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### Psychology of Personality: Real and Virtual Context

# ONLINE COMMUNICATION OF TEENAGERS AS A WAY OF COPING WITH COMMUNICATION DIFFICULTIES

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### *Abstract*

The paper is aimed to investigate online communication as an effective way to overcome real communication difficulties. It has been found that teenagers have mainly basic communication difficulties (first social contacts, irritation, expectations of biased attitudes, lack of confidence, emotional and personal dependence on a communication partner) and reflexive difficulties (difficulties of self-understanding and understanding the partner's intentions, incorrect estimation of communication acts, inability to admit and rectify communication errors). It is shown that online communication is the way to overcome real communication difficulties. There is an interconnection between communication difficulties of various modalities, resulting from real interaction with peers and the ways of coping with these difficulties online. The ways of coping behaviour may be either constructive (admitting errors, self-control, freedom of self-expression, non-conformism, ability to choose, purposefulness of communication) or destructive (aggression, manipulation, lies, demonstrative behaviour, despotism, revenge, frequent change of image etc). The authors have come to the conclusion that the teen's feelings, both positive and negative, arising during online communication, play a synergetic role in the personal development of a teenager; they become not only a mechanism of cyber socialization but also help develop communicative competence of a personality, fit for effective interpersonal communication in various social situations. The psychological and pedagogical support of communication ontogeny should be based on the sociocultural approach, i.e. should take into account the specifics of current teenage subcultures. Online communication can become a powerful resource in overcoming communication difficulties, in preventing social maladaptation and deviant behavior in adolescents.

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**Keywords:** Cyber socialization, online communication, communication difficulties overcoming.



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## 1. Introduction

Contemporary society is characterized by intensive development and a quick spread of information technologies which in a way have become psychotechnologies, because they influence psychical processes and relations between people (Emelin et al., 2012). Basic areas of human life, such as education, communication, science, art, are quickly migrating online, from a real environment into a digital simulation space (Baeva, 2014). Contemporary psychology reflects these tendencies via emerging branches: online psychology, media psychology, cyber psychology. New terms emerge, too: digital personality, virtual communication, virtual personality, digital consciousness's, digital behaviour (Krainyukov, 2019).

In general, many researchers have noticed the ambivalence of IT influence on psyche. Babaeva and Voyskunsky (1998) point out both negative (dependence and autism risk, fraud (hacking), narrow technocratic mind-sets, the reduced image of the interlocutor, impulsive and interrupted communication) and positive aspects of this influence (activation of cognitive potential, individual approaches in education, access to a wide range of information, personality development through analysing differences in viewpoints, broader communication circle, classification of emotional states through badges and emoji, use of IT in psychocorrection and rehabilitation). Besides, cyber technologies enable young people to have equal rights in intergeneration communication, actively create information environment, express their thoughts and speak of their interests (Tsymbalenko, 2012); give unprecedented possibilities to produce and distribute creative content (Bruns, 2008).

The transfer of communication online brings about new features, such as increased attention to oneself, the need in mass audience to share thoughts and feelings with, minimal feedback, chaotic content, feeling of co-participation, freedom from control and censorship, communication for the sake of communication (Baeva, 2014). A large number of research papers describe risks and threats associated with communication ontogeny in teens and adolescents. Teens and young adults are more involved in cyber communication and, in comparison with adults, are less tolerant to manipulative and aggression of the Internet-environment. Their self-image and identity are easily distorted which can result in behavioural deviations and emotional disorders (Alistratova, 2014; Gable et al., 2011; Heirman & Walrave, 2011). However, myths of inevitable threats of online communication are constantly disproved; Internet communication is now regarded as an instrument of accumulating social capital and an important resource for teen development (Mararitsa et al., 2013).

Contemporary teenagers socialize two-dimensionally – in physical reality and in digital spaces. The processes of the personality's physical development in the information world are described with such terms as cyber socialization, i.e. the set of phenomena related to the person's acquaintance with e-communication culture, with values, norms and rules that determine the specifics of communication in the cyber space (Pleshakov, 2016; Delaney & Madigan, 2017). Another term is digital socialization as a process of gaining social experience acquired in online-contexts and reproducing this experience in mixed online/offline reality, which makes a digital personality part of a real personality (Soldatova, 2018).

Cyberspace activates all socialization mechanisms of a person: identification, differentiation, acculturation, adaptation, communication etc. unlike traditional socialization agents that are

characterized by a purpose-oriented and regulated character, the Internet brings elements of spontaneity and uncontrollability into the socialization process (Aisina & Nesterova, 2019). Communicating on the Internet, teens absorb values and norms, accepted in the digital community with its vague rules and borders, based on shaky sociocultural foundations and traditions (Efimova, 2011).

At the same time, as Aisina and Nesterova (2019) show, the successful cyber socialization of a teenager can go alongside with the ineffective social functioning in real life (relatively positive cyber socialization), and the low level of cyber socialization may go hand in hand with successful social functioning beyond the cyberspace (relatively negative cyber socialization). Therefore, in teenagers the processes of virtual and real communication can be asynchronous and unaligned. Communication failures in interpersonal interaction can be compensated for by effectiveness and emotional comfort of online communication, and vice versa. It enables us to look at teenage online communication from the point of a personal approach and to study online communication as a way of constructive or destructive coping with communication difficulties, arising in real-life interactions.

By communication difficulties we mean objectively or subjectively felt obstacles, various in their power, functional direction and realization – they prevent the success solution to the communication task, upturn the inner balance of a person and/or hinder interpersonal communication. Such difficulties require additional effort to overcome them (Samokhvalova, 2017). We identify four groups of communication difficulties:

- *basic*, defined by character traits of a teenager;
- *content-related*, i.e. related to the imperfection in the development of personal cognitive abilities which prevent the analysis and understanding of the communication situation, hinder setting objectives and generating communication programmes;
- *instrumental*, manifesting themselves as inability to implement intended communication programmes;
- *reflexive*, preventing a teenager from adequate analysis and evaluation of communication acts, which blocks any desire for self-development in communication (Samokhvalova et al., 2019).

## 2. Problem Statement

Our long research on hindered communication in teenagers show that the digital environment often plays the part of the sociocultural specs where teens fulfil themselves in communication, satisfy their affiliation needs, actualize defensive mechanisms, try new communication patterns and attempt to go beyond their Self (Samokhvalova, 2014, 2016, 2014). Internet-communication is shown as a powerful resource in a teen's realization of communication difficulties (Samokhvalova, 2012, 2013). However, the research discourse seldom regards online communication as a specific way of overcoming communication difficulties.

Besides, we assume that a teenager can cope with communication problems online in constructive ways (e.g. by showing bravery, decisiveness, trying new communication patterns, self-fulfilment, attempting to express the point of view, persuading the interlocutor, asking for help etc.) and destructive ways (e.g. diffusion of self-identity, manifestations of aggression, manipulativity,

excessive playing to the public, inability to accept responsibility etc.). The study of these issues has become the foundation for this research.

### **3. Research Questions**

The main research question is whether online communication is an effective way for teenagers to overcome difficulties arising in real-life communication situations.

The other vital questions is which ways of overcoming communication difficulties in cyberspace can be regarded to be constructive, and which – destructive.

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

- study communication difficulties arising with teenagers in real-life interpersonal communicative situations with peers and adults;

- identify ways of overcoming basic, content-related, instrumental and reflexive difficulties in teenager online communication.

### **5. Research Methods**

#### **5.1. Methodological complex**

- Questionnaire by Samokhvalova (2019) *Difficulties in Communication with Peers and Adults* to identify basic content-related, instrumental and reflexive difficulties in teenager online communication;

- Survey form *Role of Online Communication in Overcoming Communication Difficulties* (developed by O.N. Vishnevskaya, A.A. Korsakova) to record amounts of time spent by teenagers in social media and messengers and to identify the role of online communication in overcoming communication difficulties and ways to overcome such difficulties online;

- The method of narration involving the content-analysis of open-end answers given by teenagers to the question: “Why does a teenager finds it easier to communicate in social media rather than in real life?”

- Methods of mathematical statistics.

#### **5.2. Participants**

Ninety three teenagers aged 14-16 (M=14,8) took part in the research: 52 girls and 41 boys. All the teenagers study in a municipal secondary school, are brought up in their birth families, have technical opportunities for online communication both at home and at school.

The research was based on the principles of sustainability, anonymity and confidentiality. Parents and the school administration issued their permission; the participants were selected on a voluntary basis.

## 6. Findings

The analysis of the obtained results enabled us to identify dominant communication difficulties arising in real-life communication with peers and adults as well as to define the role of online communication in overcoming these difficulties.

### 6.1. Communication difficulties in teenagers

Teenagers in situations of interpersonal communication most often demonstrate basic difficulties resulting from personality traits (93.5% of the sample). These are difficulties of making a contact, difficulties related to irritation and expectations of biased attitudes, lack of self-confidence and emotional and personal dependence on the communication partner.

Quite often teenagers have reflexive difficulties (84.9% of the sample), related to the low level of cognitive development and self-consciousness: difficulties in understanding their own feelings, arising in communication, difficulties in understanding the partner's intentions and expectations, difficulties in evaluating consequences of their own communication acts, inability to admit their own mistakes in communication.

Content-related difficulties are also characteristic of teenagers (65.6% of the sample). These difficulties are connected with the low level of the ability to set objectives, plan, make forecasts, understand the communication situation and quickly alter the communication programme. Content-related difficulties are often found in boys than girls ( $p \leq 0.003$ ).

Instrumental difficulties were shown by 59.1% of the participants. Here teenagers demonstrate verbal and non-verbal difficulties, inability to lead the discussion, difficulties of listening and of self-control. Instrumental difficulties are more often displayed by girls than boys ( $p \leq 0.01$ ).

### 6.2. The role of online communication in overcoming communication difficulties

The research findings have shown that nowadays teenagers spend from three to ten hours online. The most popular resource for 100% of teens is *Vkontakte* social network, where they spend over three hours a day to communicate, exchange information and find new friends. The second place in their rating is taken by *Instagram* where they spend more than two hours a day. Teenagers see this application as a source of information about other users whom they might even not know personally, but of whom they would like to know more to continue communication in real life. Teenagers emphasize that it is *Instagram* that gives them a chance to present themselves in a favourable light to friends and acquaintances, keep record of memorable moments, get back to them and re-live pleasant emotions: ("When I am sad, I scroll down my timeline and remember everything good that happened to me this year", "*Instagram* helps share my feelings with others and make the event more important", "...helps express emotions and attract attention to my problems"). Teenagers spend less than an hour a day on *Facebook* and *Odnoklassniki* to text to friends who have no accounts in other social media. Messengers are also popular: teenagers spend two-three hours a day texting to each other via *Viber* and *Telegram*.

In general, teenagers use social media to communicate with friends (1R), obtain information (2R), exchange files (3R), settle conflicts (4R), post information about themselves (5R), receive

personal information about other users (6R). There were other responses, such as “give vent to emotions”, “communicate with popular people”, “feel needed”, “feel that I am popular when my posts have many likes”, “feel more confident”.

Most of the respondents (87.1% of the sample) state that online communication helps them overcome difficulties arising in real-life communication with peers; in social media, it becomes easier to discuss traumatising information or a difficult situation as well as talk to a person with whom “it is hard to communicate in real life”, or whom it is “scary to be next to”.

At the same time, the ways teenagers use to overcome communication difficulties online vary. Some of them can be regarded as constructive as they help realize own difficulties, cope with personal barriers and fears, try new, socially approved communication patterns, solve a difficult life situation effectively, improve interpersonal relationships with communication partners. These are acceptance of own fault (1R), a possibility of stopping an unpleasant conversation at any moment, control own actions, language, emotions (2R), freedom of self-expression, non-conformity (3R), an ability to be sincere and to forgive (4R), selectiveness and purposefulness in communication (5R).

Other ways, in our opinion, are destructive, as they lead to distortions in social perception and inadequate self-esteem of a teenager; they actualize aggression and manipulativity, fail to solve difficult life tasks, ruin interpersonal relationships. These ways include wishful thinking in online communication (1R), misleading or trolling the interlocutor (2R), imitating one’s idol and becoming an idol for other people (3R), thinking better of oneself than of the others, make them obey (4R), avenge for insults (5R).

### **6.3. Ways of teenagers’ overcoming variable communication difficulties online**

The correlation analysis showed the correlation between communication difficulties of various modality, arising in real-life communication with peers, and the ways of overcoming these in cyber space.

Thus, when teenagers experience basic difficulties which manifest themselves in lack of confidence or jealousy, they use social media as ways of self-presentation where you can display only the best side of their life ( $r=0.36$  with  $p\leq 0.05$ ) and make a new, positive image of themselves ( $r=0.26$  with  $p\leq 0.05$ ). Teenagers characterised by emotional and personal dependence on the communication partner in real life initiate communication online, try to express their own opinion ( $r=0.34$  with  $p\leq 0.04$ ). However, some teenagers choose destructive ways of overcoming communication difficulties – anonymous threats, blackmailing, deceit, indirect aggression ( $r=0.29$  with  $p\leq 0.03$ ).

Teenagers who experience content-related difficulties, related to lack of communication knowledge and experience, copy communication patterns of popular peers, adjust to them, display conformity, find it impossible to be who they are ( $r=-0.31$  with  $p\leq 0.05$ ). Teenagers who find it difficult to understand the situation, find advantages in online communication as they can express their opinion even without understanding the topic of communication ( $r=0.27$  with  $p\leq 0.03$ ), hide their personality ( $r=0.28$  with  $p\leq 0.04$ ), comment on events, leave comments to posts made by strangers by using fake accounts. For impulsive teenagers social media are a space where it is possible to increase the number of followers and gradually learn to control themselves, because there is a possibility of

delayed reactions, i.e. there is time to choose words, calm down and find the adequate wording, edit or delete a post ( $r=0.26$  with  $p\leq 0.05$ ).

Teenagers who experience difficulties related to the inability to choose expressive, vivid, bright verbal means state that they demonstrate online only those emotions that they want, and do everything to hide their true emotions ( $r=0.34$  with  $p\leq 0.05$ ). In online communication, difficulties related to dialogue strategies are successfully overcome. Teenagers use communication in social media as “a safe training” of communication skills (“it is easier here to ask the interlocutor for help and for advice”, “you can choose right words, replace them with smileys”, “there is time to think and formulate the answer”). Here teenagers understand interlocutors much easier, learn to listen reflexively, are ready to make concessions ( $r=0.31$  with  $p\leq 0.05$ ).

Reflexive communication difficulties (an inability to understand oneself, admit own faults) in cyber space are usually overcome in destructive ways. Teenagers think that online they can give vent to their emotion onto unfamiliar people ( $r=0.38$  with  $p\leq 0.04$ ), show aggression, send messages with threats, blackmail ( $r=0.33$  with  $p\leq 0.05$ ), and in this way achieve emotional release. The inability to improve one’s own communication errors means that some teenagers in social media start displaying non-conformity and adjusting to other people ( $r=0.35$  with  $p\leq 0.03$ ), and others want to demonstrate their superiority by showing that they are “cleverer than many others” ( $r=0.31$  with  $p\leq 0.04$ ), and “can become an idol for others” ( $r=0.29$  with  $p\leq 0.05$ ). When teenagers face the difficulty of estimating the consequences of their communication acts, they attempt to create a new image in the virtual world that would help them be the centre of attention ( $r=0.26$  with  $p\leq 0.05$ ). The ways of attractive attention, too, can be constructive and destructive.

## 7. Conclusion

1. The processes of socialisation and communication ontogeny in contemporary teenagers take place in two spaces: real and digital. Often these processes are heterochronous; the cyber competence is formed earlier than the communication competence. It enables us to regard the teenager’s online communication as a resource and a mechanism to overcome communication difficulties, arising in real-life interpersonal communications.

2. For contemporary teenagers, online communication is an effective way of overcoming their real communication difficulties. The ways of this overcoming in cyber space can be both constructive (admitting errors, self-control, freedom of self-expression, non-conformity, selectiveness, purposefulness of communication etc), and destructive (aggression, manipulativity, deceit, playing to the public, despotism, revenge, a frequent change of images etc.). The constructive coping behaviour is manifested through realisation of communication difficulties and active attempts of a teenager to resolve a difficult communication situation, predominantly purposeful communication, mastering new constrictive communication patterns and their actualisation in further communication, an ability for self-regulation of emotional states and experiences, positive changes in interpersonal relationships with communication partners).

3. The process of overcoming communication difficulties online can be accompanied by both positive (pride in oneself, self-respect, self-assertion, a sense of social responsibility and duty, etc.) and

negative emotions (negativity, dissatisfaction with oneself, bitterness, frustration caused by lack of quick wins, fear of need to pay) that together have a synergetic function in teens' development as a subject of communication. These emotions trigger socialisation, interiorisation of external demands, intentions, motivation and values (Martsinkovskaya, 2015). They create ambivalent, dialectic perception of the social situation, provide the basis for analysis, self-understanding, self-expression; expand the behavioural repertoire and accumulate individual communication experience.

4. The psychological and pedagogical support of communication ontogeny should be based on the socio-cultural approach, which takes into account the specifics of contemporary teen subculture, nature of cyber socialisation and "mosaic thinking of the digital generation" (Prensky, 2012). It is high time to accept reality and destroy the myth of imminent risks and inevitable negative consequences of online communication. It is vital to regard cyber space as a resource to overcome communication difficulties, form personal communication competence, use the opportunities of the online space to prevent social maladaptation and deviant behaviour of the younger generation.

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