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### The Impact of Constant Connectivity: Examining the Relationships Between Social Media, Loneliness, Anxiety and Avoidant Behaviors

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**THE IMPACT OF CONSTANT CONNECTIVITY: EXAMINING THE  
RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA, ANXIETY, LONELINESS, AND  
AVOIDANT BEHAVIORS**

**BY**

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

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### **Abstract**

Conflicting evidence has been found in the past regarding the overall effect of social media on mental health. Social media, when used as a means to combat feelings of loneliness and anxiety, may be a form of avoidance away from those considered undesirable feelings. Avoiding these feelings may ultimately intensify instead of minimizing them. The focus of this study is to examine the relationship between avoidant behaviors, loneliness, anxiety and social media use. It is predicted that social media use, loneliness and anxiety will all be predictors of avoidant behaviors. 150 college-aged participants will complete three previously established scales, measuring levels of anxiety, feelings of loneliness and tendency towards avoidant behaviors. Participants will also report their average hours per week spent on social media. Comparing the scores of the completed scales as well as the average time spent on social media may illustrate a correlation between avoidance, feelings of loneliness and anxiety, and the role that social media plays in each. It is hypothesized that feelings of loneliness, feelings of anxiety and time spent on social media will all be predictors of avoidant behaviors. It is also hypothesized that time spent on social media, loneliness and anxiety will all be positively correlated with each other. Addressing the effects of social media on mental health may aid in developing a useful framework by informing people of the ill effects inherent in social media and its use in perpetuating avoidant behaviors.

## **The Impact of Constant Connectivity: Examining the Relationships Between Social Media, Loneliness, Anxiety and Avoidant Behaviors**

Sherry Turkle is a cultural analyst who studies how technology is shaping modern relationships with ourselves and others. In her TED Talk *Connected, but alone?* she discusses how cellphones have disrupted our ability to relate to others and understand ourselves. Social media provides us with the illusion of constant companionship as at least 3.5 billion people out of a global population of 7.7 billion people currently use social media today (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). The percentage of US adults who use social media rose to 79% in 2019 from only 5% in 2005 (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). Especially for smartphone owners, social stimulation is always at one's fingertips: In the US, adults spend on average more than 6 hours per day on the internet (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). The notion that individuals never have to be alone because of constant access to other people via social media has changed the human psyche to no longer view solitude as a necessary and healthy part of the human experience but to instead view aloneness as something to be avoided. Individuals now use technology to define themselves by what they share and how others react to what they share; when one does not feel validation and connection, one does not feel like themselves (Turkle, 2012). The act of seeking external validation in an attempt to construct internal validation leads to an unsatisfying cycle of individuals expecting the other people in their lives to fulfill them in a way that others are unable to do sustainably.

When people are unable to feel consistently fulfilled by others, they internalize a sense of inadequacy and disconnection. Now, instead of being viewed as an essential, although sometimes painful, part of the human experience as it once was, loneliness is now seen as a character flaw (Turkle, 2012). By conceptualizing loneliness as a character fault, individuals are encouraged to actively suppress feelings of loneliness or at least prioritize combatting those

feelings. This shift in how the human psyche views loneliness has resulted in a major psychological change that has infiltrated cultural expectations and values. Feeling alone now feels like a problem that needs to be solved.

Because of a shift in the human psyche that has left humans feeling like their loneliness is a result of social disconnection, feelings of loneliness oftentimes causes anxiety. As a way of combatting uncomfortable feelings of loneliness, it is now common for one to reflexively reach for a device in an attempt to quickly connect and negate those feelings of loneliness and disconnection (Turkle, 2012). Reaching for a device as a means of avoiding unpleasant emotions can very quickly turn into an emotional crutch. This reflex of grabbing a device at the first feeling of loneliness ultimately leads to isolation instead of connection; it eliminates the need to develop a capacity for solitude (Turkle, 2012). This proves to be harmful since the ability to be alone is an important aspect of cultivating sustainable and healthy relationships. To form real attachments with others, it is important for an individual to have a sense of self first (Turkle, 2012). When someone lacks the capacity for solitude, they feel uncomfortable with themselves and turn to other people in order to feel less anxious (Turkle, 2012). Asking others to fill a void that only an individual can fill themselves perpetuates feelings of loneliness and isolation. Unable to appreciate others for who they are, individuals oftentimes find themselves using others as spare parts in an attempt to construct or uphold their own fragile sense of self. Many people today are under the false impression that always being connected decreases feelings of loneliness, when in reality, the opposite is true. When one is unable to be alone, they will only feel more lonely.

Noticing these patterns, psychologists have begun to study the relationship between technology, feelings of loneliness and feelings of anxiety that have become more prominent with the introduction of social media sites to everyday life. For example, researchers have found

everyday technology use is correlated with loneliness (Esen et al., 2013), anxiety (Tonioni et al., 2012), and avoidant behaviors (Moqbel & Kock, 2018) among other constructs. However, researchers are yet to explicitly consider the use of technology, often conceptualized as a mechanism to suppress anxiety, as a factor that predicts increased anxiety and feelings of loneliness. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the relationships between avoidant behavioral tendencies, social media usage and feelings of loneliness and anxiety.

### **Social Media & Emotional Processing**

As the internet has expanded to include avenues for communication such as social media, social psychologists have endeavored to understand the implications of the internet on humans' social landscapes. In the last 10 years, Social Networking Sites (SNS) have begun to be analyzed in the context of emotional processing and distraction (Moqbel & Kock, 2018). SNS, for example, can be addictive, encourage task distraction behaviors, decrease productivity, and inhibit positive emotions (Moqbel & Kock, 2018). However, not all research has found that SNS have overall negative effects. For example, the minority of Instagram users have reported engaging in unhealthy or problematic behaviors on the site (Craske et al., 1987). Regardless of an overall positive or negative effect on emotional processing, the ubiquitous nature of SNS in the everyday experience of the average young adult cannot be ignored. For many teenagers, social media sites and online communication methods such as instant messaging have replaced face-to-face interactions (Pierce, 2009). This shift may present socioemotional problems since higher levels of internet use are correlated with weaker social ties (Sanders et al., 2000) and higher levels of loneliness (Esen et al., 2013). Researchers have also found a correlation between a loss of interest in communicating with real people and psychological symptoms such as anxiety and depression (Tonioni et al., 2012). This disinterest in real life communication may be a

manifestation of a desire to escape reality. For instance, it was found that excessive use of the SNS Instagram is related with the perception that a person is escaping reality (Kircaburun & Griffiths, 2018). Spending time on social media as a way to escape reality is considered an unhealthy coping mechanism since one is refusing to acknowledge and process emotions and instead engaging with others via the internet as a distraction. Although avoidance may provide short term relief from uncomfortable emotions, the long-term increased levels of anxiety are maintained through the negative reinforcement of unhealthy coping mechanisms as well as a refusal to acknowledge and process emotions (Craske et al., 1987). This concept of avoiding unpleasant emotions for short term relief is called experiential avoidance. While experiential avoidance may provide an immediate sense of relief and control, the long-term effects are oftentimes isolating.

### **Experiential Avoidance**

Avoidance of unpleasant emotions is a common coping mechanism in which an individual engages in distracting behaviors in an attempt to suppress the unpleasant emotion they are experiencing. Definitionally, experiential avoidance is an individual's unwillingness or aversion to uncomfortable thoughts and feelings (Hayes et al., 1996). Avoiding discomfort is a natural human function but, when chronic, may contribute to the development of a variety of psychological difficulties such as substance abuse, anxiety, depression and trauma-related difficulties (Craske et al., 1987; Hayes et al., 1996). Many of these problematic behaviors may be repeated and become habitual because of the short-term reduction in unwanted internal events with which they are associated (Roemer, 2005). For instance, experiential avoidance is inversely correlated with well-being (Machell et al., 2015), is positively correlated with worse overall moods due to an inclination towards negativity (Quickert et al., 2020), and is positively

correlated with higher anxiety levels (Odou & Brinker, 2015). The negative impacts of engaging in avoidant behaviors in an attempt to avoid unpleasant emotions can be applicable when specifically looking at social media use a mechanism to avoid feelings of loneliness and anxiety. Psychologists have recently started to examine the relationship between experiential avoidance and technology, specifically social media sites and other online communication methods such as instant messaging. Absent in this literature is attention to how social media utilization and experiential avoidance may result in a weaker self-understanding of one's internal emotional landscape (i.e., emotional suppression) and how this may relate to higher levels of anxiety.

### **Escape Theory**

Experiential avoidance is similar to a well-established theory in psychology called Escape Theory. Escape Theory is used to conceptualize the tendency for individuals to avoid unpleasant emotions by engaging in distracting behaviors (DeWall, 2007). Oftentimes, these distracting behaviors are unhealthy coping mechanisms or self-defeating behaviors such as social isolation or self-harm. Individuals who engage in distracting behaviors are not necessarily attempting to harm the self but instead they are trying to forget the self (Baumeister, 1991). By trying to distract with the goal of forgetting, individuals inhibit emotional processing. This human tendency to avoid and distract instead of acknowledging and processing experiences is the foundation of Escape Theory (DeWall, 2007). Understanding the human tendency to avoid instead of address uncomfortable emotions is crucial for understanding links between technology use and psychological distress.

Researchers have begun to draw links between Escape Theory and technology use. For instance, unsolved life problems are predictors of excessive smartphone use as a form of escapism (Shen & Wang, 2019). Humans attempt to find sources of distraction during times of



intense stimulation, such as when participants were presented with the choice of either a low- or high-intensity image and participants exposed to a high-intensity image were more likely to choose a distraction to decrease their negative emotional response (Murphy & Young, 2018). The notion of individuals being more likely to try to distract themselves in moments of intense stimulation can be applied to how individuals may reach for their cellphone in times of intense emotional experiences as a means of distraction. However, doing so proves to be an unhealthy coping mechanism since suppression of emotions through distraction prolongs unpleasantness associated with the negative emotional experience (Cioffi & Holloway, 1993). Meaning, when someone distracts themselves from a negative emotional experience, they end up lengthening the discomfort. Not only does ignoring an uncomfortable emotion prolong the discomfort, but it also has been shown to lead to longer-lasting negative psychological difficulties: The suppression of emotions can protract unpleasant emotions to the extent that the individual develops depression or anxiety (Wegner & Zanakos, 1994). Moreover, avoidant behaviors may ultimately lead to self-imposed isolation and prevent fulfilling and healthy relationships with others (Woody, 2018; Wegner & Zanakos, 1994). The possibility of an individual being unable to maintain fulfilling relationships with others or developing depression or anxiety due to their suppression of unpleasant emotions highlights the powerful and long-lasting effects of avoidance. With the integration of social media into everyday communication, it is critical to expand upon previous research on Escape Theory since it has yet to be examined in the context of social media use as a medium to avoid or escape unpleasant emotional experiences. It is especially important to consider loneliness when exploring social media as a means to escape because SNS were created with the intention of fostering connection. Therefore, social media can be used as a medium to evade feelings of loneliness, which presents psychological problems.

**Loneliness**

An uncomfortable emotional experience that has especially become increasingly less tolerable in recent years, loneliness has always been a part of the human experience. Social media and the sense of constant connectivity it provides has caused a cultural shift in the way loneliness is viewed and processed, with individuals seeing loneliness as increasingly negative and avoidable instead of inevitable and a part of the human experience (Fernandez & Matt, 2019). With a growing cultural concern about experiencing loneliness, Americans now attempt to avoid feelings of loneliness and see the emotion as a negative one to be avoided or suppressed (Fernandez & Matt, 2019). Social media has become an avenue for individuals to attempt to decrease feelings of loneliness, although loneliness predicts higher levels of Facebook use among adolescents (Wang et al., 2018). With feelings of loneliness predicting higher levels of Facebook use, a relationship between time spent on social media and feelings of loneliness is established. Furthermore, researchers have begun to examine the effect that SNS have on feelings of loneliness.. For example, it has been found that excessive use of social media, more than 1 hour spent on social media platforms per day, was positively correlated with increased feelings of loneliness (Pittman, 2018). Increased feelings of loneliness as a result of more than 1 hour spent on SNS suggests that limiting time spent on SNS could reduce feelings of loneliness. This was found by one experimental study that showed that decreasing social media use to 10 minutes per day resulted in a decrease in feelings of loneliness and depression (Hunt et al., 2018). This finding is consistent with the previous study that feelings of loneliness and time spent on social media are positively correlated, but it fails to determine whether or not the 10 minutes per day spent on social media reduces feelings of loneliness or if they only do not cause an increase in those feelings. Comparing results from different studies highlights the gaps in the

literature regarding the effects of social media on feelings of loneliness. It appears that social media may be helpful to an extent at reducing feelings of loneliness, but, if used excessively, social media may ultimately increase its users' feelings of loneliness. However, more research must be done in order to confidently establish the relationship between loneliness and social media use.

### **Anxiety & Technology**

The relationship between social media and unpleasant emotional experiences such as loneliness can be further analyzed by including anxiety in future research. As constant social connection through social media becomes the new standard and digital connection is labeled as a fundamental human right, feeling disconnected brings feelings of discomfort and anxiety (Fernandez & Matt, 2019). This notion emphasizes the change in the human psyche discussed previously that has equated aloneness with disconnection and loneliness. Furthering this new notion of solitude and loneliness being equal, it is important to discuss the inevitable resulting anxiety that is linked to the newfound perception of loneliness as being avoidable. With feeling lonely now interpreted as a personal deficit or character flaw, individuals are more likely to experience anxiety in conjunction with feelings of loneliness. Although feelings of loneliness may lead to increased feelings of anxiety, cellphones are often used in an attempt to appear distracted and thus avoid social situations that may be anxiety-inducing (Fernandez & Matt, 2019). The social crutch that cellphones provide further discourages individuals from developing the capacity for solitude. Similarly, procrastinatory social media use in times of heightened stress such as an exam period further exacerbates anxiety levels (Sternberg et al., 2020) which may be because SNS use can be a distracting or avoidant behavior (Moqbel & Kock, 2018) which leads to heightened anxiety levels instead of dissipating them (Tonioni et al., 2012). However, not all

studies have shown social media to heighten feelings of anxiety. For example, it was found that Instagram is positively correlated with a sense of overall well-being (Mackson et al., 2018). Contrastingly, another study found that an individual's number of social media posts is negatively correlated with their feelings of self-esteem (Phatiphong, 2020). These conflicting results call for more empirical research to clarify the relationships between SNS use and anxiety. However, such an exploration cannot be separated from considering loneliness as an integral component of this relationship. This approach, however, is yet to be addressed in the extant literature.

### **Current Study**

Given this gap in the literature, the proposed study will be undertaken to examine the relationship between social media, experiential avoidance and the possible resulting negative psychological consequences of a high number of hours spent on social media per week. Although high levels of social media use and experiential avoidance have both been correlated with increased levels of anxiety (Fernandez & Matt, 2019) and loneliness (Wang et al., 2018), minimal research has been done on the influence of an individual's social media use on their propensity to engage in avoidant behaviors that inhibit emotional processing. Conflicting results regarding the relationship between social media and anxiety and feelings of loneliness suggest that further research must be done in order to clarify the relationship. Understanding the relationship between social media use and mental health is important as technology continues to advance and one's social media presence becomes an even more ingrained cultural experience, with account creation proliferating and cellphone/technology access increasing even among younger children (Pew Research Center, 2020).

For this study, experiential avoidance (Cognitive Behavioral Avoidance Scale; Ottenbreit & Dobson, 2004), loneliness (UCLA Loneliness Scale; Russell et al., 1980), and anxiety (Beck Anxiety Inventory; Beck, 1988) will be assessed. This will afford the opportunity to examine relationships, via a cross-sectional design, between these constructs and SNS/technology use.

The following hypotheses will be tested:

- Tendency towards avoidant behaviors will be positively correlated with average hours spent on social media.
- Tendency towards avoidant behaviors will be positively correlated with feelings of anxiety.
- Tendency towards avoidant behaviors will be positively correlated with feelings of loneliness.
- Average hours spent on social media will be positively correlated with feelings of loneliness.
- Average hours spent on social media will be positively correlated with feelings of anxiety.
- Feelings of anxiety will be positively correlated with feelings of loneliness.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

Participants ( $N = 150$ ) will be college age students recruited from sharing the survey on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram as well as from flyers that will be posted in local libraries and coffee shops. An a priori power analysis was conducted using G\*power to determine an adequate sample size for the study. Using a medium effect size and power set to .95 the analysis indicated a minimum sample size of 119 participants was necessary. Data will be collected from 150 participants to account for missingness in the data and potential outliers while also satisfying

power requirements. Participants will hopefully be diverse in gender as well as race and ethnic identities. All participants will be volunteers and no compensation will be provided for participation.

### ***Materials***

#### ***Demographics***

Participants will be college age students diverse in gender as well as race and ethnic identities. The majority of participants are expected to be students at the Claremont Colleges with most participants being upperclassmen at Scripps College. Because the majority of participants are anticipated to be students at Scripps, it is expected that the majority of participants will be white and identify as female. The anticipated average age will be 20 years.

#### ***Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance Scale***

The Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance Scale (Ottenbreit & Dobson, 2004) will be used to measure the construct of experiential avoidance in the study. The CBAS is a 31-item likert-type scale designed to measure an individual's avoidant tendencies. Participants are presented with different responses to situations and asked how they would respond. They are asked to indicate for each item *not at all true for me, somewhat true for me, moderately true for me, very much true for me, extremely true for me*. Participants' responses to possible situations and the strategies they would most likely employ in each of them can be used to decide if they tend to engage in avoidant behaviors or not. The scores for each item are combined for a total scale score. The Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance Scale shows high internal consistency ( $\alpha = .95$ ) and a 4-month test-retest reliability was found. In addition, convergent validity was indicated by significant correlations with other measures of avoidance.

### ***UCLA Loneliness Scale***

The UCLA loneliness scale (Russell et al., 1980) will be used to measure the construct of loneliness in the study. The UCLA loneliness scale is a 20-item likert-type scale designed to measure subjective feelings of loneliness and feelings of social isolation. Participants rate each item, indicating *I often feel this way, I sometimes feel this way, I rarely feel this way, I never feel this way*. The scale measures the frequency in which the participants experiences feelings of loneliness and social isolation in order to prescribe how lonely they are compared to other participants. The scores for each item are combined for a total scale score. The measure is considered highly reliable, in terms of internal consistency (coefficient  $\alpha$  ranging from .89 to .94) and test-retest reliability over a 1-year period ( $r = .73$ ). There is also evidence for convergent validity indicated by significant correlations with other measures of loneliness.

### ***Beck Anxiety Inventory***

The Beck Anxiety Inventory (Beck, 1988) will be used to measure the construct of anxiety in the study. The 21-item likert-type scale includes a list of common symptoms of anxiety that participants read and indicate how much they have been bothered by that symptom during the past month, including today, by circling the number in the corresponding space in the column next to each symptom. The scale ranges from *not at all* (0) to *severely* (3). The scores for each item are combined for a total scale score. The Beck Anxiety Inventory shows high internal consistency ( $\alpha = .92$ ) and test–retest reliability over 1 week,  $r(81) = .75$ . Participants' experiences with feelings of loneliness and anxiety as well as participants' tendencies towards avoidant behaviors will be compared to their average hours spent on social media per week which can be found in settings on smart phones.

***Design***

The research design is non-experimental and correlational. Further, the data collected are cross-section in nature as repeated measures are not employed. This design, though suited to the research purposes, inhibits identifying causality within the variables.

***Procedure***

After obtaining an informed consent, participants will be asked to complete the three scales, Cognitive-Behavioral Avoidance Scale (2004), UCLA loneliness scale (1980), and Beck Anxiety Inventory scale (1988) in an online survey format. The order of the scales will be randomly assigned to each participant. After completing the scales, participants will be asked to report their average hours per week spent on social media sites as found under Screen Time within settings on their cellphone. Participants will then be debriefed through a guided 2-minute meditation aimed at reducing anxiety levels. The participants will be asked if they have any questions or concerns before exiting the study.

**Ethics**

The proposed study aims to expand the knowledge of the effects of social media use on loneliness and anxiety in the context of avoidant behaviors. It is important to investigate the relationship between emotional processing and social media use, especially as social media becomes an integral part of everyday life. By encouraging participants to reflect on their behaviors, feelings, and levels of social media use, progress can be made in each participant's individual understanding of their relationship with social media use and avoidant behaviors and the effects that may have on their mental health.

The proposed study does not involve a protected or vulnerable population, nor does it involve participants providing sensitive information. Data collected will be anonymous as



participants will not be asked to include their name and no other identifying questions will be asked. Participants will be debriefed and provided resources for help processing anxiety because of their exposure to the anxiety scale during the study. The benefits of the proposed study outweigh the potential risks because, although discussing anxiety can be anxiety-inducing, it is important to analyze the relationship between social media use and participants' anxiety levels for the purpose of encouraging healthier social media use. Understanding the potential relationship between social media and anxiety would be helpful as technology continues to progress and become more ubiquitous in everyday life. The proposed study will not involve deception and participation is truly voluntary as participants will not be compensated.

### **Predicted Results**

The proposed study examines if loneliness, anxiety and time spent on social media are predictors of avoidant behaviors. A multiple linear regression will be calculated to predict avoidant behaviors based on loneliness, anxiety and time spent on social media. It is predicted that a significant regression equation will be found, with loneliness, anxiety and time spent on social media as significant predictors of avoidant behaviors. It is predicted that loneliness, anxiety and time spent on social media will all be positively correlated with one's avoidant behavior tendencies. Further, it is predicted that loneliness and anxiety will both be significantly positively correlated with time spent on social media, and it is predicted that loneliness and anxiety will be significantly positively correlated with one another. This supports previous studies that examined the relationship between loneliness, anxiety and social media use. The hypotheses also support previous research that found positive correlations between anxiety, loneliness and avoidant behaviors.

## Discussion

The current study aims to further investigate the relationship between avoidant behaviors, anxiety, loneliness and social media use. Previous research has found conflicting results regarding the relationship between social media use, anxiety and loneliness which suggests that further research must be done in order to conclude the nature of the relationship. Specifically, conflicting results regarding the relationship between SNS use and anxiety call for more empirical research to clarify the relationship, but such an exploration cannot be separated from considering loneliness as an integral component of the relationship between SNS use and anxiety. Loneliness should be considered when analyzing the relationship between SNS use and anxiety because of humanity's new decreased capacity for solitude and negative interpretation of loneliness which has led to an increase of overall anxiety levels (Tonioni et al., 2012). The current study is built on the recognition of a shift in human perceptions of aloneness and loneliness and the role that social media may play in avoiding the now uncomfortable experience of feeling lonely. Although previous research has established a positive relationship between high levels of social media use, experiential avoidance and loneliness (Fernandez & Matt, 2019; Wang et al., 2018), minimal research has been done on the influence of an individual's social media use on their inclination to engage in avoidant behaviors that suppress emotional processing. Particularly, Escape Theory has yet to be investigated in the context of social media use as a medium to avoid or escape uncomfortable emotional experiences. The gaps in the literature identify the importance of the current study because of the current study's recognition of the unique relationship between loneliness, anxiety and social media use that has developed since this shift in humanity's interpretation of aloneness. Furthermore, the gaps in the literature also call for further research to be done regarding Escape Theory, specifically, how social media

can be used as a means of escape from uncomfortable emotional experiences. The current study aims to fill the previously stated gaps in the literature, with the predicted results having potential implications for how social media is consumed in the future. If the harmful impacts of social media on mental health become more generally accepted, it is possible that individuals will begin to reduce the amount of time they spend on social media daily. Reducing social media use could also become an integral part of treatment plans for individuals suffering from anxiety and other mental illnesses. Furthermore, recognizing that social media has caused a cultural shift in the way loneliness is perceived allows for a deeper understanding of the human experience and the way by which constant connectivity by way of SNS has changed the human psyche. Including social media use as a means of avoidance helps clarify the relationship between SNS and loneliness. With this clarification, psychologists will be more aware of the impacts of social media on one's tendency towards avoidant behaviors which has the potential to classify excessive social media use as an escape tactic and avoidant behavior which would drastically change the way social media is discussed in the study of psychology.

### **Limitations**

There are at least four limitations concerning the predicted results of this study. A first limitation is that the study will be conducted online in an environment that cannot be controlled. This may result in participants not completing the survey in its entirety or not answering truthfully on all scales. Secondly, the survey will ask participants to self-report their average time spent on social media per week and the responses cannot be verified as accurate. A third limitation concerns the possibility that participants will respond in ways they feel would be socially desirable instead of accurate. It is very possible that participants will not want to report the full extent of their anxiety or feelings of loneliness because of pre-existing stigma

surrounding anxiety. The fourth limitation concerns the idea that while the scales to measure the constructs of loneliness, anxiety and avoidant behaviors offer insights into the experiences, they are by no means all-encompassing.

### **Directions for Future Research**

Possible future directions include further investigating the concept of social media use as an avoidant behavior. Augmenting previous research on Escape Theory, future research should aim to further clarify the ways in which SNS can be used to distract from uncomfortable emotional experiences. The decrease in humanity's capacity for solitude should be further explored in the context of Escape Theory as well. As loneliness becomes a less tolerable experience, people will be more inclined to engage in avoidant behaviors as a way of distracting from the now perceived avoidable emotion. Future research should also explore the relationship between SNS and this shift in the perception of loneliness, investigating whether the introduction of SNS kickstarted a decrease in the human psyche's tolerance of solitude. Deepening the understanding of the connection between SNS and loneliness particularly would expand the knowledge of the effects of social media on social relationships.

### **Conclusion**

The concept of social media as an avoidant behavior and the possible ways SNS may impact individuals' feelings of loneliness and anxiety is an area of study that has powerful implications for mental health. As further research continues to uncover the effects of social media on emotional processing, it will be important to share the results with the population. Understanding the extent of the negative effects of social media use could encourage individuals to be more intentional about how much time they spend online and lead to an overall psychologically healthier society.

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