

Online self-disclosure and well-being among Vietnamese adolescents: online social support as a mediator

Hung Thanh Nguyen and Thi Truc Quynh Ho

Abstract

Purpose – Online self-disclosure and online social support have important effects on well-being. The purpose of this study was to examine the indirect effect of online social support through social networking sites (SNSs) in the link between online self-disclosure through SNSs and well-being among Vietnamese adolescents.

Design/methodology/approach – Using a convenience sample of 980 Vietnamese adolescents (332 men, 648 women) and three scales (the Subjective Happiness Scale, the Self-Disclosure Scale and the Two-Way Social Support Scale), this study investigated whether online self-disclosure has a direct and indirect effects on well-being when mediated by online social support.

Findings – Mediation analysis showed that online social support partially mediated the link between online self-disclosure and well-being among Vietnamese adolescents, $\beta = 0.008$, standard error = 0.004, confidence interval = [0.001, 0.017].

Originality/value – This study provides an important practical basis for developing interventions to improve the well-being of adolescents who use SNSs. This finding indicated that adolescents' well-being can be enhanced through online self-disclosure and online social support.

Keywords Online self-disclosure, Well-being, Online social support, Vietnamese adolescents, Mediator

Paper type Research paper

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1. Introduction

Self-disclosure is defined as the act of one who reveals information about herself or himself to others (Yang *et al.*, 2019). In other words, self-disclosure is the process by which a person makes others aware of himself or herself (Aharony, 2016). With the growth of social media, especially social networking sites (SNSs), online self-disclosure is becoming more and more popular (Luo and Hancock, 2020). In this paper, online self-disclosure can be defined as a process of providing personal information to others through SNSs (e.g. Facebook, Zalo, Wechat, Instagram). In Vietnam, there are about 30 million internet users, of which 87.5% of users have been using SNSs, and most of them are young people (Huong, 2018). The percentage of adolescents using Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Zalo is 87.3%, 56.3%, 24.5% and 10.0%, respectively (Huong, 2018). These are SNSs with many utilities that can meet the connection – communication needs, information search needs, learning needs, entertainment needs... of Vietnamese adolescents.

On SNSs, users can online self-disclosure by providing information on their personal profiles and sharing personal content via posts (Ostendorf *et al.*, 2020). Online self-disclosure differs in multiple dimensions, usually divided into quality (e.g. valence, accuracy and intention) or quantity (e.g. duration, frequency, depth) (Luo and Hancock, 2020).

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Data availability statement: Research data are not shared.

Self-disclosure of one's experiences, thoughts and feelings to others can facilitate the development of social relationships both in online and offline contexts (Tamir and Mitchell, 2012).

According to Diener *et al.* (2003), well-being is an umbrella concept that covers cognitive and affective aspects of the evaluation of one's life. In the offline context, the link between self-disclosure and well-being has been proven (Sloan, 2010). According to Sloan (2010), self-disclosure to people around them not only helps individuals improve their social relationships but also enhances their psychological well-being. Similarly, in the online context, online self-disclosure was found to be associated with well-being (Luo and Hancock, 2020). Online self-disclosure can increase interpersonal intimacy, enhancing feelings of interpersonal connection, which, in turn, can improve well-being (Bazarova, 2012; Utz, 2015). According to some researchers, when individuals share their problems with others during times of stress, they get help from others. And then, the support the individual receive has significant benefits to their health and well-being (Uchino *et al.*, 1996). Thus, individuals with higher levels of online self-disclosure may report higher levels of well-being. Unlike previous studies, Lee *et al.* (2013) reported that online self-disclosure has no direct effect on well-being; however, online self-disclosure can impact well-being through online social support. In addition to the positive effects on well-being, online self-disclosure can lead to some potential risks (e.g. cyber stalking, cyber-bullying and cyber-harassment) (Aizenkot, 2020) and thus can negatively affect well-being (Tsitsika *et al.*, 2015).

1.1 Online social support as a mediator

Social support talks about social benefits (e.g. instrumental, informational and emotional support) that individuals perceive, express and derive from their interactions with others (Luo and Hancock, 2020). Online self-disclosure was found to be associated with online social support (Lee *et al.*, 2013; Utz and Breuer, 2017). According to some researchers, individuals with high levels of online self-disclosure are often more interested in bridging, linking, maintaining social capital and online social support (Lee *et al.*, 2013). Exposure to self-disclosure leading people to disclose each other, which further leads to the development of trust and relationships (Mohan Masaviru, 2016; Holtz and Kanthawala, 2020). Individuals can establish and maintain successful and supportive relationships only when they express their feelings and thoughts to the communicator (Trepte *et al.*, 2018). In addition, self-disclosure induces cognitive, emotional and behavioral responses from the discloser and the recipient of the disclosure (Holtz and Kanthawala, 2020). Therefore, the more self-disclosure, the closer the relationship between the revealer and the recipient will be, and the relationship will develop. As a result, the higher the self-disclosure, the higher the social support (Lee *et al.*, 2013; Utz and Breuer, 2017).

Social support provides individuals with a sense of self-worth, acceptance and appropriate responses. It is seen as an individual protective factor against stressful events (Cohen and Wills, 1985). Social support can reduce negative effects, depression level and increase life satisfaction (Cobo-Rendón *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, social support is important to well-being (Diener *et al.*, 2015; Chu *et al.*, 2010). Online social support is a type of online support. This is a type of social support intended to help individuals cope with a stressful event using external resources that come from virtual groups (Walter, 2018). According to Utz and Breuer (2017), individuals who use SNSs tend to report high levels of online social support. The number of friends on SNSs and getting advice from friend groups on SNSs increases the level of online social support, therefore, increases well-being. Furthermore, online social support is associated with stress coping and resilience (Chung *et al.*, 2014); meanwhile, resilience and stress coping was associated with mental health (Yoo, 2019; Wu *et al.*, 2020), life satisfaction (Buser and Kearney, 2017; Zheng *et al.*, 2020) and well-being (Harms *et al.*, 2018). Hence, previous studies have revealed that online social support is associated with

an increase in well-being (Lee *et al.*, 2013; Xavier and Wesley, 2018; Ali, 2020). As such, previous studies have confirmed the link between online self-disclosure and online social support (Lee *et al.*, 2013; Utz and Breuer, 2017), between online social support and well-being (Lee *et al.*, 2013; Xavier and Wesley, 2018; Ali, 2020). Furthermore, in Korea, a study by Lee *et al.* (2013) on college students reported that online self-disclosure has an indirect effect on well-being through online social support.

Although prior studies have accumulated significant knowledge, some issues have yet to be investigated. For example, although previous studies reported that online self-disclosure is related to well-being and online social support; online social support is related to well-being, but very few studies have examined the mediating role of online social support in the link between online self-disclosure and well-being among Vietnamese adolescents. In Vietnam, this is the first study to investigate the link between online self-disclosure and well-being, as well as the mediating role of online social support in this connection. To fill this research gap, the authors choose online social support as a mediator variable to explore the link between online self-disclosure and well-being among Vietnamese adolescents.

1.2 Research hypothesis

The purpose of this paper is to explore the mediating role of online social support on the link between online self-disclosure and well-being among Vietnamese adolescents. In this study, the authors expected that:

- H1. Online self-disclosure would be positively predicted well-being.
- H2. Online self-disclosure would be positively predicted online social support.
- H3. Online social support would be positively predicted well-being.
- H4. Online social support would mediate the link between online self-disclosure and well-being among Vietnamese adolescents.

2. Methods

2.1 Sample

Three high schools in the Southern of Vietnam were selected through convenient sampling in June and July 2021. The participants were 980 Vietnamese adolescents. The age range was 15–18 ($M = 16.39$, $SD = 0.592$). Of the participants, 332 (33.9%) were men and 648 (66.1%) were women. One hundred twenty-four of the participants attended 10th grade, 585 attended 11th grade and 271 attended 12th grade. At the end of the survey, each participant received a small gift worth VND 40,000. The authors confirm that the study was approved by high school principals and that all participants volunteered to participate in the survey.

2.2 Instruments

The Two-Way Social Support Scale (Shakespeare-Finch and Obst, 2011): this scale includes 20 items divided into two main aspects of support: emotional support and instrumental support. In this study, this study only used six items of the Two-Way Social Support Scale. Previous studies have used these six items to measure online social support (Lee *et al.*, 2013). A sample item was “On SNSs, someone makes me feel worthwhile.” Adolescents rated each item on a seven-point scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” (1 point) to “strongly agree” (7 point). Social support scores range from 6 to 42, and lower scores indicate lower levels of social support. Lee *et al.* (2013) reported that α coefficient of this measure was 0.88. The authors have adapted the online social support scale in the context of Vietnamese culture. Adaptation results show that the online social support scale has good reliability and validity [$\alpha = 0.918$; $\chi^2/\text{degrees of freedom (df)} = 4.130 (<5)$, root mean square errors of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.014 (<0.05), goodness of fit index (GFI) = 0.922, comparative fit

index (CFI) = 0.956, normed fit index = 0.943 (>0.90)]. In this study, the alpha coefficient for this measure was 0.909.

The Self-Disclosure Scale (Wheless and Grotz, 1976): the Self-Disclosure Scale is a self-report scale with 32 items divided into five dimensions: consciously intended disclosure, amount, honesty-accuracy, positive-negativeness and intimacy of the disclosure or control of the general depth. In our study, online self-disclosure was assessed by the three items of the Self-Disclosure Scale. Previous studies have used these three items to measure online self-disclosure (Lee et al., 2013), which are items adapted from the Self-Disclosure Scale. A sample item is “I fully reveal myself in my self-disclosure (on SNSs).” The Likert scale ranges from “strongly disagree” (1 point) to “strongly agree” (7 point). Self-disclosure scores range from 3 to 21, and lower scores indicate lower levels of self-disclosure. In the study of Lee et al. (2013), $\alpha = 0.91$. In this study, $\alpha = 0.738$.

The Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky and Lepper, 1999): the original version of the Subjective Happiness Scale consisted of four items based on a seven-point Likert scale that measured the participants’ subjective happiness. In our study, well-being was measured by three items of the Subjective Happiness Scale. Previous studies have used these three items to measure participants’ well-being (Lee et al., 2013). A sample item was “The conditions of my life are excellent.” Each item is answered on a seven-point Likert type scale ranging from “strongly disagree” (1 point) to “strongly agree” (7 point). Overall scores range from 3 to 21, and lower scores indicate lower levels of well-being. In the study of Lee et al. (2013), $\alpha = 0.82$. In this study, $\alpha = 0.902$.

2.3 Data analysis

First, the collected data was entered into Excel software. Second, the SPSS 20 and Amos 20.0 were used to analyze the reliability, and validity of the scales and calculate the mediation model fit indices. Third, use SPSS 20 to calculate the mean, standard deviation and correlation between research variables. Finally, the authors use Process Macro V.3.3 (Model 4) to analyze the mediating role of online social support. In mediation models, online self-disclosure is the X variable, well-being is the Y variable, online social support is the M variable and age is the control variable.

3. Findings

3.1 Preliminary analysis

According to Table 1, online self-disclosure was significantly positively correlated with well-being ($r = 0.257, p < 0.01$) and online social support ($r = 0.087, p < 0.01$). Online social support was significantly positively correlated with well-being ($r = 0.111, p < 0.01$).

3.2 Test of mediation model of online social support

Table 2 presents the fit indicators of the mediation model of online social support. According to Table 2, the mediation model indicated acceptable fit statistics $\chi^2/df = 4.97, CFI = 0.968, GFI = 0.953, Tucker-Lewis index = 0.958$ and $RMSEA = 0.064$.

Variables	<i>M</i> ± <i>SD</i>	1	2
1. Online self-disclosure	9.159 ± 3.623	–	–
2. Well-being	14.269 ± 4.605	0.257**	–
3. Online social support	23.514 ± 9.211	0.087**	0.111**

Notes: **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed)

Table 2 Model fit statistics

Indices	Reference standard (Hair et al., 2010)	Mediation model
χ^2/df	<5	4.97
GFI	>0.90	0.953
CFI	>0.80	0.968
TLI	>0.90	0.958
RMSEA	<0.08	0.064

The direct and indirect effects from online self-disclosure to well-being are shown in Table 3. Table 3 indicated that online self-disclosure positively predicted online social support $\beta = 0.087^{**}$, standard error (SE) = 0.081, CI = [0.062, 0.380]. Online social support positively predicted well-being $\beta = 0.090^{**}$, SE = 0.016, CI = [0.015, 0.075]. Online self-disclosure positively predicted well-being $\beta = 0.249^{***}$, SE = 0.039, CI = [0.240, 0.394]. The indirect effect from online self-disclosure to well-being through online social support was significant $\beta = 0.008$, SE = 0.004, CI = [0.001, 0.017]. These results demonstrated that online social support partially mediated the link between online self-disclosure and well-being (see Figure 1).

4. Discussion

This paper focuses on clarifying the mediating effect of online social support on the link between online self-disclosure and well-being among Vietnamese adolescents. Here are the findings of this study:

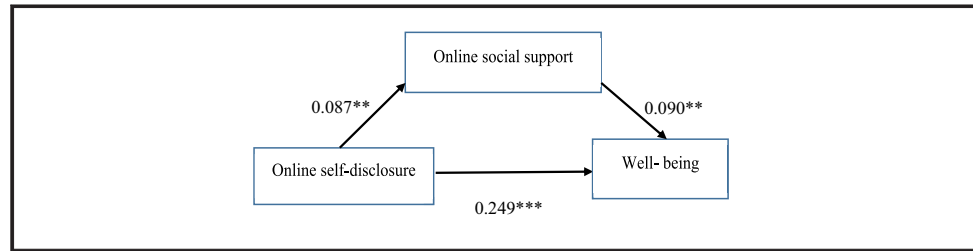
First, online self-disclosure had a positive effect on well-being among adolescents, which supports *H1*. This result is consistent with most previous studies (Bazarova, 2012; Utz, 2015; Luo and Hancock, 2020). The result implied that adolescents with higher levels of online self-disclosure have higher levels of well-being. Second, online self-disclosure was positively related to online social support among adolescents, which supports *H2*. This finding is consistent with previous studies (Lee et al., 2013; Utz and Breuer, 2017). Accordingly, when individuals express their feelings, moods and thoughts to others, they will have support from others. The higher the level of online self-disclosure, the higher the level of online social support. Third, in line with *H3*, this study found that online social support was positively related to well-being among adolescents. The result suggests that as the level of online social support increased, so did the individual's level of well-being (Lee et al., 2013; Xavier and Wesley., 2018; Ali, 2020). Fourth, this study found that online social support partially mediated the link between online self-disclosure and well-being among adolescents, which supports *H4*. This is the significant finding of our study. Previously, Lee et al. (2013) showed that online social

Table 3 Direct and indirect effects of online self-disclosure on well-being

Direct and indirect effects	β	SE	95% CI
<i>Direct effect</i>			
Online self-disclosure – Online social support	0.087**	0.081	[0.062, 0.380]
Online social support – Well-being	0.090**	0.016	[0.015, 0.075]
Online self-disclosure – Well-being	0.249***	0.039	[0.240, 0.394]
Age – Online social support	0.027	0.496	[-0.553, 1.393]
Age – Well-being			
<i>Indirect effect</i>			
Online self-disclosure – Online social support – Well-being	0.008	0.004	[0.001, 0.017]

Notes: ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$, CI: confidence interval

Figure 1 Mediation model of the indirect effect of online self-disclosure on well-being through online social support



support fully mediated the link between online self-disclosure and well-being. However, our research shows that online self-disclosure directly affects well-being and online self-disclosure affects well-being through online social support.

Based on previous studies, the authors explain the above results as follows: the fact that individuals express their feelings, moods and thoughts to friend groups on SNSs makes individuals' online relationships close and growing (Mohan Masaviru, 2016; Holtz and Kanthawala, 2020). As online relationships develop, individuals receive support (instrumental, informational and emotional) from virtual groups on SNSs (Trepte *et al.*, 2018). Through support from friend groups on SNSs, individuals can reduce negative emotions (Cobo-Rendón *et al.*, 2020) and increase well-being (Lee *et al.*, 2013; Xavier and Wesley, 2018).

5. Conclusion

This study examined the direct and indirect effects of online self-disclosures on well-being among Vietnamese adolescents. Research results have revealed that online self-disclosures not only directly affect well-being but also indirectly affect well-being through online social support. This is a new finding of this study compared to the study of Lee *et al.* (2013). The findings of this study confirm the role of online self-disclosures and online social support in enhancing adolescents' well-being. These findings may provide an important theoretical basis for developing interventions to improve the well-being of adolescents who use SNSs. Accordingly, interventions could focus on encouraging adolescents who use on SNSs to express their feelings, moods and thoughts to friends on SNSs. Through online self-disclosure, adolescents can enhance well-being and build strong and supportive relationships. On the other hand, interventions may focus on providing social skills (relationship building skills, relationship maintenance skills, communication skills and help-seeking skills) to adolescents. These skills help adolescents build strong and effective social support networks in both online and offline contexts.

Although this study has significant theoretical and practical implications, it also has certain limitations: First, this is a cross-sectional study using convenience sampling. Therefore, this study cannot infer causal relationships between online self-disclosure, online social support and well-being; it is not possible to determine the sampling error and draw conclusions for the population from the current sample results. Second, the use of self-reporting on online self-disclosure, online social support and well-being make research results highly dependent on adolescents' self-reported results. Third, the prevalence of men and women in the sample was not balanced, which may affect the results of the study. Therefore, longitudinal study design using probability sampling method is needed to further investigate the link between online self-disclosure, online social support and well-being. In this way, the researcher can also generalize the results of the sample to the population. In addition, a study having balanced mix of male and female adolescents should be considered for future studies.

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