



Practice makes perfect: The longitudinal effect of adolescents' instant messaging on their ability to initiate offline friendships



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ABSTRACT

The first aim of this study was to investigate whether instant messaging (IM) influences adolescents' ability to initiate offline friendships. The second aim was to study the validity of two underlying mechanisms that may account for this relationship: (a) the opportunities offered by IM to communicate with a variety of people, and (b) to disclose intimate information. A three-wave longitudinal study was conducted among 690 Dutch adolescents (10–17 years old). Results show that adolescents' IM use increased their ability to initiate offline friendships over time. Furthermore, IM use indirectly increased adolescents' ability to initiate offline friendships through the diversity of their online communication partners. These findings suggest that adolescents can practice social skills online and learn to relate to a variety of people, which, over time, may increase their ability to initiate offline friendships.

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1. Introduction

An important developmental task in adolescence is to learn how to form and maintain close, meaningful relationships. In order to accomplish this task, adolescents need to develop *social competence*. Social competence consists of at least the ability to (a) initiate friendships and other relationships, (b) appropriately present and disclose oneself to others (i.e., self-disclosure), and (c) be assertive when necessary (Valkenburg & Peter, 2008). Traditionally, adolescents develop these skills in face-to-face communication (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). However, with the rise of online communication adolescents' opportunities to learn and rehearse social skills have increased dramatically. Today's adolescents frequently use the Internet for communication purposes (Jones & Fox, 2009), spending on average almost an hour a day communicating online (SPOT, 2010).

Online communication has three characteristics that may stimulate adolescents' rehearsal of social skills (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). First, it is characterized by *reduced visual and auditory cues*. According to hyperpersonal communication theory (Walther, 1996), an important consequence of these reduced nonverbal cues is that adolescents feel less concerned about how others perceive them. As a result, they feel less inhibited and have more opportunities to disclose their inner feelings (Joinson, 2001; Tidwell & Walther, 2002), which, in turn, may improve their social skills.

Second, the *asynchronicity* of online communication allows changing and reflecting on a message before sending it, which increases the editability of communication (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). This allows adolescents to optimize their self-disclosure and self-presentation (Walther, 2007) and by doing so rehearse their social skills. Third, online communication is characterized by *accessibility*, because it provides many opportunities to communicate with a broader variety of people. This allows adolescents to practice communication with people whom they would not easily meet in real life.

The aim of our study is to develop and test a hypothesis, which we named the *Internet-induced social skills hypothesis*. This hypothesis argues that online communication can stimulate adolescents' offline social skills because it offers them opportunities to rehearse these skills online (Valkenburg, Sumter, & Peter, 2011). Based on the three characteristics of online communication, this hypothesis seems plausible, but has received little scholarly attention. For the most part, it is still unclear whether and, if so, how online communication influences offline social skills. Therefore, the first aim of this longitudinal study is to investigate the potentially positive influence of adolescents' online communication on their offline social competence. The second aim is to study the validity of two underlying mechanisms that may account for this relationship, namely the opportunities given by online communication (a) to communicate with a variety of people, and (b) to disclose intimate information.

In this study, we focus on one crucial aspect of adolescents' social competence: their ability to initiate offline friendships. If there is one aspect of social competence that can be influenced by the Internet, it is the ability to start conversations and initiate

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relationships. After all, never before has it been so easy to practice with initiation skills as with online communication. We define online communication as adolescents' instant messaging. Instant messaging is a highly popular internet-based form of communication, especially for adolescents' everyday communication (Ramirez & Broneck, 2009). Instant messaging can stand alone as a software application or can be integrated in other technologies, such as social network sites (boyd & Ellison, 2007). In this study, instant messaging is defined as sending and receiving text-based person-to-person messages in a near-synchronous way, on a computer or mobile device. It can occur on any application, including, for example, *Windows Live Messenger*, *Yahoo! Messenger*, and *AOL Instant Messenger*.

1.1. Online communication and adolescents' social competence

To our knowledge, there are two studies that have examined the relationship between online communication and adolescents' offline social competence, showing mixed results. One study investigated whether the frequency of adolescents' general Internet use was related to difficulties in offline social skills (e.g., inappropriate assertiveness; Harman, Hansen, Cochran, & Lindsey, 2005). The study showed that Internet use was unrelated to offline social competence. A second study focused on the effect of adolescents' online self-presentation on their offline social competence, revealing a positive relationship between online self-presentation and social competence (Valkenburg & Peter, 2008). This relationship could be explained by adolescents' tendency to communicate online with a variety of people. In other words, this tendency mediated and thus explained the relationship between online self-presentation and offline social competence (Valkenburg & Peter, 2008).

Whereas the few studies on the relationship between online communication and offline social competence have revealed inconsistent results, the results of earlier studies on the effects of online communication on adolescents' friendships are more consistent. These studies do not directly investigate adolescents' social competence, yet they are relevant to the present study because friendship formation and maintenance are both crucial aspects of adolescents' social competence. Some studies have investigated the influence of online communication on adolescents' *online friendship formation* and on their attraction to potential online friends (Antheunis, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2007, 2010; Peter, Valkenburg, & Schouten, 2005). Adolescents who communicated online more often formed online friendships (Peter et al., 2005). Online communication also stimulated adolescents' social attraction to online communication partners (Antheunis et al., 2007, 2010). In all of these studies, enhanced intimate self-disclosure during online communication proved to be an important explanation of the effects of online communication on interpersonal attraction and friendship formation (Antheunis et al., 2007, 2010; Peter et al., 2005).

Another relevant line of research involves the effect of online communication on the *quality of adolescents' offline friendships*. When the Internet was introduced in the 1990s, it was assumed that it would have a negative effect on the quality of offline interaction, because online communication displaced the time adolescents spent in interactions with their existing friends (*displacement hypothesis*; Kraut et al., 1998; Mesch, 2003; Nie, 2001). However, more recent studies have consistently found that adolescents spend much of their time online communicating with offline friends, which, in turn, increases the quality of these friendships (*stimulation hypothesis*; Bryant, Sanders-Jackson, & Smallwood, 2006; Desjarlais & Willoughby, 2010; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). Again, enhanced intimate self-disclosure was shown to account for the positive effect of online communication on the quality of adolescents' friendships. Online communication seems to

facilitate online self-disclosure to their friends, which, in turn, increases the quality of adolescents' offline friendships (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009, 2011).

1.2. The Internet-induced social skills hypothesis

So far, Internet studies on offline social competence have yielded mixed results. The studies focusing on adolescents' friendships have revealed more consistent positive effects of online communication. However, the literature on both social competence and friendships has three important gaps that prevent us from drawing decisive conclusions concerning the influence of adolescents' online communication on their ability to initiate offline friendships. First, studies on offline social competence have focused either on adolescents' general Internet use or on their tendency to experiment with their self-presentation in online communication. Neither of the studies has assessed the effects of general online communication. Second, most are cross-sectional studies and therefore unable to single out the causality of the relationships between online communication, social competence, and friendships. Online communication may increase offline social competence but adolescents with good social skills may also use online communication more frequently (Kraut et al., 2002; Peter et al., 2005).

A third gap in the literature is that few studies have paid systematic attention to possible underlying mechanisms of the relationship between online communication and offline social competence. Some studies suggest that online communication has a positive effect on adolescents' offline social competence because they can practice social skills with a variety of people on the Internet (Valkenburg & Peter, 2008). However, these studies have dealt only with the relationship between online identity experiments and offline social competence. Other studies consider enhanced online self-disclosure as an underlying mechanism (Antheunis et al., 2007, 2010). However, these studies have focused only on the relationship between online communication and social attraction. Therefore, although both the opportunity to communicate with a diversity of communication partners and online self-disclosure have been suggested as viable explanations for the effects of online communication, they have never been investigated in the context of offline social competence.

1.3. Current study

The current study is the first to address the three aforementioned gaps in literature. To address the first and second gap, we investigate the effect of adolescents' instant messaging on their offline social competence in a longitudinal design. In order to establish causality, this study investigates the longitudinal relationship between adolescents' instant messaging and their ability to initiate offline friendships. Our *Internet-induced social skills hypothesis* states that:

H1: The frequency of adolescents' instant messaging has a positive longitudinal effect on their ability to initiate offline friendships.

To address the third gap in the literature, this study investigates why the relationship between instant messaging and social competence may exist. We focus on two possible mediators of this relationship: (a) the diversity of adolescents' online communication partners, and (b) adolescents' online self-disclosure. We firstly expect that instant messaging enables adolescents to communicate with a more diverse group of people than in face-to-face communication (Suler, 2005). Practicing social skills with a variety of people may consequently facilitate offline friendship initiation. We therefore hypothesize that:

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