

SHINING A LIGHT ON LONELINESS

A TEAM OF BAYLOR PROFESSORS HIGHLIGHTS EMOTIONAL EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

“WHAT KIND OF RESEARCH CAN WE DO that will help people live better, more meaningful lives?” This potent question fuels much of the research at Baylor and recently led three professors at the Hankamer School of Business to study one of the most pervasive, invasive and – as they uncovered – emotionally affecting ingredients in our modern lives: social media.

The research team consisted of Jim Roberts, PhD, the Ben H. Williams Professor of Marketing; Phil Young, PhD, clinical associate professor of Information Systems and Business Analytics; and Meredith David, PhD, associate professor of Marketing. The study, “The Epidemic of Loneliness: A Nine-year Longitudinal Study of the Impact of Passive and Active Social Media Use on Loneliness,” was published in the October 2024 issue of *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

“This study really began when I encountered the Surgeon General’s

report in 2023 called, ‘The Epidemic of Loneliness,’” Roberts said. “My work is all about social media use, and immediately I was interested in the irony. Social media was developed to connect us, and yet the result has been the contradiction; people feel increased loneliness and report sadness. Even though it’s called social media, we consume or use social media largely when we’re by ourselves.”

For the study, the team was able to access a large amount of data produced in the Netherlands over a 10-year span. More than 8,000 people were involved in the research, with ages ranging from 16 to those in their 90s. Before the team began working numbers, they decided to start by identifying the valuable questions. They wanted to deeply and correctly understand what was being asked and how it was being asked, so they could identify what was consistently reported over time. The goal was to establish what relationships there were within the answers.

After much study and evaluation, the group’s findings confirm earlier work – and suspicions – that social media was loneliness-inducing. Aspects of the findings bring new intricacies to light. Up until a few years ago, passive social media (where content is read and observed, but not interacted with) was considered bad, and active social media use (when people create, post, like and comment on content) was good. Yet the research reveals negative effects from both passive and active social media use. Both introduce loneliness and feelings of isolation. Furthermore, the study shows passive and active use can result in more pronounced feelings of loneliness at quicker rates of change over time. In other words, users of social media can fall into patterns of loneliness more rapidly.

Roberts reports that due to the nature of his work, people often ask if all social

Jim Roberts



Meredith David

media is bad. He holds out hope for healthy usage – though he knows how much energy it can take to find and maintain that level.

“I think it is finding what I call the digital sweet spot – where you’re using social media for all the good things it can deliver,” Roberts said.

This study, among others, confirms the dangers are real, not just for individuals, but also for the cumulative effects on our larger society. Roberts speaks to ways social media can affect individuals mentally and physically with medical implications like premature death, heart disease, stroke, weakened immune systems, and heightened anxiety and depression.

With risks like these, why is social media usage still so high? The team reports that fear of missing out is a lot of what drives social media use. When people see everything going on, and

they’re not invited to all of it, that can start a spiral, Roberts said. This leads to looking for more information, feeling bad about what is found, then looking for some more to satiate the urge. This cycle of loneliness can be hard for people to break out of, and it’s worth noting that some people are just particularly susceptible to being trapped in it.

“When social media began, there was an idea that it was about connecting people,” Roberts said. “This new landscape that centers on short-form videos has done away with that pretense.”

The team points out that the sole purpose of short-form videos – whether they be TikTok videos, Instagram Reels, or YouTube Shorts – is to get people to stay engaged as long as possible, behavior that can lead to people becoming, quite literally, addicted.

Instead of just being doomsayers, the team sees these kinds of findings as ways to illuminate how people can change behavior to move forward in a positive light. Understanding where current usage patterns fall short and are even hurting people can guide a reimagining of social media for the future and future generations. The problems must be understood so people will see the effects of behavior, but there is a broader vision as well.

“With enough data in the future, we will be able to put our fingers on exactly what makes a healthier or a less healthy social media platform and social media experience,” Young said.

So, while the headline of the study may not be encouraging – no one wants our society spiraling further into loneliness – the idea that these findings could lead

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to patterning a more positive future is encouraging. What these studies can do for the culture moving forward is why the team will continue researching; it’s where the light comes in. ■

Phil Young

