

The Influence of Online Environment on Adolescent's Self-Expression

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Abstract:

The present study mainly aims to analyze the influence of the internet environment on teenagers' self-expression. The Belief in a Just World (BJW) was used to measure internet justice. The value of the self-expression scale measured how much teenagers like to express themselves on the internet. A total of 125 teenagers from 11 to 22 years old were measured. The acceptable reliability of this study was demonstrated by Cronbach's Alpha coefficients. Results indicated a significant positive correlation between perceptions of online fairness. The findings revealed a significant positive correlation between the teenagers' perceptions of the fairness of the online environment and their levels of self-expression. This suggests that young individuals who perceive the online environment to be more equitable and just are more inclined to express themselves openly and without restraint. Furthermore, the study underscores the crucial role that the creation and maintenance of equitable digital spaces play in fostering and encouraging healthy self-expression among young internet users.

Keywords: Self-expression; online environment; fairness online environment; adolescents.

1. Introduction

Adolescents' lives now revolve around online communities and the internet, which provide vital venues for self-expression, idea exchange, and identity building [1]. These online spaces let youngsters use their right to express themselves in many contexts. Recent research, however, implies that adolescents' tendency and degree of self-expression might be influenced by the characteristics of the online environment [2]. Particularly as the uncertainty and possible negative interactions online have made many adolescents feel

limited and cautious in expressing themselves, there has been increasing concern about teenagers' mental health and social behaviors in online environments over the past few years [3]. Even if social media gives young people a platform for self-expression, studies have shown that it may also have negative effects on them. For example, algorithmic recommender systems might give certain types of content great importance while overlooking others, therefore perhaps prohibiting the chance for self-expression. Moreover, young users may avoid expressing themselves online because of worries about cyberbully-

ing, incorrect information, and aggressive conflict. Considering those challenges, understanding how teenagers express themselves online has become an important issue we need to consider.

Teenage self-expression is expressed differently depending on the Internet's surroundings. First of all, many teens limit the substance and frequency of their self-expression due to unpleasant interactions and possible hazards on social media platforms, even though these platforms are sometimes meant to inspire teenagers to reveal personal elements of their lives [4]. Secondly, due to ambiguous commenting and feedback systems, teenagers may refrain from self-expression out of fear of negative feedback, which may increase social anxiety and reduce their willingness to express themselves [1].

Research on inequality in online environments has now begun to look at whether different groups have equal opportunities for social media self-expression. For instance, teenagers from various socioeconomic backgrounds might have varying access to online resources, therefore limiting part of their ability for self-expression. Moreover, the Belief in a Just World (BJW) idea holds that persons who see injustice in their surroundings might start to separate themselves from them, therefore weakening their potential for self-expression [5]. Although the online environment does not yet clearly show that it directly stifles teens' self-expression, it has been hypothesized that variations in these contexts might softly influence their expressive activities.

2. Current Study

With a focus on whether the internet environment has good or bad impacts, this study's main objective is to explore how online environments affect adolescents' self-expression. This research will investigate differences in self-expression frequency among teens from several backgrounds using quantitative analysis and data collecting to find how online unfairness can limit self-expression. The results seek to provide insights based on data for optimizing online settings and boosting adolescent self-expression education, which will enhance adolescents' online experience.

Inspired by the above literature, this study suggests the following hypothesis: Teenagers' self-expression may suffer in the online world from disparities. Based on the evidence of teenagers having unfavorable interactions in online environments, this hypothesis also hypothesizes the unequal impact of elements such as diverse socioeconomic origins and regional variations on teenagers' possibilities for expression. This study will adopt a quantitative approach to evaluate the expression tendencies of various

groups of teenagers in online environments, investigating whether there are any notable inequality factors in online environments and so investigating the effects of these elements on teenagers' self-expression to test this hypothesis.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The questionnaire link was published by Wenjuanxing, the most common data collection platform in China. Data were gathered from high school educators to provide a more diverse sample. Participants were informed that the questionnaire was solely for research purposes and that all responses would be valid. The data collection process was entirely voluntary and anonymous. A total of 125 participants were involved, specifically targeting teenagers aged 11 to 22. Participants who did not match the age requirements (those under 14 and those over 24) were eliminated, leaving 122 acceptable individuals for analysis. The sample comprised 61 males (48.8%) and 64 females (51.2%). The mean age of participants was 17 years ($M = 17.00$, $SD = 2.00$), with ages spanning from 11 to 22 years.

3.2 Measures

The questionnaire included gender, age range, perception of fairness on the Internet, and willingness to self-express on the Internet. Subjects filled in basic information directly, including gender and age range.

3.2.1 The Belief in a Just World (BJW)

The fairness of the online environment is measured using the Belief in a Just World (BJW) scale in Chinese. These subscales can be used together or separately because they have internal reliability and external validity. The Belief in a Just World includes 8 items with a Linkert-7 point scale, where ratings range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicate that they think online environment justice. The reliability of the scale was good ($\alpha = 0.93$).

3.2.2 The value of the self-expression scale (VSE)

Regarding previous studies, Kim and Sherman's Voluntary Self-Expression Scale (VSE) was used in Chinese to measure adolescents' willingness to self-express in the sample [6]. A total of 11 items were scored on a Linkert-7-point scale, and the total score was calculated by adding up the scores of the older items. Higher scores indicate higher levels of self-expression. Scores 1, 3, and 6 are reversed, with lower scores indicating lower levels of self-expression. The reliability of the scale was acceptable ($\alpha = 0.61$).

3.3 Data Analysis

It was hypothesized that inequality in the online environment was associated with adolescents' self-expression. Specifically, inequality in the online environment was positively correlated with adolescents' unwillingness to express themselves. Descriptive statistics of the research variables were performed using SPSS to verify the hypothesis. Cronbac's alpha was calculated to measure the internal reliability of each measure based on the cutoff level [7]. The Pearson correlation index was used to estimate the strength of the association between the variables. Based on the correlation, self-expression was set as the dependent variable and the online environment as the independent variable. A linear regression was established to

explore the relationship between the factors in depth.

4. Results

4.1 Correlation Analysis

According to the correlation analysis result (Table 1), there is no significant correlation between Age and Online Justice, age and expression, gender and online environment, or gender and expression. Fairness in the online environment and expression showed a positive significant correlation. In other words, the fairer online environment is, the more teenagers are likely to express themselves.

Table 1. Pearson Correlation Coefficients of Main Varibels

Variables	1	2	3	4
1 Age	-			
2 Gender	-0.41***	-		
3 Fairness of Online Environment	-0.02	-0.02	-	
4 Self-Expression	0.07	-0.11	0.67***	-
Notes: *** $p < 0.001$.				

4.2 Regression Analyze

Taking online justice as the independent variable and self-expression as the dependent variable, a linear regression analysis was conducted. According to the results, the standardized regression coefficient of online justice was 0.67 ($t = 9.93, p < 0.001$), indicating that online justice

had a positive and significant impact on self-expression. This means that higher perceptions of online justice lead to higher levels of self-expression among participants. With a Beta value of 0.667, online justice is shown to be an important predictor of self-expression. Thus, on-line justice plays a significant positive role in enhancing self-expression (see Table 2).

Table 2. Regression of Self-Expression on Fairness of Online Environment

	B	SE	β	t	p
Fairness of Online Environment	0.32	0.03	0.67	9.93	< 0.001

5. Discussion

5.1 Revisiting the Hypothesis and Study Findings

The initial theory presented was that teenagers' desire to express themselves would drop in response to recognized online fairness declining. Put another way, teenagers who believe that the internet is an unjust place would be less willing to express themselves freely. This research indirectly supports the idea that online justice and self-expression have an advantageous correlation by indicating that teenagers in fairer online surroundings are really more prone to express themselves. Though correlation shows

the relationship, it does not prove causality, and therefore, it is important to realize. Although this positive correlation indicates that adolescents who see a fairer online environment are more expressive, we cannot definitely say that an increase in perceived fairness immediately leads to a decrease in self-expression. Although it is difficult to prove causality, the favorable correlation shown in this research offers insightful analysis of how views of justice might affect teenage conduct in virtual environments. For adolescents, a fair internet environment probably creates a helpful setting for self-expression. This means that expressing themselves could decline in line with a declining sense of justice. This is consistent with the theory as it

suggests that teenagers' views of fairness and equality directly affect their readiness to express themselves; so, perceived unfairness might deter them from freely expressing their ideas, beliefs, or identities online. Therefore, this result confirms a theoretical relationship between perceived justice and adolescents' self-expression, even if we cannot prove causality.

5.2 Theoretical Context and Support from Existing Literature

The correlation between online fairness and self-expression matches the present research on teenage behavior in digital environments. Previous studies confirm that adolescents who live in surroundings seen as fair and helpful are more open and honest. García in illustration, discovered that adolescents are more likely to express themselves freely in environments they believe to be fair and inclusive; lack of felt fairness could cause withdrawal since teenagers believe the online environment does not sufficiently support or value their self-expression [2]. In support of this, Valkenburg and Peter underline how perceived fairness in online contacts might promote psychological safety as a necessary condition for adolescents to express themselves honestly and confidently [8].

Moreover, studies by Livingstone and Boyd show that increasing disclosure among teenagers depends critically on fairness and support in digital environments [2, 9]. Livingstone discovered that teenagers who see their surroundings as encouraging are more ready to take chances in expressing their ideas [9]. When adolescents come into conflict, cyberbullying, or what they consider unfairness, on the other hand, they could retreat or restrict themselves to prevent possible injury or judgment [10]. This is associated with the Belief in a Just World (BJW) idea, which holds that people who see their surroundings as unfair often separate from them []. Teenagers who feel that their online environment is unjust may so cut their self-expression in order to be self-protected.

Additionally affecting self-expression is the fact that research on unfairness in online environments has shown that access to and involvement in digital environments are not always fair. For instance, teenagers from different backgrounds and income levels might have differing degrees of access to internet resources, therefore limiting part of their capacity to freely express themselves. The difference implies that a fair and inclusive online environment might enable adolescents to express themselves without regard to criticism or rejection, therefore enabling them. Likewise, Davis discovered that teenagers are more inclined to provide personal information when they have a feeling of belonging and support in their online communi-

ties, which may be promoted by justice and inclusiveness [11].

Studies by Staksrud and Livingstone emphasize even more the need for fairness to create a psychologically secure online environment [12]. Adolescents who live in a supportive online environment are more likely to express themselves truthfully and less likely to develop anxiety about social situations. This is also evident in Lerner's BJW theory, which holds that beneficial conduct and participation in one's surroundings depend on a feeling of justice there [5]. Therefore, even if the results of this research show a simple correlation, the advantageous correlation between belief in fairness and self-expression shows that fairness is probably an essential aspect of true interaction.

5.3 Influence of Age and Cognitive Development on Perceptions of Fairness

It is also important to consider that adolescents' perceptions of online fairness may be shaped by their age and cognitive development. Younger adolescents with limited experience and understanding of complex social dynamics may be more likely to perceive the online environment as fair compared to older adolescents or adults. Developmental research suggests that adolescents' ability to evaluate fairness and justice is still maturing, which could affect their interpretations of interactions and policies in online spaces. As their cognitive and social reasoning skills develop, they may start to recognize biases or inequalities that were previously unnoticed, potentially altering their sense of online justice over time. This developmental perspective implies that the observed positive correlation between perceived fairness and self-expression may partly reflect younger adolescents' limited awareness of online injustices. Future research could explore how age and cognitive maturity influence perceptions of fairness and self-expression, providing a more nuanced understanding of how these factors interact in digital environments.

6. Limitations

Although the results of this study confirmed the hypothesis, some limitations need to be considered when discussing the result. The most important limitation is that the data are correlational, meaning that while a relationship between the online environment and self-expression is evident, a causal relationship cannot be determined. By tracking teenagers' opinions of justice in the online world and their self-expressive activities over time, a longitudinal study design could help to overcome this restriction and enable researchers to detect any causal impacts.

Another limitation of this study is its focus on adoles-

cents in China, where historical and cultural factors may uniquely shape perceptions of online fairness and self-expression. Chinese culture and societal expectations, particularly with regard to the emphasis on social harmony and community values, may influence teens' readiness to express themselves online and their idea of justice in the digital environment. Its context-specific focus limits its relevance to youth in other societies, where individuality may affect fairness and self-expression opinions. Cross-cultural studies might look at these connections to help one better grasp how cultural factors shape youngsters' digital experiences and behaviors.

Additionally, fairness in the online environment is not the only factor that affects adolescents' self-expression, and this study did not explore other factors that may contribute to the relationship between online environments and self-expression, such as adolescents having strong support network social support or peer influence. Adolescents with strong support networks may feel encouraged to express themselves online even if they perceive the online environment as unfair. Future research might investigate these putative mediators at some point in order to have a more complex awareness of the ways in which justice in the online world affects self-expression.

7. Conclusion

This study examined the impact of the online environment on teenagers' self-expression, focusing on how perceptions of fairness affect their willingness to share online. The findings show a positive relationship between perceived online justice and self-expression, suggesting that adolescents who view the online environment as fair are more likely to express themselves openly. This highlights the importance of creating equitable online spaces that encourage teenagers to engage and share their identities.

However, the cross-sectional nature of the study limits its ability to establish causation. Future research could explore the long-term effects of perceived fairness and include factors like peer influence and cultural context for a more comprehensive understanding. Overall, promoting a just and inclusive online environment can play a critical

role in supporting adolescent self-expression, contributing to healthier and more positive digital interactions.

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