**Abstract**

The current study focuses on three large closed Facebook groups in Israel, which are run by, and appeal specifically to, women. 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. This study wishes to map the patterns of activity of group members in these distinctive online spaces, identify relationships between these patterns of activity and the personal characteristics and personality traits of participating women, and uncover the role of women’s groups in members’ lives. Findings indicate thatclosed women’s Facebook groups have considerable potential to satisfy needs and functions, fill substantial deficiencies, and provide members with alternatives to dysfunctional areas in their lives.

**Keywords**

Closed Facebook groups, perceived group significance, women, self-disclosure, loneliness, online activity

**Women’s self-disclosure and loneliness:**

**Mediation of involvement in Facebook groups**

Online social networks have penetrated the lives of hundreds of millions around the world. They are integrated into a wide variety of aspects of daily life. 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 in this arena is the proliferation of closed Facebook (FB) groups. These groups are diverse in terms of participants’ activity and characteristics**.**

The current study focuses on closed FB groups run by women and which appeal specifically to women. 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. First, to map the patterns of group members’ activity in these distinctive online spaces. Second, to identify relationships between these patterns of activity and the personal characteristics and personality traits of participating women. Third, to uncover the role of women’s groups in members’ lives, including 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. The present study seeks to shed light on the characteristics of the growing phenomenon of closed FB groups and the broad socio-cultural meanings attributed to them. The research will be conducted on a range from micro to macro levels. It will consider personal aspects, as well as the general social aspect of separate and closed ‘islands,’ which 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.

**Theoretical background**

*Social media*

Rheingold (1993), who originally coined the term ‘virtual community,’ describes it as a type of social group existing only on the internet. The virtual community is formed when enough people actively participate in public discussions and invest sufficient expressions of emotion in them, to the extent of creating a fabric of interpersonal relationships in cyberspace. In this definition, Rheingold emphasizes the need for long-term interactions between people who share an emotional attachment with one another. Casual visitors are not part of the community. In contrast to Reinhold, Wellman (1998) argues that online communities are ‘online social networks,’ avoiding the term ‘virtual.’ Wellman suggests that 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: pp. 42, 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 among researchers regarding virtualization is characterized by dichotomies prevalent at the time when the internet entered the lives of many in the mid-1990s, such as online versus offline and real versus virtual. However, the difficulty in defining communities and networks is not rooted in their transition to the digital environment. Instead, it seems that the concept of community has been a topic of consideration and research among social scientists in general, and sociologists in particular, since the early twentieth century.

According to Granit and Nathan (2000), the development of online communities reflects postmodern sociological and cultural processes because they enable individuals to express their narratives and identities as they perceive them 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 based on it. 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 share similar interests, such as hobbies, networking or business-related 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 they are 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 emails, 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 user’s 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. Young and Radar (2016) also discuss the social benefits associated with sharing information on social network sites, such as increasing social capital and enhancing the perception of social support. Perceived group-significance (PGS) describes the subjective ways in which online groups are perceived or experienced by their users. As Granit and Nathan (2000) have noted, each user can create a different personal narrative of their own as a result of the uses and experiences of the online group.

*Perceptions of the online audience*

Actively participating in social network sites usually entails ‘performing’ (in Goffman’s words, 1959) in front of an unfamiliar audience. Over the past few years, we have witnessed a flourish of studies that strive to understand what Litt (2012: p. 331) calls the ‘imagined audience’ in the context of social media, defining it as ‘the mental conceptualization of the people with whom we are communicating.’ In a more recent study, Litt and Hargittai (2016) distinguish between an abstract, and a target imagined, audience and assume that when posting, most people have multiple imagined audiences that may vary from one post to the other. According to Litt and Hargittai, the imagined audience would be the user’s default when they wish to experience self-expression, while the target imagined audience would be employed when they wish to draw the attention of a specific group of people. Most scholars in this field analyze users of certain social media and their perceptions of their potential audiences (see, for example, Marwick and Boyd, 2010, on Twitter; Brake, 2012, on blogs; Jung and Radar, 2016, on FB), however, to the best of our knowledge, the research on imagined audiences within the realm of closed women’s’ groups on FB is scant.

*Self-disclosure*

Online platforms provide a place where people are more willing to open up and be intimately exposed than they are without computer mediation (Suler, 2004). One means of achieving a state of intimacy in interpersonal relationships is self-disclosure. Intimacy is one’s capacity to share happiness, excitement, longing, fears and needs with others and to be privy to the others’ emotional expressions in return (Cassidy, 2001). It has been found that sharing personal information is essential for creating intimacy through dialogue between partners in romantic relationships (Greene et al., 2006). Intimacy is also an important component in personality development and encourages rapport (Derlega et al., 1987). Self-disclosure is expressed in a person’s willingness to reveal details relating to their personal situation, life events and aspirations (Deci and Ryan, 2011). Disclosure serves a number of purposes, such as increasing mutual understanding and building trust between partners in a relationship (Laurenceau et al., 1998). In addition, disclosure enables a person to recognize and integrate meaning into processes and experiences they have undergone (Frattaroli, 2006). In the self-disclosure process, the discloser shares personal information, whereas the recipient listens and receives information. Turn-taking or reciprocity in disclosure is common in interactions (Dindia, 2000; Rubin et al., 1980). Reciprocity arouses a sense of social commitment to respond with a similar level of intimacy to the self-disclosures of others (Rotenberg and Chase, 1992). Reciprocity in self-disclosure is especially important during the early stages of a relationship when people are becoming acquainted (Won-Doornink, 1979).

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 (Chan and Cheng, 2004). Alongside the lack of nonverbal cues, the asynchronous nature of most social networking activities effects 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 both friends and strangers (Jones et al., 2008; Valenzuela et al., 2009). On the other hand, public disclosure of personal information can be problematic in terms of identity theft, stalking and harassment (Gross and Acquisti, 2005; Nosko et al., 2010). Studies show that while participants are cautious regarding their privacy and are aware of these dangers (Al-Saggaf, 2011; Boyd and Ellison, 2007; Jones et al., 2008; Young, 2009), intimate self-disclosure in cyberspace is quite common (Jones et al., 2008; Valenzuela et al., 2009) given users’ difficulty to refrain from sharing personal information (Edwards and 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 et al., 2010).

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

*Loneliness*

Loneliness is a subjective experience, often the consequence of a deficit in an individual’s social relationships (Satici et al., 2016). Nonetheless, existent findings regarding the connection between solitude and the online environment are inconclusive and at times contradictory (Nowland et al., 2017). Some studies show that people who use the internet frequently report higher levels of loneliness (Kalpidou et al. 2011). Similarly, a positive correlation was found between loneliness and frequent use of FB (Lou et al., 2012). In contrast, other studies demonstrate that online social media reduces loneliness by providing opportunities for socializing and for having control over interactions (Valkenburg and Peter, 2009). In addition, it has been found that the greater the number of members in a person’s social network, the less lonely they feel (Skues et al., 2012). Research on online loneliness offers two opposing perspectives on these conflicting findings (Valkenburg and Peter, 2007). The displacement hypothesis, on the one hand, posits that users take advantage of the medium to replace offline relationships with online connections, thereby making the internet a potential substitute for the loneliness that characterizes their offline lives. On the other hand, the stimulation hypothesis posits that the internet succeeds in reducing loneliness because it expands the possibilities for creating new relationships online.

In a meta-analysis of thousands of published papers addressing FB use and loneliness, Song et al. (2014) examine the relationship between the use of FB and the user’s loneliness, both as factors and outcomes. Overall, their analysis suggests a positive correlation between FB use and loneliness, and specifically, that lonely people use FB, rather than FB causes its users to feel lonely.

*Benefits of participation in closed FB groups*

FB 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 FB’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 FB. 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 regard to users’ ability to control their privacy (see for example, D’Arcy and Young, 2012).

A public group is open to all FB users without limitations on participation or posting messages. While a closed group enables the participation of members only, the fact that it exists is information accessible to all FB users. Conversely, 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 FB groups in Israel, considering the issue in an educational context, rather than in legal-ethical terms. Among the multitude of virtual communities operating in the Israeli online space, there is a prominent number of closed FB groups founded and operated by women, which target an audience of women only. Some of these closed women’s groups have tens of thousands of members, with a wide scope of activities conducted in their frameworks. Other groups are designed for members that know each other in daily life (for example, based on a shared living environment), while others 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 and 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 Tenth World Wide Web user survey conducted by the Graphic, Visualization, and Usability Center (GVU) (1999) found that women are more likely to use the internet for educational purposes, communication, and sharing 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 and Ben-Artzi, 2000, 2003). Lay and Young (2014), examined patterns of self-disclosure on social network sites, especially on micro-blogging platforms, and found that popularity and interpersonal needs significantly influence the individual’s self-disclosure.

The current study strive to shed light on the social and psychological mechanisms that characterize closed women’s groups on FB, as well as on the role(s) that these groups play in the lives of their members.

*Research hypotheses*

H1: A positive correlation will be found between self-disclosure and PGS, for instance, 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: 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: the higher the level of social-emotional loneliness, the higher the PGS will be. A positive correlation will be found between PGS and social-emotional loneliness: (H3a) social loneliness and (H3b) 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 social loneliness (H4a) and family loneliness (H4b).

**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 by ‘Midgam Project Web Panel,’ a company specializing in the provision of infrastructure services for internet research. For this study, participants signed up to the panel and got paid for their participation. Stratified sampling was employed, based on data published by the Central Bureau of Statistics. The respondents first answered a screening question to confirm that they had used at least one closed women FB group.

*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.* Self-disclosure was measured using the Self-Disclosure Index (SDI) (Miller et al., 1983), which is a 10-item scale measuring self-disclosure on a range of personal issues (habits, feelings, emotions, relationships, etc.). 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.* Social-emotional loneliness was measured using SELSA-S (DiTommaso et al., 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 and Spinner, 1993). We extracted two relevant subscales/dimensions of SELSA: social loneliness and family 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 can depend on my friends for help’). Internal reliability of the general social-emotional loneliness scale was α = .881. The reliability for the social loneliness subscale was α =.81; and for family loneliness it was α = .85.

*Dependent variable. PGS.* PGS was measured using an 18-item multidimensional scale for assessing the degree of the significance 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 (completely agree).

*Mediating variable*. *Group involvement*. Group involvement was measured using a 4-item index assessing the frequency of activities that users engaged in 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 |

**Results**

*Preliminary results*

An examination of the usage and activity patterns of participants in women’s groups reveals that 90% of the women use FB at least once a day, while 78% use FB several times a day. 75% of the respondents reported that they were members in closed women’s groups. The average number of groups was 4.9 (SD=5.37).

80% of the women reported that they read posts at least once a day, and 54% reported that they read posts several times a day*.*15% comment on posts at least once a day, 3% write posts at least once a day, and 7% share links at least once a day. 74% of the women reported that they are either not familiar with other group members beyond online activities or know only a few of them. For most of the women (52%) the main motivation to join these groups is ‘seeking help and advice from other women,’ while for 24.5%, the main motivation is ‘having fun’ and ‘relief from boredom.’

*Hypothesis testing*

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, so the PGS is more positive.

To examine the mediating role of group involvement in the relationship between self-disclosure and PGS (H2), we used Hayes’s (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 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).

smPGS

PGS

Group involvement

Self-disclosure

.27\*\*\*

.46\*\*\*

.09\*

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

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 social loneliness (H3a) (r = -.051, p > .005) or family loneliness (H3b) (r = -.065, p > .005) and PGS.

**Table 2.** Pearson correlations between research variables

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Group-Involvement | Self-disclosure | Social-emotional loneliness | Social loneliness | Family loneliness |
| Perceived group significance | .545\*\*\* | .258\*\*\* | .070- | -.051 | -.065 |
| Group involvement |  | .289\*\*\* | .013 | .029 | .159\*\* |
| Self-disclosure |  |  | .022 | .035 | .005 |
| Social-emotional loneliness |  |  |  | .749\*\*\* | .711\*\*\* |
| 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’s (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 indicate 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 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 social loneliness as a predictor (H4a) (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 (H4b) did not include 0 (95% CI [-.205, -.046] with 5,000 resamples. In addition, results 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 on family loneliness on PGS through group involvement (see Figure 2).

PGS

-.020

Group involvement

Perceived group significance

.019

.485\*\*\*

Social-emotional loneliness

Social loneliness

Family loneliness

.104\*\*

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

**Discussion**

This study examines the role that closed multi-participant FB 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.

Based on our model, the findings of this study indicate that the higher 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 (although we may not be able to indicate a direct causal influence). Put differently, closed women’s groups on FB 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 the participant’s 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 indicates the importance of these groups for women of a personality type that tends to share given that 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 members with a passive presence, limited to reading posts and sporadic reactions.

The study also offers findings on the relationship between social-emotional loneliness and attribution of the 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 social isolation. In other words, women’s groups are not an adequate substitute for the social real-life contexts in which women experience loneliness. Changes in the level of activity and involvement in the group did not impact 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 higher the group’s significance was 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 most significant 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 higher the significance of the groups in their lives. 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 FB groups have considerable potential to satisfy needs and functions and fill substantial gaps in members’ lives, and to provide them with alternatives to dysfunctional areas in their lives. At the same time, these groups are not an ample solution to all the deprivations in group members’ lives. For example, in terms of feelings of loneliness in general, and in social contexts, in particular, FB groups are not perceived as providing a valid substitute.

Oldenburg (1989) offers the concept of the ‘third place.’ He claims that 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 can escape from the first and second places, and gather for social activities, such as parks, cafés, street corners and pubs. These places foster a sense of community, provide support, and promote equality among members. It is possible to consider online social networks as constituting a ‘third place.’ Furthermore, 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 home.

The contribution of the closed groups to the lives of women suffering from family loneliness might be found in the broader social context as well. The activity in the women’s groups may respond to some social needs, but there is no real substitute for offline engagement, face-to-face social encounters, and communal recreational activities. The sense of support, solidarity and belonging that participation in the women’s FB groups gives 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. The main functions associated 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 satisfy 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 most instances they represent different types of women.

The rapid cultural changes brought about by the internet in general, and online social networks, in particular, have prompted new social dilemmas and contradictions (Curran et al., 2012; DiMaggio, 2001). Basic concepts explored for years in the fields of psychology, sociology and cultural studies, such as privacy, disclosure, membership, collaboration and intimacy, take on new meanings in the online environment (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2013; Dalessandro, 2018; Joinson and 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.

*Limitations*

Several research limitations should be pointed out. The current study focused on extremely large women’s groups in Israel. Thus, its findings may not necessarily be able to explain the inner dynamic of other types of women’s groups—smaller, more specific, or associated with a different culture.

Therefore, future studies should examine a more varied set of closed women’s groups on FB. The complex nature of the findings concerning different kinds of loneliness and the role that closed FB groups may play in the lives of members who face them, call for further examination of the phenomenon. Particular attention should be given to additional aspects of the interaction between the online and offline by examining patterns of activity in closed FB groups, as well as the users’ characteristics and perceptions of the groups.

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