Active Social Network Sites Use & Loneliness:
the Mediating Role of Social Support & Self-Esteem

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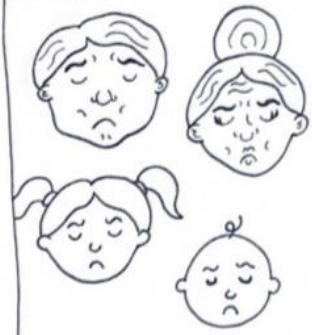
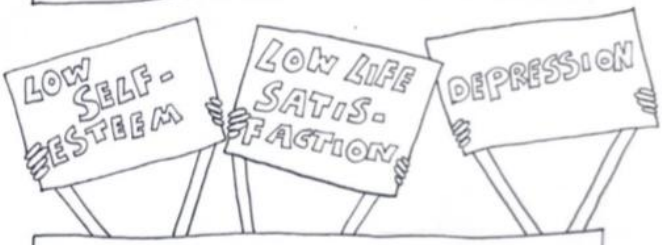
Loneliness is the subjectively uncomfortable or unpleasant state that results from the contradiction between one's perceived social network and her/his social expectation (Pepla & Perlman, 1982).

Loneliness is a common feeling among different age groups.



It is a common interpersonal experience...

...and has a wide range of negative impacts on an individual (Civitci & Civitci, 2009).



But the prevalence is relatively high among undergraduate students in China...

...and their well-being and health are at risk (Chen & Shi, 2008).

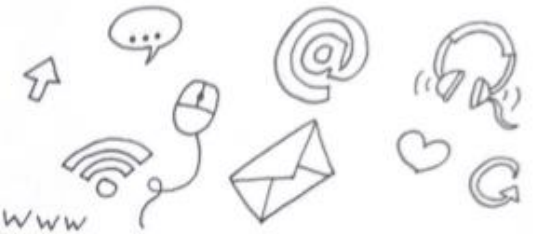
Previous studies found that both individual factors and social-environmental factors were important antecedents of loneliness.

With the development of the information technology industry, researchers suggest that we should examine loneliness in the context of the current mobile Internet era.

Nowadays, social network sites (SNS) are an important part of our daily life.

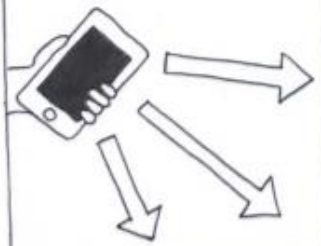
Unfortunately, prior literature has presented inconsistent results. Some research suggests that SNS use is negatively associated with loneliness, while other studies saw a positive or even non-significant association.

These contradicting findings about loneliness may result from previous research focusing on the effects of general SNS use (Zhou et al., 2017).



The current study responded to this by considering the specific SNS use patterns and investigating the association between active SNS use and loneliness among undergraduate students.

The active SNS use form refers to activities that facilitate direct information exchanges with other users on SNS, during which new information is often produced (Verduyn et al., 2017).

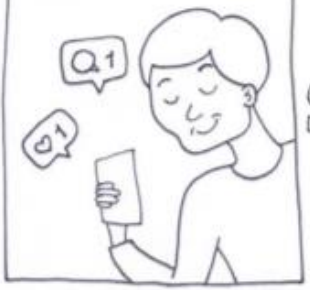


Although there was an experimental study suggesting the mediating role of social connectedness in the relationship between the active way of SNS use and loneliness (Deters & Mehl, 2013), little is known about other mediating mechanisms. Therefore, the current research examined the mediating roles of social support and self-esteem.

Social support is the experience or perception that someone is cared for, loved, valued, esteemed, and part of a supportive social network of mutual obligations and assistance (Wills, 1991).

Social support can also be achieved on SNS platforms, because one of the important motives of SNS use is to acquire and maintain social support (Jung & Sundar, 2016; Park et al., 2009).

Active SNS use might help users gain more positive feedback (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011; Valkenberg et al., 2006; Yang, 2014).



ACTIVE SNS USE

↓

SOCIAL SUPPORT & SELF ESTEEM

↓

LONELINESS

Based on the literature review, the current research proposed the following hypotheses:

H1

Active SNS use negatively predicts users' loneliness.

H2

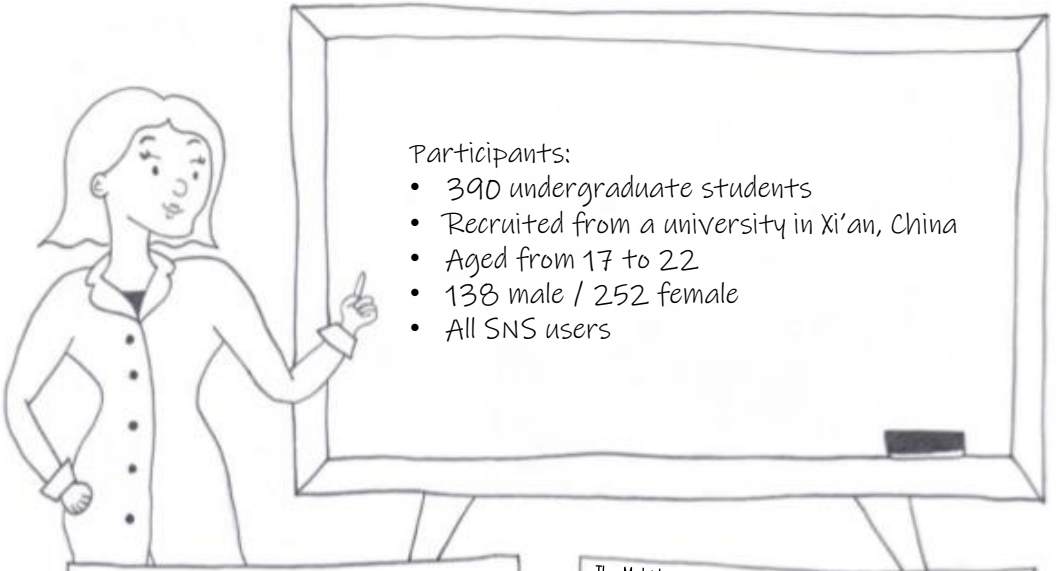
Social support mediates the relationship between SNS use and loneliness.

H3

Self-esteem mediates the relationship between active SNS use and loneliness.

H4

Social support and self-esteem are the sequential mediators between active SNS use and loneliness.

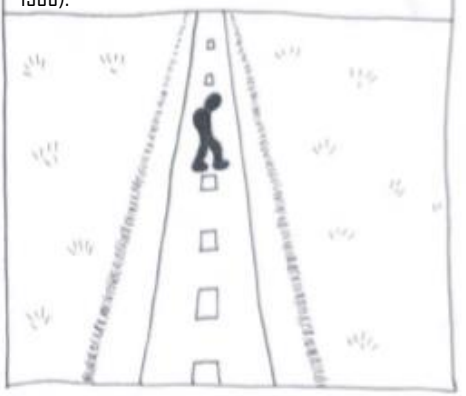


The Active SNS Use Questionnaire (ASUQ) was used to assess active SNS use frequency (Ding, 2017).

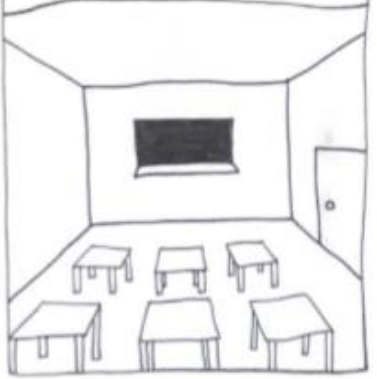
The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) was used to measure perceived social support (Zimet et al., 1988).

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) was used to assess self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965).

The Emotional and Social Loneliness Scale (ESLS) was used to measure loneliness (Wittenberg et al., 1986).



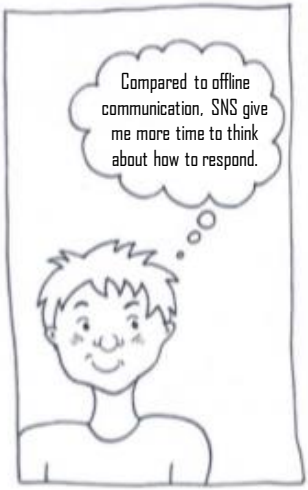
The survey was conducted in a quiet classroom environment and took about 15 min to complete.



The present study found that active SNS use plays an important role in users' loneliness. Specifically, active SNS use was negatively associated with their sense of loneliness.

H1 ✓

This result supported hypothesis 1. Active SNS use is an important factor against loneliness.



This extra time makes interpersonal communication much easier, especially for individuals with relatively low social skills (Krau et al., 2010).

H2 ✓

Consistent with hypothesis 2, social support substantially mediated the relationship between active SNS use and loneliness.

Active SNS use is a useful strategy for maintaining a relationship because of the interpersonal interaction and communication (Canary et al., 1993). Consequently, users are more likely to perceive social support from these relationships.

H3 ✗

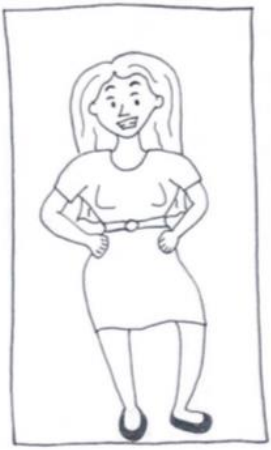
The mediating effect of self-esteem between active SNS use and loneliness was not significant, therefore hypothesis 3 is not supported.

One possible explanation is that active SNS use is a relatively general use pattern, containing many specific use behaviors.

Another possible explanation is that the relationship is moderated by some other variables, such as personality (Seidman, 2013) or social comparison orientation (Wang et al., 2017).

H4 ✓

Active SNS users often experience higher social support. This is in line with hypothesis 4.



Experiencing higher social support helps with a more favorable attitude towards themselves and eventually reduces their feelings of loneliness.

The current research has some important contributions. It contributes to our understanding of how active SNS use is indirectly related to users' loneliness.

Our findings also indicate that an intervention program, which aims to reduce undergraduate students' loneliness, may benefit from realizing the important associations among active SNS use, social support, self-esteem, and loneliness.

Rather than placing a restriction on the time of SNS use, helping college students use SNS more actively through intervention programs might be a more practical way to reduce their feelings of loneliness.