



# The mediator role of self-disclosure and moderator roles of gender and social anxiety in the relationship between Chinese adolescents' online communication and their real-world social relationships

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Available online 14 July 2011

### Keywords:

Adolescence  
Online communication  
Quality of friendship  
Social anxiety  
Self-disclosure  
Gender

## ABSTRACT

Based on theory and previous research, we examined relationships among gender, social anxiety, self-disclosure, quality of real-world friendships and online communication by Chinese adolescent Internet users. Results indicated that online communication and self-disclosure are not related to quality of friendship, and online communication is positively related to self-disclosure. For adolescent boys and adolescents with high social anxiety, online communication can explain more variance in users' self-disclosure, indicating that gender and social anxiety moderate the relationship between online communication and online self-disclosure.

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## 1. Introduction

There is no question that the Internet has significantly changed both the nature and extent of communication in the 21st century. This is especially true for adolescents, members of the so-called "Net generation," who have never know a world without the Internet. According to research conducted by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) (2009), there are approximately 384 million Internet users in China, 50.7% of whom are below the age of 25. Yet surprisingly few studies have examined the Internet behavior of this group, in particular, how they use the Internet to communicate and what effects online communication has on their offline social relationships (Ong, Chang, & Wang, 2011). The social effects of Internet use are of particular interest in adolescents because adolescence is a period of rapid social transformation, expansion of social networks and the development of social competence. Many researchers have examined the association between online communication and quality of friendship (Bessière, Kiesler, Kraut, & Boneva, 2008; Desjarlais & Willoughby, 2010; Nie, 2001; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007a). Most of this research was conducted with samples of adolescents and young adults, according to a meta-analysis by Huang (2010). From studies using adolescent samples, Desjarlais and Willoughby (2010) found that there was a main effect of using computers with

friends on friendship quality for girls, while social anxiety moderates this relation for boys. Nie (2001) found that Internet use may actually reduce adolescents' interpersonal interactions and communication, and Kraut et al. (1998) found that Internet use may reduce adolescents' social involvement and psychological well-being. However, several other studies indicate that online communication is positively associated with adolescents' social connectedness (Bessière et al., 2008; Kraut, Kiesler, & Boneva, 2002; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007a). With samples of young adults, Schiffrin, Edelman, Falkenstein, and Stewart (2010) examined the effect of Internet communication on undergraduates' well-being, reporting that increased Internet usage was significantly related to decreased well-being. In a study with 60 female undergraduates, self-reported shyness was not significantly related to increased self-disclosure in the condition without a webcam, yet shyness was related to decreased self-disclosure in the webcam condition (Brunet & Schmidt, 2007). Moreover, Ong et al. (2011) found that university students who participated in online chatting exhibited more familial loneliness than those who did not chat online, given that time spent chatting reduced the time devoted to familial relationships. There is relatively little research on online communication and relationship quality among older adults (Gatto & Tak, 2008; Ledbetter, Mazer, DeGroot, et al., 2011). For example, Ledbetter and colleagues (2011) examined the effects of attitudes toward online social connection and self-disclosure on Facebook communication and relational closeness.

Previous research suggests that the use of online communication tools, such as Instant Messaging, chat-rooms and social

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networking websites, effects offline social relationships, although the direction of these effects is not always consistent or significant. Some studies find benefits of online communication to real world social relationships (Morgan & Cotten, 2003; Shaw & Gant, 2002; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007a), while other find liabilities or no effects (Gross, 2004; Jackson et al., 2004; Nie, 2001; Nie, Hillygus, & Erbring, 2002; Weiser, 2001). Still other studies find that the effects of online communication depend on characteristics of the communicator and type of online communication (e.g., social networks or chat rooms; e.g., Bessière et al., 2008; Desjarlais & Willoughby, 2010; Huang, 2010; Kraut et al., 2002; Nie, 2001).

Two competing hypotheses have been used to predict the direction of effects of online communication on real-world social relationships: the augmentation hypothesis and the displacement hypothesis. According to the augmentation hypothesis, online communication should enhance real-world social relationships by providing opportunities for social connectedness, expansion of social networks and exposure to people and information that enhance political awareness and civic engagement (Katz & Rice, 2002; Turke, 1995). Specifically, the use of e-mail and Instant Messaging may improve face-to-face interactions and promote users' existing friendships and well-being (Morgan & Cotten, 2003; Shaw & Gant, 2002; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007b). With a sample of 1210 Dutch teenagers between 10- and 17-years-old, Valkenburg and Peter (2007b) found that Instant Messaging is a significant predictor of friendship quality and well-being when it is used for communication with existing friends. Valkenburg and Peter (2007b) reported that adolescents spend most of their online communication time with their existing friends when they are alone, a finding that is consistent with other studies (Gross, 2004; Subrahmanyam, Kraut, Greenfield, & Gross, 2000). These studies suggest that online communication is positively related with real-world friendship quality. According to the displacement hypothesis, online communication users have spent time in online settings, rather than offline, and their existing relationships have suffered as a result (Morgan & Cotten, 2003; Nie, 2001; Nie et al., 2002; Weiser, 2001). For example, Kraut et al. (1998) suggested that online communication users substitute weak online ties for strong offline ones, implying that the Internet motivates adolescents to form online contacts with strangers instead of maintaining relationships with existing friends. Online contacts are characterized by superficial, weak-tie relationships, which may reduce the quality of adolescents' existing friendships (Kraut et al., 1998).

Aside from studies supporting the augmentation or displacement hypothesis, there are also studies reporting no significant associations between online communication and offline friendship quality or well-being (Gross, 2004; Jackson et al., 2004; LaRose, Ghuay, & Boivin, 2002; Mesch, 2001, 2003; Sanders, Field, Diego, & Kaplan, 2000; Waestlund, Norlander, & Archer, 2001). The inconsistency of present findings about the effect of online communication on users' friendship quality might result from the exclusion of potential mediating and moderating variables in previous research. Most previous studies have only examined direct linear relationships between online communication and outcome variables (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). Given mixed findings and conflicting hypothesis, it is worth examining the possible mechanisms through which online communication influences quality of friendship. In particular, studies should investigate possible moderating and mediating variables (e.g., users' online self-disclosure, gender, social anxiety) that may influence the effect of online communication on adolescents' friendship quality (Huang, 2010; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). For instance, Valkenburg and Peter (2009) assumed that self-disclosure enhanced by online communication could help adolescents develop high-quality relationships. Self-disclosure is a basic building block of a sound relationship in the offline

communication context (McNelles & Connolly, 1999). Previous studies have also suggested that online self-disclosure is associated with friendship formation (McKenna & Bargh, 2000) and the quality of adolescents' existing friendships (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007a). However, social anxiety may moderate the relationship between online communication and friendship quality or psychological well-being (Schouten, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2007; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). Regarding the precise role of social anxiety in the relationships among online communication, self-disclosure and quality of friendship, two conflicting theoretical perspectives have been proposed. According to the social compensation hypothesis, adolescents with high social anxiety would prefer to disclose themselves through online communication because of the reduced audiovisual cues provided by online communication, which may thus improve their friendship quality online. Schouten et al. (2007) suggested that online communication, which is characterized by reduced auditory and visual cues, can help socially anxious adolescents release from the constraints that they often experience in face-to-face communication. Furthermore, online communication provides socially anxious adolescents a secure environment in which their self-presentation is under their control. As such, self-disclosure in the online realm may be more attractive to adolescents with high social anxiety. According to the rich-get-richer hypothesis, however, socially competent adolescents are more likely to use online communication to keep in contact with others than adolescents with high social anxiety (Kraut et al., 2002). Socially competent adolescents use online communication as another way to maintain their existing friendships. Studies supporting the rich-get-richer hypothesis indicate that use of the Internet is positively related to time spent with existing friends (Kraut et al., 2002), the closeness of existing friendships (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007b) and well-being (Shaw & Gant, 2002). Gender is also considered a possible moderator of the relationship between online communication and friendship quality of friendship, with adolescent boys self-disclosing better online than offline compared to adolescent girls (Schouten et al., 2007). Research on the mediating and moderating effects of these variables may help us understand the mechanisms by which online communication influences adolescents' real-world friendship quality.

Current literature lacks research data about online communication in Mainland China, especially in sample of adolescents. The other reasons that the present study chooses adolescents as subjects are that (a) online communication is more important for adolescents than for other samples. Adolescents tend to be self-conscious, a characteristic resulted from their psychological development (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). Self-consciousness may refer to a heightened attentional focus on one's behavior or one's internal thoughts and feelings (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975). Adolescents tend to falsely assume that their appearance or behavior is the focus of other peoples' attention, which is believed to result in the self-consciousness. It reflects the developmental process of separation-individuation, a process that adolescence has to experience when children begin the move from dependence on parents to a definition of their own independent selves (Elkind & Bowen, 1979). In online communication, adolescents' self-consciousness can be relieved to a large extent due to reduced auditory and visual cues. (b) Adolescents need to achieve psychosocial autonomy, a central goal for their psychological development (Steinberg, 2008). This involves three tasks such as developing a strong sense of identity, a sense of intimacy and sexuality. According to Valkenburg and Peter (2011), self-presentation and self-disclosure are vital for the accomplishment of these three tasks. Self-presentation can best be understood as selectively presenting aspects of one's self to others. Self-disclosure can be defined as revealing intimate aspects of one's true self (Schlenker,

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