

# ***The Influence of Internet on Adolescent Psychological Development from the Perspective of Developmental Psychology***

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**Abstract:** With the rapid development of science and technology, the Internet has gradually become a channel for teenagers to interact with the outside world. Therefore, from the perspective of developmental psychology, this study combines Kohlberg's moral theory and Erikson's development theory to analyze the influence of the Internet on adolescents. In addition, this study provides strategies for teachers and parents to strengthen the positive effects of the Internet and reduce the negative effects of the Internet. The result shows that it can bring some benefits to adolescents, such as helping adolescents to achieve self-identity and meeting the needs of communication and emotional expression. However, it can also have a negative influence on some teenagers. For example, harmful Internet information may make them set up the wrong values. In addition, cyberbullying, a new form of bullying derived from the Internet, can lead to depression problems in adolescents. Specifically, for positive effects, teachers can ask classmates to complete homework that requires using the Internet, and parents can teach children to use the Internet to a limited extent. For negative influences, teachers and parents should convey correct values to teenagers, communicate with teenagers on an equal footing, and help teenagers establish a growth mindset.

**Keywords:** adolescent, development psychology, mental health, Kohlberg's moral theory, Erikson's development theory

## **1. Introduction**

Nowadays, with the development of science and technology, more and more teenagers start to get access to the Internet. According to the 2020 Research Report on the Internet Use of Juvenile in China, the number of underage netizen continues to grow, and the trend of the younger teenager accessing the Internet is more obvious. In 2020, there were 183 million underage netizen in China, and the Internet penetration rate was 94.9%, 1.8 percentage points higher than that in 2019, which was higher than the national Internet penetration rate (70.4%) [1]. The Internet has many positive effects on teenagers, such as: broadening the space for teenagers to seek knowledge; enriching the emotional experience of teenagers; providing effective support for carrying out mental health education for adolescents. But at the same time, it also has some negative effects, including the negative impact on the personality development of adolescents and the negative impact on the character development of adolescents [2].

Recently, a Chinese study showed that active use of social network site positively predicted meaning in life, which means active use of social network has a positive impact on students' development [3]. In contrast, a Scottish study on children and adolescents aged between 11 and 17 found that time spent on social media and emotional investment in social media were positively correlated with poorer sleep quality, lower self-esteem and higher levels of anxiety and depression [4]. Current studies have extensively and comprehensively analyzed the influence of Internet on adolescent mental health, and put forward some practical intervention programs. By reading and organizing related literature, this paper analyzes some positive and negative effects on the basis of previous studies and theories of developmental psychology, and proposes some suggestions and measures that can help strengthen the positive effects and weaken the negative effects. Theoretically, this thesis studies the relationship between the Internet and adolescents from the perspective of developmental psychology. Compared with previous studies, this paper combines Kohlberg's moral theory and Erikson's development theory to analyze the influence of the Internet on adolescents, which has a unique research perspective. In practice, it can provide educators and parents with effective strategies to guide teenagers to use the Internet correctly, and help teenagers form good habits of using the Internet, which is beneficial to the physical and mental health of teenagers.

## **2. Developmental Psychology**

Developmental psychology is a branch of psychology that studies physical, cognitive, and social change throughout the life span [5]. Adolescence is the transition period from childhood to adulthood, which is the second accelerated development period in life and plays a key role in a person's lifelong development. Thus, teenagers are one of the important research objects in developmental psychology. In terms of cognitive development, adolescence is a critical stage of moral development. According to Kohlberg's theory, an individual's moral development includes three levels, which are the pre-conventional morality level, the conventional morality level, and the post-conventional morality level. People at the pre-conventional morality level are only concerned with the actual consequences of their actions, such as punishment, reward, and so on. When individuals enter the conventional morality level, they recognize the expectations of society and modify their behaviors to conform to the social norms. Lastly, post-conventional morality implies that individuals can deal with problems beyond the established norms and laws of society, and their moral judgments are based on universal principles of justice. Adolescence is the transition stage from the conventional morality level to the post-conventional morality level. Thus, society should give teenagers proper guidance to help them establish correct morals. In social development, for adolescents, the main challenge is seeking self-identity. Erikson proposed a theory about the stages of psychosocial development. There are eight stages in total, and each stage has its own psychosocial task. During adolescence, the main task of the individual is identity vs. role confusion. Teenagers try to answer questions like "Who am I?" and "what do I want to be?". They form an identity by exploring values and career goals, and peer groups are key social agents in this stage. Thus, instead of the elderly, like teachers and parents, teenagers are more willing to communicate with their peers.

## **3. Influence of Internet on Adolescents**

### **3.1. Positive Effect**

#### **3.1.1. Helping to Explore Oneself and Achieve Self-identity**

Adolescence is the period when people's self-consciousness and independent personality are formed and developed. The strengthening of self-consciousness marks the beginning of a person's maturity. With the increasing sense of independence, teenagers are willing to deal with their own affairs

independently to show their strength and talent. Teenagers have a strong desire for respect, equality and understanding. The Internet, with its strong openness and interaction, can provide them with a relatively equal and inclusive platform, allowing them to explore, communicate and express freely, so as to achieve the goal of self-identity.

The large amount of information and rich resources on the Internet make it easy for teenagers to acquire the knowledge they are interested in on the Internet. Therefore, it can effectively mobilize their enthusiasm for learning and help them to further explore, which also has a guiding significance for their future career planning. In addition, there are many innovative platforms on the Internet through which teenagers can show themselves. When their creations are recognized by others, they gain a better sense of their strengths, boost their confidence, and gain a clearer sense of who they will become in the future [6].

### **3.1.2. Meeting the Needs for Communication and Emotional Catharsis**

The Internet can meet young people's strong need for communication [5]. Teenagers are in a period of curiosity about the outside world and a strong desire for expression. However, compared with adults, teenagers can only receive information passively, and their communication with parents and teachers is often unequal. With the continuous development and maturity of adolescent students' psychology and physiology, they do not want to be in such a passive position for a long time but also hope to be regarded as adults, to be respected and understood. In the Internet world, teenagers are not limited by their age and can interact freely with all kinds of people to satisfy their desire to communicate. In addition, some young people are introverted and feel pressured to communicate with their peers in real life, but the Internet gives them a new space to communicate and provides them with the opportunity to make friends.

The Internet helps teenagers vent their negative emotions [7]. Teenagers are in a stage of great emotional volatility. At the same time, they may encounter some difficulties and problems in school, interpersonal relationships, and parent-child relationship, so it is easy to produce a lot of negative emotions. In real life, people's emotional catharsis will always be limited, and the anonymous characteristics of the network provides a good way for teenagers to vent their bad emotions, teenagers can express their emotions in the network world, so as to achieve the purpose of alleviating bad emotions, which is conducive to mental health. A study suggests that social media can help teenagers feel less anxious during the COVID-19 quarantine [8].

## **3.2. Negative Effect**

### **3.2.1. Blur Moral Cognition Leading to False Values**

Adolescents have weak discrimination ability to external information, may not be able to accurately identify and distinguish beneficial information, easy to ignore some beautified or hidden negative information, so as to blindly choose to follow bad behavior. According to Kohlberg's theory, teenagers' moral level is at a stage of development, and receiving too much bad information at this stage may have a negative impact on their formation and development of morality.

The Internet will affect the moral character of teenagers, and wrong information may lead them to establish wrong values. The Internet is an open platform, which contains all kinds of information, not only positive information, but also some that is harmful to the physical and mental health of young people, such as violence, pornography and so on. Teenagers are in adolescence; they have poor self-control, emotional instability, and inadequate cognitive development, making them more vulnerable to the influence of their surroundings.

The violent elements contained in some online games may blur teenagers' perception that violence is acceptable, thus forming a wrong moral outlook. Previous studies have shown that violent online

games have a negative predictive effect on moral sensitivity [9]. Specifically, if the exposure to violent online games is low, the moral sensitivity of teenagers is high; on the contrary, if the exposure to violent online games is high, the moral sensitivity of teenagers is low.

### 3.2.2. Mental Health Issues Caused by Cyberbullying

With the rapid development of technology, the Internet has become an important medium for young people in this area to connect with each other. Therefore, bullying may not only happen in school, but also on the Internet. Cyberbullying refers to any behavior of an individual or group that repeatedly disseminates hostile or offensive information through electronic or digital media with the intention of causing harm or discomfort to others [10]. In addition, cyberbullying is more persistent and hidden, so it may cause more serious harm to teenagers. During the adolescent period, the individual's cognition is still in the development stage, and the ability to distinguish right from wrong is weak. For their part, bullies may not realize that their actions are wrong. At the same time, some adolescents may also be influenced by other peers to engage in bullying behavior. Therefore, bullying itself is bad behavior that occurs at a high rate during adolescence.

Teenagers are at a more emotionally sensitive stage, so they are more likely to experience negative emotions such as depression if they are cyberbullied. In addition, adolescent individuals may be reluctant to communicate with their parents because of their desire for independence, so the negative emotions generated by bullying cannot be well dealt with. Previous studies have shown that adolescents who are subjected to cyberbullying have more severe depression, and lower subjective well-being and family support compared with other peers [11-12].

## 4. Discussion

As for the positive influence brought by the Internet, teachers and parents should give correct guidance to teenagers, so as to give full play to the positive influence of the Internet.

Teachers can assign assignments that require students to search for information online. The assignment of such tasks can exercise students' ability to acquire useful information on the network. At the same time, it can also let students know that the network is a good learning medium. In the future, they will seek help from the network when they do not understand problems or are interested in topics, so as to form a good learning habit. Besides, schools can set up some courses or lectures to educate students how to take advantage of online resources, which can make students learn the methods of searching information online systematically. Parents need to teach their children to use the Internet in a limited way. Now, it is the age of Internet development, and many teenagers will get information and communicate with the outside world through the Internet. If the Internet, a channel for teenagers to interact with the outside world, is completely closed, it may make teenagers feel difficult to integrate into their friends. But at the same time, it is also necessary to let young people learn to use the Internet moderately, not too addicted.

The Internet will also bring some negative effects to teenagers, and as teachers and parents, it is their responsibility to avoid these negative effects. As for the negative influence of Internet on teenagers' moral cognition, teachers and parents should pay attention to convey correct values to teenagers. The Internet environment is full of a lot of bad information, we cannot let teenagers completely shield from these kinds of information. However, we can improve the ability of young people to distinguish right from wrong, so that they can effectively identify bad information and not be misled by it. As for the negative impact of Internet violence on teenagers' depression, first of all, teachers and parents can give teenagers more psychological support to make them feel a stronger sense of security. Previous studies have shown that social support from family and teachers reduces the possibility of depression and anxiety symptoms. A higher level of social support from the family

increases the possibility of a higher level of subjective well-being of adolescents [12]. Secondly, teachers and parents can also help adolescents establish growth mindset, so that adolescents can realize the variability of things and that they are capable of changing the current situation. Previous studies have shown that a growth mindset can significantly alleviate the negative impact of cyberbullying on depression [11].

## 5. Conclusion

Based on Kohlberg's moral theory and Erikson's development theory, this article analyzes the potential positive and negative influences of the Internet on the youth, and proposes some corresponding measures. In terms of positive influence, the Internet can provide teens with rich information, and an opportunity to express themselves. In addition, according to Erikson's theory, adolescents are eager to communicate with their peers, and the Internet is a good way to connect with their peers. Therefore, the Internet can also meet the needs of teenagers for communication and emotional catharsis, which may not be available in their families. Therefore, teachers and parents should use various means to encourage teenagers to use the Internet to search for information, communicate with others and show themselves. At the same time, they should also make demands on them and help them make rules so that they can learn to use the Internet in a limited way. In terms of negative effects, according to Kohlberg's moral theory, teenagers' moral level is still developing, and the information received at this stage will affect the development of moral cognition and the formation of values. Therefore, as teachers and parents, they should pass on correct values to teenagers and avoid the influence of bad information on them. In addition, adolescence is also a period of high incidence of cyberbullying. Teachers and parents should also communicate with teenagers and give them enough social support. At the same time, attention should be paid to cultivating teenagers' growth thinking, which will help them to relieve the harm caused by bullying. There are still some shortcomings in this study. First of all, this study theoretically analyzed the influence of the Internet on adolescents in the form of literature review, future research can use survey and other methods to verify some of the intervention methods proposed in this paper. Secondly, this study only selected two positive effects and two negative effects to focus on the analysis, but in fact, the impact of the Internet on adolescents is far more than this, and subsequent research can also use developmental psychology theory to analyze more effects.

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