Social Media Addiction Works Differently for Lonely Boys and Girls
Jeffrey L. Hughes, M.S. (West Virginia University), Christa L. Lilly, Ph.D. (West Virginia University), Madison R. Johnston (West Virginia University), and Amy L. Gentzler, Ph.D. (West Virginia University)

With rates of depression on the rise during adolescence, identifying antecedents that lead to poorer mental health is crucial. Research has established a link between social media use and depression among adolescents (Keles et al., 2019), however, more investigation is needed into for whom this relationship exists. Friendships have been identified as a buffer against the negative consequences of social media, including depression (Shensa et al., 2017), and recent research has suggested that both feelings of loneliness (Cauberghe et al., 2021) and gender (Booker et al., 2018; Krasnova et al., 2017) can influence how adolescents use and are affected by social media. In the present study, we investigated how addiction to social media and loneliness interact to influence change in depressive symptoms across a year. Additionally, we investigated how this relationship differed for boys and girls. With data from 299 9th graders (52% girls; Time 1 Mage = 15.12 years, SD = 0.49), latent growth curve analyses indicated that addiction to social media may be a protective factor against depressive symptoms for boys, but not girls. Boys who reported above average levels of both loneliness and social media addiction decreased in the number of depressive symptoms reported across the span of a year. For girls, both loneliness and addiction predicted increased depressive symptoms. These results suggest that addiction to social media may be beneficial for certain populations, such as lonely adolescent boys. Future research should investigate what adolescents are doing on social media to further explain this association.