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Citation for published version (APA):
Koutamanis, M. (2016). Psychosocial consequences of adolescents’ online communication

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english summary
PSYCHOSOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF ADOLESCENTS’ ONLINE COMMUNICATION
As a crucial part of psychosocial development (Steinberg, 2011), adolescents need to acquire adequate levels of self-esteem, that is, the extent to which they appreciate their self (Harter, 2012), and social competence, that is, 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). Both self-esteem and social competence are largely shaped in social interactions with others, especially with peers (Harter, 2012). Specifically, communication with peers plays a central role in adolescents’ psychosocial development and well-being (Valkenburg & Peter, 2008, 2009a, 2009b).

These days, a large part of adolescents’ communication with peers takes place through online communication. As characteristics of online communication, such as reduced audiovisual cues and asynchronicity, have the capacity to affect online social behavior (e.g., Walther, 1996), they may also influence relevant developmental issues in adolescence. Therefore, the overarching aim of this dissertation was to investigate possible consequences of adolescents’ online communication for their psychosocial development. More specifically, this dissertation aimed to examine (1) the longitudinal relationships between online communication and social competence and self-esteem, (2) the underlying processes that may explain these relationships, and (3) individual differences and precursors that may predict which adolescents are mostly likely to experience positive or negative consequences of their online communication.

In investigating these issues, this dissertation employed a multi-methodological approach, combining cross-sectional survey data (Chapter 4) with longitudinal panel studies (Chapter 2, 3) and experimental data (Chapter 5).

**Part I: Longitudinal relationships**

Most previous research into the relationship between online communication and adolescents’ social competence and social self-esteem is based on correlational data (for a review, see, e.g., Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Therefore, Chapters 2 and 3 offer a first step towards more insight into the causal direction of these relationships by using longitudinal panel designs to investigate whether (a) adolescents’ online communication precedes changes in their psychosocial development, (b) psychosocial development precedes online communication, or whether (c) the two occur concurrently. In addition, it is important to know why online communication may affect social competence and social self-esteem. Accordingly, Chapters 2 and 3 examined several explanatory mechanisms that have been suggested in earlier research but have rarely been tested in longitudinal research. For the effects on social competence (Chapter 2), these factors pertained to what adolescents talk about online (i.e., intimate self-disclosure) and with whom they talk (i.e., characteristics of their online communication partners, such as
their diversity). For social self-esteem (Chapter 3), these factors involved the role of feedback (i.e., the tone of the reactions) that adolescents receive online.

**Chapter 2: Online communication and social competence**

Chapter 2 investigated whether online communication (i.e., instant messaging) positively predicted adolescents’ offline social competence (i.e., ability to initiate offline friendships) over time, using a longitudinal panel design among 690 Dutch adolescents between 10 and 17 years old. In addition, it tested whether this positive effect of online communication on the ability to initiate offline friendships can be explained by the opportunities provided by online communication to (a) communicate with a diverse group of individuals (who are not like them, for example with respect to age, cultural background, or geographical proximity), and (b) disclose intimate information (e.g., about being in love, the things they are proud of or ashamed about).

Online communication exerted a positive longitudinal effect on adolescents’ ability to initiate offline friendships. This relationship was explained by adolescents’ tendency to communicate with a diverse group of people in their online communication. However, the results did not indicate such an explanatory role for intimate self-disclosure. Chapter 2 thus showed that, in line with conclusions of earlier research (e.g., Valkenburg & Peter, 2011; Valkenburg, Sumter, & Peter, 2011), online communication can be a way for adolescents to practice social skills by providing adolescents with the opportunity to practice communication skills, particularly with a more diverse group of communication partners. This way, they can learn to relate to a variety of people and develop important social skills in online communication, which they can later use in offline situations to initiate and develop new friendships.

**Chapter 3: Online communication and self-esteem**

Chapter 3 investigated concurrent and longitudinal relationships between adolescents’ online communication (i.e., social network site use) and their social acceptance self-esteem (i.e., the extent to which they feel accepted and liked by their friends and successful in forming and maintaining friendships). As earlier correlational studies have suggested a positive relationship between adolescents’ social media use and self-esteem (e.g., Apaolaza, Hartmann, Medina, Barrutia, & Echebarria, 2013; Gonzales, 2014; Gross, 2009; Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006), Chapter 3 aimed to indicate whether social network site use enhances adolescents’ self-esteem over time, whether adolescents with higher self-esteem are more attracted to social network sites, or whether the effects go both ways. In addition, the chapter tested whether receiving positive reactions explains this relationship (e.g., Valkenburg et al., 2006).
Analyses based on a three-wave longitudinal panel study among 852 adolescents between 10 and 15 years old indicated a positive concurrent relationship between online communication and self-esteem. This relationship seemed to occur at least partly through the positive feedback adolescents received: The more often adolescents communicated online, the more positive feedback they received, and the better they felt about themselves at that same point in time. The results concerning the longitudinal relationships showed that adolescents with higher self-esteem increasingly communicated online over time. This suggests that adolescents who feel more accepted and liked by their friends, and who feel more successful in forming and maintaining friendships become increasingly attracted to online communication. However, in contrast to expectations, online communication did not seem to influence self-esteem over time. In addition, while positive feedback explained the concurrent relationship between online communication and self-esteem, it did not explain the longitudinal relationships. It is possible that, over time, other characteristics of feedback are of more importance, such as the public nature or the specific content to which the feedback is provided.

Part II: The role of interpersonal feedback in online communication

Chapter 4: Negative feedback

Although online communication is predominated by positive comments and likes, some adolescents also receive negative comments from peers. Because adolescents’ self-esteem can suffer from such negative online feedback (Valkenburg et al., 2006), an important first step in minimizing such negative consequences is to identify why some adolescents receive negative feedback. Against this background, Chapter 4 focused on two online behaviors that may increase the likelihood of receiving negative feedback in online communication (i.e., social network sites): online social exploration and risky online self-presentation. In addition, this chapter investigated demographic, dispositional and social precursors of adolescents who are most inclined to engage in these behaviors, and thus are, indirectly, more likely to receive negative feedback.

Chapter 4 employed a cross-sectional survey design with 785 Dutch adolescents between 10 and 15 years old. Only a small part of adolescents received negative feedback in online communication, which could be predicted by their online behavior and individual differences. More specifically, both engaging in online social exploration and engaging in risky online self-presentation were positively related to receiving negative feedback. In addition, online social exploration was more prevalent among adolescents who were older and among those with higher levels of sensation seeking and more conflict in their family. Risky online self-presentation was more prevalent among adolescents higher in sensation seeking. The online behavior of these
adolescents can thus, indirectly, put them more at risk of receiving negative feedback. Some individual differences were not related to online behavior but were directly related to receiving negative feedback: Boys, adolescents who had more problems inhibiting their impulses, and those with more peer problems were also more likely to receive negative feedback.

Chapter 5: Reciprocal feedback

Chapter 5 aimed at investigating (1) the effect of receiving positive or negative online feedback from a communication partner 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. To investigate this, Chapter 5 involved an experiment in which 149 young adults received feedback on the information they shared to a confederate. This confederate was instructed to give either positive or negative feedback to each of the subjects. All participants were given the opportunity to provide reciprocal feedback to the feedback of the confederate.

Although there was no immediate effect of positive or negative feedback on young adults’ self-esteem, their reciprocal responses did play an important role in the effect of feedback. If young adults received negative feedback in online communication, they responded more assertively, which increased their self-esteem. A similar indirect effect did not occur in face-to-face communication. These findings suggest that in online communication people may be more negative in response to negative feedback than in face-to-face communication. As a result of the reduced inhibition in online communication, young adults may be able to respond more assertively when needed and, consequently, protect or even increase their self-esteem.

Conclusions and societal implications

Despite public concern about possible negative consequences of adolescents’ online communication, the findings in this dissertation suggest predominantly positive relations of online interactions and adolescents’ psychosocial development. Specifically, online communication can be a way for adolescents to practice social skills that can be used in offline situations. In addition, online communication seems positively related to adolescents’ self-esteem through the positive feedback they receive. Finally, while most adolescents receive predominantly positive online feedback, when they do receive negative feedback, online communication stimulates more assertive responses, which can increase self-esteem. These results tentatively imply that for most adolescents online communication does not seem to pose a threat for their development, at least for the concepts studied in this dissertation.
However, a small group of adolescents may experience negative consequences of the negative feedback they receive in online communication. Considering that negative peer feedback may have detrimental consequences at this developmental stage, it is important to identify this group. This dissertation showed that boys, older adolescents, those high in sensation seeking and low in inhibitory control, and those high in peer problems and family conflict were more likely to belong to this risk group. This implies that parents should monitor the responses their adolescent children receive online. Profiling target groups that may be at risk of receiving negative feedback may also be valuable for developers of prevention or intervention programs.

It is important to note that the samples of the studies described in this dissertation had an average use of online communication. As a consequence, the positive effects that have been found in this dissertation may only hold for adolescents who use online communication in an average, non-compulsive way (e.g., Blomfield Neira & Barber, 2014; Van der Aa et al., 2009). To make adolescents more likely to benefit from their online communication in the development of their social competence and from positive feedback in the development of their social self-esteem, it is, therefore, important to teach them how to regulate the amount of their social media use within average time limits, in which parents can play an important role. At the same time, close parental supervision of what their children do online may be particularly important with respect to possible risk behaviors identified in this dissertation (i.e., social exploration and risky self-presentation), which may put adolescents at increased risk of receiving negative feedback.
References


