



## Research Report

## Online communication and subjective well-being in Chinese college students: The mediating role of shyness and social self-efficacy



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## ABSTRACT

The present study attempts to examine the relationship between online communication and subjective well-being from the perspective of psychological need satisfaction, as well as the mediating role of shyness and social self-efficacy among Chinese college students. 574 college students with average age of 20 were asked to complete Psychological Need for Online Communication Scale, Shyness Scale, Social Self-efficacy Scale and Subjective Well-being Scale. SEM evidence supports the stimulation hypothesis, namely, the psychological needs satisfied by online communication can promote a person's social self-efficacy and experience a higher evaluation of subjective well-being. Meanwhile, the psychological needs satisfied by online communication can also influence individuals' status of shyness, which will decrease their social self-efficacy and lead to a lower subjective well-being. Furthermore, Chinese female college students obtain less social self-efficacy from the satisfaction of psychological needs through online communication than their male counterparts did, and resulted in less subjective well-being. The results are discussed in terms of psychological needs theory.

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## 1. Introduction

Online communication is becoming increasingly common in college students (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005). According to the Thirtieth Statistical Report on Internet Development from the China Internet Network Information Center, there are 445 million Chinese people who are using online communication, accounting for 82.8% of all Internet users, and more than 30% of them are college students. Researchers pay more attention to the influences of online communication to peoples' real life, such as relationship formation (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002), interpersonal trust (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009), information sharing (Butler, 2001), interpersonal trust (Valenzuela et al., 2009) and social adaption (Engelberg & Sjöberg, 2004), especially for subjective well-being (Kim & Lee, 2011; Schiffrin, Edelman, Falkenstern, & Stewart, 2010), but the results were controversial.

The purpose of this study is to examine whether psychological need satisfaction can explain the relationship between online communication and the subjective well-being of Chinese college students. Based on the use and gratification theory and the self-determination theory, the present study supposed that the satisfaction of psychological needs in online communication can

promote the subjective well-being. Moreover, shyness and social self-efficacy may mediate the relationship between them. We applied the structure equation modeling (SEM) approach to assess the empirical strength of the relationships in the proposed model, and then use multi-group analysis to identify if the results would vary across gender.

This study includes 5 sections: Section 2 provides a literature review and research hypotheses; Section 3 describes the research method; Section 4 presents the results of data analysis. Finally, Section 5 makes the discussions and conclusions, and also presents limitations and implications for further researchers.

## 2. Literature review and hypotheses

American president Abraham Lincoln said that most folks are about as happy as they make up their minds to be, which is consistent with a general evaluation of one's living conditions according to the standards set by oneself, namely, subjective well-being (SWB). This may be the most popular understanding of subjective well-being, which highlights the subjective evaluation of happiness. Psychologists have identified it as a person's cognitive and affective evaluation of his or her life as a whole, which consists of satisfaction with life, and positive and negative emotion. Subjective well-being is an important indicator of mental health, with characteristics like subjectivity, stability and integrity that mainly

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come from the evaluation of people and is influenced by the individual's inheritance, personality, value expectation, social comparison and other factors.

With the wide use of internet, more and more researchers have begun to pay attention to the function of the internet on subjective well-being. Some researchers have indicated that the main function of the Internet has changed from entertainment and information seeking to interpersonal communication (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007b). Online communication, which includes instant messaging (IM) and chat rooms (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2008) has gradually become an important way for college students to have interpersonal interaction (Lenhart et al., 2005; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2003), either to form relationships with strangers or to maintain their existing friendships. Thus, online communication is not only an individual behavior, but also a social behavior, which has become an important way for college students to have social interaction.

As mentioned above, the studies of the relationship between online communication and subjective well-being did not reach a unanimous conclusion. Some researchers indicated that increased internet usage was associated with decreased well-being (Gross, Juvonen, & Gable, 2002; Kraut et al., 1998; Van den Eijnden, Meerkerk, Vermulst, Spijkerman, & Engels, 2008); whereas others found online communication will facilitate the subjective well-being of college students (Ko & Kuo, 2009; Valenzuela et al., 2009). Researchers explained the contradictory results with two opposing explanatory hypotheses: the reduction hypothesis, and the stimulation hypothesis. The first hypothesis insists that online communication mainly motivates people to form relationships with strangers, which are time-consuming and harmful to real friendships (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007b). Researchers who adhere to the reduction hypothesis found that online communication reduces the quality of existing friendships and leads to decreased well-being (Kraut et al., 1998; Nie & Erbring, 2000; Nie, Hillygus, & Erbring, 2002). In contrast, the stimulation hypothesis emphasized that online communication enhanced intimate self-disclosure between existing friends more than did face to face interaction (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). This can boost reciprocal liking, caring and trust between friends (Bryant, Sanders-Jackson, & Smallwood, 2006; Collins & Miller, 1994; Kraut et al., 2002; Morgan & Cotten, 2003), and then promote the closeness of existing friendships (Grinter & Palen, 2002; Schiano et al., 2002) and the subjective well-being (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007b) of adolescents.

The large aggregation of studies cited before attest to the fact that decisive evidence that indicates exactly what is the internal mechanism operating between online communication and subjective well-being has not yet been gathered. Some studies began to explain it from psychological need. Such as information acquisition (Parker & Plank, 2000), self-affirmation (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007a), self-disclosure (Kim & Lee, 2011; Ko & Kuo, 2009), entertainment (Perse & Dunn, 1998) and role playing (Larsen, 1998). Suler (1999) found that online communication could satisfy most of the human needs in Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, such as sexuality, achievement, belongingness, interpersonal relationships and self-actualization, which are the essence of people's online behavior. Some researchers applied use and gratification theory to explain people's online communication (Schutz, 1996). It demonstrated that there was a basic interpersonal relationship between individuals and others based on belongingness, control, and love demands, and all of these needs would inspire people's online behavior (Rosengren & Windahl, 1971). Recently, the self-determination theory which identified three basic psychological needs as autonomy, competence, and relatedness, was also used to explain the psychological need for video games (Przybylski, Rigby, & Ryan, 2010; Ryan, Rigby, & Przybylski, 2006), internet use (Shen, Liu, & Wang, 2012) and other leisure activities.

Moreover, Morris and Ogan (1996) stated that people can obtain interesting content and joyful experiences from the internet just as they can from other basic mass media.

Researchers also indicated that the anonymity of cyberspace may cause it to become a new and important addition to "real life", and even an adaptive supplement by providing new and imaginative ways for college students to satisfy some psychological needs which cannot be satisfied in real life (Suler, 1999), such as affection, social interaction, self-identity, achievement, belongingness, social affective regulation, information acquisition and so on, which leads to their online behavior, even to internet addiction (Weiser, 2001). For example, Ryan et al. (2006) found that online games inspired players primarily because these games elicited feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Ci and Jia (2001) supported the idea that the internet could compensate for some limitations and obstacles encountered in real life, and then satisfy the need for control/mastery, emotional communication, sexuality, self identity, and achievement. Thus, it can be seen that some psychological needs of college students that could not be satisfied in daily life encouraged their online behavior.

Accordingly, in order to provide a further understanding of the relationship between internet use and subjective well-being, we devised a questionnaire to explore college students' psychological need for online communication. We did this through interviews, coding, and exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with 400 participants, and then followed up with a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using another 1200 participants. The final questionnaire included 33 items and 6 dimensions which were named self-promotion, interpersonal communication, achievement, entertainment, roll playing and autonomy. The questionnaire proved to have good reliability and validity among Chinese college students, with the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient being 0.939 for the full scale, and 0.84, 0.84, 0.79, 0.69, 0.65, 0.68 for the 6 dimensions respectively.

In addition to considering the possible effect on subjective well-being of psychological needs perceived online, some researchers also insisted that it is personality that makes online behavior different, as some individuals were resilient during Internet engagements and others were vulnerable to overuse (Lei & Liu, 2005; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008). For example, Landers and Lounsbury (2006) found that conscientiousness, extraversion, and agreeableness were negatively correlated with internet use. People with high scores on these traits would have more face-to-face interaction rather than online communication. Another study (Amichai-Hamburger, Wainapel, & Fox, 2002) indicated that introverted and neurotic people locate their "real me" on the Internet, while extroverted and non-neurotic people show their "real me" through traditional social interactions. Furthermore, shyness was also proven to be a prominent personality factor which can influence peoples' online communication behavior (Desjardins, 2011; Laghi et al., 2012). Shy participants used online modality more extensively, and expressed more negative emotions during virtual interactions (Orr et al., 2009). Meanwhile, problematic internet use could also predict an individual's shyness (Ebeing-Witte, Frank, & Lester, 2007). Recently, a study by Chan (2011) revealed that there was a significant negative interaction between shyness and sociability. Namely, shy individuals with high sociability were more likely to use synchronous computer-mediated communication, which implied that sociability may be an important fact in shy people's online communication behavior.

Social self-efficacy is a subjective evaluation and faith in an individual's sociability, which guides his or her behavior during interpersonal activities (Fan & Mak, 1998). Some studies have revealed a relationship between internet use, social self-efficacy, and subjective well-being (David, 2001; Huang, Qian, & Yi, 2006). For example, Steinfield et al. (2008) found that an increased use of Facebook would predict an increased promotion of social skill,

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