

More comfortable online? Alexithymia and social media use

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Abstract:

Alexithymia includes difficulty identifying and describing emotions, limited imaginative ability, and a tendency to focus attention on external reality versus inner experience (Taylor, Bagby, & Parker, 1991, 1997).

Alexithymia is one feature of low emotional intelligence (Bar-on, 1996, 1997; Parker, Taylor, & Bagby, 2001).

There has been limited, conflicting research on the topic of emotional intelligence and social media usage. For example, emotionally intelligent people tend to use Facebook more overall (Bektas, Toros, & Miman, 2014), but tend to use MySpace less for communicating with romantic partners (Dong, Urista, & Gundrum, 2008).

Thus, we tentatively hypothesize that alexithymia may be associated with more social media usage because it may be more difficult for these individuals to form strong in-person relationships (Kauhanen, Kaplan, Julkunen, Wilson & Salonen, 1993).

938 online adults (72% female, Mean age=28.10, 84.8% Caucasian) completed the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20; Bagby, Parker, & Taylor, 1993) and self-report measures of social media use as part of a larger study.

The mean score on the TAS-20 was 44.88 (SD=10.55), with 82 (8.7%) participants having alexithymia (score ≥ 61). Overall, total alexithymia was positively associated with total social media use, $\beta=.06$, $p=.05$. In terms of type of social media, total alexithymia was marginally associated with Facebook use and Instagram use, $\beta_s=.06$, $p_s=.06$, but was *not* associated with Twitter use, $\beta=.03$, $p=.43$. When examining active (posting) versus passive use (checking) of social media, total alexithymia was positively associated with *active* social media use (posting), $\beta=.06$, $p=.04$, but was *not* associated with *passive* social media use (checking), $\beta=.05$, $p=.14$.

Alexithymia is associated with higher levels of certain types of social media. Future research should directly measure social media usage, rather than rely on self-report. But to our knowledge, this is the first study to examine question of how alexithymic people use social media.