Characteristics and Motives of Adolescents Talking with Strangers on the Internet

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Abstract

Despite widespread concerns about the dangers of adolescents' online communication with strangers, we know little about (a) which types of adolescents talk with strangers and (b) what motivates them to do so. Drawing on a survey among 412 Dutch adolescents, we found that early adolescents (12- to 14-year-olds) were most prone to talk with strangers on the internet. If adolescents communicated online more frequently, they less often talked with strangers on the internet. However, if adolescents engaged in long chat sessions, they tended to talk with strangers on the internet more often. In contrast to earlier research, introversion was not related to adolescents' tendency to talk with strangers. The motives of entertainment, meeting new people, and social compensation increased adolescents' online communication with strangers.
Characteristics and Motives of Adolescents Talking with Strangers on the Internet

Adolescents are the defining users of the internet. They not only spend more time online than adults, but they also integrate internet-based communication technologies more strongly into their social lives\(^1\text{,}^2\). The specific features of the internet - i.e., its anonymity, reduced visual and auditory cues, the insignificance of physical distance and time, and the greater control over one's self-presentation\(^3\text{,}^4\) - facilitate online contact with strangers. As a result, the predominance of the internet as a social medium among adolescents has raised fears that they may be trapped into exploitative relationships with strangers\(^5\text{,}^6\). This fear may be justified: A recent US survey has found that 39% of the adolescents interviewed communicated online with strangers\(^7\).

Because adolescents' online contact with strangers seems to be an all but marginal phenomenon, two questions arise. First, what characterizes adolescents who look for strangers on the internet? Wolak, Mitchell, and Finkelhor\(^8\) have dealt with the characteristics of youth who formed romantic relationships with people initially met on the internet. Little, however, is known about the characteristics of youth who get in touch with strangers on the internet without necessarily forming romantic relationships. A second question that arises is why adolescents seek the contact of strangers on the internet. Various researchers have suggested that investigating people's motives for using the internet may offer innovative and theoretically challenging explanations of the consequences of the internet\(^3\text{,}^9\). But still it is largely unexplored how adolescents' motives for online communication affect whether they talk online with strangers.

Characteristics of Adolescents Talking with Strangers on the Internet

By online communication with strangers we mean the frequency of adolescents' online communication with people they do not know relative to the frequency of their online communication with people they do know. This conceptualization allows us to precisely identify
adolescents who exclusively or predominantly talk with strangers when communicating online. These adolescents may differ from those who talk online with strangers, yet also communicate online with friends.

In terms of characteristics that may influence the extent to which adolescents talk with strangers on the internet, we focus on adolescents’ gender, age, introversion, and frequency and intensity of internet communication. Generally, adolescent girls value interpersonal communication more than boys do and spend more time than boys with online communication\textsuperscript{10,11}. Therefore, girls may also be more likely than boys to talk with strangers on the internet. As for age, we expect early adolescents to be more inclined than late adolescents to talk with strangers on the internet. The dramatic developmental transitions take place in early adolescence, along with an occasional feeling of disorientation\textsuperscript{12}, make that period a critical time for experimenting with oneself, for example by talking with strangers on the internet.

As far as introversion is concerned, related research on social anxiety has shown that socially anxious adolescents communicate online more often with strangers\textsuperscript{13}. Because the internet’s anonymity and reduced auditory and visual cues may enable introverted people to overcome social inhibitions more easily than in face-to-face communication\textsuperscript{2}, introverted adolescents may more often than extraverted adolescents talk with strangers on the internet.

Regarding adolescents’ frequency of internet communication, previous research has shown that adolescents who use the internet more frequently are more likely to form close online relationships\textsuperscript{8}. Furthermore, research on computer-mediated communication has emphasized the importance of the intensity of communication sessions for relationship formation\textsuperscript{4}. As a result, we expect that the more frequently and the more intensively adolescents communicate online, the more likely they may be to talk with strangers online.
Motives of Adolescents Talking with Strangers on the Internet

Based on previous interpersonal and media research and on recent internet research, we identified five motives for online communication that may influence adolescents’ online talk with strangers: entertainment, social inclusion, maintaining relationships, meeting new people, and social compensation.

The entertainment motive refers to adolescents’ tendency to have fun, to enjoy themselves, and to relax and is related to more playful web activities. As a result, adolescents who communicate online to be entertained may be less selective in their choice of communication partners and may talk more frequently online with strangers. Social inclusion motives reflect adolescents’ need to belong to a group and are linked with people’s search for social networks. Because the anonymity and reduced visual and auditory cues of online communication may facilitate talking with strangers, we expect that adolescents will more frequently talk with strangers online if they look for social inclusion on the internet. The motive to maintain relationships describes adolescents’ need to interact, through online communication, with people they already know. We hence expect that adolescents will less frequently talk with strangers online if they communicate online to maintain existing relationships.

In contrast to the motivation to maintain relationships, the motivation to meet new people on the internet refers to the development of new relationships. This conceptual difference from the maintaining relationship motive also implies that a weak or non-existing motivation to maintain relationships cannot be equated with a strong motivation to meet new people. An individual may not be interested in maintaining existing relationships, but may also not be motivated to develop new relationships. Conversely, an individual may want to maintain his/her relationships and may, at the same time, be motivated to meet new people.

Because the formation of new relationships is a critical developmental task in adolescence,
adolescents who are motivated to use the internet to meet new people may talk more frequently to strangers than will adolescents who are not motivated to use the internet to meet new people. The social compensation motive, finally, describes adolescents’ tendency to compensate, in online communication, for inhibitions encountered in face-to-face communication. People are more likely to form online relationships if they consider online communication more suitable than face-to-face communication to compensate for problems they encounter in offline social situations. As a result, we expect that adolescents will talk online more frequently with strangers if they are motivated to compensate, in online communication, for lacking social skills.

Method

Sample and Procedure

We conducted a survey among 412 adolescents between 12 and 18 years of age who had ever communicated with someone online (M = 14.1, SD = 1.45). The adolescents were recruited from six elementary, middle, and high schools in the Netherlands. The schools were chosen in such a way that they represented adolescents in all levels of socioeconomic status.

Measures

Online talk with strangers was operationalized as the difference between the frequency with which adolescents talk with “people they know in person” and the frequency with which adolescents talk with “people they do not know”. The response categories for the two items ranged from 1 (never) to 3 (often). Subtracting the two items gives a scale from -2 (talk exclusively with people they know in person) to +2 (talk exclusively with strangers) with a mid point of 0 (talk equally often with people known in person and with strangers).

Frequency of online communication was measured on a scale ranging from 1 (less than once a week) to 5 (several times a day). We collapsed response category 5 and response category 4 (every day) to form a four-point metric scale.
Intensity of online communication was measured with the question "When you are chatting, how long does this chat session last on average?" The response categories ranged from 1 (about half an hour) to 4 (about two hours or more).

Introversion. We used the introversion subscale of the Adolescent Temperament List. This scale consists of 10 items, such as “I don’t talk easily about my problems.” The response categories for each of the items ranged from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). The 10 items formed a one-dimensional scale, with a Cronbach’s alpha of .77.

Motives for online communication. We used various items from previous uses-and-gratifications studies and adjusted them to online communication. For each item, adolescents were asked how often they chatted for that purpose. Response categories ranged from 1 (never) to 3 (often). A factor analysis with varimax rotation explained 61% of the variance and yielded five interpretable factors with an eigenvalue higher than 1.0. Based on these results, five motive scales were created: entertainment (six items, eigenvalue = 3.87, Cronbach's Alpha = .73); maintaining relationships (three items, eigenvalue = 2.26, Cronbach's Alpha = .72); social compensation (three items, eigenvalue = 1.78, Cronbach's Alpha = .73); social inclusion (four items, eigenvalue = 1.27, Cronbach's Alpha = .73); meeting people (two items, eigenvalue = 1.20, Cronbach's Alpha = .77).

The items for the entertainment motive were: (1) “To have fun”; (2) “Because I enjoy it”; (3) “For pleasure”; (4) "In order not to get bored"; (5) "To have something to do"; and (6) "To relax". The motive to maintain relationships was measured with (1) “To speak with my friends from real life”; (2) “To keep contact with my friends”; and (3) “To talk with friends that live far away”. The three items to operationalize the social compensation motive were: (1) “Because I can talk more comfortably”; (2) “Because I dare to say more”; and (3) “To feel less shy”. The social inclusion motive was measured with (1) “To belong to group”; (2) “To be a member of something” (3)
“Because everybody does it”; and (4) “To belong to my chat friends”. The two items tapping the motive to meet people were: (1) “To get to know new people” and (2) “To make new friends”. The zero-order correlations between the five scales ranged from $r = .07$, n.s. (social inclusion and maintaining relationships) to $r = .37$, $p < .001$ (social compensation and maintaining relationships).

Results and Discussion

Five percent of our 412 respondents talked exclusively with strangers. An additional six percent of the adolescents talked more often with strangers than with people they knew in person. By contrast, 43% of the adolescents talked exclusively to people they knew in person and an additional 36% of the adolescents communicated predominantly with people they already knew from face-to-face conversations. The remaining 10% of the adolescents talked as often to strangers as to people they already knew.

Characteristics of Adolescents Talking with Strangers on the Internet

In contrast to our expectations, girls did not talk significantly more often with strangers than boys did ($b = .16$, n.s., see Table 1). However, age had the expected influence. Younger adolescents talked more frequently than older adolescents with strangers online ($b = -.11$, $p < .01$). This finding may reflect the developmental changes in early adolescence, particularly the identity crises typical of early adolescence that make adolescents experiment with various identities. Anonymous, cue-reduced online communication with strangers seems to be one possible venue for adolescents to try out these new identities.

In contrast to our expectations, adolescents talked less often with strangers as the frequency of their online communication increased ($b = -.17$, $p < .01$). However, adolescents whose chat sessions were more intensive talked more frequently with strangers on the internet than adolescents whose chat sessions were less intensive ($b = .12$, $p < .05$). The latter finding may
reflect the fact that conversations with strangers require time and elaboration to reduce the uncertainties accompanying a meeting with an unknown person²⁴.

Introversion had no influence on whether adolescents talked with strangers when communicating online (b = -.06, n. s.). One explanation of the lacking relationship may be that introversion is not appropriate as a predictor of risky internet behavior, such as talking with strangers. Future research may therefore want to focus more strongly on sensation seeking as a potential influence on whether adolescents talk with strangers on the internet.

M otives of A dolescents T atking to Strangers on the Inte rnet

Table 1 shows that the social inclusion motive had no impact on whether adolescents talked with strangers (b = -.09, n.s.). However, the more strongly adolescents were motivated to communicate online to meet people (b = .25, p < .001), to compensate for their lacking social skills (b = .11, p < .01), and for entertainment (b = .05, p < .05), the more often they talked with strangers on the internet. Conversely, if adolescents aimed at maintaining relationships when communicating online, they were less likely to talk with strangers (b = -.29, p < .001).

The influence of the entertainment motive on online communication with strangers dovetails with recent research showing that late adolescents often use the internet and online communication for fun¹⁰,¹³,¹⁶,¹⁸. The strong negative impact of the motive to maintain relationships on online communication with strangers fits into the larger picture of adolescents’ use of online communication as just another tool to ‘hang out’ with peers¹³. The positive influence of the social compensation motive empirically demonstrates what previous research has theoretically elaborated upon³. As a result, the social compensation motive may lend itself to more insightful explanations of sensitive internet behavior. The motive may also help us to understand better why the internet is popular among minorities or stigmatized adolescents.
Adolescents who want to meet new people on the internet are most likely to encounter strangers online. Though at first glance commonsensical, the influence of the motive to meet new people is important for two reasons. First, the motive to meet new people is related to two crucial developmental tasks in adolescence, the task to try out new things and the task to develop new relationships\textsuperscript{12,21}. Second, for adolescents the internet is primarily a social medium\textsuperscript{1,7,8,10,13} and it has never been so easy to fulfill the need to meet new people with so little effort. We are currently witnessing an unprecedented extension of adolescents’ social worlds, which interacts with adolescents’ motives to expand their social network.

Conclusion

The typical adolescent who talks with strangers on the internet is between 12 and 14 years old and has less frequent, but intensive chat sessions. It is a mixture of being bored (entertainment motive), curious (meet people motive), and inhibited in face-to-face conversation (social compensation motive) that motivates this adolescent to seek the contact of strangers on the internet. Parents should monitor these types of adolescent most carefully. If online communication may have negative consequences, then they will be found among the types of adolescents we just described.
References


Table 1

Predictors of online talk with strangers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.11**</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency online communication</td>
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<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intensity online communication</td>
<td>.12*</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introversion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social inclusion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maintain relationships</td>
<td>-.29***</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meet people</td>
<td>.25***</td>
<td>.04</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social compensation</td>
<td>.11**</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td>.05*</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Constant  
Explained variance (R square) .46 .37

Note. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001 (two-tailed). Cell entries are unstandardized multiple regression coefficients (B) and their standard errors (SE).