Making Sense of The Lonely Crowd, Today: Youth, Emotions and Loneliness in a Networked Society

# Details

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## Sample

Data were collected from a representative sample of young people, studying in secondary schools in Évora, a city in the south of Portugal. A sample of 33 classes, which corresponded to 761 young people from the secondary schools’ population, was drawn by a multistage stratified random sampling method. The sample size was obtained from a random sample formula, for a sample error below 3.5%, at a confidence level of 95%, for estimations of 30% corrected by a design effect of 1.5.

# Abstract

The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character (Riesman et al. 1950) was a landmark in the twentieth mid-century social science and cultural criticism (McLaughlin 2001). While it led the yet almost unknown sociologist David Riesman (1909–2002) to the cover of Time magazine in 1954, the book asserted itself as a critical and attentive look at a changing society. Increasingly away from a society based on production and characterized by a “tradition-directed” culture, Riesman’s Lonely Crowd unveiled the individuals’ character composing that new society, fundamentally shaped by the market orientation of a consumer and media culture, and thus “other-directed”. In the period of post-World War II, a context of strong industrialization and automation, Riesman explained how and why the other-directed character was beginning to flourish among middle-class individuals. This chapter attempts to make use of such a broad and inspiring theoretical background to unveil the senses of the lonely crowd, today, specifically as far as the youngest generation is concerned. Particularly looking at iGen, Generation Z or centennials, as often referred to (Twenge 2017), the following discussion takes as its basic assumption the existence of a networked society as a constitutive feature of such a generation, yet only seemingly irrelevant in the everyday experiences of individuals.

# Outcome

Immediate conclusions can be aggregated in the idea of “joining the crowd”, as something inevitable and pervasive among students. About the way they spend their free time, "young people in the sample declare they join the online crowd. Results show that almost all students use social networks, and more than a quarter of young people report spending, on average, more than four hours a day in a social network. The overwhelming majority of students attend these spaces for 'spending time', and almost all students are satisfied or very satisfied with their lives" (Costa, R.; Infante, P.; Afonso, A.; Jacinto, G., 2019: 174).
A set of partial results can be joined together under the title of “avoiding the crowd”. There is a significant difference in the degree of satisfaction with life among the students who refer that in their free time, they like very much being alone, and those who refer that do not like, or like a bit to be alone in their free time. Actually, students who like very much being alone are the less satisfied with life.
Data also point to the degree in which some students engage the crowd. This is different from simply joining it, as it means a deeper sense of belonging and interacting with the online crowd. A significant association was found between how much students like to spend their free time being alone and their interest in politics.
The profile that maximizes the probability of a student staying more than four hours a day in social networks highlights the student who tends to be sedentary (do not like to practice physical activity), or at least somehow accommodated (do not want to be independent).
"They are also students who do not like to read, nor to do cultural programs with the family. At the same time, those students are active in the sense they’ve boycotted certain products recently, so they cannot be considered as completely aside and disinterested in the world around" (Costa, R.; Infante, P.; Afonso, A.; Jacinto, G., 2019: 175).