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

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## 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.

## 1. Introduction

During adolescence, teens shift from a relatively great dependence on parents for interaction and support to a greater reliance on peers. Failure in dealing with this shift may lead to feelings of loneliness or “the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person's network of social relations is deficient in some important way” (Perلمان & Peplau, 1981, p. 31). Given that loneliness has been linked to poor physical and mental health outcomes (e.g., Qualter et al., 2013), the present study aims to learn more about loneliness during adolescence by investigating its relationship with social media use.

Today, social networking sites (SNSs) are important venues for communicating and interacting with peers, with Facebook being the most dominant SNS platform among teens (e.g., Lenhart, 2015; Van Waeg, Van Hoecke, Demeulenaere, & D'hanens, 2016). As a result, many researchers have investigated whether SNSs, such as Facebook, make people feel less or more lonely (e.g., Lou, Yan, Nickerson, & McMorris, 2012; Pittman & Reich, 2016). Because these studies produced inconsistent findings, scholars recently called for more research studying the relationships between specific types of Facebook use, rather than general Facebook use, and young individuals' well-being (e.g., Verduyn et al., 2015). In line with this call, the present study focuses on *active public Facebook use* or “Facebook activities that facilitate direct interactions between the user and other Facebook friend(s) in a public setting” (e.g., status

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updating, sharing of photos, etc.) (Frison & Eggermont, 2015, p. 4).

Although the relationship between public Facebook activities and loneliness recently attracted research attention (e.g., Deters & Mehl, 2013), little is known about the direction of this relationship, especially during adolescence. To fill this important lacuna, the present longitudinal study will examine the reciprocal relationships between active public Facebook use and adolescents' feelings of loneliness.

### 1.1. Active public Facebook Use and loneliness from a media effect perspective

Regarding the consequences of the Internet in general, two conflicting hypotheses have appeared in the literature. Initial research related Internet use to a decrease in individuals' well-being, because time online (which is typically spent with weak ties) may displace time offline (which is typically spent with strong ties, for instance, close friends), hereby reducing the quality of existing friendships. In line with this *displacement hypothesis*, early studies found that Internet use was related to increased feelings of loneliness (e.g., Kraut et al., 1998). Later studies related Internet use to increases in individuals' well-being, because time online may increase social interaction with strong ties, hereby enhancing the quality of existing friendships. In line with this *stimulation hypothesis*, studies found that Internet use in particular may indeed decrease loneliness (e.g., Shaw & Gant, 2002).

With the widespread use of SNSs, interest in whether SNSs may harm or enhance users' well-being rapidly increased. Similar to research on the effects of Internet use, these studies revealed both positive and negative associations between SNS use and loneliness (Lou et al., 2012; Pittman & Reich, 2016; Primack et al., 2017), hereby providing evidence for both the displacement and stimulation hypothesis. For instance, Pittman and Reich (2016) argued that image-based social media use is related to a decrease in loneliness. And according to a systemic review, social media use may lower the level of loneliness by increasing feelings of social connectedness (Seabrook, Kern, & Rickard, 2016). Lou et al. (2012), however, indicated that college students' Facebook intensity is associated with an increase in loneliness. Still other studies (e.g., Wohn & Larose, 2014) found no relationship between Facebook use and loneliness.

These inconsistent findings might be, in part, due to the fact that these studies defined SNS use very broadly, without differentiating among the various activities users can engage in. Recent studies that used more nuanced measures of SNS use found that directed communication and interaction on SNSs decreased users' feelings of loneliness (Burke, Marlow, & Lento, 2010; Yang, 2016), whereas browsing on Facebook was related to an increase in lonely feelings (Burke et al., 2010; Matook, Cummings, & Bala, 2015). Although there is growing consistency in the literature about the beneficial outcomes of SNS interaction and harmful outcomes of SNS browsing, results are far less consistent with regards to SNS broadcasting (e.g., status updating, photo sharing, etc.). Yang (2016), for instance, found that Instagram broadcasting was associated with higher loneliness, whereas Matook et al. (2015) argued that the use of active features in the form of broadcasting was related to lower loneliness. Although Deters and Mehl (2013) showed that an experimentally induced increase in status updating activity reduced undergraduate students' feelings of loneliness, longitudinal studies investigating the impact of Facebook broadcasting or active public Facebook use on loneliness are still lacking.

Another important reason why previous studies failed to find consistent results might be because the relationships between active public Facebook and loneliness may follow different directional paths than has largely been assumed in previous research (Nowland, Necka, & Cacioppo, 2018). First, it could be that increases in active public Facebook use may lower adolescents' feelings of loneliness only after a certain amount of use and up until a certain point of use. If adolescents actively use Facebook only sporadically, they may not receive enough social cues to feel less lonely. The development of intimate attachment bonds that can reduce loneliness takes time (Bowlby, 1978). Similarly, the building of a network of peers requires personal efforts and time investments (Bowlby, 1978). These conditions may not be met when active Facebook use is rather low. As such, low levels of active Facebook use may not decrease one's feelings of loneliness, but rather be associated with high levels of loneliness. Though, when adolescents regularly use Facebook in an active modus, the quality of newly developed and previous friendships may increase and, as a result, decrease loneliness (e.g., Shaw & Gant, 2002). Grant and Schwartz (2011), however, argue that "the very strengths and virtues that positive psychology has linked to higher well-being and performance can, at high levels, undermine the outcomes they are intended to promote" (p. 66). Building on these insights, it is likely that sharing too much information on SNSs may increase one's dependence on SNSs for feedback in general, and affirmation in particular. As a result, individuals who are extensive active public Facebook users may start to feel that their use no longer satisfies their emotional and social needs. Consequently, due to this high level of sensitiveness, feelings of loneliness are no longer reduced. We even imagine that extensive active public Facebook use may increase individuals' feelings of loneliness as prior research has found positive links between SNS use and loneliness (e.g., Lou et al., 2012). As such, we assume that the relationship between active public Facebook use and loneliness may appear to be U-shaped curve, with a negative association in the left part and a positive association in the right part.

Specifically, we expect a negative relationship between active SNS use and loneliness under the condition of low to medium levels of active SNS use: The more adolescents use social media in an active way, the less lonely they will feel. However, with high levels of active SNS use, we can expect a positive relationship between active SNS use and loneliness: The more adolescents use social media in an active way, the lonelier they will feel. We therefore expect to find a U-shape association between active public Facebook use at Time 1 and loneliness at Time 2 (i.e., Hypothesis 1).

### 1.2. Loneliness and active public Facebook use from a media selection perspective

Next to the relationships between Facebook use and loneliness, an inverse relationship is also conceivable. Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory argues that audiences actively select and use media in response to specific personal needs (Katz, Haas, & Gurevitch, 1973). For instance, when an audience member has a need for social interaction, this member will actively select and use a particular

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