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Adolescent Peer Relationships and Behavior Problems Predict Young Adults' Communication on Social Networking Websites

Amori Yee Mikami, David E. Szewedo, Joseph P. Allen, Meredyth A. Evans, and Amanda L. Hare

Department of Psychology, University of Virginia.

Abstract

This study examined online communication on social networking web pages in a longitudinal sample of 92 youths (39 male, 53 female). Participants' social and behavioral adjustment was assessed when they were ages 13–14 years and again at ages 20–22 years. At ages 20–22 years, participants' social networking website use and indicators of friendship quality on their web pages were coded by observers. Results suggested that youths who had been better adjusted at ages 13–14 years were more likely to be using social networking web pages at ages 20–22 years, after statistically controlling for age, gender, ethnicity, and parental income. Overall, youths' patterns of peer relationships, friendship quality, and behavioral adjustment at ages 13–14 years and at ages 20–22 years predicted similar qualities of interaction and problem behavior on their social networking websites at ages 20–22 years. Findings are consistent with developmental theory asserting that youths display cross-situational continuity in their social behaviors and suggest that the conceptualization of continuity may be extended into the online domain.

Keywords

online; social networking; adolescents; friendship; peer relationships

Explosive growth has occurred in online social communication (Madden, 2006), with youths disproportionately affected by this new technology (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2009). As online use increases, so too do debates about how internet-based interaction may compare with historical face-to-face ways of communicating (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Tyler, 2002). One argument posits that internet interaction is often of lower quality than is face-to-face interaction, because constraints inherent in the online medium hinder relationships. Furthermore, use of online communication may be positively correlated with adjustment problems because (a) socially inept youths are drawn to online interaction and (b) the almost inevitably poor quality of online communication increases maladjustment. An alternative argument postulates that the internet is merely a new medium for youths to display the same long-standing patterns as they do using modes other than online forms of communication, such that there is correspondence between face-to-face and online interaction styles and friendship quality. In contrast to the first argument, use of online communication may be negatively correlated with adjustment problems, because socially competent youths treat the online environment as yet another place in which to interact with existing friends and broaden their social circle.