



## Parents as a resource: Communication quality affects the relationship between adolescents' internet use and loneliness

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### A B S T R A C T

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The authors examined the influence of parent–adolescent communication quality, as perceived by the adolescents, on the link between adolescents' Internet use and loneliness, controlling for perceived family support in general terms. Adolescents ( $N = 216$ ,  $M_{\text{age}} = 15.80$  years) provided data on Internet use, loneliness, Internet-related parent–adolescent communication, and perceived family support. Moderated regression analyses showed that Internet-related communication quality determined whether more extensive Internet use was associated with more loneliness. This moderation effect remained significant when perceived family support in general terms was controlled for. Gender and age of the participants did not influence the findings. Implications for successful Internet-related parenting strategies are discussed.

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The Internet is an integral part of people's lives, and adolescents are among the Internet's most avid users (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). The rise of the Internet has been accompanied by worries regarding its impact on the health and well-being of children and adolescents. Although previous research pointed at Internet-related risks for the psychological development of adolescents, adaptive functions of Internet use exist as well (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). In this respect, one major challenge for research in this field is to identify factors that increase the likelihood of a positive impact of the Internet on children's and adolescents' development and that decrease the likelihood of a negative impact. The present research focused on loneliness as an indicator of adolescents' health versus problematic development. We assumed that the direction and magnitude of the link between Internet use and loneliness is influenced by the quality of Internet-related parent–adolescent communication. As a major extension of previous research, we investigated whether Internet-related communication quality plays a role that goes beyond the influence of the adolescent's perceived support by his or her family in general terms.

### Internet use and loneliness

Loneliness (i.e., perceived social isolation, Cacioppo et al., 2002) is an important marker of adolescent psychosocial development. Loneliness at an early age has been identified as a predictor of low health status later in life (Cacioppo et al., 2002; Caspi, Harrington, Moffitt, Milne, & Poulton, 2006). Since the advent of the Internet in the 1990s, researchers have examined the relationship between the use of this technology and loneliness (cf. Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2011). Whereas some theoretical approaches suggest that internet use is related to less loneliness and well-being, others have pointed at

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a potential increase of loneliness: On the one hand, the Internet provides ample opportunities to connect with classmates, family members or strangers who share similar interests. Moreover, the possibility of anonymous and asynchronous communication may contribute to a perceived controllability of a communication which may in turn facilitate the development of close relationships (McKenna & Bargh, 1999; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). On the other hand, Internet use has been connected to a decrease in offline interactions (Nie & Hillygus, 2002), and the development of more superficial relationships and weaker social ties (Subrahmanyam & Lin, 2007). Moreover, the high accessibility of communication partners and information as well as the Internet's anonymity have been related to particular risks such as unsolicited approaches by strangers or messages by (online-) friends and acquaintances that are intimidating or offensive. Such potentially harmful forms of communication may be occasional and unintended by the sender; however, they may also be massive and meant to systematically hurt the communication partner (cyberbullying, cf. Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2012; Tokunaga, 2010).

In recent years, a number of empirical studies have quantified the relationship between Internet use and the psychosocial well-being of children and adolescents. Regarding internalizing problems such as loneliness or depression (e.g., Achenbach, 1991), the empirical findings are somewhat inconsistent. Data collected by Kraut et al. (1998) suggested that the Internet is a communication technology that leads to more loneliness, a finding referred to as the "Internet paradox". However, over the last 14 years, several studies have failed to find a relationship between Internet use and loneliness or other internalizing problems (e.g., Gross, Juvonen, & Gable, 2002; Kraut et al., 2002). Some studies even highlighted that socially anxious and lonely individuals may particularly benefit from the Internet due to the better control of one's communication online (McKenna & Bargh, 1999; Peter, Valkenburg, & Schouten, 2005). Nevertheless, other studies supported the notion of a maladaptive relationship between Internet use and internalizing problems, as indicated by the time spent on the Internet, chatting or browsing the web, and internalizing problems (e.g., Deniz, 2010; Hu, 2009; Stepanikova, Nie, & He, 2010; Ybarra, Alexander, & Mitchell, 2005).

A recent meta-analysis (Huang, 2010) summarized previous findings on the relationship between Internet use and psychosocial well-being (relationships with depression, loneliness, self-esteem, and life satisfaction were observed). Based on 43 independent results of adolescent and adult samples, an average correlation of  $r = -.05$  was found, indicating that greater Internet use was related to less well-being. When the data on loneliness were observed separately (37 independent results), the average effect size amounted to  $r = .02$ , pointing out a very small relationship in a sense that more Internet use is related to more loneliness. Importantly, the results further indicated that the effect sizes were heterogeneous. However, an analysis of moderator effects showed non-significant effects of potential moderators, including the type of Internet use, the indicator of well-being, Internet use assessment, and participant age and gender.

We assume that the heterogeneity of the findings on the relationship between Internet use and adolescents' well-being is partly due to the influence of uninvestigated yet potent moderating factors which determine the strength (and direction) of this association. Internet use does not influence individuals in one and the same way (cf. McKenna & Bargh, 1999). The link between Internet use and well-being may be strong and negative among some adolescents, because they are vulnerable to the risks and fail to profit from the opportunities of the internet but weaker or even reversed among others. Results on the Big Five personality factors support this assumption (Van der Aa et al., 2009). The detrimental relationships between daily internet use, compulsive internet use, and loneliness were found to be less strong among individuals with high scores in extraversion, agreeableness, or emotional stability. However, personality is one, but likely not the only, variable that influences the relationship between internet use and loneliness. For adolescents, the influence of parents might be a key factor.

### **Do parents play a role?**

Even though young people become increasingly autonomous during adolescence, there is little doubt about the critical role of parents in their psychosocial development (Simpkins et al., 2009; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). The influence of parents to mediate or mitigate the potential (negative) role of media on the children's development has been examined for many years now (e.g., Clark, 2011; Dorr, Kovacic, & Doubleday, 1989; Nathanson, 1999). The term *parental mediation* is typically used as a label for media-related parenting and related research; however, it needs to be noted that this expression does not imply that parenting variables function as mediators in the statistical sense (cf. Clark, 2011). Although research on media and parenting focused on children and TV for the most part, the results appear to be relevant for older samples and the Internet as well. With respect to media use in mid- to late-adolescence (e.g., 13–18 years of age), active parenting strategies, i.e., communicating with adolescents about the media they use, appears to be more promising than trying to set rules and restrict adolescents' media use, as indicated by studies on adolescent TV use (Nathanson, 1999, 2002; Nathanson & Cantor, 2000).

Research on the influence of parental mediation regarding Internet use is sparse, but points in a similar direction: Restriction can be ineffective, as potentially detrimental events online may take place in spaces that are considered safe by parents and restrictions on Internet activities may be circumvented by the adolescents (Lee & Chae, 2007; Mesch, 2009). Parent-adolescent conversations on the nature, content, and potential risks of websites appear to be more successful (Holtz & Appel, 2011; Lee & Chae, 2007). Taken together, these findings suggest that parents may be unable to successfully monitor and control adolescents' online activities. Nonetheless, parents can have an impact on whether or not Internet use has detrimental effects on adolescent development. We assume that one major beneficial role that parents can play regarding adolescents' Internet use is that of a resource: Open parent-adolescent communication can prepare adolescents for the potential opportunities but also risks of the Internet. Moreover, whenever adolescents are confronted with potentially harmful content on the Internet, those who feel that they can have a productive conversation with their parents about their Internet

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