**Women’s Self-Disclosure and Loneliness:**

**Mediation of Involvement in Facebook Groups**

Online social networks have penetrated the lives of people around the world. They are integrated into a wide variety of aspects of daily life and areas of activity. The significant role that these networks play serves as a widely accepted starting point for the abundance of research in the field. One of the most interesting phenomena pertaining to this subject is the proliferation of closed Facebook groups. These groups are diverse in terms of activity and characteristics of participants**.**

The current study focuses on closed Facebook groups run by women and which appeal specifically to a female audience. Some of the groups have tens of thousands of members. The activity carried out within their framework is broad. The dynamics characterizing these groups, the items posted in their framework, and the reactions to these posts, reveal practices of socialization, intimacy, and personal exposure that are not usually seen in spheres of activity among strangers.

The current study has several primary goals. One is to map the patterns of activity of group members in these distinctive online spaces. A second is to identify relationships between these patterns of activity and the personal characteristics and personality traits of participating women. A third major objective is to uncover the role of women’s groups in members’ lives. This includes the way women perceive the groups of which they are members, and the roles and influences they attribute to these groups. An examination of the interrelationships between the study’s findings will enable exploration of whether activity in these groups meets the women’s personal and social needs, and if so, what are the conditions under which this happens. Thus, we can learn about the circumstances in which Facebook groups fulfill significant functions in members’ lives. The present study seeks to shed light on the characteristics of the growing phenomenon of closed Facebook groups and the broad socio-cultural meanings attributed to them. The research will range from micro- to macro-levels. It will consider personal aspects as well as the general social aspect of separate and closed “islands” that exist within a space that is generally open to everyone. Additionally, it will look at the implications of this phenomenon for members’ lives outside the online realm.

Online social networking platforms allow for creation of private, intimate spaces in which Internet users can choose a precise level of personal exposure. However, members may not, in fact, have real control over the disclosure of information regarding the identity and scope of recipients. To what extent is personal exposure intentionally known? How does personal exposure vary between different areas on the Internet? The present study seeks to explore these questions and concepts by focusing on a population of Israeli women who use Facebook social networks, and particularly those who are members of closed Facebook groups for women.

**Theoretical Background**

**Conceptualization of a Community**

By definition, a community is a social group in which two or more people identify and interact with each other. Humans are constantly connected to groups that unite them with others who share experiences, loyalties, and interests. Group members do not give up their individuality, but at the same time see themselves as part of an “us.” The subjective and experiential component of the community is recognized by Anderson (2006) who coined the term “imagined communities.” According to Anderson, it is impossible to define a community by means of any objective and real distinction related to a connection between the individuals that comprise it. The networks that make up a community are the result of a subjective perception of individuals who see themselves as part of a community. Hence, most communities do not exist in reality, but are simply an idea around which a group of people is united.

A type of communal relations existing in the public space is found in the social philosophy of the late 20th century. For example, Oldenburg (1989) presents the concept of the “third place.” According to him, in the modern world, people’s time is invested mainly in the home (first place) and work (second place). The third place consists of all the other sites where people gather for social activities, such as parks, cafés, street corners, pubs, and so forth. These places foster a sense of community, provide support, and promote equality among members. Today, it is possible to consider virtual communities and especially online social networks as examples of the third place. Further, online communities blend into the other two places, since the Internet allows people to enter the third place even when they are at work or at home.

Simmel (1903/2002) describes the abandonment of small villages and relocation to large cities in the late 19th century. This process of urbanization led to a type of alienation that did not exist among people living in small, isolated village communities. Tönnies (1957) distinguishes between two concepts that express distinct types of public spaces that developed in the late 19th century: *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*. He argues that these societal models express distinct styles of relationships. *Gemeinschaft* is based on face-to-face relationships, ongoing acquaintance, and shared beliefs that create a social place where interpersonal relationships develop based on deep emotions, intimacy, fellowship, and humanity. In contrast, *gesellschaft* is based on cost-effectiveness, purposefulness, and a sense of mission.

**The Transition to Online Groups**

Rheingold (1993) coined the term “virtual community.” He describes these as a type of social group existing only the Internet. They form when enough people actively participate in public discussions and invest sufficient emotion in them that a fabric of interpersonal relationships is created in cyberspace. In this definition, Rheingold emphasizes the need for long-term interaction between people who have an emotional attachment to each other. Casual visitors are not part of the community. Wellman (1998) argues that online communities are “online social networks” and avoids the term “virtual.” In contrast to Rheingold’s (1993) concept of virtual communities, online social networks are not fundamentally different from offline communities. They function as networks of interpersonal relationships that provide mutual support, and enable an exchange of information, socialization, a sense of belonging, and social identity. In a later work, Rheingold (2000, p. 49) acknowledges that the term “virtual” may be problematic and that “Virtual communities might be real communities, they might be pseudo-communities, or they might be something entirely new in the realm of social contracts.”

The debate about virtualization characterizes dichotomies that were prevalent among researchers when the Internet entered the lives of the masses in the mid-1990s, such as dichotomies of online versus offline, and real versus virtual. However, it is possible that the difficulty in defining communities and networks is not rooted in their transition to the digital environment. Rather, it seems that the concept of community has been a topic of thought and research among social scientists in general and sociologists in particular since the early 20th century.

According to Granit and Nathan (2000), the development of online communities reflects post-modern sociological and cultural processes because they enable individuals to express their personal narrative and identity as they perceive it within a social reality that allows and accepts this without question. Boyd and Ellison (2007) offer a general definition of social networking sites as online platforms that allow people to create a public or semi-public profile, share this profile with others, and form relationships on the basis of this profile. According to Riegner (2007), a social network is a space created to connect people via web-based tools such as email, chats, and blogs. The goal of this participation is to connect with people who have similar interests, such as hobbies, networking, or business topics. Similarly, according to Pallis et al. (2011), a social network is a site where individuals meet to create relationships. Each user in the online arena creates a list of other users with whom s/he is connected and, using a variety of tools, brings them together to build a community, interact, contribute, share knowledge, and participate in a variety of activities. The functional components of online social networking are also noted by Muniz and O’Guinn (2001), who describe social networking sites as applications that allow users to communicate by creating informative personal profiles, inviting friends and acquaintances to access these profiles, send email, and chat with others on the Internet. Personal profiles can contain a wide range of information, text, images, videos, audio files, and blogs.

Boyd (2011) claims that social network users see these as spaces where they may initiate and maintain social relationships with friends and acquaintances, flirt with friends of friends, and create romantic relationships. Alternatively, they may establish business relationships or discuss social and political issues. The users’ motivation is to share information with those who are interested (as well as with those who are not), and especially to see and be seen.

**Self-disclosure**

According to Rheingold (1993), a new type of fascinating and meaningful relationship has developed on the Internet as a result of its limitations. This medium provides a place where people are more willing to open up and be intimately exposed than they are without computer mediation. One means of achieving a state of intimacy in interpersonal relationships is through self-disclosure. Intimacy is the capacity to share one’s happiness, excitement, longing, fears, and needs, and the to hear these emotions from others (Cassidy, 2001). This plays a significant role in social relationships (Collins & Miller, 1994). Intimacy is a dynamic, evolving process through which people learn about each other (Reis & Shaver, 1988). It has been found that sharing personal information is essential in romantic relationships and for creating intimacy between partners in a dialogue (Greene, Derlega, & Mathews, 2006). It is an important component in personality development and encourages rapport (Derlega, Winstead, Wong, & Greenspan, 1987). Self-disclosure is expressed in a person’s willingness to reveal details relating to his or her personal situation, life events, and aspirations (Deci & Ryan, 2011). Disclosure serves a number of purposes, such as increasing mutual understanding (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998) and building trust between partners in a relationship (Rubin, 1975). Disclosure enables a person to recognize and integrate meaning into processes and experiences he or she has undergone (Frattaroli, 2006). Processes of self-disclosure are regulated by norms of reciprocity. There is a sense of social commitment to respond with a similar level of intimacy to self-disclosures made by others (Rotenberg & Chase, 1992). Reciprocity in self-disclosure is especially important during the early stages of a relationship and during which people are becoming acquainted.

Wallace (1999) argues that self-disclosure is an important component of online discourse. It has been found that people report a greater degree of self-disclosure in online relationships than in offline relationships (Parks & Floyd, 1996). Alongside the lack of nonverbal cues, the asynchronous nature of most social networking activities affects people’s level of intimate disclosure (Suler, 1996; Walther, 2004). One of the most attractive features of social networks is that users can share updates about their status, feelings, thoughts, and actions with friends and strangers (Jones, Millermaier, Goya-Martinez, & Schuler, 2008; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). On the other hand, public disclosure of personal information can be problematic in terms of identity theft, stalking, and harassment (Gross& Acquisti, 2005; Nosko, Wood, & Molema, 2010). Studies show that on the one hand, participants are cautious regarding their privacy and are aware of these dangers (Al-Saggaf, 2011; Boyd & Ellison 2007; Jones et al., 2008; Young, 2009). At the same time, intimate self-disclosure in cyberspace is quite common (Jones et al., 2008; Valenzuela et al., 2009) and it is highly difficult for users to refrain from sharing personal information (Edwards & Brown, 2009). It has been found that the anonymity of online social networks enables and encourages “lonely” people in particular to share intimate information (Bonetti, Campbell, & Gilmore, 2010).

The nature of social networks encourages self-disclosure (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007). For example, the Facebook status update box asking “What’s on your mind?” invites participants to share information. Social networks provide a user-friendly platform that easily allows for sharing of photographs, status updates, and other information (Schumaker & Van Der Heide, 2011).

“The profile of the most disclosive Facebook users in terms of amount, therefore, includes those who want to maintain their existing relationships, as well as those who want to get attention, perhaps because of their diminished social cohesion and agreeableness offline” (Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014, p. 55).

**Loneliness**

Loneliness is a subjective experience, stemming from a deficit in an individual’s social relationships (Satici, Uysal & Deniz, 2016). Findings regarding the connection between solitude and the online environment are inconclusive and at times contradictory (Nowland, Necka, & Cacioppo, 2017). Some studies have found that people who use the Internet more frequently report higher levels of loneliness (Kalpidou, Costin, & Morris, 2011). Similarly, a positive correlation was found between loneliness and frequent use of Facebook (Lou, Yan, Nickerson, & McMorris, 2012). However, other studies have found that online media reduce loneliness by providing opportunities for socializing and for having control over interactions (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). In addition, it has been found that the greater the number of members in a person’s social network, the less lonely he or she reports feeling (Skues et al., 2012). Research in the field of online loneliness offers two competing perspectives on these conflicting findings (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). The first, the displacement hypothesis, posits that users take advantage of the medium to replace offline relationships with online connections, thus making the Internet a potential substitute for the loneliness that characterized their offline lives. The second, the stimulation hypothesis, posits that the Internet succeeds in reducing loneliness because it expands the possibilities for creating new relationships online.

A meta-analysis by Song et al. (2014) examines thousands of published papers addressing Facebook use and loneliness. They test both the correlational and causal relationship between use of Facebook and users’ loneliness, both as factors and as outcomes. Overall, their analysis suggests a positive correlation between Facebook use and loneliness.

**What do Women Benefit from Participating in Closed Groups?**

Facebook is an online social network that provides a platform for its users to open online groups and invite other users to join them. A person opening such an online group must choose one of the privacy settings options: public, closed, or secret. Full and updated details about the privacy settings for groups are provided on Facebook’s page at https://www.facebook.com/help. It is important to note that there are many distinctions regarding participation and exposure to content, and these are frequently changed by Facebook. The company provides updates to its users, but it is not certain that all users notice subtle changes in the privacy clauses. There has been criticism of these frequent changes in relation to users’ ability to control their privacy (see for example D’Arcy & Young, 2012).

A public group is open to all Facebook users without limitations on participation or posting messages. A closed group only allows members to participate, but Facebook users who are not members can know about the group’s existence. A secret group is brought to the attention of selected users privately and only they have access to its contents.

Miron and Ravid (2015) examine the privacy settings of Facebook groups in Israel, considering the issue in an educational context, rather than in the legal-ethical arena. Among the multitude of virtual communities operating in the Israeli online space, there is a prominent number of closed Facebook groups founded by women, operated by women, and targeting an exclusively female audience. Some of these closed women’s groups have tens of thousands of members. A wide scope of activities is conducted in their frameworks. Some groups are designed for members that know each other in daily life (for example, based on a shared living environment). Many other groups have members that do not know each other at all, outside of the group.

Interestingly, it has been found that women display a higher degree of self-disclosure (Dindia & Allen, 1992), have more developed communication skills (Korkut, 2005), and are more likely to express and share their feelings and empathize with one another (Ridley, 1993). The 10th world wide web user survey conducted by the Graphic, Visualization, & Usability Center (GVU) (1999) found that women are more likely to use the Internet for educational purposes, communication, and sharing of personal information. Similarly, a comprehensive study (Weiser, 2000) shows that women use the Internet primarily to make and maintain interpersonal relationships and as a source of knowledge. In contrast, men use the Internet primarily for entertainment and pleasure. Other studies find that women are more likely than men to use the Internet primarily to create social interactions (Amichai-Hamburger & Ben-Artzi, 2000, 2003).

**Research Hypotheses**

H1: A positive correlation will be found between self-disclosure and perceived group-significance (PGS) such that the greater the degree of self-disclosure, the more positive PGS will be.

H2: Group involvement will mediate the correlation between self-disclosure and PGS such that self-disclosure will contribute to group involvement, which in turn will contribute to PGS.

H3: A positive correlation will be found between social-emotional loneliness and PGS such that the higher the level of social-emotional loneliness, the higher the PGS. A positive correlation will be found between PGS and three subscales of social-emotional loneliness: (H3a) romantic loneliness, (H3b) social loneliness and (H3c) family loneliness.

H4: Group involvement will mediate the correlation between social-emotional loneliness and PGS. Thus, social-emotional loneliness will contribute to group involvement, which in turn will contribute to more positive PGS. This mediation will be found between PGS and the three subscales of romantic loneliness (H4a), social loneliness (H4b), and family loneliness (H4c).

**Methodology**

**Participants**

The questionnaire was completed by 526 female respondents aged 18 and over, with a mean age of 39.2 (SD = 13.2). Most of the respondents were married (61%). A slight majority was non-religious (55%). Most have an academic education (60%). The sample of respondents was obtained from an online panel that was representative of the distribution of the Israeli population according to the Central Bureau of Statistics. Respondents first answered a screening question to confirm they have used at least one closed women Facebook group. The maximum standard error is 4.5%.

**Research Tools**

The research questions were examined through a structured questionnaire that included 70 closed questions. Socio-demographic data was provided for each respondent. The questionnaire included the following variables:

**Independent variables. *Self-disclosure*.** This was measured using the Self-Disclosure Index (SDI) (Miller, Berg, & Archer, 1983). SDI is a 10-item scale measuring self-disclosure in a range of personal issues (habits, feelings, emotions, relationships). Using a Likert scale ranging from 0 (not discussing the issue at all) to 4 (fully and completely discussing the issue), participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with each of the statements (e.g., “Things I have done which I am proud of,” “What is important to me in life”). Internal reliability of the scale was high (α = .915).

***Social-emotional loneliness.*** This was measured using SELSA-S (DiTommaso, Brannen & Best, 2004), a 15-item multidimensional scale for measuring loneliness, which is the short version of the Social and Emotional Loneliness Scale for Adults (SELSA) (DiTommaso & Spinner, 1993). The scale consists of three subscales/dimensions: social, family, and romantic loneliness. Using a Likert type 7-point scale, participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with the statements (e.g., “My family really cares about me,” “I wish I had a more satisfying romantic relationship,” “I am able to depend on my friends for help”). Internal reliability of the general social-emotional loneliness scale was α = .881. The reliability for the romantic loneliness subscale was α =.895; for social loneliness it was α = .813; and for family loneliness it was α = .85.

**Dependent variables. *Perceived group significance (PGS)*.** This was measured using an 18-item multidimensional scale for assessing the degree of personal meaning an online group has in one’s life. Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with the items using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (agree completely). A Confirmatory Factor Analysis using Principal Components Analysis (PCA) with Varimax Rotation yielded three explanatory factors, which explained 52% of the total variance. The first factor was groups support (8 items; e.g., “I fully trust other group participants,” “This group saves me,” “The group is a place of comfort for me”). The second factor was group functionality (5 items; e.g., “The group fulfills my expectations,” “The group provides things which are unavailable offline”). The third factor was group feedback (5 items; e.g., “It’s important to me to receive comments to my posts in the group,” “I understand why participants expose intimate content in this group”). The internal reliability of the PGS index was high (α = .872).

**Mediating variables**. ***Group involvement*.** This was measured using a 4-item index assessing the frequency of activities that users perform in the framework of the closed groups. Participants indicated the extent to which they perform each activity: reading posts, sharing posts, commenting on posts, or uploading original posts. The scale ranged from 1 (never) to 6 (every hour). Internal reliability of the Group Involvement Index was high (α = .73). Descriptive statistics of the research variables are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | SD |
| Perceived group significance (PGS) | 1 | 5 | 2.65 | 0.71 |
| Group involvement | 1 | 6 | 2.62 | 0.80 |
| Self-disclosure | 0 | 4 | 1.43 | 0.86 |
| Social-emotional loneliness | 1 | 7 | 2.88 | 1.25 |
| Social loneliness | 1 | 7 | 3.02 | 1.35 |
| Family loneliness | 1 | 7 | 2.06 | 1.32 |
|  Romantic loneliness. | 1 | 7 | 3.40 | 2.05 |

**Results**

To examine the correlation between self-disclosure and PGS (H1), a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted. As shown in Table 2, a significant positive correlation between self-disclosure and PGS (r = .274, p < .001) was found. Thus, the greater the self-disclosure, the more positive the PGS.

To examine the mediating role of group involvement in the relationship between the self-disclosure and PGS (H2), we used Hayes’ (2018) PROCESS bootstrapping command with 5,000 iterations (model 4). The analysis treated self-disclosure as a predicting variable, group involvement as the mediator, and PGS as the dependent variable. Results show that the 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect of self-disclosure on PGS through group involvement did not include 0 (95% CI [-.007, -.012] with 5,000 resamples. Moreover, results also showed that the 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect of self-disclosure on PGS through group involvement did not include 0 (95% CI [.067, .180] with 5,000 resamples, F(2,289) = 36.93, p < .001, Rsq=20.36%). In other words, the model indicates an indirect effect for self-disclosure on PGS through group involvement (see Figure 1).

Perceived group significance

Group involvement

Self-disclosure

.27\*\*\*

.46\*\*\*

.09\*

\*p < .05, \*\*\*p < .0001

*Figure 1.* Model of Self-disclosure Mediating Perceived Group Significance

To examine the correlation between social-emotional loneliness and PGS (H3), a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted. As shown in Table 2, no significant correlation between social-emotional loneliness and PGS (r = -.070, p > .005) was found. Additionally, no significant correlations were found between romantic loneliness (H3a) (r = -.050, p > .005), social loneliness (H3b) (r = -.051, p > .005), or family loneliness (H3c) (r = -.065, p > .005) and PGS.

Table 2

*Pearson Correlations between Research Variables*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Group-Involvement | Self-disclosure | Social-emotional loneliness | Romantic loneliness | Social loneliness | Family loneliness |
| Perceived group significance | .545\*\*\* | .258\*\*\* | .074 | .039 | .068 | .084 |
| Group involvement |  | .289\*\*\* | .013 | .075- | .029 | .159\*\* |
| Self-disclosure |  |  | .022 | .013 | .035 | .005 |
| Social-emotional loneliness |  |  |  | .850\*\*\* | .749\*\*\* | .711\*\*\* |
| Romantic loneliness |  |  |  |  | .382\*\*\* | .393\*\*\* |
| Social loneliness |  |  |  |  |  | .468\*\*\* |

\*\*p < .01, \*\*\* p < .0001

To examine the mediating role of group involvement in the relationship between social-emotional loneliness and PGS (H4), we used Hayes’ (2018) PROCESS bootstrapping command with 5,000 iterations (model 4). The analysis treated social-emotional loneliness as a predictor variable, group involvement as the mediator, and PGS as the dependent variable.

Results showed that the 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect of social-emotional loneliness on PGS through group involvement did include 0 (95% CI [-.1225, .043] with 5,000 resamples. Moreover, results also showed that the 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect of social-emotional loneliness on PGS through group involvement did include 0 (95% CI [.070, .029] with 5,000 resamples. In other words, the model did not indicate an indirect effect for social-emotional loneliness on PGS through group involvement (see Figure 2).

 The same results were found using romantic loneliness as a predictor (H4a) and social loneliness as a predictor (H4b) (see Figure 2). In contrast to this trend, results showed that the 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect of family loneliness on PGS through group involvement (H4c) did not include 0 (95% CI [-.205, -.046] with 5,000 resamples. Moreover, results also showed that the 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect of family loneliness on PGS through group involvement did not include 0 (95% CI [-.084, -.017] with 5,000 resamples F (2,289) = 55.60, p < .001, Rsq = 27.79%). In other words, the model did indicate an indirect effect for family loneliness on PGS through group involvement (see Figure 2).

-.020

Group involvement

Perceived group significance

.019

.485\*\*\*

Social-emotional loneliness

Romantic loneliness

Social loneliness

Family loneliness

-.021

.104\*\*

\*\*p < .01, \*\*\* p < .0001

*Figure 2.* The mediating model of loneliness on Perceived Group Significance

**Discussion**

This article examines the role that closed, multi-participant Facebook groups have on the lives of group members. By analyzing data from questionnaires distributed among Israeli women, we sought to learn about the characteristics of members in online groups for women, their patterns of activity in these groups, and their perceptions of the groups. Further, we looked for possible connections among these variables.

The findings of the study indicate the greater the extent to which members exhibit traits of openness and willingness to share, the higher the degree of significance the groups have in their lives. In other words, closed women’s groups on Facebook are a significant arena of activity for women who tend to benefit from exposing various aspects of their personal lives. However, it was found that the relationship between these two variables is mediated by the level of involvement and activity in the group. The greater their tendency to share with other participants, the greater their level of activity in the group. In turn, this greater level of activity leads to an increase in the perception of the group as a significant factor in their lives. This clearly indicates the importance of these groups for women of a personality type that tends to share, since mere membership in the group does not instill meaning. Women who respond regularly, write posts, and share content with group members reap more significant benefits than do members who have a passive presence, limited to reading posts and sporadic reactions.

Similarly, the study also offers findings on the relationship between social-emotional loneliness and attribution of significance of these women’s groups in members’ lives, although not in a comprehensive manner relative to each of the secondary variables. Contrary to the hypotheses of the study, no positive correlation was found between the level of the surveyed women’s social-emotional loneliness and the degree of importance they attributed to groups in their lives, in terms of romantic loneliness and social isolation. In other words, women’s groups are not an adequate substitute for women who experience loneliness in the social and romantic aspects of their lives. Changes in the level of activity and involvement in the group did not affect the quality of the relationship between the two variables in question.

In contrast, a positive correlation was found between family loneliness (a sense of loneliness in the family context) and assessment of the group’s place in the lives of the study participants. The more isolated the women were in this respect, the greater the meaning the group had in their lives. Additionally, in this case it was found that the relationship between the two variables is mediated by the variable ‘level of involvement and activity in the group.’ In other words, in order to achieve the greatest benefits from these online women’s groups, participants who experience feelings of family loneliness must participate actively. The more active and involved women are in the groups, the greater the significance the groups have in their lives. Moreover, this increases the possibility for the group to serve as an alternative supportive framework for a failing family framework.

**Conclusion**

The findings of the study indicate that closed women’s Facebook groups have considerable potential to satisfy needs and functions in members’ lives, to fill substantial lacks, and to provide them with alternatives to dysfunctional areas in their lives. At the same time, these groups are not a complete answer for all the deprivations in group members’ lives. For example, in terms of feelings of loneliness in general, in romantic and social contexts, Facebook groups are not perceived as providing a true substitute.

The finding related to romantic loneliness can be explained with relative ease. Despite the centrality of the closed women’s Facebook groups in the lives of many of their members, the groups cannot adequately fill empty spaces of a romantic nature. But what about social loneliness? Precisely because of the contribution of the groups to the lives of women suffering from family loneliness, it may be expected that similar findings would be found in the wider social context as well. The answer to this question lies in the simple fact that activity in the women’s groups may respond to some social needs, but there is no real substitute for offline activity, face-to-face social meetings, communal recreational activities, and so forth. The sense of support, solidarity, and belonging that participation in the women’s Facebook groups give to their members, and the fact that the group is a source of advice and assistance to decision-making processes, can explain their central role for women who experience family loneliness. Apparently, the main functions identified with family connections are adequately met, especially for women whose level of activity and involvement in groups is high.

This research shows the high level of significance attributed to membership in women’s groups by members from different backgrounds and with radically different personality characteristics and needs. The findings were similar for women who tend to be open, those who seek common areas of activity to realize their needs, and for women who say they experience social and emotional loneliness in their lives. While it is possible that in some cases these seemingly contradictory characteristics may coexist (social openness may mask loneliness, for example), it is reasonable to assume that in many cases these do in fact represent different types of women.

The rapid cultural changes brought about by the Internet in general and online social networks in particular have provoked new social dilemmas and contradictions (Curran, Fenton, & Freedman, 2012; DiMaggio, 2001). Basic concepts studied for years in the fields of psychology, sociology, and culture such as privacy, disclosure, membership, collaboration, and intimacy, take on new meanings in the online environment (Amichai-Hamburger, Kingsbury, & Schneider, 2013; Dalessandro, 2018; Joinson & Paine, 2007).

Although in many situations it seems that online activity imitates and reflects what is happening in the offline world (thereby blurring the boundaries between the two), the present research indicates that in some situations online activity is used to meet needs that may not be fulfilled in the offline realm. In future studies, it will be necessary to further examine additional aspects of the interaction between the online and offline by examining patterns of activity in closed Facebook groups as well as examining the characteristics and perceptions of the users. The present study focuses on groups of women in Israel. The findings suggest that similar phenomena may occur in Facebook groups with other characteristics, and whose activities are concentrated in societies that are completely different from Israeli society.

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