



## The associations between young adults' face-to-face prosocial behaviors and their online prosocial behaviors

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### ABSTRACT

Drawing on the co-construction theory (Subrahmanyam, Smahel, & Greenfield, 2006), this study investigated the relationship between online and face-to-face prosocial behaviors among 493 (345 women) young adults (ages 18–25 years). Findings indicated that face-to-face prosocial behaviors were positively associated with the engagement in online prosocial behaviors through social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Myspace, Twitter), chat programs (e.g., Google Talk, AOL Instant Messenger, Yahoo Messenger), email, and text messages, after controlling for gender and time spent using each type of technology. These findings extend the application of the co-construction theory to online prosocial behaviors. Furthermore, these findings suggest that the internet is also a place for positive interactions and call for more research investigating online prosocial behaviors.

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### 1. Introduction

The consistent findings between adolescents' engagement in cyber aggression and face-to-face aggression suggest that school bullies may generalize their aggressive behaviors to online interactions (Campbell, 2005; Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Ybarra, Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2006). The co-construction theory was originally proposed to explain the similarities between adolescents' nondigital identities and their identity online (Boneva, Quinn, Kraut, Kiesler, & Sklovski, 2006; Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2011). This theory has recently been applied to explain the associations between face-to-face and cyber aggression (Calvete, Orue, Estevez, Villardon, & Padilla, 2010; Gradinger, Strohmeier, & Spiel, 2009; Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Ybarra et al., 2006). With a growing body of support, the co-construction theory posits that adolescents are psychologically connected to their online worlds similarly to their offline worlds (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008; Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008; Subrahmanyam, Smahel, & Greenfield, 2006). Although less research has been conducted among young adults, available studies have shown that they use electronic technologies at similar rates as adolescents (Lenhart et al., 2011; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004; Ybarra et al., 2006). Recent studies (McMillan & Morrison, 2008; Subrahmanyam et al., 2008) indicate that young adults use

electronic technologies to connect and reconnect with their offline friends providing an additional application of the co-construction theory to young adults' online and offline activities and communications. Much of the previous research has focused on negative interactions that may occur online, such as cyber aggression (Calvete et al., 2010; Gradinger et al., 2009; Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Ybarra et al., 2006), with little attention given to positive online interpersonal exchanges.

The internet has brought individuals conveniences for exchanging information as well as opportunities to communicate in positive ways (Wellman & Gulia, 1999). Recent research has also recognized the "prosocial promise" of the internet by investigating the advantages of online therapy, online volunteerism, and online support groups (Amichai-Hamburger, 2008; Eichhorn, 2008; Warmerdam, van Straten, Jonsma, Twisk, & Cuijpers, 2009). To address the potential of positive interactions through electronic technology, researchers have started to examine prosocial interactions specifically through online games.

#### 1.1. Online prosocial behaviors

The only published study to investigate online prosocial behaviors was conducted by Wang and Wang (2008) who examined the relationship between altruism and prosocial behaviors through online games. Altruism was assessed using the altruism facet scale (e.g., active concern for the welfare of others) from the NEO-Personality Inventory-Revised (Goldberg et al., 2006). Findings indicated that altruistic gamers were more likely to help others (e.g., helping with quests, provide answers to questions) through online games when compared to less altruistic gamers. Additionally,

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men and women were equally likely to help others in online games. However, men were more likely to help female gamers only, while women helped male and female gamers equally.

Drawing on the co-construction theory, (Wang & Wang, 2008) findings may suggest that prosocial individuals may generalize their helpful nature beyond their face-to-face interactions and into their digital worlds. Potentially, young adults may treat their prosocial behaviors in the digital world as an extension of their prosocial dispositions. This orientation could extend beyond the online gaming environment into other electronic mediums (e.g., social networking sites, text messages), which are important to consider because only 25% of young adults play online games (Lenhart et al., 2011). Furthermore, there are noticeable differences between online gaming and other electronic mediums. First, online gaming limits the recipients of prosocial behaviors to individuals the young adult may or may not know in a nondigital context. Investigating other electronic mediums may shed more light on prosocial behaviors to a broader range of recipients. Second, online gaming may require cooperative behaviors in order to achieve common goals inviting more opportunities to act prosocially when compared to other electronic venues. Therefore, the current study investigates multiple electronic mediums to broaden the online contexts in which young adults may engage in prosocial behaviors.

Furthermore, Wang and Wang found no gender differences in helping through online games which contrasts with findings regarding face-to-face prosocial behaviors. Specifically, women are typically more prosocial in their face-to-face interactions when compared to men (Caprara & Steca, 2005; Hardy & Kisling, 2006; Lenhart et al., 2011). It is unclear whether gender differences will be found in broader online settings. Therefore, in order to clearly examine the association between online and face-to-face prosocial behaviors, it may be necessary to control for gender in the analysis.

### 1.2. The present study

Guided by the co-construction theory that suggests young adults construct their online worlds like their nondigital worlds (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008; Subrahmanyam et al., 2008; Subrahmanyam et al., 2006), the present study examined the relationship between young adults' face-to-face and online prosocial behaviors. We hypothesized that young adults with a face-to-face prosocial orientation would generalize this orientation to their online interactions through social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Myspace, Twitter), chat programs (e.g., AOL Instant Messenger, Yahoo Messenger, Google Talk, MSN Messenger), email, and text messages. Each of these technologies was examined because of their high frequency of usage among young adults (Lenhart et al., 2011). In our analyses, we controlled for the time spent using each technology type as we expected young adults who spent more time using these technologies might have more opportunities to act prosocially through that particular technology. We also controlled for gender in the analyses for possible gender effects in prosocial behaviors (Caprara & Steca, 2005; Hardy & Kisling, 2006; Padilla-Walker, Barry, Carroll, Madsen, & Nelson, 2008).

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were 493 undergraduate students (345 women) enrolled in introduction to psychology courses with an average age of 20 years ( $SD = 2.90$ ). Most of the participants were White (63%), followed by Hispanic (18%), Asian (8%), Black or African American (8%), and other (3%).

### 2.2. Measures and procedures

All participants received an internet address directing them to the survey. Before taking the surveys, all participants read an informed consent document letting them know that their participation was voluntary and they could stop participating at anytime without penalty. After giving their permission, participants filled out measures regarding their demographics (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity), time spent using electronic technology, online, and face-to-face prosocial behaviors.

#### 2.2.1. Time spent using electronic technologies

Participants reported how many hours per day they used social networking sites (SNS) (e.g., Facebook, Myspace, Twitter), chat programs (e.g., AOL Instant Messenger, Yahoo Messenger, Google Talk, MSN Messenger), email, and text messages on a scale of 1 (*never*) to 5 (7 h a day or more). The usage of the three social networking sites was averaged as well as the usage of the four chat programs. Cronbach's alpha was .86 for SNS and .92 for chat programs.

#### 2.2.2. Face-to-face prosocial behaviors

This measure examined participants' engagement in prosocial behaviors in their face-to-face interactions. The questionnaire used the four prosocial behaviors items from Prinstein and colleagues' (Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003) measure of aggressive and prosocial behaviors. The questions included "I helped someone out when they were having a problem", "I was nice and friendly to someone when they needed help", "I stuck-up for someone who was being picked on or excluded", and "I helped someone join a group or conversation". Participants rated the items on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = *never*, 5 = *a few times a week*). We compared these items with other prosocial behaviors questionnaires used among young adults and found similarities among them (Linder, Crick, & Collins, 2002; Loudin, Loukas, & Robinson, 2003; Werner & Crick, 1999). The four prosocial behavior items were averaged to form a score indicating face-to-face prosocial behaviors. Cronbach's alpha for this measure was .88.

#### 2.2.3. Online prosocial behaviors

This questionnaire included a description of four prosocial behaviors (e.g., "say nice things", "offer help", "cheer someone up", "let someone know I care about them"). We adapted two items (e.g., "I helped someone out when they were having a problem", "I was nice and friendly to someone when they needed help") from the face-to-face prosocial behaviors measure (Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003), but revised these items to make them more general. Two more items (e.g., "cheer someone up", "let someone know I care about them") were added specifically for this study. Different items were used for online prosocial behaviors than face-to-face prosocial behaviors because there are limited ways young adults can express prosocial behaviors through the online environment. Thus, we opted to use more general items to represent online prosocial behaviors. Participants rated how often they engaged in the four prosocial behaviors through each technology type (e.g., social networking sites, chat programs, email, text messages) on a scale of 1 to 9 (1 = *never*, 3 = *monthly*, 9 = *daily*). The four behaviors were averaged resulting in a prosocial behavior score for each technology type. Cronbach's alphas for online prosocial behaviors were .84 for social networking sites, .90 for chat programs, .85 for email, and .84 for text messages.

## 3. Results

To examine the associations between the engagement in online prosocial behaviors and face-to-face prosocial behaviors, we

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