

Chapter 67

Loneliness, Disclosure, and Facebook Usage: Results From a Hong Kong Survey

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ABSTRACT

The authors conducted an online survey of 241 emerging adults in Hong Kong, China to assess potential associations between loneliness, Facebook usage, and self-disclosure on Facebook. Loneliness was not associated with Facebook usage, but rather inversely related with negative disclosure; the lonelier the Facebook user, the less he/she disclosed negative information. The pattern of associations between Facebook usage and self-disclosure indicated that the more time users spent on Facebook, the more they revealed positive disclosures and the less they revealed negative disclosures. The authors argue that these findings may provide evidence of a “remain positive” norm among emerging adult Facebook users in Hong Kong. They note that their findings may be unique to their cultural context.

INTRODUCTION

Emerging Adult Theory argues that a distinct life stage exists between adolescence and adulthood, a time when individuals “have not yet settled into the long-term choices and life-paths that make up adulthood” (Bigham, 2012, p. 533). As originally conceived by Arnett (2015), this life stage extended from late teens through the 20s when individuals address the challenging tasks that typically accompany the transition into adulthood. Munsey (2006) identified five features of emerging adulthood:

- Identity exploration concerning lifestyles and believe systems (e.g., religion, politics)

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- **Instability.** Individuals may change residences frequently, moving frequently for education, work, and/or family reasons. They may change intimate partners and friends frequently as well. The challenge for emerging adults is to find stability including negotiating on-going, positive interpersonal relationships and moving along a chosen career path that allows life in primarily one location.
- **Self-focus.** Given the above described instability and focus on identity exploration, emerging adults remain self-focused until they begin making commitments to specific career paths and to significant others—commitments that lead to adulthood.
- **Feeling in between.** Individuals know they are not children or teenagers anymore, but often do not see themselves as adults yet.
- **Endless possibilities.** This time of exploration and confusion leaves emerging adults with a sense of incompleteness but also with a sense of wonder and endless possibilities. The experience of endless possibilities can lead to a sense of empowerment or feeling overwhelming by too many options.

The Theory of Emerging Adulthood is not without its critics (Hendry & Kloep, 2007). Some adherents have argued that tying the definition of emerging adulthood to its challenges rather than specific ages is more sensible, given that individuals complete development tasks at differing paces (Bigham, 2012). Additionally, researchers argue that ethnicity (Munsey, 2006) and culture (e.g., Arseth, Kroger, Martinussen, & Bakken, 2009) may influence how individuals experience this life stage. Despite these concerns, an on-going line of research has emerged that examines the online behavior of emerging adults (e.g., Wu & Webb, 2016).

This chapter reports the findings of an original research study that continues an exploration of emerging adulthood among these newer concerns (i.e., extended age-frame, cultural differences, and online behaviors). We examined Facebook usage and its relationship to emerging adult users' perceived loneliness and self-disclosure on Facebook in a Hong Kong sample. This study fills a gap in the current body of research in two ways: (a) by examining the inter-relationships among this specific combination of three variables (i.e., loneliness, self-disclosure on Facebook, and Facebook usage per se) as well as (b) collecting data from a culturally unique sample, emerging adults in Hong Kong.

BACKGROUND

Motivations for users to join and use social networking websites (SNS) vary (boyd, 2006; Bryant, Marmo, & Ramirez, 2011; Chen, 2015), but the primary motivation is to communicate and maintain relationships with other users (Dwyer, Hiltz & Passerini, 2007). Individuals can form online communities around shared interests with others outside their pre-existing social group or location (Webb & Lee, 2011). However, many participants in large SNSs like Facebook primarily search for and communicate with their offline connections rather than looking for new people to meet (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2006; Miller & Munday, 2015). Nonetheless, the more users want to maintain relationships on social media, the more likely they are to spend time in self-disclosing activities, such as updating Facebook profile information, posting status updates, and uploading photos and videos.

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