

Loneliness, Social Support, and Adolescents' Preference for Online Social Interaction: The Mediating Effects of Online Social Identity Gratifications

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This study explores adolescents' practices of online social activities in order to uncover the connections between the preference for online social interaction and loneliness, social support, and the mediating effect of online social identity gratifications. Data were gathered from a random sample of 718 youngsters, aged 9 to 19. Analyses revealed that individuals who are lonely and have a lower level of offline social support find online social identity (i.e., opportunities for identity experimentation and age-identity gratification online) more gratifying than the less lonely and the nonlonely. Both loneliness and social support offline were found significantly related to preference for online social interaction, but the relationships were mediated by online social identity gratifications. Finally, it was found that age differences exist particularly with individuals aged 9-14 who are lonely and the older, aged 15-19 with little social support, show a significant preference toward online social interaction. Implications for future research into online social identity and relationship are discussed.

Key words: Loneliness, preference for online social relationships, social identity gratifications, and social support