

Three lessons we learned about how students socialized online during the pandemic

Brown Human Computing Interaction Lab

Neil Xu, 2024

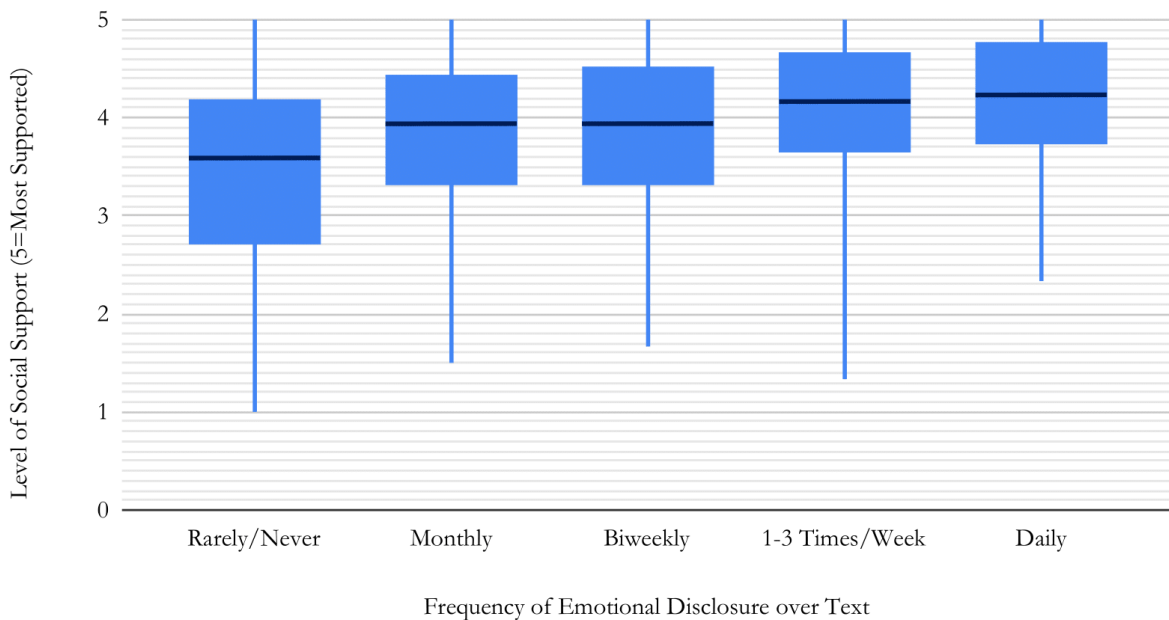
For many college students, 2020 was a year where Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat replaced dinners with friends and parties on Friday night. As online socialization replaced in person interaction, students began spending an extra 6 hours each week interacting with others online, a figure that translates to over 90 more hours online each semester compared to 2019. The pandemic has taken an undeniable toll on the relationships and mental health of students across the world, with some universities reporting that 71% of students are feeling higher levels of stress and anxiety. However, the situation also raises the question: how can we utilize social media and other online interaction to support our mental health?

To answer this question, we surveyed a sample of over 800 US college students regarding their social media usage behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic. We analyzed student tendency to disclose their emotions over messaging, phone calls, and video calls, and how these practices are associated with their feelings of social support and loneliness. Afterwards, we identified several online interaction patterns that can potentially improve student mental health.

1. Simply sharing your feelings with friends and family may increase the level of emotional support you experience by nearly 30%

As a student studying remotely or in isolation, it's easy to bottle up your feelings and forget to check up on those close to you. However, being closed off may take a toll on your mental health. Reaching out by talking to, texting, or calling friends and family about your emotional state is a great way to make a positive change. Our study finds that students who were most likely to open up in this way tended to report levels of social support that were 27% higher than individuals who do not reach out at all. This finding points to a few simple actions that you can take to supplement your mental health.

Sharing Emotions Over Text Linked to Higher Social Support



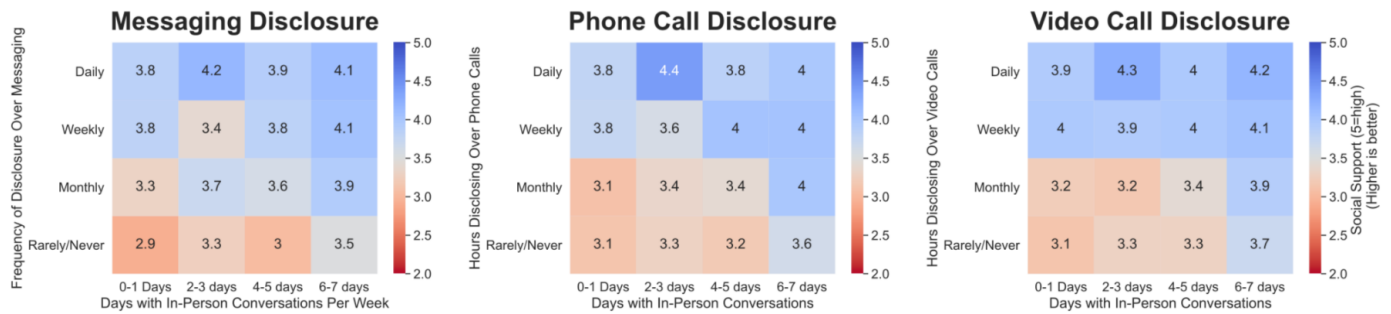
We encourage students to make an effort to share their emotions to trusted friends and family. Also, make sure to reach out to friends and family who may be struggling and offer to listen. Whether it's a longer Zoom conversation, or just a quick phone call to check in, we believe that sharing your emotions with others may help to create a sense of social support when you are distanced from one another.

2. Doing one of the following: Text or call friends and family on a daily basis, or interact face to face with others for 15 minutes a day

It may seem obvious that social interaction improves mental health, but over 50% of the students we surveyed did not believe that interacting over online platforms such as text-messaging was helping them cope with COVID-19. With this in mind, we studied whether online interactions were as effective as face-to-face interactions at boosting mental health.

We identified a positive relationship between the frequency of which a student spends conversing with others online and the social support they experience. Our data also reveals a similar increase in social support among students who interacted in-person for more than 15 minutes a day. This means that online interaction may be an effective source of social support if in-person interaction is not an option.

Social Support Across Private Online Self-Disclosure and In-Person Interactions



We see that students who interact with others online on a weekly basis, but do not interact in-person seem to report similar levels or even higher levels of social support than individuals who only interact in-person. However, the most promising behavior appears to be a combination of both forms of interaction, when students meet in-person for a few days each week, but also spend time interacting online.

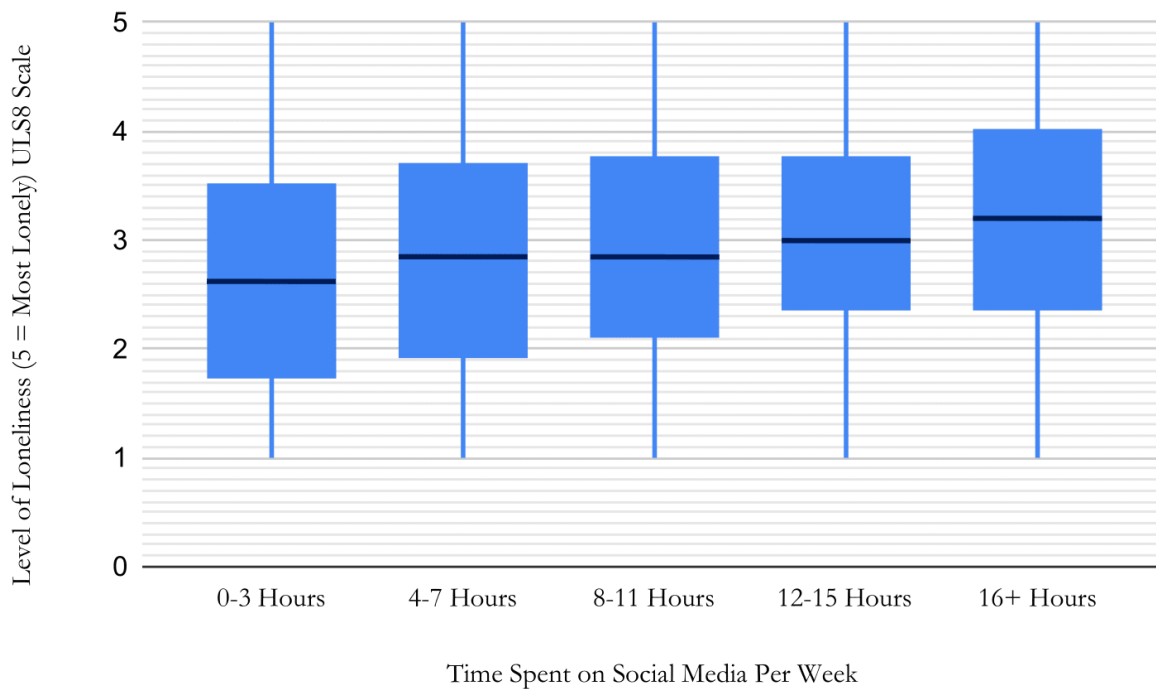
As a result, we recommend that students try to text or call their friends and family on a daily basis, and if possible, meet with others in-person for at least 15 minutes a day. We believe that communicating online as much as you can may help to provide social support and reduce loneliness as in-person activities gradually resume. But as always, be careful when engaging in online interactions, as common behaviors such as social media usage seem to have a negative relationship with mental health. This leads us to our next tip:

3. Social media seems to make students more lonely. Limit your social media usage to less than 2 hours a day as a preventative measure

In the age of Instagram and Snapchat, social media addiction is a very real issue. These apps seem like fun ways to take a mental break, but almost always lead you to waste more time and gain a lot less satisfaction than you hoped for.

If you find yourself in a spiral of scrolling through TikTok or browsing Facebook, don't worry, as our study suggests that this is a common pattern with a feasible solution. We found a concerning relationship between the amount of time an individual spends on social media per week and their level of loneliness. Specifically, students who spend 16+ hours each week on social media report levels of loneliness that are 20% higher than individuals who spend less than 3 hours per week on social media. Though 16 hours seems like a lot, it translates to just over 2 hours a day of scrolling, which 1 in 5 students reported achieving. The relationship between loneliness and social media use stands out because we don't see the same trend with texting, phone calls, and video calls. In fact, more time on these platforms is actually linked to lower levels of loneliness.

Higher Social Media Usage Linked to Higher Loneliness



While this does not necessarily imply that social media usage causes feelings of loneliness, it may indicate that using social media platforms to cope with feelings of isolation might not be as effective as it seems. So the next time you turn to apps like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, or TikTok for entertainment or social interaction, acknowledge that the practice may have very limited mental health benefits, and may be harming your mental health instead.

Though we see this correlation between social media and loneliness, we can't say whether one causes the other. Therefore, we don't suggest abandoning social media entirely. Instead, make a conscious effort to monitor the time you spend on it and your emotions as you use it. Try setting social media time limits and talking about your emotions with others to ensure that your time spent swiping and scrolling is helping, rather than hurting your mental health.

4. Students studying online spent around 10% more time on social media than students who studied in person last fall

Unsurprisingly, there were some distinct differences between the online interaction behaviors of students who attended college in person and those who spent the semester online. For example, online students spend around 1.2 more hours each week using social media than in-person students. However, we see that the amount of time spent texting and calling is very comparable

across all students. The difference in social media usage might point to online students using social media as a primary source of interaction to compensate for a lack of in-person interaction.

Interestingly, when asked about which platforms that they most frequently use to communicate with friends and family, in-person students tended to use Snapchat, Facetime, and Facebook more regularly than online students. This could mean that although online students are spending more time on social media, they are not spending as much of that time communicating with others. Furthermore, as the levels of loneliness among online students are around 8% higher than in-person students, we believe these differences in social media usage behavior may be contributing to their poorer mental health.

Although the pandemic has transformed the way we interact with each other, our research shows that people have found ways to stay socially connected. By simply talking about your emotions, reaching out to friends and family, and communicating with others on a consistent basis, we may restore a sense of social unity as the pandemic moves into its second year. We know that online interaction platforms are not miracle cures for loneliness, but the promising trends associated with users' perceived social support cannot be taken lightly. Overall, as we gradually transition back to our normal lives, we should be conscious of our interactions online, using them to supplement social interaction rather than to escape our current state.