Psychosocial consequences of adolescents' online communication
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CHAPTER 1

introduction and dissertation outline
chapter 1

INTRODUCTION AND DISSERTATION OUTLINE
Adolescence is characterized by many physical, psychological, and social changes. As children transition into adults, the developments they go through lay the foundations for their psychosocial functioning and well-being as adults. One important developmental task that adolescents need to accomplish is to develop a sense of self (a view of who they are and want to become) as well as an adequate level of self-esteem, that is, the extent to which adolescents appreciate their self (Harter, 2012). A second task is to develop a sense of intimacy, that is, to learn to initiate, maintain and deepen, and also terminate close, meaningful relationships (Steinberg, 2011). To accomplish this task, adolescents need to develop social competence: the social skills needed to initiate relationships, to adequately and appropriately present and disclose themselves to others, and to be assertive when necessary (Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenberg, & Reis, 1988). Self-esteem and intimacy are two of the main predictors of psychological well-being (Buhrmester & Prager, 1995; Rosenberg, 1986). Acquiring an adequate level of self-esteem and learning to relate to others are therefore crucial to adolescent development. Both self-esteem and social competence are largely shaped through interactions with others, especially with peers. Social interaction with peers thus plays a central role in adolescents’ psychosocial development and well-being (Valkenburg & Peter, 2008, 2009a, 2009b).

Traditionally, adolescents develop their social competence and self-esteem in face-to-face communication. However, the recent development of Internet-based technology, and in particular its application for interpersonal communication, has considerably changed our social interactions. A large amount of interpersonal communication now occurs through online communication. Adolescents are the most active users of online communication and, in particular, of social media (CBS, 2015), such as social network sites (such as Facebook and Instagram) and instant messaging applications (for example, WhatsApp). Most adolescents have a profile on at least one social medium, and they spend on average three hours per day communicating online (Valkenburg, 2014). A large part of adolescents’ interactions with peers thus take place online. Consequently, a logical question to ask is whether and how this avid use of social media affects the way in which adolescents develop into young adults. Although in the past this question has been asked for many newly appeared technologies (Wartella & Jennings, 2001; Wartella & Reeves, 1985), there are at least three important reasons to investigate the role of online communication in adolescents’ psychosocial development. First, the Internet is one of the most pervasive technologies in adolescents’ daily lives and, consequently, their social interactions. Second, it provides adolescents with a more active role than any other medium. Through the internet, they can actively create content, initiate and maintain relationships, and are exposed to an abundance of social information and possibilities for social interaction. Third and most important, online communication differs from face-to-face communication in several ways that can influence social behavior and its consequences (e.g., Valkenburg & Peter, 2011; Walther et al., 2011).
Online communication has fewer audiovisual cues than face-to-face communication, and is typically more asynchronous compared to face-to-face interactions. The reduced audiovisual cues and asynchronicity offer people more control over what they say and share, as they can check and edit information, messages, and pictures before sending them (Walther, 2011). This controllability of online communication is particularly attractive for adolescents, who can often be self-conscious about their looks or social skills (e.g., Valkenburg & Peter, 2009b). The reduced cues and asynchronicity of online communication typically also make people feel less inhibited (Walther, 1996). This reduced inhibition might make adolescents more likely to try out and practice social behavior (e.g., Valkenburg & Peter, 2008), which may stimulate the development of their social competence and self-esteem. In addition, the reduced inhibition makes adolescents more likely to disclose about intimate topics (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009a). As self-disclosure plays an important role in initial stages and in maintaining and deepening of existing relationships (Buhrmester & Prager, 1995; Knapp & Vangelisti, 2000), it is important to consider in the context of social competence and intimacy development in adolescence. In addition, many social media are designed to elicit interpersonal feedback in the form of positive comments and likes, which may positively affect adolescents’ self-esteem (Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006). However, the disinhibiting effect of online communication is also thought to make it easier to be more explicitly positive or negative in interactions with others (Walther, 2011). This can facilitate negative social behavior such as flaming or cyberbullying, which may negatively affect adolescents’ self-esteem and well-being.

As characteristics of online communication, such as reduced audiovisual cues and asynchronicity, have the capacity to affect online social behavior, they may also influence relevant developmental issues in adolescence. As a result, it is important to know exactly how online communication influences adolescents’ communication with their peers, and how this in turn affects their development (e.g., Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). In addition, it is not only important whether effects emerge, but also how the effects may take place, so which underlying mechanisms explain these effects, as well as for whom the effects may be more apparent, so which adolescents are mostly affected. The aim of this dissertation is therefore to investigate the consequences of adolescents’ online communication for their psychosocial development, and, more specifically, their social competence and self-esteem. In doing so, this dissertation aims at examining (1) the longitudinal relationships between adolescents’ online communication and their social competence and self-esteem, (2) the underlying processes that may explain these relationships, and (3) individual differences that may predict which adolescents are mostly likely to experience positive or negative psychosocial consequences of their online communication. Such knowledge makes us better able to help adolescents use online communication in a responsible way; to inform developers of communication technologies on how to create environments
that stimulate positive consequences of online communication and minimize negative ones; and to develop prevention and intervention strategies to target adolescents who are most at risk of possible negative consequences.

Dissertation outline

This dissertation consists of a collection of four empirical studies. All of these studies deal with the relationship between online communication and psychosocial development. Being self-contained, each of the chapters starts with its own introduction. Therefore, this introduction only briefly discusses the outline of the dissertation and the relationships between the chapters.

The dissertation consists of two parts. The first part focuses on the longitudinal relationships between online communication and social competence (Chapter 2) and self-esteem (Chapter 3). The second part deals with the role of interpersonal feedback in online communication. Online feedback refers to the positive or negative reactions that adolescents receive in their online communication (e.g., on their profiles or posts). Chapter 4 investigates which specific online behavior may increase the risk of receiving negative feedback, and which adolescents are most at risk of receiving negative feedback. Chapter 5, the final empirical chapter, examines the role of reciprocal positive and negative feedback in online communication, and the effects on the self-esteem of the recipient of this feedback.

This dissertation employs a multi-methodological approach, with results based on cross-sectional (Chapter 4) and longitudinal survey data (Chapter 2 and 3) as well as experimental data (Chapter 5). Chapter 2 is based on a three-wave longitudinal panel study conducted among 690 Dutch adolescents between 10 and 17 years old. Chapter 3 also describes a three-wave longitudinal panel study among 852 adolescents between 10 and 15 years of age. Chapter 4 employs a cross-sectional survey design, which includes 785 Dutch adolescents between 10 and 15 years old. The final empirical chapter involves an experiment, in which 149 young adults received feedback on the information they shared to a confederate, who was instructed to give particular positive or negative feedback to each of the subjects. Partly due to ethical concerns, this final chapter deals with young adults rather than adolescents.
Chapter 1

Part I: Longitudinal relationships

Chapter 2: Online communication and social competence

Chapter 2 investigates whether online communication positively predicts adolescents’ offline social competence over time. This chapter employs a longitudinal panel design investigating the relationship between online communication and adolescents’ ability to initiate offline friendships. In addition, this chapter tests the validity of two underlying mechanisms that may account for this relationship, namely the opportunities given by online communication (a) to communicate with a diverse group of people and (b) to disclose intimate information. Specifically, this chapter examines the extent to which adolescents use online communication to practice relationship initiation skills with a variety of people as well as to practice self-disclosure skills. In addition, it investigates whether adolescents are, over time, able to apply these skills in face-to-face situations, increasing their ability to initiate offline friendships. Finally, this chapter investigates whether the relationships between instant messaging and social competence through self-disclosure and the diversity of online communication partners differ between boys and girls and between younger and older adolescents.

Chapter 3: Online communication and self-esteem

Chapter 3 investigates whether online communication positively affects adolescents’ self-esteem by looking at the concurrent as well as the longitudinal relationships between adolescents’ online communication and their social acceptance self-esteem. Several earlier cross-sectional studies have found a positive relationship between online communication and self-esteem (for a summary, see Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). This chapter is one of the first to investigate the direction of this relationship. In doing so, it aims at answering the question of whether it is online communication that enhances self-esteem in adolescents, or whether adolescents with higher self-esteem are more inclined to turn to social media. Furthermore, Chapter 3 introduces a focus on online feedback by examining whether the positive online feedback that adolescents receive from their peers can explain the relationship between social network site use and self-esteem. Finally, the chapter investigates whether the mediating role of positive online feedback holds for both the concurrent and longitudinal relationships between online communication and self-esteem.

Part II: The role of interpersonal feedback in online communication

Chapter 4: Negative feedback

Although social media are predominated by positive comments and likes, some adolescents do also receive negative comments from peers on things they share
online. The self-esteem of these adolescents can suffer from such negative feedback (Valkenburg et al., 2006). Chapter 4 aims to explain why some adolescents predominantly receive negative feedback. The chapter focuses on two online behaviors that may increase the likelihood of receiving negative feedback: online social exploration (i.e., exploring new social contacts and initiating conversations through social network sites) and risky online self-presentation (i.e., posting pictures of oneself with a strong focus on sexuality and physical attractiveness). In addition, Chapter 4 examines three types of precursors that may predict this online behavior and, indirectly, receiving negative feedback: demographic (i.e., sex, age), dispositional (i.e., sensation seeking, inhibitory control), and social precursors (i.e., peer problems, family conflict). Differentiating between these types of individual characteristics leads to a fuller understanding of which adolescents are particularly susceptible to negative experiences as a result of their online communication.

**Chapter 5: Reciprocal feedback**

The final empirical chapter investigates whether the relationship between feedback and self-esteem differs between online and face-to-face communication. This chapter also zooms in further on feedback processes in online communication. If young adults receive positive or negative feedback to something they shared online, what is the immediate effect on their self-esteem? Furthermore, this chapter investigates how young adults’ reciprocal response to the provider of the feedback (i.e., an experimental confederate) affects their self-esteem. In an experiment, 149 undergraduate students chatted online with a male or female confederate. Half of them received positive feedback from the confederate on the information they shared with him/her. The other half received negative feedback. All students were given the opportunity to provide reciprocal feedback to the feedback of the confederate. With this design, Chapter 5 aims at investigating (1) the effect of receiving positive or negative online feedback from a communication partner (i.e., the confederate) on young adults’ self-esteem, (2) the effects of providing reciprocal feedback by the young adults on their own self-esteem, and (3) whether the effects of feedback and reciprocal feedback differ between online and face-to-face communication.

**Chapter 6: Discussion**

Chapter 6 provides an overview of the main findings and conclusions of this dissertation. In addition, the chapter offers scientific and practical implications, and proposes directions for future research. Table 1 shows an overview of all of the four empirical chapters.
Table 1. Chapter overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Chapter 2</th>
<th>Chapter 3</th>
<th>Chapter 4</th>
<th>Chapter 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Design</strong></td>
<td>Longitudinal survey</td>
<td>Longitudinal survey</td>
<td>Cross-sectional survey</td>
<td>Experiment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Online communication medium</strong></td>
<td>Instant messaging</td>
<td>Social network site use</td>
<td>Social network site use</td>
<td>Instant messaging (vs. face-to-face communication)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Psychosocial consequence</strong></td>
<td>Ability to initiate friendships (social competence)</td>
<td>Social acceptance self-esteem</td>
<td>Negative feedback</td>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Feedback</strong></td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Positive vs. negative, reciprocal feedback</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual differences</strong></td>
<td>Gender, age</td>
<td>Gender (control variable)</td>
<td>Gender, age, sensation seeking, inhibitory control, peer problems, family conflict</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


Chapter 1


