

Perceived Importance and Influence of Online Groups in Early Adolescence: The Role of Intragroup Behavior and Patterns of Interaction



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Introduction

In early adolescence, peers become increasingly important, exerting significant influence on behaviors and attitudes (Berndt, 1982). There is a lot of studies on this topic; but the social life of children has recently undergone significant changes: their interactions now substantially occur on the Internet (Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2011), where they both maintain existing friendships and participate in new and distinct online groups. The character of these online relationships—sometimes described as deficient, and other times, paradoxically, as more fulfilling than offline bonds (McKenna & Bargh, 2004)—raises new questions concerning children's development. Can online groups provide the support and sense of belonging typical for "real" groups? Do they constitute a distinct social environment? Can membership in online groups be connected to changes in behavior and attitudes? Considering these questions, this study aimed to examine the role of online groups in the lives of early adolescents. We focus on children who participate in online groups, on their behaviors inside these groups, and consequences of this membership. Moreover, we focus on possible differences between children who meet the members only online, but also on children who interact with them to larger (or even prevalent) extent offline.

Method

Sample
The data come from first way of panel-survey on 3,055 students from a stratified random sample of schools in the Czech Republic. A subsample of 865 respondents (50% girls) aged 11-14 ($M=12.83$, $SD=1.00$) was selected on the basis of reporting participation in online groups. Respondents were divided into those interacting with members of online groups "only online", ($n=143$), both "online and offline" ($n=398$), and "mostly offline" ($n=314$).

Measures
„Sense of belonging“ in the online group ($M=2.76$, $SD=.71$; $\alpha=.820$)
„Perceived support“ from group members ($M=2.82$, $SD=.78$; $\alpha=.823$)
Extent to which respondent's and members' behavior within the group differed from behavior in other settings („different behavior – respondent“, $M=2.21$, $SD=.67$; $\alpha=.724$); „different behavior – members“, $M=2.18$, $SD=.76$; $\alpha=.779$)
Depth of the respondent's „self-disclosure“ inside the group ($M=2.07$, $SD=.81$; $\alpha=.734$)
Perceived „personal change“ due to group membership ($M=2.12$, $SD=.77$; $\alpha=.837$).
All scales were transformed into Z-scores.

Analysis 1: ANOVA

We conducted one-way ANOVAs on the standardized values of examined variables (see Figure 1).

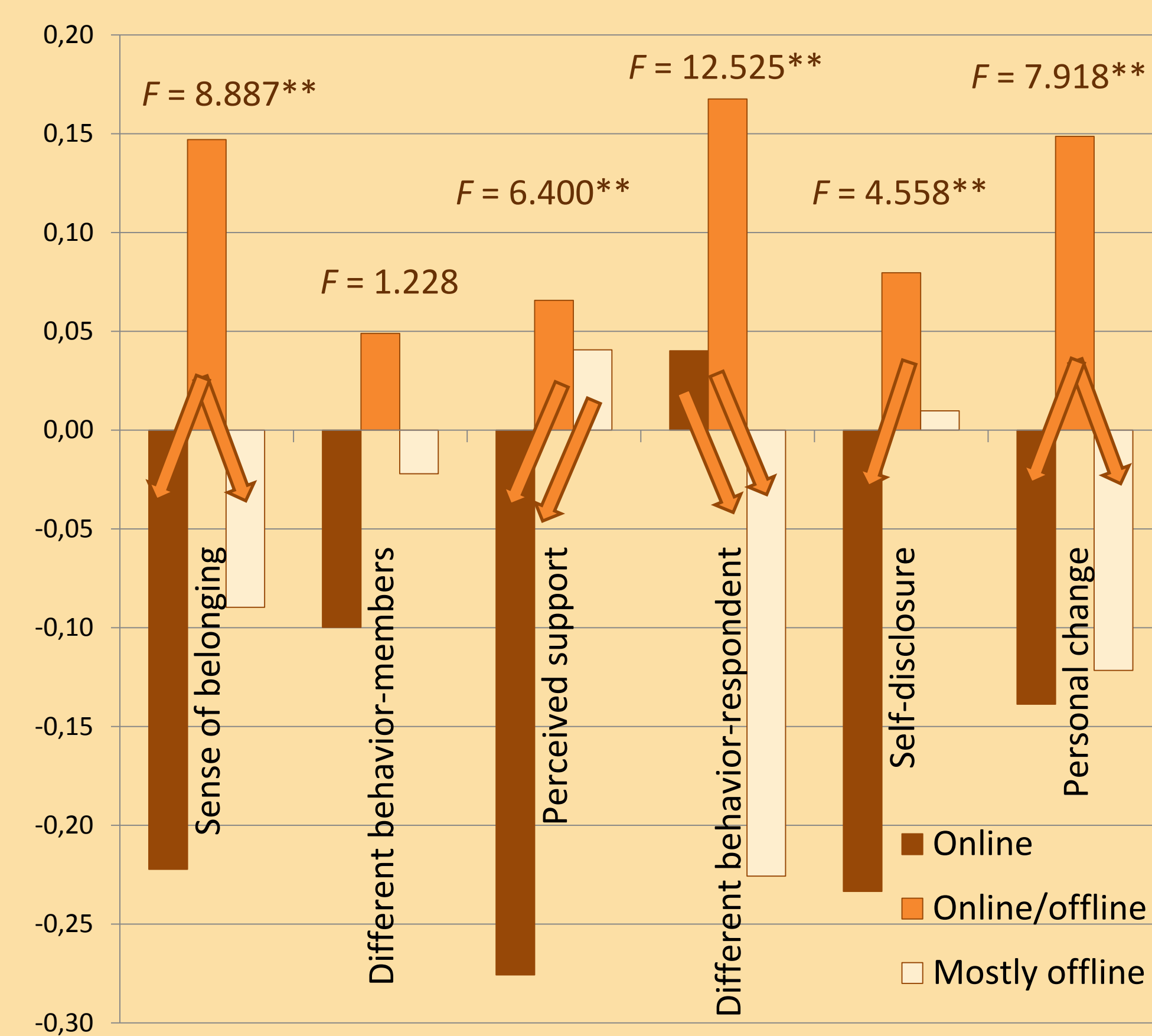
Results 1

Respondents meeting group members both online and offline reported highest levels on sense of belonging and personal change; they also disclosed more and perceived more support than „only online“ group, and behaved more differently in their group than „mostly offline“ group. „Only online“ group also inclined more to behave differently within the group than „mostly offline“ group, but perceived less support than them.

Analysis 2: OLS regression

To assess different group dynamics, three hierarchical linear regressions were conducted predicting the perceived personal change (Table 1).

Figure 1. Intergroup differences on examined variables



Note: Significantly ($p<.05$) higher scores between two groups indicated by Tukey post-hoc tests are designated by the arrows; all $df=2$; ** $p<.01$

Table 1. Three step hierarchical regression predicting perceived personal change due to group membership

	Only online			Online/offline			Mostly offline		
	b	S.E.	β	b	S.E.	β	b	S.E.	β
Step 1									
Constant	-.026	.085		.073	.046		-.073	.046	
Sense of belonging	.457**	.075	.489	.576**	.05	.524	.557**	.05	.558
Adjusted R2	.232**			.272**			.309**		
Step 2									
Constant	-.041	.072		.074	.041		-.062	.044	
Sense of belonging	.173*	.08	.185	.392**	.05	.357	.495**	.053	.496
Different behavior-members	.602**	.092	.582	.426**	.048	.411	.321**	.051	.344
Perceived support	-.016	.087	-.016	.033	.051	.03	-.088	.059	-.087
Adjusted R2	.461**			.422**			.398**		
Step 3									
Constant	-.066	.072		.06	.039		-.013	.041	
Sense of belonging	.093	.08	.099	.274**	.051	.25	.36**	.052	.361
Different behavior-members	.38**	.104	.368	.232**	.053	.223	.133*	.052	.142
Perceived support	-.091	.085	-.094	.053	.048	.048	-.091	.054	-.09
Different behavior-respondent	.322**	.104	.331	.233**	.051	.237	.309**	.057	.315
Self-disclosure	.121	.083	.119	.18**	.045	.182	.16**	.047	.172
Adjusted R2	.561**			.491**			.502**		

Note: ** $p<.01$, * $p<.05$

Results 2: OLS Regression

The extent to which respondent's and member's intragroup behavior differed from extragroup behavior was a significant positive predictor of personal change within all groups, while sense of belonging and self-disclosure predicted change only in the "mostly offline" and "online and offline" groups.

Conclusions

Our study identified several important differences among the members of three types of online groups: those interacting only online, both online and offline, and mostly offline.

The most distinct (and in many senses beneficial) seem to be groups composed of people who children meet both offline and online. It seems that the online/offline types of relationships get „the best“ from both modes of relationships. In comparison to groups meeting only online or mostly offline, the online/offline groups provide children with most support and sense of belonging. This probably creates better conditions, such as higher mutual trust, feelings of safety, which underlay higher tendency to self-disclose than in only online groups, but also more chances for preferred self-presentation and behavior than in mostly offline groups.

In the end, these online/offline groups also support largest personal changes, and these changes are positively predicted by all mentioned variables. We can now only speculate, whether these changes are beneficial or if they represent unwanted influence. This is the question which should be asked in the future research.

There is also interesting difference between the other two groups, which correspond with previous findings about the character of online relationships (McKenna & Bargh, 2004). It seems that only online groups are not able to provide support to such extent as mostly offline ones, but they provide better conditions for distinct behavior. Thus, although the relationships in these groups seem to lack the quality of offline ones, these groups offer an environment for preferred self-presentation, which can influence the identity development of early adolescents.

References

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