

Thinking about the Loss of Social Networking Sites May Expand the Distress of Social Exclusion

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Abstract : Social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook and Twitter are low-cost tools that can promote the creation of social connections by providing a convenient platform that can be accessed at any time. In the current research, a laboratory experiment was conducted to test the hypothesis that reminders of losing SNS would alter the impact of social events, especially those involving social exclusion. Specifically, this study explored whether losing SNS would intensify perceived social distress induced by exclusionary bogus feedback. Eighty-eight Facebook users (46 females, 42 males; mean age = 22.6 years, SD = 3.1 years) were recruited via campus posters and flyers at a national university in southern Taiwan. After participants provided consent, they were randomly assigned to a 2 (SNS non-use vs. neutral) between-subjects experiment. Participants completed an ostensible survey about online social networking in which we included an item about the time spent on SNS per day. The last question was used to manipulate thoughts about losing SNS access. Participants under the non-use condition were asked to record three conditions that would render them unable to use SNS (e.g., a network adaptor problem, malfunctioning cable modem, or problems with Internet service providers); participants under the neutral condition recorded three conditions that would render them unable to log onto the college website (e.g., server maintenance, local network or firewall problems). Later, this experiment employed a bogus-feedback paradigm to induce social exclusion. Participants then rated their social distress on a four-item scale, identical to that of Experiment 1 ($\alpha = .84$). The results showed that thoughts of losing SNS intensified distress caused by social exclusion, suggesting that the loss of SNS has a similar effect to the loss of a primary source for social reconnections. Moreover, the priming effects of SNS on perceived distress were more prominent for heavy users. The demonstrated link between the idea of losing SNS use and increased pain of social exclusion manifests the importance of SNS as a crucial gateway for acquiring and rebuilding social connections. Use of online social networking appears to be a two-edged sword for coping with social exclusion in human lives in the e-society.

Keywords : online social networking, perceived distress, social exclusion, SNS

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