

Chapter 26

Internet Use and Psychological Well-Being

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ABSTRACT

The direction of the correlation between Internet use and psychological well-being is debatable. The displacement hypothesis indicates the correlation is negative, as Internet use for communication replaces face-to-face interaction. Conversely, the augmentation hypothesis suggests that the correlation is positive because Internet use for communication complements existing social interaction. While previous empirical findings about the relationship between Internet use and psychological well-being have been diverse, two previous meta-analyses and the present meta-analysis about the use of social networking sites and psychological well-being supported neither position, and found no relationship between Internet use and psychological well-being. Investigation of causal predominance between Internet use and psychological well-being, increased attention to measurement problems of social networking site use and older adults, and consideration of effects of indicators and moderators should be addressed in future research.

INTRODUCTION

The association between Internet use and psychological well-being, including self-esteem, depression, loneliness, and life satisfaction, is an intriguing topic in computer-mediated communications. The association is described as the Internet paradox in the pioneering work of Kraut

et al. (1998). Two different perspectives regarding the effect of Internet use have been proposed by researchers. The displacement hypothesis (Lee, 2009; Shklovski, Kraut, & Rainie, 2004) claims that time spent using a given medium replaces that spent using other mediums. Online interaction thus detrimentally replaces face-to-face interaction, and Internet use negatively affects

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psychological well-being. The second position is the augmentation hypothesis advanced by the same researchers (Lee, 2009; Shklovski, Kraut, & Rainie, 2004) that using certain mediums can facilitate the use of others. For example, Internet use for communication enhances genuine social interaction and thus promotes psychological well-being. Although numerous researchers (Cooper, 2003; Huang, 2010; Moody, 2001) have examined this link, they obtained inconsistent findings.

The exponential increase in the number of Facebook users has made the use of social network sites and psychological well-being an increasing popular research focus. A new phenomenon dubbed “Facebook depression” describes individuals who display depressive symptoms after heavy use of social networking sites (O’Keeffe et al., 2011). Such phenomenon has increased awareness of the risks associated with the use of social networking sites.

OVERVIEW

Whether the effect of Internet use on psychological well-being is beneficial or detrimental is debatable. To address this issue, Kraut *et al.* (1998) examined the influence of Internet use on psychological well-being for a sample of 169 first-time Internet users and found that Internet use negatively affected psychological well-being. The Internet paradox refers to the positive effects of heavy Internet use on communication. Since the publication of the Internet paradox, further research has been replicated. For example, Kraut *et al.* (2002) reported that the negative effects of Internet use for first-time Internet users described in their original research dissipated during a 3-year follow-up study. Kraut *et al.* (2002) also investigated 406 new computer and television purchasers via a longitudinal survey between 1998 and 1999, and reported that participants generally displayed positive effects of Internet use on psychological well-being. However, better psychological well-

being was associated with individuals that had adequate social support; while worse outcomes were associated with those without such support. As Kraut *et al.* (1998) sampled first-time users, the sample was more likely to include individuals with low Internet self-efficacy, who in turn were likely to encounter difficulties in using the Internet that could trigger depression. LaRose *et al.* (2001) indicated that Internet self-efficacy mediated the relationship between Internet use and psychological well-being. To test this possibility, they sampled 171 undergraduate students and found a low correlation between Internet use and depression ($r = -.02$) and mediation effect of Internet self-efficacy was not supported. Wästlund *et al.* (2001) tested the Internet paradox in different national settings using 500 Swedish students. Their study reached two main conclusions. First, younger individuals tend to use the Internet more heavily and experience lower psychological well-being than older people. Second, no connection exists between Internet use and psychological well-being.

Internet Use and Psychological Well-Being

Studies examining the relationship between Internet use and psychological well-being have frequently used cross-sectional designs. These cross-sectional designs have identified diverse correlations between Internet use and psychological well-being. For example, Cooper (2003) surveyed a sample of 26 boys and identified a moderate and positive correlation between time spent online and depression measured by a Children’s Depression Inventory of 47. Moody (2001) sampled 166 undergraduate students and found a negative and weak correlation ($r = -.175$) between frequency of Internet use and social loneliness.

However, such cross-sectional studies are limited because the age effect is confounded with the cohort effect and development trajectories were not examined. Some longitudinal studies thus were

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