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# Loneliness and new technologies in a group of Roman adolescents

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## Abstract

This study was carried out on 331 Italian secondary school students (64 females and 267 males; their mean age was 17.25, S.D. = 0.87). The first aim of this study was to explore the relationships among type of class (computer science or not), gender and socio-economic status and frequency and modality of using the computer, Internet and the mobile phone. The second aim was to explore the relationship between the use of Internet and feelings of loneliness. Two instruments were administered: a questionnaire to explore some of the social habits of adolescents and their use of the three technologies considered, and the UCLA Loneliness Scale. The results confirmed that those with a higher socio-economic status use Internet more; the computer is used more by those who frequent a computer science section and by those with a higher socio-economic status. Loneliness emerged in relation to gender (higher in females), but not in relation to socio-economic status. Moreover it emerged at both the univariate and multivariate level in relation to the use of Internet and in negative relation to frequenting an informal peer group. A positive relationship between feelings of loneliness and number of friends who go on-line emerged only at the univariate level. The use of the mobile phone was almost completely independent of the variables examined here.

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*Keywords:* Loneliness; Use of Internet; Use of computer; Use of mobile phone

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## 1. Introduction

Loneliness has been defined (Peplau & Perlman, 1979) as a psychological condition that develops from the perceived discrepancy between the relationships one

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wishes to have in number and quality and those one actually has. During adolescence this feeling can become very important; although it does not necessarily constitute a negative experience, it can become, for someone, a factor impeding healthy development.

Establishing meaningful social relationships or fitting in with a group of peers are basic stages for the healthy development of the adolescent. Success in facing these developmental tasks can induce satisfaction with the control one is able to exercise over his/her own life, while failure can lead to a pervasive feelings of loneliness (Nurmi & Salmela-Aro, 1997). In adolescents and young adults, loneliness has been associated with age and family income. It was found to be higher with increasing age (Ammaniti, Ercolani, & Tambelli, 1989; Brage, Meredith, & Woodward, 1993) and in subjects with medium income compared to subjects with low and high income (Williams, 1983). However, this relationship with socio-economic status did not emerge in other studies (Medora & Woodward, 1986). Regarding gender, in some studies loneliness was higher in females (Medora & Woodward, 1986; Woodward & Frank, 1988) and in others it was higher in males (Schmitt & Kurdek, 1985; Wheeler, Reis, & Nezlek, 1993).

Loneliness has been considered both a multidimensional and a unidimensional construct; this difference may explain the non univocal results of some of its correlates (Schmitt & Kurdek, 1985). As synthesised by Nurmi and Salmela-Aro (1997), deficits in social competence (self-centred behaviour, scarce communicative skills and strategies of avoidance in social situations) and characteristics of the social environment (low social integration, few social activities, a limited number of close friends who provide emotional support and reduced density of the social network) are related to feelings of loneliness.

The relationship between loneliness and the broader social context in which adolescents must face their developmental tasks has also been underlined: a high sense of belonging to one's own neighbourhood, for example, corresponds on average with less intense feelings of loneliness (Pretty, Andrewes, & Collet, 1994; Pretty, Conroy, Dugay, Fowler, & Williams, 1996).

Recently, some studies explored the relationship between loneliness and a high use of Internet. Although from one point of view being able to use Internet offers professional opportunities and employment possibilities (Moharan Martin, 1998), from a social point of view it can involve risks.

Kraut et al. (1998) defined Internet as a paradox: although it allows communication, and is therefore a social technology, it can also cause a decrease in social activities through a "displacement of social activities" and a "displacement of strong ties"; people tend to dedicate time to virtual social activities, taking it away from real social activities.

Thus, a "privatisation" of amusement is produced resulting in social isolation. Also, virtual ties are weaker than real ones because of the type of communication that characterises them (Wallace, 1999). For example, it is probably more difficult to provide practical support through exclusively virtual means.

From some research conducted on adolescents and young adults, it emerged that greater use of Internet is associated with greater emotional loneliness (Moody,

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