Active public Facebook use and adolescents' feelings of loneliness: Evidence for a curvilinear relationship

# Details

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## Sample

In total, 1188 students from fifteen high schools in Belgium with a mean age of 14.30 participated at both time points.

# Abstract

Inconsistent results have been reported concerning the relationships between SNS usage and
loneliness. The current two-wave panel study with a one year interval examined the possibility of
reciprocal and curvilinear relationships between active public Facebook use and adolescents'
social/emotional loneliness. Belgian adolescents from fifteen high schools participated
(N = 1188, 55% male). The results showed a U-shaped relationship between (1) active Facebook
use and social/emotional loneliness and (2) emotional loneliness and active Facebook use.
Specifically, active Facebook use predicted decreased social/emotional loneliness among low to
moderate users, while among heavy users, increased levels of social/emotional loneliness were
predicted by active Facebook use. Emotional loneliness predicted higher active Facebook use
among lonely adolescents. At the same time, emotional loneliness predicted decreased active
Facebook use among adolescents who did not feel lonely. These findings stress to consider different types of loneliness, and reciprocal and curvilinear relationships in future social media
research.

# Outcome

"We found that the relationships between active public Facebook use at Time 1 and social and emotional loneliness at Time 2 followed U-shaped curves. Active public Facebook use are related to decreases in feelings of emotional and social loneliness over time under the condition that adolescents have rather low to moderate levels of active public Facebook use. In this case, social media use helps adolescents to reduce their feelings of loneliness. However, for heavy active Facebook users, the more adolescents used Facebook to update their status or the post photos or videos, the more time online displaces the time they would otherwise spend with their friends in an offline setting, the more they experienced a lack of intimate ties and missed a rich network of social relationships. Another reason for the increased loneliness among heavy Facebook users is that they have highest tendencies to engage in upward social comparison processes on Facebook.
Regarding social loneliness, it seems that feelings of lacking a social network drive adolescents to use Facebook more actively, assuming that media are selected to satisfy certain needs such as the need to have (many) friends. However, when experiencing low levels of emotional loneliness, active Facebook use was not increased over time, on the contrary, it was decreased. It thus seems that a certain threshold of emotional loneliness has to be reached before adolescents turn to active Facebook use to cope with their feelings of missing an intimate tie. Among adolescents with low levels of emotional loneliness, increases in their feelings of missing a social network related to lower levels of active Facebook use. They may turn more to other strategies to cope with their feelings of loneliness, such as offline meetings with friends or investing in new social activities (e.g., enrolling in a youth movement) and thus build new social networks." (Wang et al., 2018, p. 42)