



Article

## Connected but Alone: The Paradox of Social Networking Sites and The Rise of Loneliness

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**Abstract:** This study aims to explore the impact of social networks and social isolation on neighborhood security, focusing on the role of social relationships in mitigating social isolation and fostering a sense of security within groups. It highlights how the strength of social relationships contributes to community cohesion and collective security. At the same time, the study addresses how social isolation weakens trust and interaction among residents, increasing vulnerability and perceived insecurity. It emphasises the importance of building inclusive social networks to strengthen neighbourhood resilience and promote a safer living environment. The study employed a quantitative approach, utilizing a descriptive questionnaire distributed to a non-random sample of 30 university students. The results revealed that most students use social media platforms at a higher than average rate, with an average score of 3.68, and many expressed discomfort when they stopped using them. Regarding loneliness, participants reported an average level of 3.60, primarily attributed to difficulties in forming friendships and challenges in communicating with others. Furthermore, statistical analysis showed no statistically significant differences between genders, with a p-value (0.145) greater than 0.05, indicating that gender does not play a major role in this relationship. The study also recommended that future researchers explore non-student groups and use mixed-methods approaches to gain deeper insights into the social and psychological effects of social media use.

**Keywords:** *Social network, loneliness, Interaction, Stress, higher education*

## Introduction

Social media platforms have witnessed widespread proliferation, becoming a crucial source for obtaining information, statistical data, and staying updated with the latest global news quickly and effortlessly. This expansion has contributed to transforming the world into a closely-interconnected global village, fostering openness among different societies. However, this shift has significantly impacted individuals' social lives, leading many to prefer isolation over real-life interactions (Al-Tawil, 2019). The increasing number of social media users has reached an alarming rate, with some individuals developing an addiction to these platforms, using them as an escape from reality (Xuan & Amat, 2020). The daily rise in social media usage is particularly evident among young people, especially students, who rely on these platforms for everyday life, academic research, and maintaining connections with friends and classmates (Al-Saadi, 2021).

Research indicates that continuous use of social networks plays a significant role in fostering addiction, often resulting in poor concentration, heightened distraction, and diminished academic performance. Moreover, prolonged usage is closely associated with feelings of social isolation and elevated anxiety levels (Abdul-Muttalib, 2020; Rakan, 2023).

Such extended reliance on these platforms can negatively impact interpersonal relationships, as individuals may gradually lose friendships and struggle to maintain healthy ties with family and peers. Empirical studies further highlight that excessive use of social media and the internet constitutes a primary cause of these challenges (Tariq, 2020; Keles et al., 2020).

Against this backdrop, the significance of the present study lies in its contribution to deepening our understanding of how social media use shapes the social and psychological well-being of university students. While previous research has explored the impact of social media broadly, limited attention has been directed towards this phenomenon within the specific socio-cultural context of local society. Accordingly, the research gap centres on examining these dynamics in a diverse community of higher education students. Beyond addressing this gap, the study seeks to construct a cognitive framework that clarifies the potential social and psychological implications of social media engagement among students.

**Objectives**

1. To examine the extent of social networks usage among university students.
2. To assess the level of loneliness experienced by university students.
3. To investigate the relationship between social networks usage and feelings of loneliness according to gender (male, female).

**Questions and Hypothesis**

1. What is the level of social media usage among university students?
2. What is the level of loneliness experienced by university students?

**H0.** There is no statistically significant relationship between social networks usage and feelings of loneliness among university youth attributable to gender as a variable.

**Literature review**

Al Sudaimi's Study (2022), titled *The Role of Social Media in Psychological Influence among University Youth: A Study on a Sample of Students from Menoufia University in Egypt*, this study employed a descriptive methodology. The sample consisted of 320 students from the Faculty of Education at Menoufia University. The findings indicated that social media has a significant psychological impact on university youth in Egypt. The study recommended raising awareness among students about the negative effects of social media. In contrast, Moataz (2022) conducted a survey study on the impact of social media and psychological problems, using a random sample of 40 male and female students from Hashemite University. The results demonstrated that social media contributes to psychological issues among users. The study recommended increasing awareness among students regarding the negative effects of social networking platforms.

Ameen's study (2020) examined *The Psychological and Social Effects of Social Media Addiction Among Omani Youth*. The sample included of 128 students. The results indicated that social media networks contribute to addiction and anxiety. The study emphasised the need to educate students about the psychological and social consequences of excessive social media use. Ezz's study (2019) titled *The Role of Social Media in the Psychological Well-being of Egyptian Youth*, applied a descriptive research method, with a sample of 300 students from Damietta University. The results showed that social media had a negative impact on psychological well-being. The study recommends raising awareness among young people about the adverse effects of social media use.

Based on the above, this study aims to identify the potential effects of social media use among university students, with the objective of providing evidence-based insights and recommendations that may contribute to shaping and informing policies related to this issue. The findings will also be of significant value to researchers and others interested in the field of social media.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Social media platforms emerged initially among students in schools and universities, with Classique.com being the first electronic platform introduced in the American context. Following this, MySpace.com gained popularity. However, the rapid technological advancements of 2004 led to the emergence and widespread adoption of Facebook, particularly among young people. This platform offered an effective means for instant communication through text messaging, allowing individuals to interact with friends, colleagues, and family members.

There is no universally agreed-upon definition of Social Networks. However accepted perspectives describe them as digital communities where individuals with shared goals, interests, and experiences interact and exchange content (Lampropoulos et al., 2022; Griffiths & Koss, 2017; Ho et al., 2019; Andreasen, 2015). These platforms enable communication through written and spoken language, while also facilitating the sharing of visual media such as short videos. With rapid technological advancements, social media platforms have evolved into diverse forms and manifestations. Over the past two decades, some of the most influential platforms have included Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and others.

Despite the significant role of social media, its long-term use may also generate negative consequences (Pellegrino et al., 2022; Erfani, S. S., & Abedin, 2018). On the one hand, these platforms provide valuable opportunities for individuals to explore foreign cultures, expand their knowledge, and build virtual connections that can eventually develop into real-life relationships (Machidon et al., 2018). At the same time, excessive use often leads to addictive behaviours that contribute to deferent problem (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011; Al Barashdi, 2020; Balakrishnan et al., 2023; Shern et al., 2016; Seabrook et al., 2016; Elias & Gorey, 2022; Baumeister and Fonach, 2015; Patzelt et al. ,2025). Researchers have highlighted several adverse effects of social media addiction, including reduced self-esteem, poor social integration, and neglect of responsibilities (Carbonell & Panova, 2017; Prasetya & Wardani, 2023; Kuss & Lopez-Fernandez, 2016; Marciano et al., 2022; Masaeli & Farhadi, 2021; Montag & Diefenbach, 2018; Paulus et al., 2018; Kellis et al., 2020; Schwan & Amat, 2020). Many individuals also turn to

social media primarily for entertainment (Golder et al., 2017; Van Bavel et al., 2024; White & Hanley, 2024). However, prolonged periods of online activity and continuous browsing of these platforms tend to reinforce social isolation while further diminishing users’ ability to fulfil social obligations and maintain effective communication with others.

**Methodology**

**Research Design**

The study employs a descriptive research method, which provides a precise and detailed account of the phenomenon under investigation. This approach allows for the collection of a substantial amount of information, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

**Participants**

The study population comprises all students at University of Stellenbosch. Random sampling was used to select a sample of 30 students from the university for the 2023/2024 academic year. This method ensures the representation of diverse perspectives within the student body while maintaining objectivity in data collection.

**Table 1**  
*Sample Distribution*

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Level</b>	<b>Sample Size</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
<b>Gender</b>	Male	19	63.3%
	Female	11	36.7%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Age</b>	20-30 years	5	16.7%
	31-40 years	19	63.3%
	41-50 years	5	16.7%
	51+ years	1	3.3%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Marital Status</b>	Single	6	20%
	Married	19	63.3%
	Divorced	4	13.3%
	Widowed	1	3.4%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Family Size</b>	Less than 4 members	3	10%
	5-8 members	17	56.7%
	9-12 members	6	20%
	More than 12 members	4	13.3%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>100%</b>

## Data Collection

To ensure a comprehensive data collection process, quantitative methods were used. Questionnaires served as the primary data collection tool and were conducted with the aim of assessing the impact of social networks on loneliness. By incorporating a set of Likert scale items, the questionnaires provided a structured framework while also allowing participants to express their perceptions and experiences in a consistent and measurable manner, facilitating reliable statistical analysis of the study variables.

## Instrument

To achieve the objectives of the study, a structured questionnaire was developed, consisting of two parts. The first contained the general information, such as (gender, age, marital status, and family size). The second section comprised 10 items distributed across two key dimensions.

The first dimension focused on the level of social media usage among university students and included five items: spending most of one's time on social media, experiencing distress when unable to use social media, ignoring family members while using social media, being preoccupied with social media even in social gatherings, and disregarding advice from others to reduce social media use.

The second dimension examined the level of loneliness among university students and also contained five items: feeling isolated despite being surrounded by others, experiencing boredom and fatigue throughout the day, struggling to form friendships, lacking a sense of purpose, and finding it difficult to understand those around them.

To ensure the credibility and validity of the study instrument, it was reviewed by a panel of experts specialising in the relevant field. Their feedback and evaluations were taken into consideration, and necessary modifications were made to enhance the clarity, accuracy, and appropriateness of the questionnaire items for the study's objectives.

The study used Cronbach's alpha to determine the reliability of the questionnaire. The results, as presented in Table 2, indicated that the obtained reliability coefficients were appropriate and acceptable for the purposes of this study.

**Table 2**

*Internal Consistency Reliability Coefficient of the Study Instrument*

Questionnaire Domains	Internal Consistency
Overall Instrument	0.80

**Results**

This section reports the findings obtained through the analysis of primary data using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), with particular emphasis on the main indicators related to social media use.

**Question one result: What is the Level of Social Media Usage Among University Students?**

To answer this question, **means (arithmetic averages) and standard deviations** were calculated to assess the level of social media usage among university students. These statistical measures provide insights into the extent and variability of students' engagement with social media platforms.

**Table 3**

*Items Related to the Level of Social Media Usage Among University Students*

Rank	Item No.	Statement	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Level
1	5	I do not listen to others' advice to reduce my social media usage.	4.20	0.83	High
2	2	I feel distressed when I do not use social media.	4.19	0.91	High
3	1	I spend most of my time on social media.	3.63	1.41	Moderate
4	3	I ignore my family members when using social media.	3.47	1.32	Moderate
5	4	I am preoccupied with social media while sitting with others.	3.34	1.11	Moderate
Overall Score			3.68	0.94	High

Table 3 indicates that the overall mean score for university students' social media usage is 3.68, reflecting a high level of agreement. The mean scores for individual items in the study sample ranged between 3.34 and 4.20. Notably, two items received a high level of agreement: Item 5, which states, "I do not listen to others' advice to reduce my social media usage," had the highest mean score of 4.20, and Item 2, which states, "I feel distressed when I do not use social media," had a mean score of 4.19. The remaining items were rated at a moderate level of agreement, with mean scores ranging from 3.34 to 3.63. Among these, Item 1, which states, "I spend most of my time on social media," received the highest moderate score of 3.63, while Item 4, which states, "I am preoccupied with social media while sitting with others," had the lowest mean score of 3.34.

**Question two result:** What is the Level of Loneliness Among University Students?

To answer this question, mean scores and standard deviations were calculated to assess the level of loneliness among university students. These statistical measures provide insights into the extent and variability of loneliness experienced by the study sample.

**Table 4**

*Items Related to the Level of Loneliness Among University Students*

Rank	Item No.	Statement	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Level
1	5	I struggle to understand those around me.	4.32	0.86	High
2	3	I find it difficult to form friendships.	4.23	1.16	High
3	2	I feel bored and exhausted throughout the day.	3.43	1.25	Moderate
4	1	I feel isolated from those around me despite their presence.	3.30	1.20	Moderate
5	4	I feel like I have no purpose.	3.12	1.14	Moderate
Overall Score			3.60	0.96	Moderate

Table 4 reveals that the overall mean score for university students' level of loneliness is 3.60, indicating a moderate level of agreement. The mean scores for individual items in the study sample ranged between 3.12 and 4.32. Two items received a high level of agreement: Item 5, which states, "*I struggle to understand those around me,*" had the highest mean score of 4.32, and Item 3, which states, "*I find it difficult to form friendships,*" had a mean score of 4.23. The remaining items were rated at a moderate level of agreement, with mean scores ranging from 3.12 to 3.43. Among these, Item 2, which states, "*I feel bored and exhausted throughout the day,*" received the highest moderate score of 3.43, while Item 4, which states, "*I feel like I have no purpose,*" had the lowest mean score of 3.12.

**Hypotheses (H0) result:** There is no statistically significant relationship between social media usage among university students and feelings of loneliness, attributable to the gender variable.

To test this hypothesis, statistical analyses were conducted to determine whether differences in social media usage and loneliness levels vary significantly between male and female students. The results provide insight into whether gender plays a determining role in this relationship.

**Table. 5**

*T-Test Results Based on Gender Variable*

Gender	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	T-Value	Significance (p-value)
Male	2.7831	0.58579	-1.263	0.145

Gender	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	T-Value	Significance (p-value)
Female	2.8900	0.47659	-	-

Table 5 indicates that there are no statistically significant differences at the 0.05 significance level in the responses of the study sample regarding university students' use of social media and their feelings of loneliness, based on gender. The p-value (0.145) exceeds the 0.05 threshold, confirming that gender does not significantly influence the relationship between social media usage and loneliness among the participants.

### Discussion

Regarding the level of social media use among students, the results showed that the overall mean score for university students' social media usage is 3.68, reflecting a high level of agreement. The mean scores for individual items ranged between 3.34 and 4.20. Notably, two items received high agreement: Item 5, *"I do not listen to others' advice to reduce my social media usage,"* had the highest mean score of 4.20, while Item 2, *"I feel distressed when I do not use social media,"* had a mean score of 4.19.

The remaining items were rated at a moderate level of agreement, with mean scores between 3.34 and 3.63. Among these, Item 1, *"I spend most of my time on social media,"* received the highest moderate score of 3.63, whereas Item 4, *"I am preoccupied with social media while sitting with others,"* had the lowest mean score of 3.34.

The results showed that the majority of students are heavily immersed in social media use and are unaware of the seriousness of addiction. This finding is fully consistent with the studies of Al-Sudaimi (2022), Moataz (2022), and Amin (2020), which confirmed the prevalence of social media addiction among students.

One of the most prominent potential effects of social media addiction is social isolation, characterised by an inability to integrate and interact with others. Psychological effects also emerged, such as feelings of boredom, exhaustion, and resentment throughout the day. These results were similar to those of Al-Sudaimi (2022), Amin (2020), and Ezz (2019), who confirmed that social media addiction often leads to isolation and depression.

Finally, the findings indicated no differences between males and females regarding the degree of addiction to social media. This result was consistent with previous research. Moreover, the study results did not reveal statistically significant differences at the 0.05 level in responses related to social media use and feelings of loneliness based on gender. The p-value (0.145) exceeded 0.05, indicating that gender does not significantly influence this relationship.

## Conclusion

The study aimed to examine the impact of social networking sites and social media on university students in terms of their personal, academic, and social well-being. The results clearly demonstrated that, over the long term, social media produces serious and undeniable effects, including feelings of loneliness, a loss of psychological and social balance, and difficulties integrating with others.

This study faced some limitations, most notably its small sample size; applying it to a larger group of students would have enhanced the credibility of its findings. Furthermore, the research relied entirely on a social questionnaire. The use of additional methods, such as interviews or focus groups, might have yielded stronger and more comprehensive results.

Therefore, the study recommends that future researchers explore non-student populations and employ mixed-method approaches to gain deeper insights into the social and psychological implications of social media use.

In addition, institutions such as universities have a social responsibility to mitigate the impact of this technology on students. For instance, universities can launch social initiatives encouraging students to put away their mobile devices during specific periods, such as lectures and meals. They can also organise seminars, workshops, and discussion groups on the dangers of excessive social media use, which would help raise student awareness. Furthermore, awareness meetings can be held with parents to promote joint cooperation in reducing this phenomenon. It is equally important to conduct on-campus campaigns involving students and teachers, using images and symbols that warn of the dangers while encouraging participation in alternative social and athletic activities. Neglecting the issue by both official and non-official institutions will undoubtedly exacerbate the problem and could turn it into one of the most serious phenomena threatening the future of youth in the near future. Addressing the issue requires intensive efforts, reflecting shared responsibility and cooperation among various social systems such as education, health, and the environment.

If these findings and recommendations are taken seriously and implemented by effective institutions, they could bear fruit in the near future, helping to create an active, creative generation capable of producing results and contributing to the sustainable development of society as a whole. From a sociological perspective, theories such as functionalism emphasise the importance of cooperation and collaboration to ensure the completeness and stability of the social system. Likewise, symbolic

interactionism highlights that social interaction occurs through real-life encounters, which play a valuable role in building skills and shaping individual character. However, the most important question remains: Is social media addiction a modern form of social alienation? And what insights might emerge if we connect it to Marx's theory of alienation?

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