

Loneliness in US adults linked with amount, frequency of social media use

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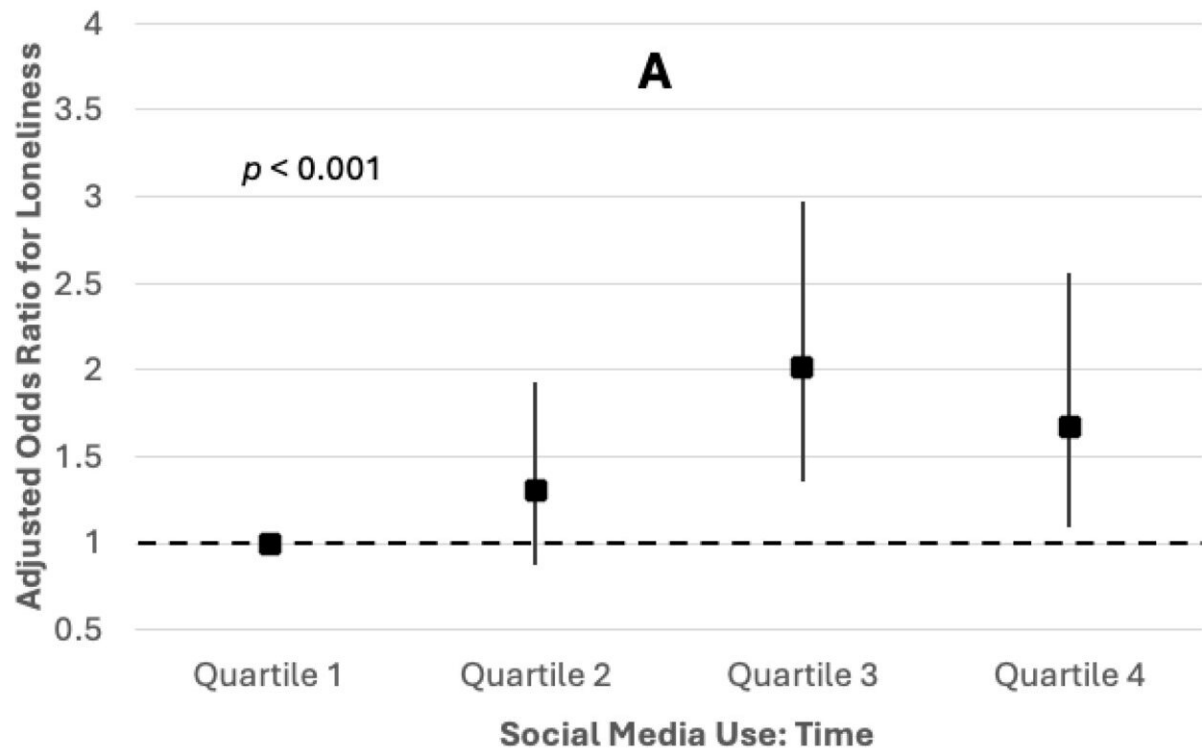
TikTok, Instagram, Facebook and similar platforms are apparently no antidote for the global loneliness epidemic, according to Oregon State University research that linked increases in social media use with a greater likelihood of feeling alone.

The study led by Jessica Gorman of the OSU College of Health, [published](#) today in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, featured more than 1,500 U.S. adults ages 30–70 and builds on a 2017 study by co-author Brian Primack that looked at [young adults](#).

As in the previous study, two different measures of [social media use](#)—time and frequency—each correlated with [loneliness](#); that is, many short "checks" are just as apt to be associated with loneliness as a few long sessions.

"I wasn't sure if we would see as strong a relationship between social media and loneliness for 60-year-olds that we saw with 18-year-olds, but we did," Primack said. "Those who were in the upper 25% based on frequency of social media use, compared with those in the lower 25%, were more than twice as likely to test as lonely."

The findings have important [public health](#) implications, the authors say, given loneliness's high cost to society. This is especially true because the study used survey weights to make the findings nationally representative of all U.S. adults.



These figures represent odds ratios and 95% confidence intervals for loneliness based on social media use among U.S. adults ages 30–70. Independent variables were time of social media use. Credit: *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (2025). DOI: 10.3390/ijerph22101510

Loneliness, characterized by the subjective experience of insufficient social connections and resources, is linked to a range of negative health consequences including [cardiovascular disease](#), substance use, poor mental health and intimate partner violence. A 2023 advisory from the U.S. Surgeon General estimated the health impact of loneliness to be equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day, and it identified social media use as a loneliness risk factor.

Americans were already growing lonelier before COVID-19, the authors

note, and the pandemic worsened the trend. In the United States, an estimated 50% of the [adult population](#) is lonely.

"Most prior research on social media use and loneliness has focused on youth and young adults," Gorman said. "Even after adjusting for all measured sociodemographic factors among the people in our study—gender, age, [sexual orientation](#), [educational attainment](#), employment status and [marital status](#)—we found a significant association between people being lonely and people being on social media frequently or for extended periods."

For context, estimates suggest it's not uncommon for a person to check in with social media between 100 and 200 times a day and to spend two to four hours on their platforms of choice. Older adults, as "digital immigrants," may be less adept than younger social media users, which could be one factor behind the connection to loneliness in the older population, the researchers say.

"There hasn't been enough research on adults, who use social media a lot and experience harm due to loneliness," Primack said. "An important caveat is that this was a correlational study, so we can't say whether using social media leads to loneliness or whether lonely people seek out more social media. It may be a combination."

Although this study cannot determine why the connection exists, it does recommend caution around heavy social media use among U.S. adults, Gorman added. The results also suggest that, if it's primarily a case of lonely people seeking out more social media, doing so doesn't make the loneliness go away.

More information: Jessica R. Gorman et al, Time and Frequency of Social Media Use and Loneliness Among U.S. Adults, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (2025). [DOI:](#)

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