Personality and Individual Differences xxx (2017) xxx–xxx

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Personality and Individual Differences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/paid

Loneliness and online friendships in emerging adults

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 1 August 2016
Received in revised form 12 March 2017
Accepted 19 March 2017
Available online xxxx

Keywords:
Internet
Loneliness
Internet friendship
Online friendship
Social networking sites
Online communication
Self-disclosure
Emerging adults

ABSTRACT

We examined the relationships between loneliness, interpersonal motives for Internet use, online communication, and friendships on Social Networking Sites (SNS) in emerging adults. Participants were 1st-year university students ($N = 149$; $M_{age} = 20.33$ years; $SD = 2.51$). Social and romantic (emotional) loneliness were indirectly related to the total number of friends reported on SNSs via social compensation and social networking motives and mechanisms of spending more time in online communication and engaging in more self-disclosure. Romantic loneliness was indirectly related to the number of new friends made on SNSs via social networking motives and online communication. These different relationships show that to understand the mechanisms by which emerging adults make friends online, it is important to consider individual differences in the type of loneliness as well as their motives for going online and their communication while online.

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1. Introduction

Emerging adulthood, in general, and the transition from high school to university or college, in particular, are heightened times for loneliness (Baker, 2012; Özdemir & Tuncay, 2008). Transitions, such as to university, disrupt the earlier connections and security found in the family and home community and require the emerging adult to establish new friends and possibly romantic relationships (Asher & Weeks, 2014). In general, the formation of intimate relationships is a key developmental task for emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1968). The Internet, particularly Social Network Sites (SNSs), provides emerging adults an important alternative environment in which to maintain existing relationships and to make new ones. SNSs are online friend-networking sites (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Facebook is the most common, with over 1 billion daily active users (Facebook Newsroom, 2016). Emerging adults are the most prevalent SNS users; 89% of 18- to 29-year-olds have a SNS profile (Pew Research Centre, 2014). University students commonly use SNSs to make new friends and to connect with old ones (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009; Raake & Bonds-Raake, 2008). We tested a model of the social motives for Internet use and online communication behaviours that might explain the SNS friendships of lonely emerging adults in their first year of university.

Since its inception, there have been mixed findings regarding the relationship between Internet use and loneliness, and debate regarding the direction of any cause-effect relationship (Stepanikova, Nie, & He, 2010). As a result, there are many explanatory hypotheses. Early studies found that higher Internet use was associated with increased loneliness, which was explained by the time online displacing time that could be spent developing more gratifying face-to-face (F2F) relationships (displacement hypothesis; Kraut et al., 1998; Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2000). However, not all studies found this (Gordon, Juang, & Syed, 2007; Kraut et al., 2002). In contrast to the displacement hypothesis, Valkenburg and Peter's (2007) stimulation hypothesis was that the Internet can stimulate social interaction. The current study derived from McKenna and Bargh's (2000) social compensation hypothesis, which proposes that the Internet attracts individuals who are lonely because it offers them broader social networks than are available offline and altered patterns of communication to overcome poor social skills (Morahan-Martin, 1999; Whitty, 2008). This social compensation hypothesis is a "poor-get-richer model", and contrasts with the social enhancement hypothesis or "rich-get-richer model", which argues that those who are already rich in interpersonal capital and social skills benefit more from online communication options (Zywica & Danowski, 2008).

Amichai-Hamburger and Schneider (2014) identified the characteristics of the online psychological environment that enable these altered communication patterns and differentiate it from the offline environment. These are anonymity, enhanced ability to control one's physical appearance and social interactions, enhanced ability to find similar others that one might not encounter in the offline world, the flexibility

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2017.03.045
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Please cite this article as: Hood, M., et al., Loneliness and online friendships in emerging adults, *Personality and Individual Differences* (2017), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2017.03.045

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of access, and the capacity to interact asynchronously. Anonymity reduces social anxiety (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). In addition, the combined anonymity and asynchronicity of online communication promote social disinhibition, leading to greater self-disclosure, which is related to friendship formation and maintenance (Bonetti, Campbell, & Gilmore, 2010; Joinson, 2007). This particularly suits those who are lonely as they typically engage in less self-disclosure (Solano, Batten, & Parish, 1982). Unlike some other communication options on the Internet (e.g., chat rooms, discussion forums), SNSs tend not to be anonymous as users create and maintain a personal and largely public profile (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). However, they do afford users the other important characteristics noted by Amichai-Hamburger and Schneider.

Amichai-Hamburger, Kaplan, and Dorpatcheon (2008) found support for the social compensation hypothesis of Internet or SNS use with introverted young people; that is, they were motivated to use SNSs to compensate for their poorer social skills. However, although Poley and Luo (2012) found that socially incompetent young people perceived that online dating would be beneficial to them, they did not prefer online dating, yielding only partial support for the social compensation hypothesis. Understanding the motives that people have for Internet or SNS use is important as this influences the extent to which they communicate with others and seek out friendships or other relationships online (Rubin, 2002). For example, Peter, Valkenburg, and Schouten (2005) found that when introverted children and adolescents held stronger social compensation motives, they communicated with others more online, and this was related to making more new online friendships. Others also found that lonely adolescents and adults were more motivated than those who were not lonely to use the Internet (Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2003) and Facebook (Teppers, Luyckx, Klimstra, & Goossens, 2014) for social compensation and to meet people. Social compensation motives were associated with more time communicating online (Amichai-Hamburger & Ben-Artzi, 2003), which was related to making more new online relationships (Bonebrake, 2002) that were rated more satisfying and closer than F2F friendships (Baker & Oswald, 2010; Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2003).

We extended this existing literature by testing a model that examined social compensation and networking Internet use motives and, in turn, online communication behaviours as predictors of the number of SNS friends of lonely emerging adults in their first year of university (Fig. 1). We included age and gender as potential control variables. Dunbar (2016) found that younger age was associated with more total SNS friends. The findings for gender differences are mixed, depending on whether the total number of SNS friends or the number of new friends made on SNSs is examined. Dunbar reported that females had more total SNS friends. However, others found that males were more likely to use SNSs to make new friends (Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Muscanell & Guadagno, 2012).

We examined three dimensions of offline loneliness (social, romantic, and familial) as predictors of these online motives and behaviours, thereby extending on existing studies that have examined loneliness as a unidimensional construct (e.g., Gordon et al., 2007) or only examined peer- and parent-related loneliness (Teppers et al., 2014). Social loneliness is the lack of an adequate supportive social network with which the individual can relate and gain a sense of belonging, whereas emotional loneliness is the subjective interpretation and response to the lack of a close emotional attachment figure (familial or romantic) that can provide personal support (Weiss, 1973). As these different forms of loneliness are associated with different psychopathology (Lasgaard, Goossens, Bramsen, Trillingsgaard, & Elklit, 2011), it is important to examine them separately (see also Cramer & Barry, 1999). Further, online motives and friendship outcomes differ depending on the type of loneliness. Teppers et al. (2014) found that only social loneliness was related to Facebook use motives; parent-related loneliness was not and they did not examine romantic loneliness. Moody (2001) found that emotional, but not social, loneliness was associated with more online friends.

We expected that higher loneliness, particularly, social loneliness, would be associated with stronger social compensation and networking motives, which would, in turn, be associated with more frequent online communication, and via that with more friends on SNSs (Peter et al., 2005; Teppers et al., 2014). We examined both the total number of SNS friends as well as the number of new friends that had been made exclusively online. Consistent with Valkenburg and Peter's (2009) Internet-enhanced self-disclosure hypothesis, in which online communication leads to greater self-disclosure and, in turn, friendships, we expected that online communication would be related to the amount of self-disclosure (Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2003; Peter et al., 2005), and, via that, to the number of friends (McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Peter et al., 2005).

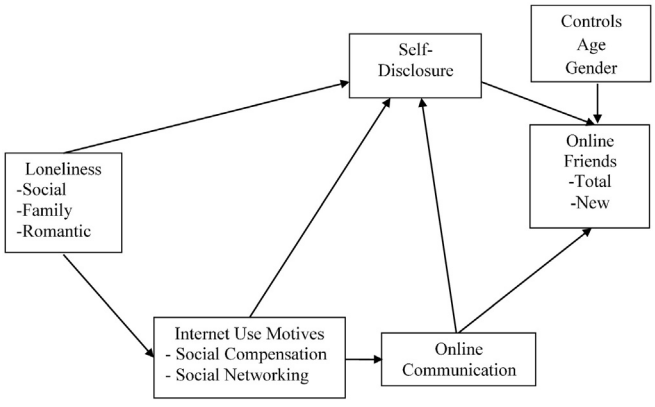

Fig. 1. Hypothesized model of the relationship between loneliness and friends on SNSs.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 149 first-year psychology students aged 17 to 25 years with an active SNS profile (i.e., a current profile with at least 1 friend). There were 120 women and 28 men (M_{age} = 20.31 years; SD = 2.51). Most were domestic students (89.2%) and identified culturally as Australian (80.1%), reflecting the population at the participating university.

Participants reported living with their parents (49.0%), housemates or friends (33.8%), romantic partners (14.5%), relatives (1.4%), or their children (1.4%). Participants' SES was measured using Hollingshead's 4-Factor Index of Social Status (Hollingshead, 1975, as cited in Bornstein & Bradley, 2003). A wide range of SES was represented, with the average indicating middle SES (M = 40.08; SD = 11.33; range = 11–61).

2.2. Materials

Unless otherwise indicated, scale item responses were made on a 7-point Likert-type response format, ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*). Scale items were summed, with higher scores indicating stronger endorsement of that construct.

2.2.1. Loneliness

The Social and Emotional Loneliness Scale (DiTommaso & Spinner, 1993) comprises 37 items. The social loneliness subscale measures satisfaction with social friendships (14 items; e.g., "I do not feel satisfied with the friends that I have"). There are two emotional loneliness subscales: romantic loneliness, which measures involvement in a satisfying intimate relationship (12 items; e.g., "I find myself wishing for someone

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