

CHAPTER 16

Loneliness and Social Media: A qualitative investigation of young people's motivations for use, and perceptions of social networking sites

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The democratisation of Internet access has incrementally changed every domain of activity and has created new business and economic models. From answering work emails to learning a new language, shopping, booking medical appointments or managing one's finances, almost everything is attainable at the click of a button. The added implications of the rapid rise of social networking websites (SNSs), such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or Snapchat, have further contributed to changing the way we communicate and build new friendships. Indeed most of our social relationships are now being 'increasingly developed and maintained online' (Nowland, Necka & Cacioppo, 2017: 1). Ostensibly, despite improved Internet access and enhanced social connectedness, modern societies are struggling to combat loneliness. It is reported to affect people of all ages, especially young adults (16-24 and 25-34 years old) who are avid Internet and social media users (see Office for National Statistics, 2018).

There are 4.388 billion Internet users around the world, representing 57% of the world population and 3.484 billion of them are active social media users (45% of the world population) (Digital Report, 2019). As more and more people worldwide are becoming active online every year, a burgeoning interest in examining the effects of online activity on users' physical and mental health has been reported, resulting in a plethora of academic studies on the topic. We are witnessing the rise of a normative turn in the media and communication research field (Couldry, 2015) and concerns have been voiced in the Internet research field that increased social media use has repercussions on human general wellbeing, connectivity and sociability (e.g. Kraut et al., 1998; Nie & Hillygus, 2002; Stepanikova et al., 2010). Reviewing the abundant literature on the topic, Nowland, Necka & Cacioppo (2017) have found two contrasting dominating perspectives regarding the association of loneliness and social internet use: the displacement hypothesis - which advances the idea that people often displace offline relationships with online relationships - and the stimulation hypothesis, which looks at the potential of social technologies to reduce loneliness by enhancing existing relationships or forging new ones.

However, despite this upsurge of research in the consequences of social internet use on people's lives, none of the existing studies present consistent findings nor do they show enough empirical evidence to support any of the hypotheses and most of them rely on data self-reported by participants. Moreover, an overview of the literature shows the prevalence of cross-sectional studies to the detriment of longitudinal studies (Nowland, Necka, & Cacioppo, 2017), which suggests that more work still needs to be done to fully understand the magnitude of the phenomenon and its long-term effects.

Refuting any fundamental misconceptions concerning the impact of social media on social relationships and avoiding falling into the trap of either technological

dystopianism or technological utopianism, this chapter is a ground-breaking attempt to fill a gap in scholarship and attempts to advance an understanding of the relationship between the use of social networking websites (SNSs) and loneliness. This is the first qualitative study in the UK that identifies which SNSs can increase or decrease loneliness in young adults and in what conditions. Until now, most of the studies that look at the association between internet or social media use and loneliness have been conducted in the US (Gross et al., 2002; Gross, 2004; Subrahmanyam & Lin, 2007; Lemieux et al. 2013; Kross et al., 2013; Sheldon, 2012; Lou et al., 2012; Pittman & Reich, 2016), Australia (Skues et al., 2012; Ryan & Xenos, 2011), Turkey (Erdoğan, 2008; Şar, Goktürk, Gülşah, Kazaz, 2012; Özdemir et al., 2014; Ozsaker et al., 2015), Taiwan (Ong et al., 2011) or Canada (Matsuba, 2006). The uniqueness of this research also lies in the fact that it takes a focus on young adults (18-24 year olds), which are frequently reported to be significantly lonelier than any other age group (Office for National Statistics, 2018). Moreover, instead of merely taking an interest in undergraduate students, like previous studies (e.g. Ong et al., 2011; Tan et al. 2013; Lemieux et al., 2013; Kross et al., 2013; Guo et al., 2014; Ozsaker et al., 2015), this chapter involves a sample of young adults from different walks of life (students, graduates, young people who have not been in higher education, entrepreneurs etc.).

LONELINESS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

With the BBC documentary *The Age of Loneliness* (2016) and the launch of Jo Cox's Commission on Loneliness in January 2017, loneliness has been acknowledged as a serious social problem in the UK. Indeed loneliness affects so many people that a minister for loneliness was appointed on 17 January 2018, making the UK the first country in the world to recognise the social significance of the state of being.

As it is a basic fact of life, loneliness can be experienced by anyone, regardless of age (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006). However, research conducted so far shows that when discussing loneliness, the assumption is that we are talking about elderly people who are not in their line of work anymore and/or experience bereavement, usually ignoring young adults who also struggle to live with loneliness. According to Pinqart & Sorensen (2003), the prevalence and intensity of loneliness are in fact greater in young adults than in any other age group. Victor and Yang (2012) also argue that the prevalence of loneliness is U-shaped when mapped graphically against age, indicating that younger and older people have the highest risk of experiencing social isolation. Even so, to date, not much is known about loneliness in young adults and the studies that focus on this age group involve merely undergraduate students (e.g. Matsuba, 2006; Ong et al., 2011; Ryan and Xenos, 2011; Skues et al., 2012; Sheldon, 2012; Lou et al., 2012; Lemieux et al., 2013; Kross et al., 2013; Tan et al. 2013; Guo et al., 2014; Ozsaker et al., 2015), ignoring any other young adults' groups that are not in Higher Education.

Loneliness is a prevalent serious problem in today's networked society and is associated with various health problems both somatic and mental (Cacioppo et al. 2002; Nummela, Seppanen, Uutela, 2010; Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010; Luo, Hawkley, Waite, Cacioppo, 2012). Recently, loneliness has been associated with

Internet addiction (Durak-Batugün & Hasta, 2010; Esen & Siyez, 2011), mobile phone (Oztunc, 2013) or smartphone use (Paper & Harvey, 2018), and mobile phone addiction (Jin & Park, 2012; Reid & Reid, 2007; Takao, Takahashi & Kitamura, 2009; Wei & Lo, 2006; Tan, Pamuk & Donder, 2013). The links between social media use and loneliness have also been explored with mixed results (e.g. Kraut et al., 1998; Odaci & Kalkan, 2010; Spraggins, 2011; Guo et al., 2014; Uusiautti & Maatta, 2014; Twenge, Spitzberg & Campbell, 2019). Interestingly, most of these studies focus on Facebook use more than any other social networking website. For example, Ellison et al. (2007) show that students who use Facebook feel less lonely and more integrated in the university community. Lemieux et al. (2013) and Skues et al. (2012) examine correlations between time spent on Facebook, number of Facebook friends and loneliness, and Burke et al. (2010) distinguish between active and passive use of social networking sites, showing that only the active users feel less lonely, while passive users (those who just observe other people's lives, view photos but never post anything) can feel very lonely. Similarly, Ryan & Xenos (2011) and Sheldon (2012) found that Facebook users are lonelier than non-users, while Deters & Mehl (2013) contend that posting Facebook status updates daily can reduce loneliness in undergraduate students. Given that, so far, literature on the topic has been struggling to certify either the benefits or the negative effects of social media use, we position our study in the middle of this debate and, like Nowland, Necka & Cacioppo (2017), argue that social media can both increase and decrease loneliness when and if certain conditions are met.

This chapter analyses young adults' experiences of loneliness and explores the relationship between loneliness and social networking. Amidst the confusion and controversy surrounding the topic, the aim of this study is to build a holistic picture that captures the essence of the phenomenon and to do so, a qualitative approach was employed because only qualitative methods 'allow us to explore the beliefs, values, and motives that explain why the behaviors occur' (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018: 807). Leaving behind various moral panics built around the use of social media, this research aims to find out if and in what circumstances social media can decrease or increase loneliness in young people. We acknowledge that social media is a very broad term, thus a focus will be sustained on the most widely used social networking websites, Facebook (text and image based), Twitter (text-based), Instagram (image-based) and Snapchat (image-based). In this chapter, social networking websites are defined as a 'web-based service that allows individuals to: 1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, 2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and 3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site' (boyd & Ellison, 2007: 211). Although the authors differentiate between 'social network sites' and 'social networking sites', two concepts used interchangeably in the literature, in the chapter I will be using the term 'social networking websites' to emphasize the possibility of initiating relations facilitated by these websites.

METHOD, DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYTIC APPROACH

The measurement of loneliness is either uni-dimensional or multi-dimensional (McWhirter, 1990). Loneliness instruments developed so far are designed to measure

loneliness from either of these perspectives. Until now, loneliness has been measured using questionnaires (Cramer & Barry 1999) or large population surveys (Hughes, Waite, Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2004). The most frequently used instruments to measure loneliness are the UCLA Loneliness Scale developed at the University of California, Los Angeles (Russell, Peplau & Ferguson, 1978) and De Jong Gierveld Loneliness scale (De Jong & van Tilburg, 2006).

The study reported here is part of a larger mixed-method longitudinal research project that examines experiences of loneliness in young people and how life changes can increase the risk of loneliness with the aim of finding sustainable solutions for early prevention and coping mechanisms. Data for this project was collected in two stages: an online questionnaire followed by semi-structured interviews. The research design is innovative and aims to challenge existing research. It intends to approach this topic from a different perspective, opting for a relatively new method of selecting participants, namely via social networking websites. In addition to contacting major local employers and student unions, and posting a link to the survey on the university's website, we recruited participants for this study via Facebook and Twitter. With over 2,271 million monthly active users (Digital Report, 2019: 92), Facebook is considered 'a population from which study participants may be recruited' (Murphy, 2015), with its potential lying in the fact that on Facebook, researchers have instant access to individuals and companies linked on the site (Sage, 2013). Following Bhutta (2012) who conducted a survey of thousands of Catholics using Facebook, managing to recruit 7,500 people in only a month and Rhodes and Marks (2011) who used Facebook for a longitudinal study urging Facebook users (18-24 years old) to accept to complete a telephone interview, I have joined several Facebook groups and encouraged people to complete the online questionnaire. Individuals with high and low levels of loneliness were selected and invited to an interview.

The online questionnaire generated 1,400 responses (49% women and 51% men) from people aged 18-24, living in the UK (see table 16.1 below). All participants reported to be avid Internet users, having access to Internet both at home and at work/university and having used social networking websites for more than 10 years.

Table 16.1. Characteristics of the sample

Variables	N	%
Total sample	1,400	100
Gender		
Men	715	51
Women	685	49

The online questionnaire included open and closed questions and used both the UCLA and de Jong Gierveld loneliness scales to measure participants' levels of loneliness.

From 1400 participants aged 18-24, 20 people (10 showing no loneliness and 10 showing high levels of loneliness) were selected and invited them to an interview. Both groups are equally active on social networking sites, spending between 4-6 hours a day on SNSs. 63% of the participants are online all the time regardless of other activities they are engaged in, and check their messages and posts throughout

the day. All of the participants use social networking sites, 93% having used social networking sites for more than 10 years. The most popular device to access social networking sites is the smartphone - 94% of the respondents use it to access their social media accounts, while 58% use laptops and only 12% use tablets.

This chapter presents the findings of 20 semi-structured interviews carried out from February to August 2018. The interviews were mostly conducted at the University of Wolverhampton, according to the interviewees' preference and via Skype for those living outside Wolverhampton. At the start of the interview the participants were asked to complete the de Jong Gierveld loneliness scale (De Jong & van Tilburg, 2006) again to re-assess their level of loneliness.

Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data, which allowed us to 'discover themes and concepts embedded throughout' the interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 1995: 226). Maguire & Delahunt (2017: 3352) define thematic analysis as 'the process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data.' The goal of this research method is to identify themes in the collected data that are important and explain the issue that is being investigated. Themes are patterns that must 'capture (s) something significant or interesting about the data and/or research question' (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017: 3356).

There are two levels of themes: semantic (captures exactly what the participants have said) and latent (involves making assumptions and theorizing what the participants have said) (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis presented in this chapter identifies themes at the semantic level, because our goal was to reflect young people's opinions more than the researcher's interpretations of what the participants have said.

Braun & Clarke (2006) found that thematic analysis can be either top-down or bottom-up (theoretical). The top-down thematic analysis is usually guided by a pre-established set of specific research questions, while the theoretical, bottom-up thematic analysis is mostly guided by the researcher's focus or interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Our analysis was driven by our main concern; to find out an answer to the following research questions:

RQ1 - Do people with high loneliness levels use social networking sites more and for different reasons than people with low loneliness levels?

RQ2 - What are young adults motivations of using social networking sites and in what conditions is social networking decreasing or increasing loneliness?

RQ3- What are the social networking websites that increase and decrease loneliness in young adults?

In analysing the data, we followed Braun & Clarke (2006)'s guide consisting of six phases, as follows: become familiar with the data, generate initial codes, search for themes, review themes, define themes, write-up. We coded each segment of data that was relevant to our research questions. We used Microsoft Excel to code data and identify themes as explained by Bree & Gallagher (2016). Codes were organized in broader themes that revealed something about or contributed to providing an integrated and holistic response to each research question.

RESULTS

The thematic analysis of the interview data generated three main themes that answer each research question, as follows:

a) Theme 1: People with high/low loneliness levels and SNS use

People with high levels of loneliness use SNSs for the same amount of time daily as those with low levels of loneliness. Both groups reported spending on average more than 10 hours online every day and at least 5-6 hours a day on social media accounts.

‘I spend more than 10 hours a day online, in fact I am online all the time so it is difficult to say when I am not online, er ... I have six social media accounts, Insta, Snapchat, Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp and Viber and I am logged in on all my social media accounts on my phone. // I’d say I spend around 5-7 hours on social media every day’ (Male, 21, works in retail, low levels of loneliness).

‘You know, for me it’s not a matter of how many hours I spend online any more ... I am online all the time. I take my smartphone with me anywhere and this allows me to be online all the time or at least any time I want to. Hmm, I can’t say I am spending all my time being active online but technology allows it, you know? I guess I am spending around 5-6 hours everyday browsing or talking to my friends on Insta, Twitter or Facebook and it feels normal’ (Female, 24, works in a call centre, high levels of loneliness).

Young adults (18-24 years old) feel lonelier now than when they were younger because they feel they have to go through more transition periods and they have less people around them to help them cope with the personal and professional uncertainty. Both groups have reported increased loneliness and social media use during transitions.

‘I feel lonelier now at 24 than I have ever been before. // I think my age group is lonelier because people expect so much from us just because we are young. All my friends feel the same. I have moved away from home and I am constantly changing jobs. I have changed five jobs this year. It can be incredibly challenging and lonely. I feel like I can’t find new friends and each time I do I have to either change jobs or move house’ (Female, 24, manager, high levels of loneliness).

‘I’d say going to uni is a lonely experience ... (mm) especially if you are working and your colleagues aren’t, it can be very isolating. In my first year I felt I had no one to talk to and none understood me. Although there is a counselling service at the university I did not know about it... er, you know, in fact I still don’t know how it works to be honest. That was my most isolating experience, you know, making everyone understand I had a job in my first year at uni. // The situation has improved over the years because of mobile apps and now I keep in touch with colleagues on Facebook and WhatsApp. If you are lonely, who can you really speak to?’ (Male, 21, student, low levels of loneliness)

Results derived from the data show correlations between long working hours and high levels of loneliness. Working long hours every week determines young people to be more active on social networking sites. Participants reported being mentally and

physically exhausted at the end of the day, so exhausted that instead of going out to spend a few hours in the company of their friends, they prefer to spend a few minutes or hours on social networking sites. Working extra hours to be able to pay the monthly bills can be alienating and leads to excessive SNSs use. A longing to share daily experiences or just change a few words with someone else at the end of the working day appears to determine young adults' use of SNSs more than they would otherwise.

'Well, I am working all week until 11pm ... // I feel so tired I really can't spend any energy on meeting new people. I almost never go out. When I do have spare time it is easier to chat for a few minutes with whoever is online on Facebook, you know... // There are no expectations and they won't care if I fall asleep during the conversation' (Male, 19, works in retail, high levels of loneliness).

'I am busy with work and don't see my friends as often as I would want to but feel social media allows me to keep up with their week even if I can't be there physically' (Female, 20, Shop assistant, high levels of loneliness).

B) Theme 2: Motivations to use social media

Although social media has opened new avenues of communication, 92% of the participants in this study declared that they have not got enough people to talk to or ask for help when they need it. The lack of communication is very often associated with loneliness. Participants commonly articulated that they feel lonely when they do not have someone to talk to, often considering loneliness to signify the absence of communication.

'Well...some people think it's sadness, others think it's depression [long pause] To me I guess loneliness is feeling like no one is available to you and a sense of isolation within yourself ... Feeling isolated as if I am nobody's first choice to hang out with or to talk to. Basically, feeling isolated to the world, unwanted and unappreciated' (Female, 20, student, high levels of loneliness).

'... erm I guess loneliness means feeling isolated, with no one you can properly communicate with. Could be around people but not engaging with them in a meaningful way ... So I guess that leads to a feeling of sadness when you're unable to talk to people' (Female, 22, Shop Assistant, low levels of loneliness).

Social networking websites provide a platform for dialog. Young adults use SNSs mainly because they are looking for someone to talk to.

'The groups I am part of on Facebook make me feel alive. I always have someone to talk to ... er every time I'm online, there's someone there to listen to me and talk to me. // To me that is life-changing and I don't know what my life would be like without those people. Even if I have never met any of them, I feel closer to them than to some of my friends, I mean, the ones I meet face-to-face' (Male, 22, unemployed, low levels of loneliness).

'Social media and some mindfulness apps I have on my phone help me a lot ... (mm) Also, on Twitter there's always someone to talk to and it makes me feel like I belong to a community of people of my age' (Male, 21, student, low levels of loneliness).

Often young adults do not feel part of the community they live in and more often than not, they use social networking websites in search for a community that will accept them. The sense of belonging has also been found to be a predictor of using SNSs.

‘To me loneliness is a lack of companionship or a sense of belonging, you know... (mm) It’s when you have people around but you don’t feel like you belong anywhere, you know? You feel like no one cares about you and you don’t really fit in... [silence] and that’s why I spend so much time networking online, I guess...’ (Female, 20, student, low levels of loneliness).

‘For me, loneliness is a disconnect from community and interaction. Some people don’t need it as much as others but it’s still vital. I sometimes enjoy being lonely and other times I hate it. I am part of various online groups on Twitter and that helps. I feel like I have my own constructed small community and I don’t have to struggle to fit it’ (Female, 24, Teaching assistant, high levels of loneliness).

The fear of being judged is also pushing young adults to use SNSs more. Online interactions are more permissive and make one feel less fearful of being judged.

‘I use Facebook and Twitter to find new friends and reach out to people. // For me it’s a way to connect, to be part of a community, to feel like I belong and I do feel like I belong to these Facebook groups because people treat me nice and they always answer my questions without judging me, you know’ (Female, 23, single mother, high levels of loneliness)

‘I love having people online that can just discuss the things you enjoy, it’s great fun. Some people may not have that in person where they feel comfortable enough to share their interests due to fear of being judged ...’ (Male, 19, student, low levels of loneliness).

c) Theme 3: Social networking sites that decrease or increase loneliness

The relation between increased loneliness and the use of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat is apparent when users are exposed to pictures that depict others’ happiness or an unattainable lifestyle, or when users are exposed to criticism, negative behaviour and bullying.

Results report a shift in popularity with Facebook and Twitter losing popularity among young adults who prefer image-based social networks like Instagram and Snapchat. Contrary to existing findings (Pittman & Reich, 2016), our results show that Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram can equally increase loneliness when the users are exposed to negative content or bullying. The over exposure to images that depict a certain style of living also increases loneliness in young people. However, this feeling of loneliness is not triggered by the use of SNSs per se, but by the quality of the online interactions and the people one encounters and interacts with online.

‘Some people live a false life through Instagram giving false representations of what your life should be like ... er Facebook can make people feel worse looking at pictures online of people’s perfect lives and perfectly shaped bodies. [short pause] It

can have a detrimental effect on myself and that's why I have deleted my Facebook account and I barely use Insta any more' (Male, 24, manager, low levels of loneliness).

'Facebook and Insta can be very distracting. I have considered deleting both because it affects my self-confidence. Most people create these fake personas online and watching others having a perfect life even if you know it's not real can still make you feel very lonely' (Female, 23, single mother, high levels of loneliness).

Facebook and Instagram are associated with increased loneliness because they enable users to distort reality and make people feel unhappy with the life they are living by promoting an unrealistic lifestyle.

'I only have Snapchat and Instagram now. I have deleted Facebook because I didn't think they look after our data well enough' (Female, 20, student, high levels of loneliness).

'Social media can make you feel lonely. Snapchat and Instagram in particular, you know? Little things like pictures and a certain way of living that you could never have, it can give you an inferiority complex' (Male 21, student, low levels of loneliness).

Having large number of 'friends' on SNSs increases loneliness in young adults. All four SNSs analysed in this study can equally increase loneliness when users are exposed to criticism, negative content or bullying. The constant exposure to pictures of happy people that live a perfect life was further associated with low self-esteem and a sense of underachievement.

'Facebook has given me a sense of having a huge amount of 'friends' when in reality this is not the case you know... (mm) They are definitely the cause of a lot of people having low self-esteem and feeling the pressures of keeping up false lifestyles; by constantly comparing yourself to others' (Female 24, receptionist, low levels of loneliness).

'It's an easy platform for bullies and such to take control. It's quite easy for someone to feel isolated if this happens and everyone is laughing at them... [short pause] It's also an easy place to put yourself down. // Seeing other people's amazing lives online can make you feel depressed about your situations at home. A lot of it is fake, I know, and it's made to look better online but people don't realise that. It can really mess with your mind and make them feel worthless' (Male 22, freelance journalist, high levels of loneliness).

All four SNSs (Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat and Instagram) are seen as projecting a false reality and additionally, Facebook and Twitter are perceived as projecting a false sense of companionship generated by the number of friends or followers one can have on these networks that is often not equated by the number of meaningful offline relationships.

'I think social media provides a false sense of companionship, you know... I don't feel lonely whilst using social media as I talk to people online that I've made friends with. However, when social media is taken away it makes me realise that I have no friends or people to talk to in real life, thus reminding me how lonely I really am' (Male, 22, Assistant manager, high levels of loneliness).

Interestingly, other social media apps, like WhatsApp or Viber, are found to be useful to keep in touch with family and friends. Moreover, while Twitter is perceived to be useful when one needs to connect to people from the same professional field, Facebook is preferred when one needs to find a community.

‘When you live away from family and friends the only way to not feel lonely is to spend time with them via social media and share things online. But if you normally have no one to talk to both in real life and online, that’s when you’re completely isolated no matter the environment’ (Female, 22, Shop assistant, low levels of loneliness).

Despite its acknowledged usefulness, almost all participants have considered, at least once, deleting all of their social media accounts, while 80% of them have already deleted at least one social media account. The most frequent reason to deactivate their social media accounts was because of the need to experience positive loneliness. Positive loneliness is a form of loneliness that all people experience. According to Fromm-Reichmann (1959), positive loneliness is always voluntary, and refers to a self-induced temporary period of solitude, which is valued for its constructive potential, especially when used for creative work or reflection.

‘I periodically quit social media just because on Instagram I can get a bit carried away and be on it all the time. A detox did me good and I was productive in the time I wasn't on the app’ (Male, 22, Assistant manager, high levels of loneliness).

‘I have deactivated all my social networks before to take a break and focus on myself. Now I don't need to because I don't use it as often as I did when I was younger. I mainly browse for entertainment now’ (Female, 24, Teaching assistant, low levels of loneliness).

The most often deactivated social media accounts are Facebook accounts. All of the participants have deactivated their Facebook account at least once and 70% of the participants have deleted their Facebook account for good. The most common reasons for deactivating Facebook accounts are bullying, increased exposure to negative and inflammatory content and experiencing destructive criticism.

‘...er...I did delete my original Facebook account as I was being bullied/trolled. It’s the way media is used by others, you know... I find it annoying/distressing to see’ (Female, 23, single mother, high levels of loneliness).

‘Reading negative posts from other people can sometimes encourage me to log out an app for a while. // I tend to have short breaks from it’ (Male 21, student, low levels of loneliness).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Designing support services and intervention strategies to target and alleviate loneliness in young people requires a deep understanding of the phenomenon from the perspective of young people themselves. The present study is a qualitative investigation into young adults’ perceptions of social networking websites and

contributes to the growing body of research assessing the psychological effects of social media use. Recognising a lack of qualitative evidence in the field, the research presented in this chapter is the first of its kind in the UK and sought to analyse and compare the way different social networking websites (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat) can increase or decrease loneliness in young adults. Contrary to Pittman & Reich's (2016) findings, the present results show that all SNSs (text-based, image-based or hybrid) can equally increase loneliness when a set of specific circumstances is met, such as: exposure to images of extreme happiness, perfect bodies or unattainable lifestyles, bullying, and increased exposure to negative content or destructive criticism.

Ever since Prensky (2002) introduced the idea of 'digital natives', though widely criticised, it generated the misconception that young people know how to use digital technologies just because they were born in a time when access to technology and access to the internet were possible and widespread. The results presented in this chapter show that young adults often feel overwhelmed by the quantity of information found on SNSs, hence the need to deactivate all social media accounts in search of short periods of experiencing positive loneliness. As digital fatigue grows, more and more young adults tend to quit SNSs but not having anything else to replace it with forces them to reactivate their accounts.

In order to fully understand the relationship between loneliness and social media use, this chapter looked not only at young people's use of SNSs, like previous studies, but also at motivations for using SNSs. Consistent with findings from previous studies, that have also reported little or no association at all between the time spent online and loneliness (e.g. Gross, 2004; Gross et al., 2002; Subrahmanyam & Lin, 2007), the present findings support no link between the levels of loneliness and young people's motivations to use SNSs. The most frequent reason to use SNSs was the need to have someone to talk to, alongside the need to belong and feel companionship.

British young adults have an open-minded approach to using social networking sites and are aware of their false reflection of reality. Interestingly, despite being aware of this false reality and of people's tendency to display a perfect life on SNSs, pictures depicting happiness or an ideal lifestyle were linked to increased loneliness. This shows that passive use of SNSs increases loneliness, confirming Burke et al.'s (2010) findings that also found passive Facebook users feel lonelier than active Facebook users. The present results are also close to the findings of Blachnio, Przepiorka, Boruch, & Balakier (2016) that identified loneliness as one of the predictors of Facebook usage. Most participants in this study declared a tendency to use SNSs when they feel lonely. Lastly, it is noteworthy that young people do not seem to displace offline relationships with online relationships, as none of the participants in this study perceived online friendships as meaningful friendships that could entirely replace face-to-face relationships. Although most participants in this study seemed content with their social internet use, further research is needed to assess the quality of the relationships that young adults initiate online and identify ways of helping those who use SNSs to escape their loneliness.

The present results suggest that face-to-face communication is not the only meaningful way of communication. Online and face-to-face communication can coexist without having a detrimental effect on individual's wellbeing or on the quality

of one's social relationships. Social networking sites are very useful tools to connect with family when one is away from home and, in some cases, may help alleviate loneliness by providing a platform for dialogue where people don't have to disclose their identity and can, therefore, escape the stigma associated with disclosing loneliness. Stigma attached to loneliness can make people reluctant to declare it, which leads to difficulties in identifying individuals who are struggling with loneliness and difficulties in finding innovative solutions for prevention and intervention. Griffin's (2010:15) Lonely Society report shows that one in three people would be embarrassed to admit to being lonely and it goes on to explain that loneliness is often related to feelings of 'anger, sadness, depression, worthlessness, resentment, emptiness, vulnerability and pessimism'.

Finally, our results show that the reason this age group (18-24) report highest levels of loneliness than any other age group is because they are experiencing more transition periods than any other age group (they change jobs more often, they move away from home, they work and study at the same time, or they don't work normal hours, all of which takes them away from their family and friends). This means that it is not social media alone making young adults feel lonelier, but also other factors associated with growing-up and becoming an adult (like for example, finding one's way in life, finding the right job or finding one's place in the community) and living in a networked society. More focused efforts to understand the particular needs of this age group could contribute to a targeted support strategy.

Taking further Nowland, Necka & Cacioppo's (2017: 70) idea that lonely people need more support with 'their social internet use so that they employ it in a way that enhances existing friendships and/or to forge new ones', this chapter suggests that young adults need support to learn how to use SNSs in a meaningful way that will help them cope with temporary moments of loneliness by finding the right people to talk to. Indeed one can always find someone to talk to on SNSs but that someone is not always the right person to talk to. Finding a way to offer more expert support on SNSs could have a tremendous impact on lonely people who are trying to reach out and find help on SNSs.

Social media can be the perfect remedy for loneliness (see Blachnio, Przepiorka, Boruch, & Balakier, 2016). As previous studies show, online networks allow people to communicate with each other more easily (Oldmeadow, Quinn, & Kowert, 2013; Przybylsk & Weinstein, 2012) and can make university students feel less lonely (Uusiautti & Maatta, 2014) whilst increasing people's life satisfaction by facilitating a platform to build quality social relationships online (Martin & Schumacher, 2003). Therefore, research in this area should attempt to find innovative ways to use social networking sites as tools to reduce loneliness (some of the few existing studies have already started to do so, see for example, Fokkema & Knipscher, 2007; Şar , Goktürk, Tura, & Kazaz, 2012; Blazun, Saranto & Rissanen, 2012; Pittman & Reich, 2016; Blachnio, Przepiorka, Boruch, & Balakier, 2016). Without casting a critical gaze over existing research, this chapter shows the need for a digital strategy for the lonely and urges academics - and the Government - to start working together on loneliness reduction. One suggestion is to develop innovative intervention programmes that employ digital technologies and educate people to find the right balance between online and face-to-face interaction.

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