

Being ignored online or in person, it's still exclusion

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People who are excluded by others online, such as on Facebook, may feel just as bad as if they had been excluded in person, according to researchers at Penn State and Misericordia University.

"If you've ever felt bad about being 'ignored' on [Facebook](#) you're not alone," said Joshua Smyth, professor of biobehavioral health and of medicine at Penn State. "Facebook -- with its approximately 800 million users -- serves as a place to forge [social connections](#); however, it is often a way to exclude others without the awkwardness of a face-to-face interaction. Most people would probably expect that being ignored or rejected via a remote source like the Internet would not hurt as much as being rejected in person. Yet, our studies show that people may experience similar psychological reactions to online exclusion as they do with face-to-face exclusion." Smyth and Kelly Filipkowski, assistant professor of [psychology](#) at Misericordia University, conducted two studies examining the perceptions of and reactions to face-to-face and online [chat room](#) exclusion. In the first study, the team asked more than 275 college students to anticipate how they would feel in a hypothetical exclusion scenario in which they were ignored during a conversation. The [participants](#) said they expected that they would feel somewhat distressed and that their self-esteem would drop, regardless of whether the [rejection](#) occurred in a chat room or in person; however, they expected the in-person exclusion to feel worse. According to Smyth, such anticipated reactions are important as they may help determine how people make decisions about situations that they perceive as holding some risk of rejection -- attending a party where they do not know

anyone or participating in an online dating event. In the second study, Smyth and Filipkowski set up two scenarios in which [77 unsuspecting college students](#) were ignored during a staged "get to know each other" conversation. Half of the participants were excluded in person, while the other half were excluded in an online chat-room setting.

The students operating face to face believed they were participating in a study on the formation of impressions in casual settings. They thought they would briefly interact with two other student participants and then supply the researchers with their impressions of themselves and the others.

The students involved in the chat-room conversation believed they were participating in a study to investigate the formation of impressions when individuals do not receive visual cues from one another. In reality, the researchers set up both scenarios -- the in-person conversations and the chat-room conversations -- so student participants would be ignored by student research assistants trained to pose as study participants.

The team found that participants in both scenarios responded similarly to being excluded.

"Contrary to our expectation, the students' responses to rejection were not primarily characterized by severe distress, but rather characterized by numbness and distancing or withdrawal," Smyth said.

Overall, the team showed that the participants expected the exclusion to be much worse than what they actually reported when they experienced the exclusion. The results of both studies appeared in a recent online issue of *Computers in Human Behavior*.

"What we found interesting is that in the lab setting, the vast majority of participants attributed their exclusion as being no fault of their own, but

rather due to the other individuals in the room," Filipkowski said. "In other words, people said, 'it isn't me, it's you.' This may have been a type of protective mechanism in order to buffer their mood and self-esteem."

The results suggest that our culture may not differentiate between in-person and online experiences as much as we might think, according to the researchers.

"Although the meaningfulness of online or remote interactions may seem troubling, these data may also hold a more positive message," Smyth said. "Meaningful online interactions may support the utilization of remote interventions that can enhance physical and psychological well-being, in turn providing increased access to opportunities for people who are in need."

However, the researchers caution that these findings may be related to the types of individuals who participated in their study.

"These studies were conducted with college-aged students who have grown up with the Internet and other related technology," Filipkowski said. "These findings may not apply to individuals who have much less experience with technology and remote communication."

Filipkowski suggests that future studies investigate the applicability of these findings to different populations.

In the future, the team wants to investigate biological reactions to different types of [exclusion](#).

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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