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Psychological security and deviant peer affiliation as mediators between teacher-student relationship and adolescent Internet addiction[☆]



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ABSTRACT

A growing body of research has documented that teacher-student relationship is negatively associated with adolescent Internet addiction. However, little is known about the mediating mechanisms underlying this relation. The present study investigated whether psychological security and deviant peer affiliation mediate the link between teacher-student relationship and adolescent Internet addiction. A sample of 747 middle school students (51% male; $M_{age} = 13.73$ years, $SD = 1.00$) completed questionnaires regarding demographics, teacher-student relationship, psychological security, deviant peer affiliation, and Internet addiction. After controlling for demographic covariates, the results revealed that: (a) teacher-student relationship was negatively associated with Internet addiction; (b) both psychological security and deviant peer affiliation partially mediated the link between teacher-student relationship and Internet addiction in a parallel fashion; and (c) psychological security and deviant peer affiliation also sequentially mediated the link between teacher-student relationship and Internet addiction. These findings have important implications for the prevention and intervention of adolescent Internet addiction.

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1. Introduction

Over the past 20 years, Internet technology has brought great convenience to modern life (Dhir, Chen, & Nieminen, 2015). However, the excessive use of the Internet may lead to Internet addiction, which will cause serious problems such as impaired physical, academic, and psychosocial functioning (Spada, 2014). Adolescents are at particularly high risk for Internet addiction because of their immature frontal cortical and subcortical monoaminergic systems, which are associated with motivation, impulsivity, and addiction

(Brand, Young, & Laier, 2014; Chambers, Taylor, & Potenza, 2003). More importantly, Internet addiction is particularly harmful to adolescents, because the addictive use behaviors and related negative consequences have been suggested to continue into adulthood (Englund, Egeland, Oliva, & Collins, 2008; Park, Kang, & Kim, 2014; Stavropoulos, Kuss, Griffiths, Wilson, & Mottistefanidi, 2017). Recent literature reviews have indicated that adolescent Internet addiction is widely distributed across countries (Kuss, Rooij, Shorter, Griffiths, & Mheen, 2013; Wang, Wu, & Lau, 2016). For instance, using the diagnostic criteria of Young (1998), 1.6% of Finnish, 8% of Chinese and 10.7% of South Korean adolescents were identified as Internet addicts. In order to develop effective strategies for prevention, it is important to identify the risk factors and mechanisms for adolescent Internet addiction.

According to the stage-environment fit theory, negative school environment may trigger problem behaviors both in and out of school (Eccles et al., 1993). Consistent with this view, recent research has shown that the school plays a critical role in adolescent Internet addiction, which is believed to occur more often

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outside school (Li et al., 2013; Li, Zhou, Li, & Zhou, 2016). As an important aspect of school context, teacher-student relationship quality is closely related to adolescent Internet addiction. Teacher-student relationship quality refers to the closeness between teachers and students characterized by the sense of teacher care and support (Wentzel, 1997). A high-quality teacher-student relationship has important functions such as warmth and control (Luthar, 2006; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012), which are theoretically related to adolescent Internet addiction. Based on attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; Fredriksen & Rhodes, 2004), when individuals experience low levels of warmth from significant others such as teachers, they are more likely to seek alternative sources such as the Internet to compensate for their emotional hungers that are unable to be satisfied in the real-world. Second, according to Hirschi's (1969) social control theory, bonding to conventional institutions such as teachers serves as social control, thus socially integrated individuals are less likely to engage in deviant behaviors (i.e. Internet addiction) compared with those who are socially isolated. Consistent with these theoretical views, a number of empirical studies have documented the negative association between positive teacher-student relationship and adolescent Internet addiction (Jin, Liu, & Cui, 2014; Wang et al., 2011). For example, in a sample of Chinese middle school students, Wu and Wu (2014) found that teacher-student relationship quality was negatively associated with Internet addiction. Similarly, Ni, Zhang, Zhang, and Shen (2012) found that teacher-student relationship negatively predicted high school students' Internet addiction.

These studies confirmed the direct link between teacher-student relationship and adolescent Internet addiction. However, few studies, if any, have examined the mediating mechanisms that "explain" how teacher-student relationship is related to adolescent Internet addiction. Therefore, little is known about how the impact of teacher-student relationship may spillover to Internet addiction. The answer to this question is particularly important for prevention and intervention of adolescent Internet addiction from the school stakeholders' perspectives. The present study tests a theoretical model in which psychological security and deviant peer affiliation account for the relation between teacher-student relationship and adolescent Internet addiction.

1.1. The mediating role of psychological security

As a fundamental human need, psychological security refers to the feeling of calm, security, and belonging, as well as the absence of threat, disturbance or distress (Maslow, 1942). Psychological security has critical implication for adolescent adjustment. According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), close interpersonal relationships provide individuals with psychological security across the lifespan. The perception that close others are untrustworthy and unreliable may severely threaten individual's sense of psychological security, which in turn impedes normal function, and/or triggers compensatory responses aimed at restoring security from other sources (Abeyta, Routledge, Roylance, Wildschut, & Sedikides, 2014; Keefer, Landau, Rothschild, & Sullivan, 2012). In other words, psychological security mediates the links between interpersonal relationships and maladjustment as well as compensatory responses. This view has been supported by a wide array of empirical studies. For instance, Mann and Gilliom (2004) found that psychological security mediated the relationship between interparental conflict and adolescent adjustment. Likewise, Keefer et al. (2012) found that individuals primed with situations in which close others were unreliable reported lower psychological security (i.e., attachment anxiety) than those primed with reliable close others, which resulted in increased object attachment (a form of compensatory response). Because adolescents spend significant

amount of time in school with their teachers, teacher-student relationship is inherently meaningful for adolescents.

To our knowledge, no studies to date have examined the mediating role of psychological security in the relation between teacher-student relationship and adolescent Internet addiction. Some indirect evidence suggests the mediating role of psychological security. On one hand, teacher-student relationship may impact adolescent psychological security. Previous research has suggested that perception of caring and supportive teachers is related to student outcomes in important ways (Wentzel, 1997). Adolescents who have poor relationships with their teachers have difficulty to take teachers as important sources of social support (Verschueren, 2015), thus they are more likely to experience psychological insecurity. On the other hand, research has documented that lacking of psychological security contributes to adolescent Internet addiction (Zhou et al., 2012). The underlying rationale is that adolescents may attempt to recoup the psychological security they lacked in real life and reduce their psychological distress through virtual world (Yang, Zhu, Chen, Song, & Wang, 2016; Ying, Se, & Zhang, 2014). Based on these theoretical and empirical grounds, we propose our first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Close teacher-student relationship is positively associated with psychological security, which in turn is negatively related to adolescent Internet addiction. In other words, psychological security mediates the link between teacher-student relationship and adolescent Internet addiction.

1.2. The mediating role of deviant peer affiliation

According to social control theory (Hirschi, 1969), strong bonds with significant others may discourage individuals from affiliating with deviant peers (because of the obligation to fulfill the expectations of significant others and the fear of compromising established good relationships), which in turn decrease the risk of deviant behaviors as a result of reduced exposure. Hence, deviant peer affiliation is an important mediator in the link between strong relationship bonding and problem behaviors. Consistent with this theory, Zhu, Zhang, Yu, and Bao (2015) found that the association between parent-adolescent relationship and Internet game addiction was mediated by deviant peer affiliation. Similarly, Li and collaborators (2013) found that the relation between school connectedness (i.e., a student's sense of belonging within the school) and Internet addiction was mediated by deviant peer affiliation.

Although not yet tested, it is reasonable to speculate that deviant peer affiliation plays a role in the association between teacher-student relationship and Internet addiction. On one hand, according to social control theory, strong bonds with teachers may reduce deviant peer affiliation. Adolescents who have close relationship with teachers often feel obliged to stay away from deviant peers (Catalano & Hawkins, 1996). In contrast, adolescents who have weak bonds with their teachers tend to affiliate with deviant friends, because teachers' expectations are not meaningful for them (Han, Kim, & Ma, 2015). On the other hand, social learning theory posits that peer settings provide training ground and reinforcement for deviant behaviors such as Internet addiction (Bandura & Walters, 1963), ample empirical research has shown that deviant peer affiliation is a prominent risk factor for adolescent Internet addiction (Li, Newman, Li, & Zhang, 2016; Li et al., 2013; Zhu et al., 2015). Based on the literature reviewed above, we propose the second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Close teacher-student relationship is negatively associated with deviant peer affiliation, which in turn is related to adolescent Internet addiction. In other words, deviant peer affiliation mediates the link between teacher-student relationship and adolescent Internet addiction.

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