

VIRTUAL COMMUNICATION, SOCIAL SUPPORT AND LONELINESS IN ADOLESCENTS

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Abstract: Increased propensity to use virtual communication in adolescents raises questions about the benefits and costs of this behavior. Present study aims to relate the feelings of loneliness that teenagers encounter and the Facebook personal network size, in parallel with the consistence of actual social support network reported. The survey is conducted on a sample of 147 subjects, students at humanistic and scientific specializations profiles, evaluated using the UCLA loneliness scale, version 3, and as a means of statistical processing of information they are used one -way analysis of variance and correlation. The results indicate a significant increase in the intensity of loneliness in adolescents and high tendency of compensatory way of facebook utilization instead of using real communication. The results are reported at the results of recent studies on this topic and the paper take into account future directions of study.

Keywords: loneliness, social support, virtual communication

Human nature is essentially social, most of our lives take place within social groups of varying sizes, which allow our basal biological survival, the perpetuation of the species, and the assurance of a human specificity of life by increasing the level of safety, offering social roles and standards for their realization, opportunities for personality development, etc, all of which have become an important source of building their own identity (Baumeister, Bushman 2008). Concretely, social needs include attachment, integration, reassurance of self-worth, alliance of trust, coordination, etc. In fact, each level of Maslow's pyramid involves the presence of the other (Maslow, 2007)

Reality shows that not all people have a proper level of social integration, different degrees of social inclusion affect to a varying extent the achievement of these goals and thus influence the quality of our lives. In this logic, it is not surprising that social integration becomes a priority objective of our lives at any age. The temporary or permanent failure of social integration, is generic termed lonely, and the loneliness degrees lie on a very wide range of nuances. We might think that, objectively, loneliness could be only a diminution of the social network. In fact, the loneliness phenomenon is much more complex, with a high dose of subjectivity, in which the diminishing of the social network is just a variable, not necessarily the most important. There are many cases where, despite a very good social connectivity, the person feels alone and vice versa, in which a diminished social support is well tolerated, without

inducing loneliness. Loneliness is therefore a problem of the perception of social isolation, to distinguish it from the objective social isolation.

Not only the quantity but also the quality of social exchanges between social networking partners influence the degree of loneliness experienced by a person. For example, it is proven that self-disclosure, a strong indicator of interpersonal relationships, is negatively correlated with loneliness, and in the context of negative social relationships, students who are rejected have an increased level of loneliness (Zhang et al., 2015). Taken together, the two coordinates interfere: a small amount of social relationships can be offset by intense relationships and exchanges, without the feeling of loneliness. While the superficiality of numerous relationships is not able to be protective for loneliness.

There are two major theories involved in explaining loneliness, one on the social needs theory for which loneliness is due to the lack of social contact needs or the existence of unsatisfactory social contacts and a cognitive theory in which loneliness is due to the unsatisfactory perception of social relations, in other words the cognitive awareness of quantity or the quality deficiency of social relationships that leads to discomfort and loneliness.

The needs felt by each person are subjective in their turn, therefore loneliness is thought to be generated by a "perceived discrepancy between the current level and the desired level of social relations." (Luhmanna, 2016). Perceiving social isolation is also a matter of interpretation. The cognitive discrepancy between the desired level of social experience and its real level anticipates sadness and social pain and a state of dissatisfaction with the social state, which emphasizes the feeling of social isolation, regardless of the number of relationships, the quality of these relationships or the frequency of contacts. Social experiences that are inconsistent with social expectations give rise to the perception of a social deficit that precipitates social pain labeled as loneliness (Laursen et al., 2013).

The effect of the cognitive assessment of the discrepancy between the desired need and the satisfied one generate emotions linked and labeled as loneliness: sadness, distress of isolation, pain similar to physical pain, etc. In emotional terms, loneliness is characterized as a negative social emotion, with a state of distress that originates in being isolated and from the judgment of an inappropriate social relationship, a difficulty in reaching a desired level of intimacy, of attachment with others, associated with a level of stress perception given by the separation from attachment objects, and positively correlated with perceiving the non-attainment of the desired level of intimacy and social relation (Satici et al., 2016). The subjectivity of loneliness is amplified by the fact that it is by definition an inner mood, which is characterized as any inner state in terms of feelings and thoughts that are less observable in comparison to other emotional states.

Loneliness involves dissatisfaction with the level and quality of social relationships, more than the lack of people. Loneliness seems to be the most significant predictor of psychological distress, and is positively correlated with depressive mood, poor functioning of health, avoidance attachment and anxiety, low self-esteem, neuroticism, social anxiety, and shyness. It is negatively correlated with adaptive constructs such as self-esteem and resilience, self-sufficiency, life satisfaction, and well-being (Satici, 2016). Loneliness is a complex construct attached to a configuration of traits, some of which are stable in terms of disposition, the core of personality (the features of the Big Five model - introversion, neuroticism, low level of contentedness), other more unstable, which predispose them to social exclusion and rejection: aggressiveness and destructiveness are important sources of rejection, an insecure attachment pattern forms an internal model of work that makes it difficult to establish proximity

relationships with others and induce alienation. Shyness is also a predisposing factor for social isolation and loneliness.

People are different in terms of their reaction to social isolation. Social isolation emphasizes the feeling of loneliness for those who interpret it as a limit of one's own, especially if this limit is seen as innate and immutable. Two other coordinates enhance the feeling of loneliness in this case: the attributions made by the person / internal locus of control seem to emphasize the feeling of loneliness. . The feeling of one's own value, a low self-esteem, emphasizes the internal attributions made and leads to a learning of helplessness over loneliness. People with a high self-esteem provide situational explanations for faulty in social integration, and are more motivated to face loneliness (when it is considered a temporary social condition). Self-confidence does not protect too much of loneliness, as we tend to believe that loneliness can be remedied. People with high self-esteem interpret neutral social isolation; In the absence of social pain or the perceiving of threats, isolation is perceived as a period of respite and reflection necessary to improve attitude towards oneself. Instead, low self-esteem interprets social isolation as a confirmation of their social undesirability and rejection by the group (Zhao et al., 2013). The sensitivity to rejection exacerbates this situation, to which is added the self-perceiving of a low level of social competence.

There are gender differences in relation to the specificity of interpersonal relationships and thus to the perception of loneliness: girls prefer diadic relationships, valued intimacy and self-disclosure and emotional support, while boys prefer developing relationships with larger groups involving the company and collective activities , So boys use group-centered criteria while girls tend to assess loneliness according to the quality of diadicating relationships. There are also gender-specific features of social support: girls look for social support more easily and gain much more emotional support than boys (Zhang et al, 2015)

Loneliness also has cultural valences. Most studies on loneliness have been done on the European and American spaces that valorizes individuality, autonomy and the private sphere. The Asian countries are oriented towards the collectivist cultures that value the proximity, the group relations and the cohesion. Individualist cultures are associated with loneliness. Multinational studies do not indicate significant differences between loneliness rates among people in different cultures, but the study of patterns of social relationships, including loneliness, is different between these cultures. For example, shyness is seen as a defamatory trait in Western states, and indeed shyness is associated with loneliness in Canada but not in China. This suggests that the nature of loneliness is different and influenced by the characteristic of the socio-cultural context in which we have formed and we live.

Loneliness is a dynamic reality whose configuration changes from one evolutionary stage to another, sometimes in normative coordinates, which are related to the general development rhythm over which the individual co-ordinates overlap, specific from one individual to another. As well as normative amplifications of loneliness predisposition, the age of adolescence and the third age is recorded: the loneliness trajectories go with the appearance of a peak in early adolescence followed by a depression during late adolescence and adulthood followed by an increase in old ages, this is when examining the average of scores (Qualter et al., 2013). A more detailed analysis indicates that loneliness may be a transient stage in people's lives, and a detail that must be taken into account is that stable loneliness seems to have other predictors of vulnerability compared to passing loneliness.

For the adolescence period, the vulnerabilities are related to other developmental norms - autonomy and individualization, identity exploration, cognitive maturity, etc. Larson (1999)

observes a greater cultural and social demand during adolescence (individuality, need for autonomy, need to identify with congeners rather than parents) are changes that induce changes in the level of loneliness (Ladd et al. 2013) In addition to many other changes in teenager the social universe of the person changes very quickly, modifying the content and frequency of social interactions and the identity of reference groups; with these changes occur different expectations of the subjects and their perceptions of isolation and loneliness. An example of this is that old teenagers perceive lack of a company on saturday and sunday evening as an extreme loneliness, much higher than the same lack of companion from other days of the week, and distinct from the perception of young teenagers who do not perceive the week end alone as a very loneliness.

Five categories of change occurred in adolescence are identified that would affect vulnerability to loneliness, the formation of social experiences and their perception (Laursen et al., 2013):

- a first change involves with whom teens spend time and how to spend their free time
- the second change is related to the process of individualisation and the increase of autonomy
- the third change involves exploring your own identity
- The fourth change is related to increasing cognitive maturity and social perspectives
- Fifth is related to physiological changes due to maturation

Each of these transformations are extremely complex and leaves space for negative repercussions of isolation or perhaps only the subjective perception of loneliness. Studies conducted over an extended period are still uncertain: some advocate a normative increase in loneliness towards adolescence, with a peak in adolescence, while others show that a normative tip of social loneliness is not based on adolescence but rather on childhood. These contradictions are due to the very general nature of studies that do not take into account specific types of loneliness. Here is another specificity of adolescent dynamics: one of the teen development tasks is to gain autonomy towards parents and to establish intimate relationships with peers, and then to manage these relationships. The failure of these relationships leads to the feeling of loneliness. Each of the two parts, and parents and peers can play a different role from supporting and adjusting adolescents. The two types of relationship, with peer group and with the parents generate different types of loneliness and consequently different psychopathologies. The distinction between the two forms of loneliness is specific to adolescence. When considering only the loneliness associated with the similarity group, the loneliness level decreases towards adolescence, these tendencies persist for variables such as gender, race, family income.

There are also individual variations of loneliness over time. Specialized studies try to determine to what extent there is the possibility that a level of loneliness attained at one point can be changed, and so what are the possible patterns of evolution of individual loneliness. The number of these evolution paths is variable, depending on the longitudinal studies performed. For adolescents Harris et al. (2013) indicates three possible paths:

- constantly low
- initially low but with a growing trend
- Iniciously elevated rates.

Ladd et al (2013) adds a pattern, of those with a constantly increased level of loneliness attached to chronic loneliness. In principle, it is considered that a low level of loneliness is a prerequisite for good adaptation: those who begin their adolescence with a moderate level of loneliness or without having high rates of loneliness towards adolescence are unlikely to become lonely by the end of adolescence.

The consequences of loneliness - social isolation are not always seen as a deficit or as an unfulfilled desire so that some people enjoy loneliness and do not bind it to a negative emotional state, being rather used as an opportunity for restoring energy reserves, creativity, etc. (Laursen, 2013).

In situations where isolation is undesirable, it affects cognitive and emotional functioning, the social one, and causes alterations in the pattern of general evolution of the subject. Outwardly observable elements for loneliness are emotional manifestations of sadness, social withdrawal, or social hostility. These are also manifestations of other inner states such as depression, anxiety, or features of neuroticism or a low level of tolerance, so they are imperfect indicators of loneliness (Luhmanna, 2016). A high level of loneliness alters the quality of life and causes long-term disorder; it is associated with low self-esteem, increased levels of anxiety and social avoidance, low school performance and the risk of school dropout, delinquency and many mental and physical problems. Children's loneliness is a good predictor of depression in teens. (Zhang et al., 2014)

From an evolutionary perspective, loneliness is adaptive because it signals a disruption of its own social connectivity and motivates people to reconnect to others. However, loneliness can have undesirable and non-adaptive consequences that lead people to behave in ways that do not diminish but deepen feelings of loneliness. Very lonely people have a high level of mistrust over others, perceive social interactions and social stimuli as threatening, and in front of them they activate the defensive mechanisms and isolate themselves even more. Longitudinal studies of loneliness indicate a cognitive decline, reduced intellectual performance even the thought of loneliness deteriorate the sleep quality and induced depressive symptoms. These cognitive and behavioral components of loneliness lead to the chronicle of loneliness and entry into a vicious circle. Chronic loneliness has negative effects on mental and mental health and on longevity. Preventing loneliness requires intervention before installing the vicious circle.

Loneliness is associated with poor health, sleep problems and diurnal activity, high blood pressure, teenage loneliness is associated with a poor perception of health, an increase in psychosomatic symptoms of distress such as headache and loss appetite. Long-term disturbances of sleep modify endocrine, immune function, increase the risk for chronic diseases of aging: diabetes, obesity, blood pressure. Chronic loneliness correlates with depressive feelings of adolescents and adults (2013, R. Harris)

For adolescents, especially those at the beginning of a new educational cycle (entry into high school, or the beginning of university studies) with age specific demands, in a culture that emphasizes individuality, solving the loneliness problem requires the activation for increasing communication resources upgraded to modern demands. The social life of adolescents occurs both online and offline, nowadays the internet has a strong impact on social behavior, social identity, and adolescent relationships. Facebook being the most popular social networking site, keeps them in touch with friends, family, creates new friendships and exchanges with others. As adolescents are concerned about social acceptance and physical appearance, communication on Facebook becomes very important.

Among the needs that Facebook has to meet are: social curiosity (that leads people to pursue the profile of others), maintaining contact with others, and building a social capital (user students feel more integrated in university colleges and less alone), those related to entertainment and leisure, satisfy the need for belonging.

Facebook meets contradictory needs - maintaining the private sphere with sharing of information and self-representation. The private sphere involves temporary withdrawal from the

social field; the need for private space is a human need that gives individuality, identity and autonomy. In recent years, the need for private acquires new aspects, Facebook providing some privacy through restricted access policies for certain people in the circle of friends - especially for young users who have greater abilities to control private space. The need for self-expression and self-presentation, for the presentation of hobbies is an activity that seeks to change the image that we impose in front of others, to change the way we are seen, trying to impose a desirable image. Virtual, we can delete those parts of our own image that lead to social disapproval, this behavior being gender-driven, women are looking to compare with the others while men are looking for sources of new friends (Błachnio et al., 2016)

Here are some contradictory outcomes of the social networking effect of adolescent social functioning: In many cases, it is considered that loneliness in relationships with the group of peers is correlated with the use of Facebook as a way for compensating the lack of social skills, reducing oneliness feelings and as social contact supplement. Using Facebook as a source of friends reduces in time the level of loneliness within the group of friends, but using Facebook as compensation for lack of social communication skills increases in time the level of loneliness in the group of peers. Consequently, the effect of using Facebook depends on the students' motivation. It is also unclear whether the social skills acquired through the use of facebook are integrated into the pupils' social life and whether they influence the level of loneliness.

Another controversial issue in social networking is that Facebook is abusing the time and willingness to build more gratifying real social relationships. The social benefits of using Facebook depend to a large extent on how it is used. For example, active communication (postings, updates) with friends is correlated with a lower level of loneliness, while passive consumption (the passive search for information - watching postings, photos posted by others) is correlated with a higher level of loneliness. Lone individuals tend to reveal rather emotional information or personal information, while sociable people tend to use facebook as the source of information.

The relationship loneliness - using of social networks is bidirectional: individuals with a high level of loneliness tend to use internet networks because it allows them to share ideas, others prefer to share ideas only with those with the same position; the utility is to access social, professional, leisure, etc. information services. Frequency of using the internet depends on the level of loneliness (Lee, Kyiun, 2015). The effect is the opposite - people alone tend to use Facebook rather than Facebook creating lonely people.

Psychological, social and academic adaptation to the university environment, especially in the early years, has very strong effects on academic performance. It is known that in the first years of study the level of loneliness of students is higher and this interferes with academic performance. Connecting with people at a distance has a double effect - on the one hand, it can amplify the feeling of loneliness by making distance relationships much stronger by underlining offline relationships, or can diminish feelings of loneliness by strengthening social support. In the positive example, network influences on performance are positive, allowing subjects to find people who share their ideas, and find information from congeners about courses, study strategies, and so on; may diminish the feeling of loneliness by providing social support and social capital. Negative results may occur through excessive engagement with ex-colleagues and withdrawal from offline social interactions or by supporting superficial online relationships to the detriment of the closest.

Factors that can influence loneliness are: low levels of direct communication, the number of Facebook friends, active content consumption; however, the variables related to Facebook

matter too little in the loneliness variances as compared to self-esteem, life satisfaction; In other words, the most significant generators of loneliness are the psychological factors of well-being. A major risk of using the internet is the compulsive use - it is rather a mental state than a directly observable behavior, it's diagnostic indicators being: unsuccessful attempts to control, perceiving loss of control, attempt to hide the use that are pathologically correlated with loneliness (Wohn, LaRose, 2014)

The present study aims to analyze the level of loneliness of students in 1st year, the first semester, correlated with the extent of the Facebook network extension (the number of existing network friends) and the extent of offline social network (the number of people with who have met in the last semester - as an order of magnitude). The study is intended to make nuances based on gender and specialization (humanist, real or polytechnic) for which students have opted. As a measure of loneliness, the UCLA scale of loneliness was used (after Louis, 2014). The study group consisted of 147 subjects, students of the first year of these specializations. As statistical methods of data processing we used the correlation and the analysis of the uni-factorial variance. The results obtained are the following:

As regards loneliness of students in 1st year, the results indicate a very high increase in the intensity of this feeling. The results will be presented in graph 1

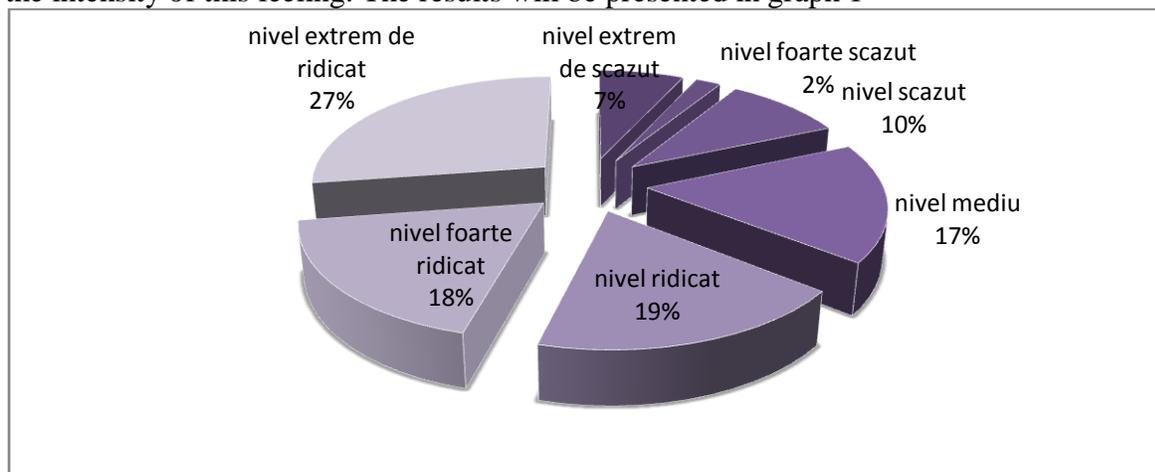


Figure 1. Distribution of loneliness level in first year students, first semester

As can be seen from Figure 1, the level of loneliness experienced by students at the beginning of university studies is extremely high, more than half of them (64%) registering very high rates, over the 70th percentile (equivalent to asserting that 70% of the population is registered Lower odds at loneliness), of which 27% have even high odds (over 85th percentile).

The media of loneliness is in the 65th percentile. We could speculate, being the first semester of university experience, an acute loneliness feeling given by the adaptation to the new context and not by a high level of loneliness as a stable personality trait. This conclusion is reinforced by the relative uniformity of solitude for the two genres ($F = 0,265$; $p = 0,748$), but also to the non-differentiators between the level of loneliness of students for different specializations ($F = 0,912$; $p = 0,404$). It seems that adapting to new conditions is an universal one that erases potential differences between categories, thus speaking about a functional, normative loneliness for this life event.

The analysis of Facebook's size indicates that network expansion ranges from very low limits (45 people) to 4700. As a distribution, 31.6% of subjects have less than 500 members, 27% have less than 1000, 8.8% have Between 1,000 and 1,500, 7,5% up to 2000, as many as

2500 and up to 3000 members and 8,8% have over 3000 members. Only one case has been registered that does not access the Facebook network. Neither in this context it was not a statistically significant difference between the number of network members depending on gender and the specialty followed ($p > 0, 200$).

The results obtained by correlating the number of Facebook members with the level of loneliness felt are not significant ($r = 0.060$, $p = 0.597$)

A similar analysis was carried out on the number of offline contacts (the question "how many people have you met in the last semester - the size of the order). Their number varied within a much lower limit, half compared with the virtual network. As a distribution, most 71.3% have under 100 people with direct offline communication, 27.39% have up to 500 people in the support network and 1.3% have over 500.

The correlation between the number of offline friends and loneliness has not proved statistically significant, but its values have come closer to the ones predicted: a negative correlation was obtained ($r = -0.197$, $p = 0.095$) what Means that the level of real social support is more predictive for losing feelings of loneliness than the size of the online network.

Doubling the online network compared to the offline network can be taken as an indicator of the deficit-compensate tendency felt in coping with loneliness, unfortunately they do not seem to have an immediate effect on solving problem. Of course, a more nuanced analysis should take into account: the type of network exchanges, the dynamics of adding new members (given that they are students in the first semester, it is possible that the network has been explode), but its network is not still functional), and necessarily the study should monitor the evolution in time of loneliness and communication dynamics in social and virtual networking. What we can say for sure is that the beginning of a training cycle with very different operating parameters induces an acute level of loneliness that students are trying to manage.

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