

Pandemic Social Media Use, Loneliness and Social Skills Among Emerging Adults

Media Watch

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Chrysalis L. Wright¹  and Jeyliz M. Collazo Rivera¹

Abstract

The pandemic's social isolation increased social media use, amplifying the existing risks of social media use among users. Such risks included increased mental health struggles, reduced opportunities for social interactions and social skill deficits. Previous research on social skill development has not fully explored the potential mediating role of loneliness. We examined how pandemic social media use relates to current feelings of loneliness and social skills (i.e., conversational skills, self-exposure to strangers and situations, empathetic skills and expression of feelings, coping with risk, academic and work skills), considering participant sex differences. Participants included 101 undergraduate emerging adult college students from a large southeastern public research university. We assessed social media use during the pandemic by modifying the Facebook Addiction Scale and administered the Social Skills Inventory and Short-Form Measure of Loneliness. Participants also answered general demographic questions. We tested a mediational model in which loneliness mediates the relationship between social media use and social skills. Compared to males, female participants reported more social media use and higher empathy levels. Pandemic social media use was associated with feelings of loneliness and decreased social skills. We also found that increased loneliness was associated with decreased social skills. The Test of Joint Significance also confirmed our hypothesised mediational model in which loneliness mediated the relationship between social media use and social skills. These findings highlight the nuanced effects of pandemic social media use on loneliness and interpersonal competencies and may be helpful regarding the development of social media use guidelines, social skill development interventions and mental health response interventions in times of crisis.