

Graham C.L. Davey Ph.D.

Why We Worry

Social Media, Loneliness, and Anxiety in Young People

Is there a role for social media in perpetuating anxiety and loneliness?

Is there a role for social media in perpetuating anxiety through feelings of disconnection and loneliness? At first glance, social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter seem to be a modern means of facilitating our connectedness with others, sharing activities and news, and keeping in touch with friends both old and new. But new technologies are usually a mixture of both good and bad, and modern social media are no different.

First, loneliness appears to have a reciprocal relationship with social anxiety. Social anxiety is an anxiety problem where a person has an excessive and unreasonable fear of social situations. Social anxiety is known to facilitate loneliness; but loneliness also increases social anxiety and feelings of paranoia, and this may represent a cyclical process that is especially active in the young and in our modern times may be mediated by the use of social media

So how might social media be involved? Loneliness in the young is largely a function of perceived friendship networks.

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Effectively, feelings of loneliness increase the fewer friends that an individual has. In the modern day, social media such as Facebook and Twitter are a significant contributor to the friendship networks of young people, so whether you perceive yourself to be a successful user of social media is likely to have an impact on feelings of loneliness, anxiety, paranoia, and mental health generally.

The relatively modern phenomenon of social media and its associated technology adds a new dimension to loneliness and anxiety by offering the young person a way of directly quantifying friendships, viewing the friendship networks of others for comparison, and providing immediate information about social events. You can compare your own popularity with that of your peers, and manage that adolescent 'fear of missing out' (FOMO) by continually monitoring what's going on socially. So it's easy to see how technology use can take the place of more traditional social interaction and provide a yardstick for one's popularity – or more significantly, one's feelings of loneliness and alienation.

There's no shortage of evidence that loneliness, social anxiety and social isolation can cause excessive use of social networking sites in young people. For example, a study of university students in the UK found that real life social interaction was negatively associated with excessive use of Twitter, and loneliness was a significant factor that mediated this relationship

networking sites in general to relieve themselves of their

loneliness.

Social anxiety and the need for social assurance are also associated with problematic use of Facebook to the point where Facebook use can become an addiction

shown to activate the same brain areas as addictive drugs such [2]

, so it's clear that many people use social

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, and has even been

as cocaine

psychological well-being and interferes with performance at school or work, and staying away from Facebook is viewed by users as an act of 'self-sacrifice' or a 'detoxification'. So the vicious cycle is that loneliness and social anxiety generate use of social networking sites, but then problematic addiction to these sites itself causes further forms of anxiety and stress.

For instance, a study of 1,839 college students by Reynol Junco at Lock Haven University in the US found that time spent on Facebook was strongly and significantly negatively related to overall grade point average (GPA), but it was only time spent socializing on Facebook that had this negative relationship with school performance

sharing information was positively predictive of GPA –

suggesting that, like most technologies, Facebook use can

have some good as well as negative impacts. This study

provides no real insight into the direction of cause here: Do

lower grades lead to more Facebook use or does more

Facebook use lead to lower grades (or does something else

influence both at the same time)? However, if Facebook use is

a genuine addiction that the user cannot easily control, it takes

little imagination to see that Facebook use when it has become uncontrollable may be detrimental to academic performance.

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What is your IQ? 30 Multiple

Questions.

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! This addiction poses a threat to physical and

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Secondly, a study of college student Facebook use by Jay

Campisi and colleagues at Regis University in Colorado found

that almost all respondents experienced some form of

Facebook-induced stress and that this stress was directly

associated with physical health problems such as upper

was interesting was that this

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was interesting was that this

stress wasn't a function of how small a respondent's social

network was, but how large it was – the larger the Facebook

network, the greater the stress – so a large network of friends

on social networking sites may also be an added source of

stress to today's young people.

The added stress and anxiety that large cyber social networks

bring has been well illustrated in a study by Julie Morin-Major

ly found that after controlling

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ly found that after controlling

for other relevant factors such as sex, age, time of awakening,

perceived stress and perceived social support, the larger your Facebook network, the greater your diurnal cortisol production. Higher awakening cortisol levels are associated with chronic stress and worry, burnout, and are a vulnerability factor for depression. The authors of this study speculated that the number of Facebook friends you have might be positive up to a point, and offer social reassurance and social support, but after this optimum level is passed, this may switch social support into social pressure and lead to increased stress and higher cortisol levels.

We've already seen that use of social media can affect physical health and college or work performance, but just as with any other forms of addiction, fear of not being able to use or access social networking sites causes added distress – in this case caused by feelings of social exclusion that would result from

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of addiction – for many of us, our social media is often the first thing we check in the morning and the last thing we check before going to sleep! Social media such as Facebook and Twitter provide constant updates which can turn a mere interest in social networks into an unhealthy, stressful compulsion that not only affects stress levels, but leads to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem. As empowering as our modern culture is, it's also dangerous. Young people can talk

readily about their addiction to social media, but how candidly can they talk about the anxieties that it generates?

A study of social isolation in America by Miller McPherson and colleagues found that between 1984 and 2005, the mean number of confidants a person had decreased from 2.94 to 2.08 – a significant drop in what we would call “real friends”

Klinenberg pointed out, it’s the quality of your social interactions, not the quantity, that defines loneliness something that older people are aware of, and life seems to have taught them that a few quality friends are more important than the quantity of connections in your friendship network. Yet although connectedness has fallen significantly over the past 40-50 years, we still have the compelling evolutionary need to connect with other human beings. As John Cacioppo has pointed out “forming connections with pets, or online friends, or even with God, is a noble attempt by an obligatory gregarious creature to satisfy a compelling need,” and this continuing need in the face of creeping social isolation has coincided with the internet providing us with an “army of replacement confidants” – none of whom are confidants in the original meaning of the term.

In this sense, social media such as Facebook have become surrogates for seeking connectedness, and as a consequence our connections grow broader but shallower.

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But our use of

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. This is social media to chase connectedness may merely make us feel more disconnected and lonelier. For example, feelings of disconnectedness are associated with passive interactions with Facebook, such as using it only to update your own activities or merely scanning the activities of friends. If you log on to Facebook every day like more than half of all Facebook users in the world do, and you use it in this passive way, it will merely reinforce your feelings of disconnectedness.

What comes out of these findings about the use of social networking sites is that loneliness and social anxiety do indeed appear to facilitate use of these sites – often to the point of an addiction, when there is an unhealthy desire to spend hours each day checking these sites. However, even with a good sized social network on sites such as Facebook and Twitter, there come added stressors and feelings of disconnectedness, anxieties that can cause physical health problems and negatively affect academic performance in the young. It's fair to say that use of social media by young people is not just a consequence of their social anxieties, but causes additional anxieties and stresses that are all grist for the modern day anxiety epidemic.

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Graham C. L. Davey, Ph.D., is an expert in anxiety and a professor of psychology at the University of Sussex.

In Print: *Psychopathology: Research, Assessment and Treatment in Clinical Psychology (BPS Textbooks in Psychology)*

Online: [Graham Davey's Blog](#)