Peer Support's Effect on Social Media Usage and Loneliness in Adolescents

As technology has developed, the modes in which adolescents communicate have transitioned from spending time in-person with their peers to interacting online using social media (Nesi et al., 2018). It is important to assess the impact this has on adolescents’ well-being, as research has found a small, but positive association between social media use and depressive symptoms (Ivie et al., 2020). The current study included 103 adolescents in 10th and 11th grade and examined how social media use amongst teens impacts their perceived loneliness while also examining how their peer relationships can moderate this impact. The adolescent’s overall relationship quality with their best friend, their daily objective social media use, and their daily self-reported levels of loneliness were assessed over a 14-day period. Our results showed that higher average social media usage was associated with increased loneliness across the 14 days of participation. When adding peer social support as a moderator, the model was not significant. An exploratory analysis found that White adolescents had lower average social media usage than Black adolescents. However, no other racial/ethnic differences were found. Since peer moderation was not significant, our results highlight the ambiguity around teens’ motivations for using social media and since causality was not determined, this needs to be further explored. Moreover, because social media serves numerous functions, further research is needed to determine how teens are using social media, individual differences in usage, what function it serves teens, and how this function can impact their mental health.