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Smartphone-mediated communication vs. face-to-face interaction: Two routes to social support and problematic use of smartphone

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ABSTRACT

The present study examines two possible routes lonely people can take to alleviate their loneliness: One route via escape motivation and smartphone-mediated communication vs. another route via relationship motivation and face-to-face interaction. Two hypothesized path models were tested with a total of 930 U.S. American participants who were nationally recruited through a professional survey company. Those with a high level of loneliness tend to rely more on smartphone-mediated communication, while being reluctant to engage in face-to-face interaction. Such combination of the two increases the possibility of developing problematic use of smartphone but decreases perceived social support from their social networks. Furthermore, a multi-group analysis suggested that young adults of age 31–40 would develop problematic use of smartphone more than adolescents of age 13–18.

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“All men’s misfortunes spring from their hatred of being alone.”

Jean de la Bruyère

1. Introduction

Loneliness has become a silent plague that is hurting people. This trend seems to become prevalent across the globe: 40% of U.S. Americans report that they are lonely, a figure that has doubled in 30 years (Renzetti, 2014). An interesting twist of loneliness statistics is that young adults are getting lonelier than the elderly: In the U.S., it turned out that 61% of 18–34-year olds, 47% of 35–64-year olds, and 33% of those aged 65 and above perceived loneliness as a serious problem (Dykstra, 2009). A group of surveys from Western countries such as UK (Mental Health Foundation, 2010) and New Zealand (The Quality of Life Survey, 2010) also supported that people felt less lonely as they age (e.g., nearly 60% of young adults aged between 18 and 34 felt lonely often or sometimes compared to 35% of the elderly aged over 55 at UK).

One of the reasons for the increase of loneliness is that more people are living alone than ever before, and mediated

communication channels such as texts and social media made it easier to avoid forming substantive relationships that require face-to-face (FtF) encounters, time and efforts (Worland, 2015). A group of studies points out potential harm caused by relying on media in building social networks (e.g., Jin & Park, 2013; Kraut et al., 1998; Yao & Zhong, 2014), suggesting that mediated or online relationships cannot be replacement for FtF interactions.

Considering the increase of loneliness and people’s reliance on mediated communication to relieve their loneliness, the current study compares two possible routes people would take to cope with loneliness—one route via smartphone-mediated communication (SMC) and another route via FtF interaction. Indeed, smartphone has become the most popular and accessible medium for diverse functions, and world is rapidly getting wired with smartphones: Surpassing 1.64 billion smartphone users at the end of 2014, it is expected that there will be over 2 billion smartphone users across the globe by 2016 (eMarketer, 2014). Within the US, where the present study’s data was collected, smartphone users are more than 190.5 million in 2015 (Statista, 2015). This study investigates whether those two routes enable lonely people to alleviate their loneliness by increasing perception of social support (positive outcome) or rather make them end up developing unhealthy smartphone use (negative outcome). Furthermore, based on the previous reports that young adults suffer from loneliness and that adolescents might be exposed to a great danger of

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developing problematic use of smartphone (Kwon, Kim, Cho, & Yang, 2013), the present study examines if age moderates any of the path in the two routes to cope with loneliness.

In the following, the present study discusses previous studies and theories relevant to loneliness and its association with smartphone-mediated communication, FtF interaction, perceived social support and problematic smartphone use, followed by method, results, and discussion of the findings and limitations of the study.

2. Literature review

2.1. Coping with loneliness: smartphone-mediated communication (SMC) vs. face-to-face (FtF) interaction

Loneliness is defined as perception of deficiency when one feels that his/her relationship networks are smaller (quantity) or less satisfying (quality) than one desires (Peplau, Russell, & Heim, 1979, p. 55). Going beyond just feeling lonely, individuals with a high level of loneliness are known to be lacking in communication skills (Jones, 1982), which leads to deficits in social interaction. Those who are lonely and socially anxious have doubts about their capacities to create favorable impressions to others and rather try to avoid disapproval of others than to win approval (Arkin, Lake, & Baumgardner, 1986; Jackson & Ebnnet, 2006). Feeling incompetent in interacting with others, lonely people tend to avoid social interaction and prefer spending time alone (Spitzberg & Canary, 1985). Thus, the lonely tends to perceive FtF interaction riskier than those with a healthy psychological composite, because FtF interaction is usually synchronous and allows little opportunity to modify what individuals say, which induces anxiety especially for those who feel less confident in their social skills (Kim, LaRose, & Peng, 2009).

In that sense, mediated communication such as texting or social network sites (SNS) is attractive to lonely people when they try to find less intimidating ways to interact with others compared to FtF interaction in gratifying their desire to be connected with others (Bian & Leung, 2014; Townsend, 2000). Because of its greater anonymity and asynchronous features, lonely individuals have higher preference for mediated interaction (Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2000) believing that they would suffer less from a failure in it. This proposition is supported by Caplan's social skill account of problematic Internet use (Caplan, 2005), indicating that individuals who have deficient self-presentation skills would prefer mediated communication to FtF interaction. In addition to such theoretical prediction, today's social media users spend more time on SNS and Internet browsing via mobile phones than via personal computers in ten countries including US and Japan (CNET, 2012; Sterling, 2015). With both theoretical and practical rationale, we predict that individuals with a high level of loneliness would rely on SMC such as texting or social media (H1a), while they feel reluctant to engage in FtF interaction (H1b).

2.2. Two motivations in coping with loneliness

Based on the proposition that lonely people would prefer relying on SMC (i.e., texting and SNS) to FtF interaction, this study suggests and compares two routes lonely people can take when they are trying to cope with loneliness: One path aims to temporarily distract themselves from their loneliness by engaging in SMC, and the other path aims to tackle loneliness by spending time with others FtF. These two routes can be linked to two different motivations to cope with loneliness: Escape motivation and relationship motivation. According to uses and gratification theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974), these two motivations are parts of

motivations for media use along with entertainment, information seeking, and passing time (Charney & Greenberg, 2002; Ferguson & Perse, 2000; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). Escape motivation is a motivation to get away from the current negative emotional state one is facing, but this motivation would not stimulate one to actively find ways to resolve the source of the problem (loneliness). On the other hand, relationship motivation is a motivation to fight loneliness by improving or strengthening relationships with others. Thus, we predict that individuals with a high level of loneliness will be motivated to either escape from loneliness (H2a) or strengthen relationship with others (H2b) as a way to relieve their loneliness.

Given that escape motivation is based on people's desire to distract themselves, even temporarily, away from their loneliness, it is natural that they would look for something that can help them forget about their negative emotional state. As shown in many research based on uses and gratification theory, media, such as TV or Internet, have been major and most accessible sources for distracting people from their distress (Rubin, 1983; Ye, 2005). Smartphone is a device that is full of features that can occupy one's attention, and he/she would engage in one or multiple features on smartphone when he/she is motivated to find ways to easily escape from negative emotional state—loneliness. Among multiple features and functions of smartphone, the current study focuses on SMC, especially texting and SNS—the two most popular features that are mainly used for mediated communication with others.

Compared to interacting with others through smartphone, meeting up and spending time with others FtF takes more effort and energy. FtF interaction, as a type of interaction which is full of social and emotional cues (e.g., facial expressions, gestures) and does not allow much time for people to refine what they say or how they act (Walther, 1996), can be risky and challenging for some people who are not that socially confident or who do not have a high level of self-esteem (Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2000). In that sense, it would take a bit more active and willful motivation to have FtF interaction with others than the motivation to escape from the current negative emotional state. Individuals who prefer FtF interaction are willing to take a risk or chance of rejection or social embarrassment, because they are aware of the fact that benefits of FtF interaction can be big. That is, those who choose FtF interaction would be driven by a stronger self-enhancement motivation (Joinson, 2004) than a mere desire to escape from loneliness. Thus, we predict that escape motivation would be likely to lead people to easily accessible and convenient means (i.e., SMC) to connect with others, while it would be less likely to lead people to a more effortful way to confront loneliness—FtF interaction (H3). Meanwhile, relationship motivation would be likely to lead people to rely on FtF interaction, but not much to SMC (H4).

2.3. Two different ends: perceived social support vs. problematic use of smartphone

Given that escape motivation as well as relationship motivation routes are meant to alleviate loneliness, people with a high level of loneliness would hope to experience a positive outcome after taking one of these two routes. However, the present study proposes that there might be two possible outcomes at the end of these two routes: Amplified perception of social support and problematic use of smartphone.

2.3.1. Perceived social support

Since loneliness refers to one's perceived deficiency in both quantity and quality of his/her relationship networks, heightened perception of social support from one's social networks would decrease one's loneliness. Social support refers to either support received (e.g., instrumental or emotional) or sources of the support

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