Proceedings of ICEIPI 2025 Symposium: AI Am Ready: Artificial Intelligence as Pedagogical Scaffold
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.CB25779

The Impact of Online Socializing on Teenagers' Real-Life Social Fear: Evidence from Post-00s Generation

Yuhao Wang

School of Environmental Studies, China University of Geosciences, Wuhan, China
dami_040603@qq.com

Abstract. With the popularity of the Internet and smart mobile terminals, online socializing has gradually become an indispensable communication method for the new generation of teenagers. Against the backdrop of rising social anxiety and perceived social support needs, although the popularity of online social networking provides adolescents with new ways to express themselves and seek identity, it also brings problems such as weakening of social abilities and alienation of real relationships. Using the documentary Post-00s Generation as the analytical sample, this study integrates case analysis with a literature review to examine how online social interaction simultaneously impacts adolescents' social anxiety in real-life contexts and their perceived social support. The results show that although online platforms provide teenagers with convenient means of communication, which can reduce loneliness and enhance social identity, they may also contribute to the decline of in-person social skills and the intensification of social anxiety. In addressing these challenges, real-world support systems, from families, peers, and schools, are vital to adolescent development.

Keywords: Online socializing, Teenagers, Perceived social support, Social anxiety, Post-00s Generation documentary

1. Introduction

The rapid growth of digital technology has made online socializing a central aspect of adolescent life, drawing increasing attention from the fields of education, psychology, and communication studies. Social media platforms and online communities have not only reshaped how teenagers access information and express themselves but also influenced their mental health, perceived social support, and offline social skills [1]. Online interaction can ease loneliness and foster a sense of connection, but it may also impair face-to-face communication and increase social anxiety. Most existing research is based on Western contexts, with limited evidence from China. In particular, the relationship between online interaction, real-life social anxiety, and perceived support remains underexplored in studies grounded in Chinese adolescents' lived experiences. As such, the study takes typical cases presented in the documentary Post-00s Generation as its analytical foundation, integrating relevant research findings to investigate the dual impact of online social interaction on adolescents' real-life social anxiety and perceived social support. In addition, it explores how online interaction, within a social environment where the virtual and the real are intertwined, can both facilitate emotional connection and pose potential psychological risks. And it also analyzes the role

© 2026 The Authors. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.CB25779

of real-world support systems in moderating these effects. By enriching empirical research in the Chinese context and providing practical guidance for families, schools, and social institutions, this study deepens our understanding of how online socialization affects adolescents.

2. Theoretical background and case foundation

2.1. Key concepts of social anxiety and perceived social support

Both social anxiety and perceived support strongly influence adolescents' online engagement. In particular, social anxiety involves tension and avoidance due to fear of negative evaluation, while perceived support reflects feeling understood and backed by family, peers, or social groups [2,3]. These constructs influence not only adolescents' motivations for using online platforms but also the outcomes of such use. Studies show that adolescents with high social anxiety often turn to online communication to avoid real-life pressures, which may deepen social withdrawal and reinforce the cycle [2]. This is supported by a strong link between loneliness, social anxiety, and problematic internet use [4]. Perceived social support moderates this dynamic by reducing psychological distress in stressful situations, according to the buffering hypothesis [3]. Although online social support may contribute to mood regulation, its limited emotional depth and inconsistency make it a less effective substitute for offline support [5]. Moreover, it was found that strong family and school support can significantly reduce adolescents' internet dependence and enhance their mental health and social adaptability [6].

2.2. The presentation of the documentary Post-00s generation

To further explore how online social interaction shapes adolescent development, the documentary Post-00s Generation offers rich empirical material and representative case narratives. Filmed over twelve years since 2006, it follows the developmental trajectories of eighteen adolescents from diverse regional and familial backgrounds, from kindergarten to high school. This documentary serves as a valuable case for analysis due to its extended tracking design and grounded realism. Its twelve-year continuous filming provides coherent and in-depth empirical material for understanding the social adaptation and psychological changes of adolescents in China's rapidly evolving online environment [7]. It captures how digital-native youth navigate the intersecting influences of family, school, and the internet, reflecting their struggles, behavioral shifts, and social support needs across different developmental stages. In addition to its temporal depth, Post-00s is notable for its diversity. This diversity in personality, socioeconomic status, and regional origin allows the documentary to capture the multifaceted realities of Chinese youth in a rapidly changing society. And it enriches theoretical inquiry into adolescent development and simultaneously reveals broader structural issues in youth socialization under digital conditions. More importantly, Post-00s shows how virtual and real social environments together shape adolescent development. By highlighting internet-driven shifts in interaction, it underscores the need for offline support for healthy development.

2.3. The manifestations of online social behaviors in adolescent development

The impact of online social interaction on adolescent development is multifaceted, fostering growth in some areas such as social skills and identity formation, while potentially disrupting emotional well-being and real-world adaptation. Numerous studies have investigated these dynamics through empirical and theoretical approaches. Early research indicates that online platforms like Facebook and MySpace strengthen adolescents' existing peer connections and facilitate new relationships,

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.CB25779

thereby broadening their social networks and enhancing interpersonal skills [8]. In addition, online communication has been shown to enhance adolescents' ability to express themselves and explore their identities. This effect is explained by the "stimulation-alternative hypothesis," which suggests that digital interaction can fill gaps in real-life social resources [9]. Besides, online platforms help regulate emotions and relieve stress, but their limited depth makes offline ties crucial [5]. Despite its benefits, online social behavior carries psychological risks, as loneliness and social anxiety are strongly associated with problematic internet use, particularly those who lack meaningful offline social engagement [4]. Such individuals tend to rely excessively on digital interaction, often at the expense of their real-world social functioning. Besides, frequent social media use is linked to higher anxiety and identity confusion [10]. And in China, while online engagement expands social circles, overuse can undermine adaptability and offline communication skills [11].

3. The impact of online social interaction on real-life social anxiety: case studies

3.1. The case of Wu Yishu: from social terror to self-confidence

The case of Wu Yishu illustrates the dynamics of social compensation in adolescence, where online interaction temporarily offsets real-world anxiety but requires offline support to foster long-term growth. Featured in Post-00s Generation, she initially relied heavily on platforms like QQ groups to communicate with peers, finding it easier to express emotions and receive affirmation in digital spaces. By interacting online, she was able to articulate her feelings with greater ease, which in turn led to quicker recognition and feedback from classmates. In contrast, she often showed signs of social anxiety in face-to-face settings, experiencing nervousness during public speaking and group activities. Her reliance on online interaction exemplifies the social compensation hypothesis, where offline social limitations are offset by the perceived safety and affirmation of digital spaces [9]. The preference for online communication among socially anxious adolescents can be attributed to the perceived benefits of emotional safety, autonomy, and reduced social threat [4]. However, research also warns that long-term dependence on such communication may exacerbate offline social deficits, hindering real-world functioning over time [12]. Empowered by her mother's ongoing guidance, Wu began transitioning from digital reliance to active participation in offline interactions. Through consistent real-world group interactions, she gradually gained emotional security and belonging, leading to less social anxiety and greater support. This aligns with findings that parental emotional support fosters adolescents' self-efficacy, social confidence, and connectedness [13].

3.2. The case of Chen Qiyuan: escape from online to offline return

Unlike Wu Yishu's gradual transition from digital reliance, Chen Qiyuan's case reveals a reactive withdrawal into digital spaces, triggered by acute interpersonal setbacks and academic stress. In response to interpersonal conflict and declining academic performance, he sought refuge in digital media. While this behavior offered temporary emotional relief, it exemplifies avoidance coping that ultimately reinforces underlying distress. Though such behaviors offered short-term relief, they did not resolve the core issues of social anxiety and isolation. Under the continued support of his father and teacher, Chen transitioned back into offline social life, engaging in collaborative activities that helped restore his peer relationships. This transition marked a process of emotional repair and reconnection with real-life social support, leading to significant improvement in his communication and coping skills. His recovery process illustrates how cognitive-behavioral approaches, such as social skills and problem-solving training, can facilitate emotional regulation by encouraging direct

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.CB25779

engagement with social challenges. Previous research demonstrated that actively expressing distress and receiving consistent support from adults or peers can enhance adolescents' self-efficacy and reduce avoidant behavior [4]. Moreover, studies highlight that realistic interpersonal feedback and a sense of belonging are central to repairing social fear and restoring adaptive functioning [14]. In contrast to Wu Yishu's gradual self-driven adjustment supported by emotional guidance, Chen's case reflects a reactive withdrawal triggered by situational setbacks, with recovery dependent on structured external intervention. Though shaped by different triggers and recovery paths, both cases illustrate a consistent dynamic in adolescent development, in which online escape emerges as a response to social stress, and real-world support plays a key role in facilitating healthy reintegration.

3.3. Peer group: social dependence, real-life alienation and relational guidance

The peer dynamics observed in Post-00s Generation reveal how adolescents' excessive reliance on online communication can contribute to reduced engagement in real-life interactions. Many students are active in digital peer groups such as WeChat, yet show noticeable reticence during offline group tasks and social settings. The shift from online engagement to offline withdrawal illustrates more than individual struggle; it highlights the amplifying role of peer dynamics in reinforcing or weakening adolescents' real-world social abilities. Within adolescent communities, both positive and negative social climates tend to be quickly reinforced, amplifying patterns of engagement or withdrawal. To address this alienation and rebuild authentic social bonds, schools and teachers have introduced structured group activities, including collaborative learning tasks, open class meetings, themed group games, and campus-based social practice. These initiatives create spaces for shared goals and interpersonal contact, enhancing student participation and fostering a stronger sense of classroom cohesion. Research suggests that peer-based activities significantly enhance adolescents' social competence and sense of belonging, while teacher facilitation provides critical emotional modeling and reinforces inclusive social norms [12,13].

4. The mechanism of online social interaction on teenagers' perceived social support

4.1. The virtual support and emotional comfort brought by online socializing

Online social interaction offers adolescents accessible channels for emotional expression and virtual support, and a growing body of research highlights its potential to reduce loneliness, broaden social networks, and fulfill emotional needs. Studies have shown that moderate engagement with digital platforms can enhance adolescents' sense of social connectedness, boosting emotional well-being and self-worth [9]. For adolescents with limited offline support or introverted tendencies, prompt responses from online peers can offer valuable psychological reassurance [12]. Nevertheless, virtual support has notable limitations, often lacking the trust, depth, and emotional connection found in face-to-face interactions, especially during periods of crisis or prolonged stress. Overdependence on online communication may contribute to social withdrawal, weakening real-life relationships and amplifying feelings of isolation. This phenomenon has been described as the "online warmth-offline detachment" effect, where adolescents exhibit social engagement in digital settings while remaining withdrawn in face-to-face contexts [4]. Furthermore, the impact of virtual support varies markedly across adolescent subgroups. For socially anxious or marginalized individuals, online interaction may serve as a protective buffer, encouraging gradual reentry into offline engagement. In contrast, adolescents with strong offline support may feel less motivated for face-to-face interaction when immersed in online spaces [15]. When real-world ties are weak, adolescents often rely more on the

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.CB25779

digital world, which can increase detachment and dependence, whereas strong offline support helps build resilience [14].

4.2. The irreplaceability of real interaction in deep social support

Emotional intimacy and trust in adolescence develop best through real-life interaction, which offers nonverbal cues, emotional resonance, and immediate feedback essential for authentic social bonds. Studies show that in-person friendships enhance adolescents' sense of belonging, self-esteem, and psychological security more effectively than digital interactions , and better regulate stress, prevent mental health issues, and promote overall social development [13,16]. The documentary Post-00s Generation reflects this through the experiences of Wu Yishu and Chen Qiyuan. Encouraged by her mother, Wu Yishu engaged in class discussions and collaborative tasks, where she received genuine recognition and support from peers, gradually overcoming earlier social anxiety. Similarly, group activities and peer engagement helped Chen Qiyuan regain social confidence and emotional security, offsetting the effects of his earlier online withdrawal. In contrast, while virtual interaction can offer temporary emotional comfort, it often lacks the depth and sustained support of offline relationships. It has been found that adolescents tend to trust face-to-face relationships more, as online ties often do not offer the stability and consistency needed during crises or important stages of growth [12]. Thus, real-world interaction remains essential not only for fostering lasting trust and emotional security but for strengthening adolescents' overall social and psychological resilience.

4.3. The moderating role of real support systems such as families and teachers

Through emotional reinforcement and guidance, families and schools actively support adolescents in coping with social challenges and building interpersonal confidence. Within families, emotional presence, unconditional acceptance, and positive reinforcement help cultivate self-confidence and self-efficacy, while mitigating the impact of negative emotions [13]. In parallel, teachers contribute to adolescent well-being by fostering inclusive classroom climates, facilitating collaborative activities, and offering consistent emotional feedback [14]. In Post-00s Generation, these dynamics are vividly illustrated. When Wu experienced social discomfort, her mother provided empathetic listening and encouraged her to engage in offline peer interaction, gradually strengthening her sense of emotional security and social capability. Similarly, Chen received instrumental support from both his father and teacher. Through emotional guidance and structured group involvement, he was able to confront interpersonal tension, rebuild trust, and recover prosocial behaviors. These interventions created a psychologically safe environment and activated the adolescents' internal coping resources. Empirical research supports the critical influence of such real-life interventions. Parental empathy and teacher attentiveness have been shown to enhance adolescents' feelings of trust and social belonging [13]. Besides, school-based intervention programs show that teacher-led group activities significantly reduce social isolation and reinforce adolescent self-esteem [14]. To maintain mental well-being and ease the shift between online and offline social contexts, adolescents rely on key forms of support like emotional reassurance, empathetic role models, and practical social resources.

5. Integration and intervention strategies for online and offline social interaction

The effective promotion of adolescent social development relies on the interaction between online and offline engagement. Although digital platforms expand opportunities for communication and self-expression, face-to-face interaction remains key to building trust and emotional intimacy. Thus,

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.CB25779

balancing these two approaches helps strengthen social bonds and promote mental health. As such, schools, families, and communities have widely adopted practical programs, often using the model of "online guidance and offline implementation." Specifically, teachers or parents assist adolescents in forming online interest groups, which are then transformed into real-life interactions via campus activities or offline gatherings, hence deepening friendships and social relationships [12]. Moreover, measures like limiting screen time, establishing "offline days," and encouraging family engagement in real-life activities can help reduce reliance on digital devices and boost social skills [9]. Besides, social skills training coupled with reflective learning has also proven effective. Specifically, schools guide adolescents to manage emotions and resolve conflicts in both digital and physical contexts via communication courses and peer sharing, boosting confidence and supporting skill transfer [14]. Such efforts require coordination across multiple parties, with educational institutions offering more offline practice opportunities, parents playing a key role in emotional support and guidance, and society strengthening online literacy education and mental health services. Within this framework, training for teachers and parents becomes essential, enabling them to identify potential risks early and take timely action.

6. Conclusion

Using documentary case analysis, this study investigates the dual impact of online social interaction on the developmental trajectories of adolescents. In particular, it provides convenient channels for emotional communication and access to social support. Furthermore, it may lead to a decline in real-world social skills and an increase in social anxiety. In this context, a multidimensional support system involving families, schools, and society plays a crucial role in helping adolescents achieve a balance between online and offline social interaction and enhancing their overall social adaptability. It is important to note that although this study offers valuable empirical insights through richly contextualized case analysis, the sample is relatively limited, focusing primarily on the post-2000 generation in China. Thus, the external validity of the findings remains to be tested across broader populations and cultural contexts. Future research should expand samples and methods to better explore online-offline social interactions, and foster family, school, and social support to promote adolescents' healthy development.

References

[1] Wang, L. and Chen, H. (2020). The impact of online social interaction on adolescents' social skills and mental health. Psychological Development and Education, 36(6), 645-652.
[2] Prizant-Passal, S., Shechner, T. and Aderka, I.M. (2016). Social anxiety and internet use-A meta-analysis: What do we know? What are we missing? Computers in Human Behavior, 62, 221-229.
[3] Cohen, S. and Wills, T.A. (1985). Stress, social support, and the buffering hypothesis. Psychological Bulletin, 98(2), 310-357.
[4] Caplan, S.E. (2007). Relations among loneliness, social anxiety, and problematic Internet use. CyberPsychology & Behavior, 10(2), 234-242.
[5] Frison, E. and Eggermont, S. (2015). The impact of daily stress on adolescents' depressed mood: The role of social support seeking through Facebook. Computers in Human Behavior, 44, 315-325.
[6] Lin, M. (2021). The role of family and school support in reducing internet addiction among adolescents. Psychiatry Research, 299, 113859.
[7] Zhang, T., et al. (2019). The "Zero Zero Generation": A long-term observation on Chinese post-2000 children. Beijing Normal University Documentary Center.
[8] Subrahmanyam, K., Reich, S.M., Waechter, N. and Espinoza, G. (2008). Online and offline social networks: Use of social networking sites by emerging adults. Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 29(6), 420-433.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.CB25779

[9] Valkenburg, P.M. and Peter, J. (2011). Online communication and adolescent well-being: Testing the stimulation versus the displacement hypothesis. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 16(2), 200-209.
[10] Vannucci, A., Flannery, K.M. and Ohannessian, C.M. (2017). Social media use and anxiety in emerging adults. Journal of Affective Disorders, 207, 163-166.
[11] Zhuo, L.F. and Wang, X.Y. (2008). Adolescent's internet use and social adaptation ability. Chinese Journal of Public Health, 24(3), 292-293.
[12] Reich, S.M., Subrahmanyam, K. and Espinoza, G. (2012). Friending, IMing, and hanging out face-to-face: Overlap in adolescents' online and offline social networks. Developmental Psychology, 48(2), 356-368.
[13] Wentzel, K.R., McNamara Barry, C. and Caldwell, K.A. (2004). Friendships in middle school: Influences on motivation and school adjustment. Journal of Educational Psychology, 96(2), 195-203.
[14] Best, P., Manktelow, R. and Taylor, B. (2014). Online communication, social media and adolescent wellbeing: A systematic narrative review. Children and Youth Services Review, 41, 27-36.
[15] Subrahmanyam, K. and Šmahel, D. (2011). Digital youth: The role of media in development. Springer Science & Business Media.
[16] Odgers, C.L. and Jensen, M.R. (2020). Annual research review: Adolescent mental health in the digital age: Facts, fears, and future directions. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 61(3), 336-348.