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Symbolization of mobile phone and life satisfaction among adolescents in rural areas of China: Mediating of school-related relationships



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ABSTRACT

Mobile phone is popular among residents in rural areas of China, especially among the adolescents. The aim of the present research was to investigate how the attitude towards mobile phone as a social status symbol affected life satisfaction of adolescents living in rural areas of China. Teacher-student relationship and student-student relationship as important interpersonal relationship indicators of adolescents were included as mediator variables. Participants were 656 adolescents (316 girls, $M_{age} = 14.43 \pm 1.67$ years), and they were surveyed on the attitude towards mobile phone as a social status symbol, teacher-student relationship, student-student relationship, and life satisfaction in the present research. Results showed that the attitude towards mobile phone as a social status symbol reduced life satisfaction. What's more, attitude towards mobile phone as a social status symbol could reduce life satisfaction via teacher-student relationship, as well as via teacher-student relationship and student-student relationship in sequence. We concluded that the attitude towards mobile phone as a social status symbol is a new risk factor of adolescents' development.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays mobile phone, especially the smart phone, is very popular (Vanden Abeele & Roe, 2013), and has become an important element of adolescents' daily life (Subrahmanyam, Garcia, Harsono, Li, & Lipana, 2009). Wirth, Von Pape, & Karnowski (2008) distinguished the pragmatic and symbolic functions of mobile phone. Pragmatic function refers that mobile phone is a pure instrument for persons, and symbolic function refers that mobile phone is a symbol of person's status or identity. Many previous studies focus on the effect of pragmatic function on adolescents' life satisfaction (e.g. Coleman, Hale, Cotten, & Gibson, 2015; Kang & Jung, 2014; King, Wang, & Oh, 2013; Lee & Moon, 2013), whereas there is no study focus on the effect of symbolic function. Mobile phone is popular among adolescents living in the

rural areas of China now, and it is important for rural adolescents (Wei & Zhang, 2008). Research finds that about 61.5% adolescents living in rural areas of China own mobile phone, and price of their mobile phone ranges from 1000 to 2000 RMB (about \$151.84–\$303.68) (Jiang, 2006). According to Lu's (2014) investigation, rural adolescents in China will more likely pursue the symbolic function of the mobile phone than urban adolescents. To sum up, it is significant to study how the symbolic function of mobile phone affect the rural adolescents' life satisfaction. Thus the primary aim of the present study was investigating the effect of mobile phone symbolic function on the life satisfaction of rural adolescents in China.

1.1. Life satisfaction and rural adolescents

Positive subjective well-being is necessary to a good life and a good society (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003). Life satisfaction as a core element of subjective well-being is important for human development (Diener, 2009). Life satisfaction is a cognitive, judgmental process (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). People

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will compare their circumstances with an appropriate standard they thought to be, and make the satisfaction judgment (Diener et al., 1985). Adolescence is a key period of the life (Shaffer & Kipp, 2010). Having a satisfying life is very important for adolescents' development. Adolescents with a satisfying life often have good physical health and good school success (Holder, 2012). In detail, having a happy life can improve adolescents' immune system, increase longevity (Holder, 2012), and then prevent the illness (Veenhoven, 2008). Adolescents who report higher levels of life satisfaction tend to report better academic achievement, more positive attitude to the school, better relationships with peers, as well as higher levels of life meaning experience and a healthier lifestyle (Holder, 2012; Marques, Lopez, & Pais-Ribeiro, 2009; Proctor, Linley, & Maltby, 2010). Thus, how to protect and enhance adolescents' life satisfaction become a research hot point in many disciplines such as psychology, education, and sociology.

Adolescents living in rural areas of China mostly live in families with low SES, and their parents often have low educational backgrounds (Liu, Chen, & Cheng, 2015). Parents with lower SES and poorer educational background can give adolescents less high-quality parenting (Votruba-Drzal, Coley, Maldonado-Carreno, Li-Grining, & Chase-Lansdale, 2010). Therefore, rural adolescents are often at high risks of problem behaviors. What's more, some adolescents become left-behind-children and have to live in non-intact families because their parents, especially fathers, migrate to urban areas to seek jobs. The parenting quality of left-behind children is poorer than their counterparts (Fan, Su, Gill, & Birmaher, 2010). Many researches reveal that rural area adolescents, particularly the left-behind-children, experience lower life satisfaction, lower self-esteem, worse school engagement, poorer physical health, and have more depression, social anxiety, loneliness, and deviant behaviors than non-left-behind children (Fan et al., 2010; Sun et al., 2015; Wen & Lin, 2012). The shortage and weakness of educational environment in rural areas, such as small number of schools, poor educational condition, low educational quality, is another risk factor of rural adolescents' positive development in China (Liu et al., 2015). Low-quality parenting and poor educational environment not only are the risk factors against rural adolescents' development, but also work together to form a cumulative risk. The cumulative risk as the co-occurrence of more than one risk factor for a given individual or within a population (Rutter, 1987), will make adolescents feel lower life satisfaction and have a greater power to damage adolescents' positive development than single risk factor (Evans, Li, & Whipple, 2013). In this way research on rural area adolescents' life satisfaction and the factors affecting rural adolescents' life satisfaction is very important.

1.2. Mobile phone symbolic functions and adolescents

Mobile phone has permeated in every aspect of people's life. Several functions of mobile phone have emerged such as coordination, expressive usages, safety link, texting, multimedia, and Internet usage. These functions refer to that mobile phone can help adolescents do flexible judgment, maintain relationships, and cope with the adverse circumstance (Ling & Bertel, 2013). From the usage characteristic aspect, these functions based on the concrete behaviors of the mobile phone usages, such as calling, texting, and searching the Internet. These functions reflect that people use mobile phone in purely instrumental sense (Wirth et al., 2008). Therefore, we define these functions as the pragmatic functions following Wirth and colleagues' (2008) view.

Besides the pragmatic functions, there are also symbolic functions of the mobile phone (Wirth et al., 2008). Symbolization is a process where artifacts (social or material reality) are bestowed symbolic meanings abstract of the artifacts, and it usually contacts

with the particular culture (Zheng, Qu, & Yang, 2009). Apparatus theory developed by Katz and Aakhus (2002) provide a framework to explain the consistencies of the social change that come out of the adoption and use of the mobile phone (Campbell & Park, 2008). Basing on this view, the symbolic functions reflect how individuals use the mobile phone in the capacity of prestige object in order to define their identity (Humphreys, Von Pape, & Karnowski, 2013; Wirth et al., 2008), and it can be seen as a strategy of self-presentation (Campbell & Park, 2008). Based on Zheng and colleagues' (2009) view, we define symbolic functions as the efficacy that artifacts present or reveal their symbolic meanings in a particular culture. The symbolic functions of mobile phone are more than one kind, among which researchers focus on the social status symbol most (e.g. Özcan & Koçak, 2003; Vanden Abeele, Anthéunis, & Schouten, 2014; Vanden Abeele & Roe, 2013).

Adolescence is a special period, during which individuals' self-concept develops speedily (Brown & Prinstein, 2011). Adolescents can distinct the "I-self" and the "Me-self" (Brown & Prinstein, 2011). I-self is the cognitive processes that define how the individual thinks about the self; and Me-self is the object of one's thinking about the self, self-descriptions and self-evaluations, such as self-esteem (Brown & Prinstein, 2011). Adolescents are greatly concerned about others' evaluation of themselves, and the "imaginary audience" and the "egocentrism" appear during this period (Shaffer & Kipp, 2010). Because of these characteristics, mobile phone will play a key role in adolescents' daily life. Mobile phone can not only help adolescents maintain relationships (Subrahmanyam et al., 2009), but also boost adolescents' self-identity exploration (Vanden Abeele & Roe, 2013). Researchers also suggest that youth media use is strongly connected with their real life identity (Hodkinson & Deicke, 2007). For early and middle adolescents, owning a "cool" mobile phone can let them feel more popular than those without mobile phones (Blair & Fletcher, 2011; Vanden Abeele et al., 2014). "Ritual of passage" and "virtual brotherhood" are two meanings of mobile phone to adolescents (Rosell, Sánchez-Carbonell, Jordana, & Fargues, 2007). Ritual of passage means mobile phone is an object of initiation to adolescence (Rosell et al., 2007). Owning mobile phone implies that adolescents have high level of autonomy (Blair & Fletcher, 2011) and allows adolescents to communicate without parents' monitoring (Rosell et al., 2007). Virtual brotherhood is a sense of fraternity basing on adolescents' sharing emotions and feelings (Rosell et al., 2007). Without mobile phone, adolescents will feel more peer pressures (Campbell, 2005). One study also indicates that the youth who own mobile phones can form a subgroup and who don't own them are seen as the out-group (Walsh, White, & Young, 2009). Owning mobile phones confer the owners' in-group status among youth (Walsh et al., 2009).

Bourdieu (1996) explained that the lower classes have a stronger need for the expensive consumer goods compared with the upper classes. Research finds that adolescents with low SES background and poor academic performance are more likely to have mobile phones than adolescents with high SES background and good academic performance (Skog, 2002). Researchers also find that the proportion of adolescents owning mobile phones is higher in low SES families than in high SES families, and adolescents from low SES families are more likely to see the mobile phone as a social status symbol than those from high SES families (Thomas, Heinrich, Kühnlein, & Radon, 2009). Lu (2014) found that residents in rural areas of China are keen on comparing with their acquaintances, neighbors, and persons who have similar characteristics with them unrealistically. Consumption for daily life is the most important comparison dimension among them (Lu, 2014). Thus, we inferred that adolescents living in rural areas are more likely to pursue the social status of mobile phone.

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