

Tweets, Hashtags, & Likes: How is Social Media Use Related to Empathy?
Sasha Zarins¹, Ava Le², Emily Mahurin³, Michael McFerran³, & Sara H. Konrath PhD^{1,4,5}
¹Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis
²University of Indianapolis
³Butler University
⁴University of Michigan
⁵University of Rochester Medical Center

Abstract:

Empathy is the tendency to perceive and interpret others' perspectives and feel care and concern for them (Davis, 1983; Hoffman, 1977). However, empathy has been declining in American college students in recent years (Konrath, O'Brien, Hsing, 2011) and many scholars blame new technology and social media (see Konrath, 2012 for a review). Over the course of 3 separate studies, we investigated the relationships between social media usage and empathy.

Study 1 found that among online adults Empathic Concern (emotional empathy) was related to less frequent Twitter use, $\beta = -.07$, $p = .04$, and Perspective Taking (cognitive empathy) was related to less frequent Facebook use, $\beta = -.07$, $p = .05$. However, Fantasy and Personal Distress were both associated with more frequent use of Twitter and Facebook, $\beta s = .06-.11$, $p s < .04$. Study 2 found that among students, dispositional personal distress is associated with more daily tweeting, $\beta = .60$, $p = .009$, but fewer Facebook status updates, $\beta = -.39$, $p = .007$. Finally, Study 3 found that among teens, those higher in empathic concern were more likely to feel connected to their friends and family when using Facebook, $\beta = .47$, $p = .03$.

These studies reveal that empathy is related to both the frequency of social media usage and the emotional connections experienced through social media. These results can be used to help better understand and navigate this fairly new media terrain. Our studies take a more comprehensive look at the relationship between empathy and social media use by measuring not only frequency of use but emotional connection on different social media platforms.