



## Exploring the relationship between adolescents' self-concept and their offline and online social worlds



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### ABSTRACT

Recent research has established online social lives as a significant aspect of adolescents' lives and development. The current study considered the relationship between adolescents' offline (i.e., 'real life') and online social worlds and their self-concept, which is a broad indicator of well-being during adolescence. In this quantitative study, 733 adolescents between the ages of 10 and 18 ( $M = 15$ ,  $SD = 2.33$ ) were surveyed about their online and offline social worlds and self-concept. Regression analysis revealed the moderating effect of online socializing in the relationship between offline social life and general self-concept, consistent with a 'Rich Get Richer' hypothesis of online use.

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The unprecedented advent and growth of the internet has significantly impacted how adolescents communicate, work, learn, entertain, socially interact, access and share information (Boyd, 2014; Common Sense Media, 2012). With the growing access to computer and mobile internet communication tools such as social network sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat), on-line communication has been firmly established as a social tool (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009; Lee, 2009; Mishna, Saini, & Solomon, 2009; Schrock & Boyd, 2008; Van Dijck, 2013). Consequently, Bosancianu, Powell, and Bratović (2013) propose that social networking has become integral to our conceptualization of the internet and inseparable from what we know the internet to be. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project (2012), 95% of American teenagers use the internet, with 74% of teenagers having accessed the internet through a mobile device such as a tablet or smart phone. The nature of the access to the internet has changed from being stationary connections with a desktop to a rapid instant connection throughout the day. Similarly, 81% of on-line teens use some form of social media such as Facebook, twitter and Instagram. Indeed, a number of studies have found that the

one of the main reasons adolescents go online is for interpersonal communication (Gross, 2004; Reich, Subrahmanyam, & Espinoza, 2012; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). Social media allows for teens to build a personal profile, participate, share, network and stay connected to others with similar interests (Boyd, 2014; O'Keeffe, Clarke-Pearson & the Council on Communication and Media, 2011).

While access to the internet provides educational benefits such as access to knowledge and academic support, as well as the development of analytical thinking, critical thinking and decision-making, the benefits of online social interaction are now more than ever extended to include increased opportunity for social support, identity exploration, and interpersonal relations (Gross, 2004; Jackson et al., 2006; Mishna et al., 2009; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007, 2009). In fact, several studies have revealed that adolescents are using online spaces to address developmental issues, especially needs for intimacy, connection with others, self-expression and identity exploration (Reich et al., 2012; Stern, 2004).

While researchers are increasingly recognizing online interactions as playing a prominent role in the social lives of adolescents and their overall development (e.g., Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, Kraut & Groos, 2001), much of the research and theoretical understanding about adolescents' social contexts remains predominantly grounded in offline interactions, namely with peers at school. To this end, the role of (offline) peers is firmly established as of foundational importance and associated with positive development and well-being during adolescence (Baumeister & Leary,

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1995; Merrell & Gimpel, 2014). Less clear is whether online social interaction has the same impact on positive adolescent development and well-being. The current study addresses this by investigating the relationship between online and offline socialization and the positive development of adolescents.

## 1. Online social interaction

With social media firmly entrenched in the fabric of adolescent culture, broadening the scope of research on adolescent social lives to online as well as offline settings is necessary for an accurate understanding of its association with adolescent development and well-being. Despite well-documented prevalence of active online social lives among adolescents (Chiungjung, 2010; Lee, 2009), research remains inconclusive on the interplay between online social lives and real-life interactions (Lee, 2009) and their synergistic translation to adolescent well-being (Chiungjung, 2010; van den Eijnden, Meerkerk, Vermulst, Spijkerman, & Engels, 2008).

In spite of its prevalence, online relationships are often perceived as shallow approximations of real-life relationships (Mitchell, Lebow, Uribe, Grathouse, & Shoger, 2011). Social time spent online is also considered to displace conventional interactions and ultimately erode real-life social support, with negative associations demonstrated between time spent online and frequency of communication with household members, as well as with size of real-life social circles (Kim, LaRose, & Peng, 2009; Shklovski, Kraut, & Cummings, 2006). However, moderate overlap between adolescents' online and offline social connections, demonstrated in recent research, challenges assumptions of the spurious quality of adolescents' online social interactions and its separation from offline contexts (Reich et al., 2012). Moreover, adolescent self-reports in Reich, Subrahmanyam, and Espinoza's survey (2012) also indicate perception of online socializing activities as useful in reinforcing or broadening real-life relationships.

Likewise, research on the social and emotional consequences of online social interactions also remains equivocal. High levels of online socialization have been associated with social isolation and self-rated loneliness (Desjarlais & Willoughby, 2010; Kim et al., 2009). However, online social interactions have also been reported to reduce loneliness by presenting low-risk opportunities for mutual self-disclosure with both online and offline acquaintances (Bargh, Katelyn, & McKenna, 2004; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). Research also suggests that the relationship between adolescents' online socialization and quality of social supports online or offline may differ according to factors such as level of anxiety (Desjarlais & Willoughby, 2010). Overall, literature suggests that the quality of social support from online interactions is complex and context-dependent, with much unknown regarding its relationship to offline interactions and general well-being.

Two theories have emerged in the literature regarding the benefits of an online social life and its relationship with offline social status: Social Compensation Theory and the Rich Get Richer hypothesis (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). Social Compensation Theory argues that adolescents with weak offline social supports may benefit most from active online socialization as a relatively low-risk opportunity for compensatory social connections (Campbell et al., 2006; Kraut et al. 2002). For example, adolescent boys who reported high social anxiety and social computer use in Desjarlais and Willoughby's longitudinal study also reported more positive friendship quality relative to boys with similar levels of social anxiety and lower levels of social computer use (2010). According to this theory, adolescents with low levels of companionship or peer support at school, who compensate through online socializations, would demonstrate greater well-being than those with low peer support who do not spend as much time socializing online.

In contrast, the Rich Get Richer hypothesis states that online socialization primarily benefits socially successful adolescents as additional avenues of interaction and social connection. According to this model, adolescents with strong offline social supports use online interactions to supplement and enrich existing relationships, creating greater disparity in the quality of social lives and associated benefits on overall well-being relative to those with less active offline social lives (e.g., Lee, 2009). Greater frequency of communication technology use among socially competent adolescents (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009) and association between frequent online self-disclosure and lower rates of introversion in adolescents (Peter, Valkenburg, & Schouten, 2005) support this model. This hypothesis suggests that adolescents with high levels of peer support at school who also socialize online may demonstrate even greater well-being than otherwise, and also relative to their peers with low peer support at school.

Despite more studies in favor of the Rich-get-Richer hypothesis (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009), current literature shows support for both theories. However, exploration of adolescents' online and offline social lives in relation to indicators of their well-being remain limited. This study examined the interaction of adolescent online social lives with their offline social supports in the context of their relationship with General Self-concept, as an indicator of well-being.

## 2. Self-concept

Self-concept has been linked to various outcomes. For example, having a high self-concept and sense of self-worth has been shown to be protective against poor mental health outcomes, such as depression and anxiety (e.g., Harter, 1999; Harter & Whitesell, 1996). As such, it can be considered a key indicator of positive development in adolescence (Harter, 1986; Owens & King, 2001; Whitesell, Mitchell, Kaufman, Spicer & the voices of Indian teens project team, 2006); self-concept is an appropriate construct for measuring the impact of online social interaction, as part of the adolescent social landscape, on adolescent development (Berndt & Burgy, 1996). More specifically, self-concept has been defined as "the relatively stable schemata of oneself that are generalized to the extent that they refer to an individual's view of him- or herself across different situations" (Nurmi, 2004, p. 95). Historically in the literature, self-concept has been confused with self-esteem and often the two have been used interchangeably (Dusek & Guay McIntyre, 2003; Shapka & Khan, 2014). However, an important distinction is that research on self-concept tends to focus on patterns of development and change that are similar across most individuals; whereas self-esteem literature tends to focus on the causes and correlates of individual differences in self-esteem (Kernis & Goldman, 2002; Leary & MacDonald, 2003; Shapka & Khan, 2014). For the current study, self-concept is conceptualized as the collective image of one's true abilities and uniqueness. It is a multi-dimensional, hierarchical model of self-concept that becomes increasingly differentiated with age (Bracken, 1992; Shapka & Khan, 2014). Pastorino and Doyle-Portillo (2013), describe that in the early years one's self-concept is very general and changeable, however as we mature it becomes much more specific, detailed and organized. Moreover, adolescence is a developmental period in which there is a focus on one's concept of self as well as how that translates in different social contexts (Ybrant, 2008). Thus, peer relationships (more than parents) are thought to be highly salient in the development of self-concept (Fulgini & Eccles, 1993). The current study, therefore, explores the relationship between adolescents' offline and online social lives and general self-concept.

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