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Loneliness and Facebook motives in adolescence: A longitudinal inquiry into directionality of effect



Eveline Teppers^{a,*}, Koen Luyckx^a, Theo A. Klimstra^b, Luc Goossens^a

^a Department School Psychology and Child and Adolescent Development, University of Leuven, Belgium

^b Department Developmental Psychology, Tilburg University, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

The increasing popularity of Facebook among adolescents has stimulated research to investigate the relationship between Facebook use and loneliness, which is particularly prevalent in adolescence. The aim of the present study was to improve our understanding of the relationship between Facebook use and loneliness. Specifically, we examined how Facebook motives and two relationship-specific forms of adolescent loneliness are associated longitudinally. Cross-lagged analysis based on data from 256 adolescents (64% girls, $M_{\text{age}} = 15.88$ years) revealed that peer-related loneliness was related over time to using Facebook for social skills compensation, reducing feelings of loneliness, and having interpersonal contact. Facebook use for making new friends reduced peer-related loneliness over time, whereas Facebook use for social skills compensation increased peer-related loneliness over time. Hence, depending on adolescents' Facebook motives, either the displacement or the stimulation hypothesis is supported. Implications and suggestions for future research are discussed.

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Online communication especially on social networking sites such as Facebook has become an integral part of adolescents' lives (Subrahmanyam & Lin, 2007). Given that there are substantial changes in one's social network during adolescence, loneliness is also highly common in this life phase (Goossens, 2006). Previous research has shed light on the linkages between Facebook use and loneliness, but the exact nature of these linkages and the directionality of effect need further investigation. Further, it remains largely unknown whether social skills acquired by using Facebook are integrated in adolescents' social life and influence adolescent loneliness. The present study addresses the longitudinal association between Facebook use and loneliness by focusing on motives for Facebook use and two relationship-specific forms of adolescent loneliness, that is, parent-related and peer-related loneliness.

Loneliness as a surface personality trait

In several personality theories (McAdams & Pals, 2006; McCrae & Costa, 1987), two levels of individual differences in behavioral consistency are distinguished. At the first level, enduring patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that distinguish one person from another, referred to as dispositional characteristics or core personality traits, are situated (Asendorpf & van Aken, 2003). Examples of such core traits are the Big Five (McCrae & Costa, 1987). At the second level,

* Corresponding author. School Psychology and Child and Adolescent Development, University of Leuven, Tiensestraat 102, Box 3717, 3000 Leuven, Belgium. Tel.: +32 16325812.

E-mail addresses: Eveline.Teppers@ppw.kuleuven.be, Eveline.Teppers@gmail.com (E. Teppers).

less stable and more situation-specific and dynamic ways in which people adapt to their roles and environments, referred to as characteristic adaptations or surface personality traits, are distinguished (Asendorpf & van Aken, 2003). Loneliness, an emotionally distressing response to the discrepancy between desired and achieved levels of social relationships (Peplau & Perlman, 1982), can be defined as a surface trait (Asendorpf & van Aken, 2003). Specifically, feelings of social disconnection can change in accord with shifting developmental demands and maturation. Furthermore, within the aforementioned personality theories, surface traits or characteristic adaptations are the product of a dynamic interaction between core traits and environmental influences (McAdams & Pals, 2006; McCrae & Costa, 1987). In line with this assumption, previous research (Teppers et al., 2013) has shown that the core traits of the Big Five show consistent associations with loneliness.

Loneliness and Facebook use in adolescence

Loneliness is particularly relevant to investigate in adolescence (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006). Adolescents have to become independent from their parents and achieve greater intimacy with peers. Therefore, an important developmental task of adolescence is to balance and manage these different relationships (Brown, 2004). Failure in dealing with this task may lead to loneliness, which can take on different forms in the relationships with parents and peers (Goossens et al., 2009). Both parents and peers provide unique forms of support and contribute uniquely to adolescent adjustment (e.g., Collins & Steinberg, 2006). Furthermore, peer-related and family-related loneliness are associated with different forms of psychopathology (Lasgaard, Goossens, Bramsen, Trillingsgaard, & Elklit, 2011). Therefore, the distinction between peer-related and parent-related loneliness is particularly relevant in adolescence.

Furthermore, adolescents' social life takes place offline as well as online. Nowadays, the Internet has a major impact on adolescents' social behavior, social identity, and interpersonal relationships. Facebook, the most widely used social networking site, can help adolescents to stay in contact with friends and family, make new friends, and exchange ideas or opinions. Given that adolescents are concerned with peer acceptance and physical appearance, they are especially receptive to Facebook (Livingstone, 2008).

Previous studies have shown that Facebook use is related to lower levels of loneliness (Lou, 2010) and higher levels of social capital (Steinfeld, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008). Another study showed that Facebook nonusers are more likely to experience social loneliness (i.e., lack of social integration), but less likely to experience family-related loneliness than Facebook users (Ryan & Xenos, 2011). As such, Facebook stimulates social interaction (stimulation hypothesis; e.g., Valkenburg & Peter, 2007) but it may also displace time from establishing more emotionally gratifying relationships (displacement hypothesis; e.g., Kraut et al., 1998). However, these findings can also be interpreted as indicating that adolescents who experience more social loneliness but less family-related loneliness are less motivated to use Facebook (Ryan & Xenos, 2011). Hence, longitudinal research is needed to explore the direction of effects between Facebook use and loneliness.

Contrary to the aforementioned studies, other research found no association between Facebook use and loneliness (Baker & Oswald, 2010). These mixed findings may be explained by the fact that the ability to get social gains from Facebook is affected by the way it is used (e.g., Burke, Marlow, & Lento, 2010). For instance, active communication with Facebook friends was linked to less loneliness, whereas passive consumption (e.g., searching news reported on Facebook) was linked to more loneliness. However, the direction of effect is unclear. For instance, another study found that lonely adolescents have a preference for more passive Facebook features (Ryan & Xenos, 2011). This finding suggests that not all Facebook users are using the site to improve their social capital, unlike what previous research had suggested (Steinfeld et al., 2008). Hence, researchers have proposed that motives for online communication are important to consider when studying psychosocial consequences (Peter, Valkenburg, & Schouten, 2006). Recently, research has acknowledged that adolescents vary in their motives for using Facebook (e.g., Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012). Hence, focusing on motives rather than merely on the frequency of specific behaviors, aids in understanding the relationship between loneliness and online communication.

As lonely adolescents are more likely to experience difficulties in relationships, they turn to online communication as it reduces social boundaries (e.g., greater control over self-presentation). This "social compensation" hypothesis states that the different features of online communication may help lonely adolescents to overcome their shyness and inhibition, resulting in online relationships appearing more attainable (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). This hypothesis has been confirmed as lonely adolescents use online communication to compensate for their weaker social skills (Bonetti, Campbell, & Gilmore, 2010). Similarly, lonely adolescents are also more likely to use online communication for forming rather than maintaining relationships (Bonetti et al., 2010). Additionally, adolescents who are socially anxious use Facebook to pass time and combat loneliness (Sheldon, 2008). However, research is needed to examine whether using Facebook to compensate for offline inhibitions or to diminish loneliness is indeed effective in reducing loneliness. Hence, the present research focuses on different Facebook motives and examines their association with parent-related and peer-related loneliness.

The present study

In contrast to the commonly used cross-sectional designs of previous studies, we used a longitudinal design consisting of two measurement waves to assess the direction of effects. In total, we included seven motives (Peter et al., 2006; Recchiutti, 2003): entertainment (i.e., to have fun and to relax), maintaining relationships (i.e., to interact with people you already know),

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