Contemporary friendships of socially vulnerable youth: The role of communication technology in relationship quality

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The prevalence of internet-connected devices in everyday life means that social interactions now frequently take place online. However, for youth higher in social anxiety and loneliness it may be particularly important to examine distinctions between online and offline contexts of friendships. The current study sought to add to our understanding of friendships in the digital era, to explore the relationships between social anxiety, loneliness, and interactions with friends on friendship quality, and to examine the role of the primary context of interaction with friends (online, offline, or a mixture of both) in explaining these associations. A large sample of Australian young adults ($N = 687$; 59.8% female) who ranged in age from 17 to 25 years (Mage = 19.45, $SD = 2.07$) were included in the study. Of the sample, 95.9% reported having mixed-mode friends (friendships initiated offline and later maintained across online and offline contexts). A serial mediation model tested the effects of social anxiety on perceptions of friendship quality, through loneliness and the frequency of interacting with friends. The findings suggest that although social vulnerabilities can negatively influence relationship development and maintenance for young adults who interact with friends primarily in offline environments, or both online and offline, online environments may reduce the damaging effects of social vulnerability on friendship quality. These results provide a more nuanced understanding of contemporary modes of friendships, and how social anxiety and loneliness are associated with perceptions of friendships across contexts.