

Not all teens turn to social media when they're lonely

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Technology is so pervasive it may seem as if teens spend more time on social networking sites than in real conversations with friends. New research challenges that assumption and finds some teens, especially

when they feel lonely, prefer face-to-face interactions over social media.

The findings are encouraging given that 80 percent of [teens](#) say they constantly feel lonely, said Rui Chen, associate professor of information systems in Iowa State University's Ivy College of Business. The study, published in the journal *Information and Management*, offers a deeper understanding of why some teens use social media when they're lonely, and found a striking difference based on gender. Chen says girls tended to interact directly with friends, while boys in the study defaulted to Facebook.

"More and more generations are growing up as [digital natives](#). As teens they use technology all the time to keep in contact with their friends, to learn and for entertainment," Chen said. "However, when it comes to loneliness, we found the reason teens go on or offline depends on their [coping strategies](#)."

Digital natives who develop active coping strategies tackle the issue of loneliness directly and engage in more face-to-face interactions with friends, compared to those who use passive coping strategies and avoid the problem by connecting with friends on social media, according to the study. In these situations, Chen says Facebook can be destructive for teens.

"Facebook creates an illusion," Chen said. "Teens are creating a vast network of friends online, but they don't have a lot of deep interactions with these friends to help solve their problems. It just creates an illusion of friends."

For the study, Chen and Elodie Gentina, lead author and associate professor at the IÉSEG School of Management in France; surveyed 409 French teens, ages 13 to 18, about feelings of loneliness, coping strategies as well as when and how they interact with friends on social

media and in person. While the study looked specifically at Facebook, Chen says the findings extend to other [social media](#) platforms.

Teaching positive coping strategies

By age 20, digital natives will have spent approximately 20,000 hours online. According to a 2018 Pew Research Center report, 95 percent of teens have a smartphone or access to one, and 45 percent say they are almost always online. There are pros and cons associated with such extensive use, which is why Chen says parents and educators need to encourage constructive use of technology.

Helping teens develop positive coping strategies is also vital. Chen says based on their findings related to gender differences, parents and educators should coach and model positive social interactions for boys.

"If we want generations of digital natives to be competitive, smart and healthy, we cannot blindly hand them this technology without giving them the tools and education," Chen said. "If we guide them correctly and foster their mindset, it will have a long-lasting impact on how they use technology."

More information: Elodie Gentina et al. Digital natives' coping with loneliness: Facebook or face-to-face?, *Information & Management* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.im.2018.12.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.im.2018.12.006)

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