the criteria for a significant difference between male and female groups. There was no significant difference observed in Loneliness scores between males and females.

Pearson's correlation was employed on the data to check if screen time of social media usage was related to loneliness. The r-value was 0.084, which indicated an insignificant correlation. Another correlation was probed to check if the loneliness levels were higher in participants who said they used social media to develop relationships with higher social media usage. A very weak negative correlation of r-value of -0.119 was observed.

DISCUSSION

The present study aims to examine the impact of social media and the internet on feelings of loneliness in young adults of the Indian population. Multiple studies have consistently indicated that people with deficient psycho-social relations are more likely to use compulsive internet and social media. Studies have also predicted that these compulsive behaviors can further lead to adverse outcomes in core areas of life (work, school, relationships), eventually leading to higher levels of loneliness (Kim, LaRose, & Peng, 2009).

On the contrary, the present study could not establish any significant correlation between the time spent on the Internet and social media usage and loneliness levels in the Indian sample.

A systematic review conducted in 2021 showed that social anxiety and loneliness are associated with problematic social media usage (PMU). It pointed out that loneliness is a risk factor for PMU (O'Day & Heimberg, 2021). Caplan has extensively attempted to conceptualize PMU. Research conducted by Caplan indicates a few essential parameters that define PMU. They include compulsive/ excessive time spent online, deficits in social skills, self-presentation, and other psychosocial problems (Caplan, 2005).

According to the biopsychosocial model, PMU can be defined by symptoms that include mood modification as a result of excessive social media usage, salience or preoccupation with the usage of social media, tolerance and withdrawal symptoms like irritability and anxiety, conflicts as a result of diminished relationships due to excessive social media usage and finally a tendency to relapse after a period of abstinence (Griffiths M, 2005). Thus, multiple factors have to be present to account for PMU and related behaviors. There is still significant ambiguity about the conceptual definitions of PMU.

Nevertheless, the existing approaches indicate that time spent on social media or internet usage is not a mere factor that can singularly account for PMU. Thus, those two variables do not necessarily have to be correlated with each other. Therefore, the study findings are not inconsistent with the established literature.

A separate survey was conducted to understand why people use social media. It includes a total of 156 responses. The respondents are aged within the range of 18-45 years. It also delved into the question of whether or not the usage of social media serves the purpose of using them. The results of the survey are presented below.

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A question aimed at understanding the reasons why they use social media. These reasons can further affect how social media influences the individual. Subjects could choose more than one option. As can be observed in the table, 43.6% of the respondents said they use social media to develop relationships, 35.3% said they use it to upload pictures, 53.2% said they use it to view pictures, 23.7% said they use it for voicing out their opinions and advocate for social issues, 60% said that it is for being updated about the world and political affairs, 88% said they use it for entertainment purposes. Finally, 25% said they use it for other purposes as well.

Addressing the gender differences observed in social media usage, the study confirms previous research that females score higher than males. According to the Yellow Social Media Report (2018), 41% females use social media at least five times a day when only 26% males use social media at the same frequency.

The data collected were analysed using SPSS software. There was no significant correlation between the variables. Significant gender differences in social media usage were observed. Females showed higher levels of usage compared to males. Most respondents reported that their social media usage serves the purpose of using the same. The average social media per day was between 2-4 hours. A maximum number of respondents (88.5%) used social media for entertainment purposes, whereas a minimum number of respondents (23.7%) used social media for voicing opinions and advocating for social issues.

The study aimed to understand the relationship between the level of loneliness and social media usage. The data was collected from a total of 120 students through Google forms. UCLA loneliness scale was used. In addition, participants were asked to self-report on their social media usage. The total raw score for loneliness was calculated for each student. Correlation analysis done through SPSS software indicated no significant correlation between the level of loneliness and levels of social media usage. On the contrary, gender differences in the usage of social media was observed with higher duration for females.

Loneliness levels and their relationship to social media usage can be more clearly determined by understanding an individual's priority or reasons for the usage of the same. The present study shows that the relationship is not merely defined by considering the duration of social media usage. Rather a more complex relationship might potentially exist. Social media usage can be evaluated by also observing once online behavior - the social media feed, likes, comments and connections for instance. The authors urge that further research be conducted to determine complex inter-relationships between these two variables. Obtaining a greater understanding of these complex interrelationships can help devise methods aimed at regulating one's own social media usage. This self-regulation will eventually prevent individuals from being vulnerable to the negative consequences of overuse of social media, like depression and loneliness, in addition to physiological repercussions.

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Conflict of Interest

We, the authors, declared no conflict of interest.

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