LIVING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

SELF-PRESENTATION, NETWORKING, PLAYING, AND PARTICIPATING IN POLITICS

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Online Communities and Early Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

The chapter focuses on the role of online communities in the lives of early adolescents. This developmental stage is typical for many changes, including identity development as well as the expansion of social life beyond family boundaries. Children gain new experiences in new social groups, which introduce them to diverse attitudes, opinions, and behavioral patterns. Currently, one of these new groups can take the form of an online community (i.e., a group of people who regularly interact in a specific place on the internet). In the chapter, current knowledge about online communities is reviewed and processes by which online communities may affect children's development are described. Specific focus is given to the form of interaction with community members: whether it is only online, partly offline, or mostly offline. Using the sample of Czech early adolescents (aged 11–14), empirical evidence depicting the character of community membership and how it differs across the three types of communities is presented. Findings show that online communities with partly offline contact are most distinct – they are typical for the highest sense of belonging but also the highest perceived influence on children´s behavior and attitudes.

Keywords
online communities, online and offline interaction, early adolescence

INTRODUCTION

Online communities are new online social environments in which contemporary youth participate. "Online communities" designate groups of people who regularly interact through some specific virtual environment, such as web sites, blogs, or social network sites. Based on previous studies, we know that membership in online communities may be connected with potential risk (e.g., in the form of negative influence on attitudes or behavior) but can also bring many benefits (e.g., the opportunity to gain support or a sense of belonging) (Černá & Šmahel, 2008; Giles, 2006; Machackova & Blinka, 2009).

But, as most prior studies on online communities focused on the population of older adolescents or adults, we lack knowledge about the role of these communities in younger children. This chapter aims to fill this gap and focuses on community members in early adolescence.

Early adolescence is a sensitive developmental stage between ages 11–14. While still nested in the family, early adolescents are becoming more involved in and influenced by other social groups. This can shape the development of their attitudes, behavior, and overall self-concept (Schave & Schave, 1989). In current "digital society", online communities can also become one of the influential groups in children's lives. But the role of online community differs in relation to several factors. Considering that the online social life of youth is often interconnected with the offline one (Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2011), I aim to differentiate between three types of online communities based on the types of interaction with members: online communities with only online contact, with some offline contact, and with predominant offline contact. Based on existing knowledge and a theoretical framework depicting the process upon which online communities can become a significant part of children's lives, I will examine data from Czech, early adolescent members of online communities. My aim is to illustrate how children perceive the importance and influence of these communities in terms of the provided support, sense of belonging, opportunities for self-disclosure, and perceived personal change due to community membership.

ONLINE COMMUNITIES: DEFINING THE CONCEPT

In last two decades, online communities have spread throughout cyberspace and have become an integral part of the online social life of millions of internet users. In the Czech Republic, a country in which the data analyzed in this chapter originates, 27% of internet users older than 12 visited an online community in 2007. The members were most often youth: half of the users aged 16–19 and 37% or the users aged 12–15 (Šmahel, 2008)[6]. Online communities exist in multiple forms (Porter, 2004; Smith & Kollock, 2005), varying in size (with dozens, hundreds, thousands, or millions of members), form of member interaction (a/synchronic, in/frequent, strictly online, or also offline), or in topics and goals. Some are explicitly centered on a specific theme, such as communities of gamers, movie fans, or people with a specific hobby, while some simply emerge in an online place where people meet, for example

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6   It is important to mention that these data are a bit outdated. For comparison, we can consider findings from America, where 15% of internet users (across all ages) visited online communities in 2007, and 17% did so in 2012 (Lebo, 2013).

on social network sites or discussion forums. What all these environments have in common is the label "online community" (sometimes also "virtual" or "cyber" community), applied by their founders, their members, or researchers.

But use of the term "community" for the online environment has been vastly contested and its appropriateness is still in dispute (e.g., Fernback, 2007; Watson, 1997; Yuan, 2012). The reason for this controversy stems mostly from the discrepancies between the perceptions of the virtual environment and the traditional conceptualization of community, which denoted a close-knit group of people living in a specific location; mutually sharing trust, a commitment, and a sense of belonging; and pursuing similar goals, norms, or morals. This seemed to contradict the nature of online ("virtual") groups and relationships, which, compared to offline ones, were sometimes perceived as weak, deficient, artificial, or not real. But in reality, many members feel a strong connection to their online community. For example, half of American online community members felt as strongly about online communities as about their offline ones (Lebo, 2013). Moreover, many researches also considered overall declining engagement in "traditional" communities and argued that the online communities present new possibilities to re-connect with social life in the neighborhood as well as to spread one's social network beyond the local horizon (Hampton & Wellman, 2003). This view diminished the importance of "local" in terms of space and emphasized the "social" aspects of community existence. Online communities then could be taken as a symbol of current societal connections: transgressing boundaries and connecting different – yet common – people who interact in seemingly boundless cyberspace. This is why, for some, online communities represent the decline of society, while for others they signify its unstoppable further development.

This conceptual struggle, combined with the notion of multiple community forms (which can't be easily covered by a single definition) resulted in a variety of definitions of online communities. Some prior studies utilized broad definitions, which cover only the basic aspects of the online community. This would be, for example, Ridings, Gefen, and Arinze's (2002) depiction of online communities as "groups of people with common interests and practices that communicate regularly and for some duration in an organized way over the internet through a common location or mechanism" (p. 273). Other definitions were more selective, focusing and specifying one or more attribute necessary to label the online group as a community (for different approaches, see Blanchard, 2007; Lee, Vogel, & Limayem, 2003; Porter, 2004; Ridings & Gefen, 2004; Smith & Kollock, 2005). Among the most often used attributes needed

to define an online community belong the following. Members of an online community must, to some extent, sustain an online form of interaction; but, they can also meet offline. There should be rather regular interaction within the community. Members should share some common discourse, norms, informational, or emotional support, and pursue common goals and interests. And, members should feel the sense of the virtual community, i.e., "feelings of membership, identity, belonging, and attachment to a group that interacts primarily through electronic communication" (Blanchard, 2007, p. 827). Inevitably, every researcher must choose which definition and which attributes are most suitable for his or her research goals and questions. The empirical findings presented later are based on a more broad operationalization of online community as a *specific virtual place where people of similar interests or opinions regularly interact and exchange information or materials*. Besides this, I will also specifically focus on one specific attribute: the form of interaction with community members, ranging from purely online to predominantly offline.

WHAT MAKES ONLINE COMMUNITIES SO DIFFERENT?

As described above, sometimes the label "virtual" or "online" for a community might be misleading, suggesting that they are ephemeral or unreal. But similar to offline ones, we can observe rich social life within these communities. The members interact, communicate, and share information, materials, interests, goals, and support. Nevertheless, despite these similarities with offline communities, there are also some specifics which make online communities unique social environments.

Overall, online communities bear specifics which have been recognized in online communication, foremost the lack of non-verbal cues in communication (i.e., absence of tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures, posture, etc.) (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). While interacting, the members do not see or hear each other, and rely only on written text, sometimes accompanied by emoticons or other signs and symbols (e.g., pictures, implemented audio or video, or hyperlinks). This can be limiting for self-expression and mutual understanding, but, at the same time, it can also increase control over members' self-presentations, as these "limits" can help to overcame constraints present in offline communication (caused, for example, by lower communication competencies).

The members also can stay, or at least they perceive to be, relatively anonymous, and usually interact while at a mutual physical distance. This perceived anonymity is connected to the disinhibited behavior of members, be it in its benign (increased self-disclosure and support) or toxic (increased hostility)

form (Suler, 2004). Moreover, due to anonymity and distance, community members may have no relation and awareness of one's offline social circle and behavior and vice versa. Thus, offline friends and family do not have to know anything about the online community and one's behavior and image within that community. In result, the anonymity and distance can decrease the fear of the possible consequences of a member's behavior within the community.

The information within the community (and also the whole community as an online platform) is accessible and relatively stable. If the community is alive, it can be accessed by members at any time from any internet connection (Smith & Kollock, 2005). Moreover, online communities enable the members to store and share information and materials, including past conversations and events, creating and sustaining a specific discursive environment centered within community topics. Thus, although seemingly ephemeral, an online community may be very real, immediately accessible, and even more stable than an offline community, in which common history can more easily be forgotten or is usually less accessible.

Finally, accessibility is important not only in terms of immediate access, but also with regard to the "spatial" and "social" dimension. An online community could potentially be visited by anyone, regardless of the location. It also is open to all regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, education, beliefs, opinions, etc. Of course, every online community has a specific discursive framework and it is an open question as to how the newcomer will fit in, even when these attributes are not immediately recognizable (Williams, 2009). But, if he or she connects with the community on a basic level (e.g., they share the same interests, goals, or attitudes), those others characteristics, which might limit interaction in the offline world, are mitigated online.

All these attributes vary across specific spaces (and platforms) on which online communities exist, based on their "technical" setting, but also their overall community rules, preferences, and discourse. For example, some communities enable the deletion of some information, while others forbid it. In some communities, members may use live video-chats; in others they prefer asynchronous bulletin board messages. Or, while blog communities offer a high degree of anonymity and "protected space" (Rains, 2012), if the community functions on an online social network site, members are usually highly identifiable (Papacharissi, 2010).

Online Community and Offline Interaction

One of the crucial attributes of online communities is whether members sustain only online or also offline relationships. I mentioned earlier that with ongoing social change the emphasis on "local", including the physical contact of community members, has decreased. But this is not to suggest that the offline aspect has lost its importance. Due to the current high penetration of the internet, many online communities connect people who are in physical proximity (Wellman, Boase, & Chen, 2002) or rather easily reachable. Currently members of plenty of online communities (almost half of them in America; Lebo, 2013) also interact offline, which blurs the distinction between online and offline communities. Many online communities emerge as another dimension of an offline community like, for example, online communities of people living in the same neighborhood (Hampton & Wellman, 2003). In other cases, some "purely" online communities extend the social life into the offline environment, for example, by organizing offline meetings with members (Machackova & Blinka, 2009).

Some previously mentioned attributes, especially those connected to anonymity, are typical mostly for communities in which members interact exclusively online, but do not apply for others. The form of contact can have substantial impact on how the members perceive the benefits of the membership and how they behave within the community. Offline contact can result in decreased control over self-presentation and limit behavioral freedom (i.e., behavior disconnected from offline norms and roles as described above). This is why some members may refuse to cross the online/offline boundaries (Matzat, 2010). On the other hand, offline interaction can strengthen and deepen social ties, and help increase mutual knowledge, trust, and overall joy from community visits. This is a reason why others strive to extend and sustain community life also offline (Machackova & Blinka, 2009). Thus, despite the fact that the criterion for offline contact is no longer necessary, it still is one of defining attributes in the description of an online community, and an important factor in the assessment of the role of online community in members' lives.

ONLINE COMMUNITY AS A SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT FOR CONTEMPORARY CHILDREN

The role of online communities should be also assessed with regard to the factors related to the members: their individual characteristics and the specifics of their offline environment. These factors shape the motivation to join the online community, the character of participation, and, consequently, the role of the community in the member's life. This chapter focuses on a single individual characteristic: the developmental stage of community members.

Specifics of Early Adolescence

Early adolescence, occurring approximately between the ages of 11 and 14, is a sensitive developmental period. According to Erikson's developmental theory (1968), early adolescence is the stage in which the crisis between industry and inferiority (based on experiences in new social environments outside family, mostly school) should result either in the sense of competence or the sense of inferiority, while the new battle between establishing identity versus the confusion of roles begins. Early adolescence is, therefore, typical for behavioral, emotional, cognitive, psycho-social, and physical changes. It is a time of increased psycho-social vulnerability accompanied by increased emotional and behavioral fluctuations. Children are searching for and experimenting with their identity, which is connected to increasing social experiences within groups outside the family circle, most notably peers. These groups can become influential reference social groups in which children search for acceptance (Schave & Schave, 1989; Steinberg & Morris, 2001).

Early adolescence is thus a stage in which "outside" social influences can shape the ongoing changes in children's personalities. Different social groups present early adolescents with examples of different types of behaviors, introduce them to opinions and attitudes which can differ from those socialized in the family, and offer them an opportunity to gain a sense of belonging. Early adolescents seek new experiences within these groups and strive for their approval and acceptance, which might lead to different outcomes: some groups can help children gain sufficient self-esteem and positive self-concept; others have the opposite effect (Shave & Shave, 1989).

The Role of Online Communities

Online communities can become one of the social environments within which children interact. Based on previous findings, we can assume that a substantial part (in fact, more than a third; Šmahel, 2008) of early adolescents visit online communities. But we do not have sufficient empirical evidence about the role and importance of these communities for early adolescents, since most studies were conducted on older populations. Moreover, psychologically oriented research on the younger population has been often focused on risky communities, such as communities devoted to eating disorders or self-harm (Černá & Šmahel, 2009; Giles, 2006; Whitlock, Powers, & Eckenrode, 2006), and less often to more common communities, such as communities of practice or interest (e.g., fan online communities; Machackova & Blinka, 2009). Nevertheless, previous studies provide important insight into the role of online communities, albeit valid mostly for older adolescents. Considering the overall existing body of

knowledge, I will outline the processes upon which an online community can become one of the influential social groups. The next few paragraphs will offer a theoretical approach to the examination of the role of online communities in the lives of early adolescents. But, because we lack sufficient empirical evidence to support these hypothesized processes, this is just a hypothetical framework, which guided the empirical research presented here.

Online communities can provide information and materials on a variety of topics: civic issues, religion and beliefs, or healthy lifestyles. As there are countless online communities, there is also a myriad of possible new information, presented attitudes, or interaction styles. This sea of new information can be very attractive for early adolescents, who reach beyond their family, test new social waters, and seek new information (Shave & Shave, 1989). In online communities, they can encounter alternative views and behavior than those socialized within their family. But simple exposure to such new environments does not equate to influence. The importance of the community would depend on the extent to which children identify with the online community.

This process could be built upon regular contact and visits to the (ever-present and ever-accessible) online community. In time, children can develop a sense of belonging, a necessary component in the social lives of early adolescents who need to belong and be accepted within social groups. This can be encouraged by support provided by community members. While sometimes distance and anonymity can lead to hostile behavior, it can also underlie increased support (Suler, 2004), which has been found in many online communities (Baym, 2007; Watson, 1997). Moreover, the online environment is typical for increased self-disclosure, especially in the relatively anonymous environment (Rains, 2012). If we consider early adolescence as a stage with the increased need to fit in, such support or positive feedback to disclosures can contribute substantially to the development of a sense of belonging in the community. According to Czech data, these processes – i.e., increased positive feedback from others, sense of belonging, and bringing new information – seem typical mostly for adolescent and youth members (until age 26), while disinhibition within the community is relatively high across a wider age range (up to age 50) (Šmahel, 2008).

Upon these processes, children may become members of the community and start to internalize some of its norms and attitudes, and replicate behavior in the online community also offline. Generally, they may develop a social identity (Tajfel, 2010; Turner & Reynolds, 2012) connected to this community. This can be very beneficial: children can find a safe group, which helps them self-

disclose, build a positive self-image, consider different opinions and attitudes, and offer a much needed sense of belonging. But this exact process can have both positive and negative consequences for overall development. Risky online communities – for example communities supporting eating disorders, self-harm communities, or extremist communities (Černá & Šmahel, 2009; De Koster & Houtman, 2008; Giles, 2006) – are also typical for the prevailing support for members' attitudes and behavior – yet, these would be considered harmful. In many cases, it is difficult to assess whether an online community is beneficial or risky. In this assessment, one aspect to consider is the extent to which people in a community are distinct from those in the offline environment, and the extent to which a child behaves differently in the online community compared to the offline environment. Although such questions still do not provide a definite answer to the possible influence of the community, they help assess the role of the online community as compared to offline conditions.

ONLINE COMMUNITIES IN EARLY ADOLESCENCE: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

In this sub-chapter, I aim to empirically assess the role of online communities in the lives of early adolescents. I described that online community can offer example of attitudes, opinions, and behavioral patterns, which might influence a child's identity and behavior within it, but can also be extrapolated to the offline world. But such process can vary significantly across different types of online communities. Here, I will specifically focus on the moderating effect of the type of interaction with community members and compare the three aforementioned types of online communities. First are Only Online communities, i.e., those in which children interact with other members only online and do not meet in real life. Second are Partly Online and Partly Offline communities, in which children interact with some members only online and with others also offline. Third are Mostly Offline communities; i.e., those in which children interact with most members offline (but still they sustain online contact). Therefore, I ask how children in different types of online communities perceive the benefits and consequences of their membership. Specifically, whether these communities are similar or distinct from the offline environment; if they provide support, opportunity for self-disclosure, and a sense of belonging; and whether children perceive that they changed in attitudes and/or behavior due to community membership.

To answer these questions I utilized data from a national survey conducted in the Czech Republic[7] in 2012. We asked children whether they are members of

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an online community, which was described as follows: "On the internet there are a lot of places where people of similar interests or opinions meet. Sometimes these people make groups to which their members come back regularly, they often use a nickname, know each other, talk to each other or exchange information or materials. They can meet e.g., on discussion forums, blogs, chats, or in games. Do you personally visit such a place or group regularly?"[8]

Membership in Online Communities

In our sample, 50% of early adolescents (N=857; 50% girls) indicated that they are members of an online community. From these, 16.5% interacted with members "only online", 46.8% interacted "partly online and partly offline", and 36.6% "mostly offline". In mostly offline communities, girls were a bit more prevalent (56%), while boys were more often members in only online communities (58%). Almost no gender differences were found in partly offline communities. All types of communities showed similar age trends: older youth were members of communities more often than younger ones.

The importance of community in children's lives can be indicated by several aspects. The frequencies of visits and the length of membership may reflect whether these communities are part of the everyday life of children. There were some differences, with only online communities being visited on a daily basis by 65% of their members, partly offline by 79%, and mostly offline by 67%. Moreover, partly and mostly offline communities were in most cases part of children's lives for more than a year, while this applied only for 40% of only online communities (see Figure 1).

Online communities can be connected to the offline environment (as we can presume in the case of mostly offline ones), but they can also present a new and distinct social environment. We asked respondents to what extent they perceived their *own behavior within the community as different* from behavior in other settings (e.g., "In this group I behave very differently from how I behave among people I know personally"). According to our expectations, the only and partly online groups both reported higher levels of such behavior than the mostly offline group. More surprisingly, when we asked if they perceived *members as different* compared to people in their offline environment (e.g., "The members are very different from people I commonly meet in person"), there were no significant differences between the three groups.

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8   The initial results, including measurement and analytical details, are available here: http://irtis. fss.muni.cz/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/The_Perceived_Importance_and_Influence_of_Online_Groups_poster.pdf

I described that the online communities can provide many benefits, such as a sense of belonging, perceived support, and the possibility for self-disclosure within the community. These factors can fulfill the developmental needs of early adolescents and also underlie the process of identification with the community. For *perceived support* (e.g., "They are willing to help me"), offline contact seems to be crucial, as the two groups with offline contact both reported higher levels than the only online group. It is possible that on average, the strictly online environment is not sufficient to provide as much feeling of support when compared to offline ties. It was a bit surprising that the only online group also reported lower levels of *self-disclosure* (e.g., "I talk also about very personal issues") than the partly offline group; yet, they did not differ significantly in this regard from the mostly offline group. Finally, *sense of belonging* (e.g., "I can belong to the group") was highest in communities with partly offline contact. It seems that the online dimension of these community types still offers some (maybe necessary) distance and possibility for control over self-presentation, while some regular offline contact can strengthen the ties and offer more chances to feel accepted.

Thus, these findings suggest that respondents meeting community members partly online and partly offline benefit most from membership in the online community, as they reported the highest levels of a sense of belonging as well as higher levels of perceived support and self-disclosure than in the only online group. It seems that the balanced combination of online and offline contact enables the most trust and still offers a safe environment to encourage self-disclosing behavior. But, they also behaved more differently in the community than the mostly offline group. The only online group also inclined more to behave differently within the group than the mostly offline group, but also perceived less support. Therefore, while this environment probably offers a change to exert different opinions and behavior than the offline one, this is not rewarded as much by provided support.

Finally, we also asked how the respondents themselves evaluated possible *personal change* in their attitudes or behavior due to the membership in the online community (e.g., "Thanks to this group, I started to behave differently from before in everyday life"). The partly offline group reported the highest average of perceived personal change. Also considering previous findings, this can indicate that belonging in a community with both online and offline contact could be most influential on children's development, as members of this type of community also reported higher levels of support, sense of belonging, and self-disclosure, which all can underlie identification with the community as a
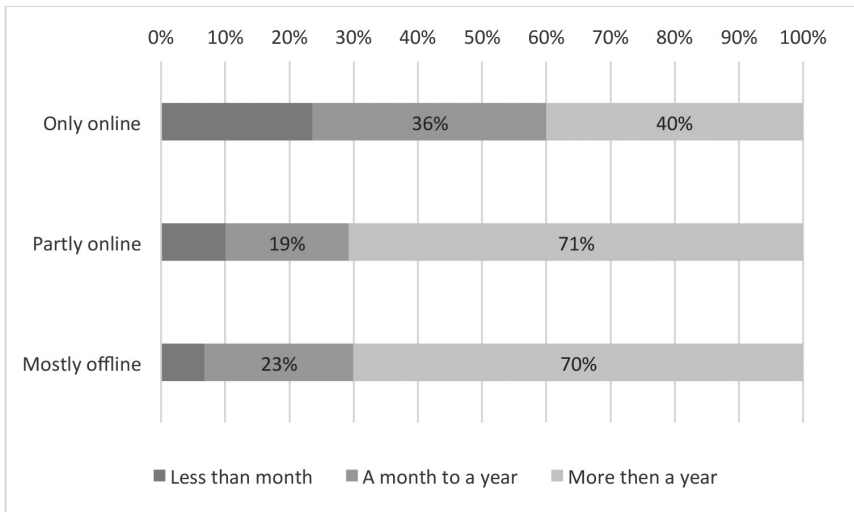
Figure 1: The average length of membership in an online community.

social group. To test this presumption, we also conducted separate analyses in which we accounted for single effects of all these factors and examined their association with personal change. In only online communities, personal change was positively linked with distinct behavior of respondents and members; in partly offline and mostly offline communities, it was linked also with increased sense of belonging and self-disclosure. Therefore, while these latter two factors might underlie behavioral change in members of communities with some offline contact, this might not be the case for purely online communities.

CONCLUSION

Online communities are new social environments which contemporary children visit. In this chapter, I focused on the importance of online communities as perceived by early adolescents, an age at which children undergo significant changes in terms of identity development (Erikson, 1968) and enlarge their social experiences within diverse groups (Shave & Shave, 1989). Acknowledging that the online community is an umbrella term for many different online places, this chapter was focused on one specific attribute: the form of contact with community members, specifically only online, partly offline, and mostly offline.

The findings showed that half of Czech early adolescents participated in some kind of online community. Most often, they participated in a community where

they sustained some kind of offline contact with other members, while strictly online communities were visited by less than a fifth of all community members.

Based on our findings, it seems that it is the community with mixed and balanced online and offline contacts which brings the most potential benefits. Members of these communities reported high levels of support, a sense of belonging, and self-disclosing behavior. But, they also reported the highest levels of behavior distinct from the offline environment and the highest perceived personal change due to community membership. These mixed communities seem to provide both a safe online environment, which enables members to control their expressions and self-presentations, and an environment where they can still strengthen and sustain the ties via offline meetings.

On the other hand, the only online communities probably lack such stability and influence in children's lives. According to our findings, they were rather new environments in children's lives, visited by most for less than a year. Although they offer a chance to practice different behavior and meet people distinct from their offline environment, they fail to provide as much support and sense of belonging. They might urge personal changes due to the possibility to perform distinct behavior and meet distinct people, but, probably because of the barrier between children's offline environment and online communities, even an increased sense of belonging does not lead so often to the extension of the identity and behavior within the community to other contexts.

In the case of predominantly offline communities, we can speculate that most of them emerged due to existing offline ties, which were simply extended to the online environment. Therefore, it is not surprising that the behavior of members within such communities is not distinct from the offline world. Yet, they also do not provide much sense of belonging. This could be because these communities are formed within specific existing environments (e.g., a class) typical for the mixed quality of relationships, while the partly online communities can more often be based on the selection of specific groups (or at least people to interact with offline), who share similar interests and views. Among these, children can feel more accepted, because the common link can be the most pronounced part of community relationships.

The aim of this chapter was to shed more light on the role of online communities in early adolescence. Still, many questions remain unanswered. There are other important factors besides developmental stage which intervene in the process in which online communities influence children's development, like for example,

socio-psychological characteristics (including personality traits, self-esteem, self-concept, and social competencies) or the character of the offline environment (quality of relationships with family and peers, or overall living conditions). Moreover, I focused only on the character of ties with community members, yet there are other important attributes of communities: the topic, discursive nature, or even platform on which they exist. Finally, I also focused on the perceived role in the children's lives, but did not capture its character. Considering the perceived influence, are partly offline communities beneficial or do they present potential harm? We measured potential behavioral change, but the character of such change was not assessed in this study. This aspect is of great importance but also of great methodological complexity, which will pose a challenge for future studies.

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