



## Internet use, happiness, social support and introversion: A more fine grained analysis of person variables and internet activity

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Available online 19 May 2011

#### Keywords:

Internet use  
Personality  
Happiness  
Introversion  
Social support

### ABSTRACT

The Internet is no longer an advanced technology accessible to a select few. It has become a ubiquitous tool for users ranging from professional programmers to casual surfers and young children. The exponential increase in time online has prompted curiosity and speculation about the interaction between this technology and individual person variables. While general survey data exist regarding broad patterns of Internet use, less is known about the relationship between specific usage and individual personality dimensions, mood variables, or social activity. This study sought to clarify several of these relationships. One hundred eighty-five undergraduate student volunteers completed two detailed measures of Internet use across various domains (for example: work/school, tasks/services, entertainment), as well as measures of happiness, perceived social support, and introversion. Specific types of Internet use, including gaming and entertainment usage, were found to predict perceived social support, introversion and happiness. Use of the Internet for mischief-related activities (for example: downloading without payment, fraud, snooping) was associated with lower levels of happiness and social support. These findings support the utility of and need for specific rather than general Internet research. Directions for future research clarifying the role of the Internet in quality of life and interpersonal relations are suggested.

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### 1. Introduction

Members of almost every demographic background use the Internet in order to stay better connected with loved ones, to quickly and efficiently complete daily tasks and transactions, and stay abreast of the most up-to-date current events. Broad survey studies confirm that Internet use continues to rise, and that previously cited gaps based on age, gender, technology access and socioeconomic status, are quickly disappearing (c.f., Fallows, 2004; Lenhart, Madden, Macgill, & Smith, 2007; Madden, Fox, Smith, & Vitak, 2007).

The Pew Internet and American Life Project represents one of the main efforts to gather large-scale data on Internet use. Using nationwide telephone surveys, most recently in December 2008 ( $N = 2253$ ), Pew has been a leader in documenting the activities of the Internet. Those data support and verify the rapid continued expansion of Internet use. While the Pew project has characterized teens as one of the most wired segments of the American population for the past 10 years, they also reported that Internet penetration reached 74% for all American adults in 2008 (Jones & Fox,

2009) reflecting a sharp increase from 66%, 3 years earlier. The same 2008 survey found that 93% of 12–17 year olds and 89% of 18–24 year olds regularly go online, and, though the trend decreases with age, 87% of those aged 30–34, 78% of 50–54-year-olds, and 45% of those 70–75 use the Internet regularly (Jones & Fox, 2009).

Use of the Internet also bridges previously reported (e.g., Lenhart, 2000) gender and ethnicity gaps. Responses to the Pew 2008 survey indicate that 75% of adult females and 73% of adult males use the Internet. As well, 77% of Caucasian respondents, 64% of African-Americans and 58% of Hispanic participants reported regular online use (Jones & Fox, 2009). Internet usage also is relatively well-represented across most income and education brackets, though usage trends increase in relation to annual income and education (Jones & Fox, 2009). Overall, general survey data indicate that despite slight differences in prevalence, Internet use is not limited to specific demographic profiles. Further, across almost every demographic group, online use has increased and continues to do so rapidly. Within a relatively short period of time the Internet has penetrated American society both swiftly and thoroughly.

In addition to this trend research, other, less conclusive data have been gathered regarding the consequences and benefits of this popular technology. Not only is Internet use in general on the rise, the sorts of uses for the Internet are diversifying and

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broadening in ways that, only a few years ago, would have seemed unlikely or impossible. In addition to access to products, information, and transactions, users increasingly turn to the Internet for social reasons. The Internet enables individuals to find new relationships and fosters more efficient communication within existing relationships as well as offers multitudes of new ways to develop and maintain friendships and romances. It is unclear however, how individual person variables, and interpersonal variables interact with the burgeoning use.

Perceived social support has long been recognized (e.g., Barrera, 1986; Cohen & Wills 1985; Winemiller, Mitchell, Sutliff, & Cline, 1993) to provide a buffer in times of stress, increase happiness, and enhance psychological well-being. Internet relationships offer a new avenue for potential experiences of perceived social support, in which relationships may exist entirely without any face-to-face interaction. It is an empirical question whether or not interpersonal relationships developed and maintained predominantly or even entirely over the Internet increase levels of perceived support and/or convey the same benefits that social support has been shown to provide in the past.

Some (e.g., Parks & Floyd, 1996) contend that online interactions are shallow approximations of quality real life relationships, and that cyberspace creates an easily-penetrated illusion of community. This argument suggests the possibility that time spent online, in lieu of participating in the face-to-face world, might actually detract from an individual's assessment of perceived social support. Indeed, preliminary survey data suggest that online relationships may not be equivalent to their face-to-face counterparts. Virtual interactions are generally marked by higher levels of self-disclosure than face-to-face interactions (Underwood & Findlay, 2004). Deception and misrepresentation on the Internet are easy and frequent, and misinterpretation of specific interactions due, in part, to the absence of nonverbal cues, also are common concerns (Wallace, 1999; Whitley, 1997). The somewhat limited data are mixed; some studies support better outcomes in face-to-face interactions, whereas others show evidence that online support carries unique benefits (Bargh, Katelyn, & McKenna, 2004). Controversy exists as a consequence of contradictory findings and much remains unknown regarding the benefits and drawbacks of online social support.

Initial investigations of the emotional benefits and consequences of the Internet (Kraut et al., 1998; Shklovski, Kraut, & Cummings, 2006) found high levels of Internet use to be associated with depression and social isolation. Specifically, increased time online was associated with declines in individuals' communication with members of their household, declines in the size of their "face-to-face" social circle and increased feelings of loneliness. Amichai-Hamburger, Fine, and Goldstein (2004) found that Internet use was directly related to feelings of loneliness. These findings have not been consistently supported by other studies. For example, Bargh et al. (2004) reviewed the existing Internet research and disputed the conclusion that Internet use contributes to depression and loneliness characterizing those findings as exaggerated media-friendly fallacies. Their review found that the Internet helped reduce these symptoms, facilitating relationships with long-distance friends and family members and enhancing feelings of connectivity and community.

In addition to these studies, several authors (e.g. Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2004; Kraut et al., 1998) have attempted to identify patterns of Internet use in relation to personality variables. The notion that individuals may be predisposed to excessive use or avoidance of Internet use is predicated on the view that individual characteristics underlie this behavior in much the same way as these same variables would influence face-to-face behavior. Amichai-Hamburger et al. (2004) examined introversion, identity, and level of neurotic behavior in relation to establishing group mem-

bership. Noting the anonymity of the Internet, the investigators sought to examine one's sense of identity in relation to an individual's sense of the location of his/her true identity. He found that extroverted individuals reported that the self interacting in real time was a more accurate representation of their identity than the individual portrayed in Internet interactions; conversely, introverts reported that the self portrayed in the virtual world more accurately represented their real self.

Though these results were fairly clear, the relationship between Internet use and introversion and extroversion does not appear straightforward. Previous research on these personality variables would lead one to hypothesize that introverts would have lower levels of interaction if compared to extroverted individuals (c.f., Diener, Larsen, & Emmons, 1984; Fleenon, Malanos, & Achille, 2002; Laney, 2002). However, the capacity for Internet anonymity and the fact that such behavior occurs while totally alone but can virtually include others, or at least the idea of others, radically shifts the understanding of what it means to be solitary, and opens a path for introverts to reach out to others without actual, real life interaction. Hence, behavioral patterns associated with individuals on the basis of qualities such as extroversion or introversion may no longer have relevance, as interaction has taken on a more complex meaning. As the Internet begins to play an increasingly large role in developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships, personality dimensions such as introversion and extroversion may not account for variance in behavior in the same way as in the past.

This study sought to develop a more specific and nuanced picture of Internet use in relation to introversion, levels of happiness, social support by using various domains of Internet use. The current study identified six specific domains of usage to determine if a model could be produced in which type of Internet use predicted levels of happiness, perceived support, and introversion and to determine if there were differences between groups of individuals by type of Internet use.

## 2. Materials and methods

One hundred eighty-five undergraduate students at a Midwestern technological university participated in the study and ranged in age from 18 to 30 years ( $M = 20.5$  years). The sample consisted of 124 males and 61 females. The ethnic composition included 110 Caucasian, 44 Asian, 6 African American, 6 Hispanic, and 17 other designated students. Participant volunteers were emailed a one-time use individualized link to an anonymous web-based survey site at which demographic and background information items and nine self-report measures were available for completion. There were two measures of happiness, two measures of introversion, two measures of social support, and three measures of Internet use. Consent was obtained electronically at the start of the survey.

The measures used were as follows: Bradburn Affect Balance Scale (ABS; Bradburn, 1969) The ABS was designed to assess the balance between positive and negative affect experienced during the 4 weeks prior to administration. It consists of 10 "yes" or "no" items that measure the affective component of subjective well-being. The authors report that the ABS has adequate validity.

Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS; Lyubormirsky & Lepper, 1999). The SHS is a measure of global happiness and consists of four items rated on a seven point Likert scale. The authors reported excellent internal consistency across age, occupation, language, and culture ( $r = .86$ ). They also demonstrated strong test-retest reliability over time ( $r = .72$ ). There was convergence with other published measures of happiness and well-being ( $r = .62$ ); it did not correlate with constructs thought to be unrelated to happiness.

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