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## Loneliness and social uses of the Internet<sup>☆</sup>

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### Abstract

Loneliness has been associated with increased Internet use. Lonely individuals may be drawn online because of the increased potential for companionship, the changed social interaction patterns online, and as a way to modulate negative moods associated with loneliness. Online, social presence and intimacy levels can be controlled; users can remain invisible as they observe others' interactions, and can control the amount and timing of their interactions. Anonymity and lack of face-to-face communication online may decrease self-consciousness and social anxiety, which could facilitate pro-social behavior and enhance online friendship formation. Support for this model was found in a survey of 277 undergraduate Internet users that was used to assess differences between lonely and not-lonely individuals in patterns of Internet use. Loneliness was assessed on the UCLA Loneliness Scale; students in the highest 20% (Lonely) were compared with all other students (Non-lonely). Lonely individuals used the Internet and e-mail more and were more likely to use the Internet for emotional support than others. Social behavior of lonely individuals consistently was enhanced online, and lonely individuals were more likely to report making online friends and heightened satisfaction with their online friends. The lonely were more likely to use the Internet to modulate negative moods, and to report that their Internet use was causing disturbances in their daily functioning.

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*Keywords:* Internet; Loneliness; CMC; Disturbed use of Internet; Social behaviors

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## 1. Introduction

Although the Internet is widely used to communicate with others (Pew Internet & American Life, 2002), loneliness has long been associated with excessive use of the Internet. Many early Internet users were computer hackers, who were characterized as preferring the machine to people. Often social outcasts, they turned first to the computer and then to the Internet in lieu of people (Shotten, 1991; Turkle, 1984). “The Internet gave them a vehicle for both communication and recreation, often providing a safe and fun social life that was denied in real life” (Morahan-Martin, 1999, p. 431). Many turned to the Internet to escape from the pressures and discomfort of their lives. Online, they found a world where they could be accepted and where their technical skills could be used to gain prestige. As use of the Internet spread to a broader population, early chroniclers of life online, such as Rheingold (1993) and Turkle (1995), continued to draw anecdotal links between loneliness and Internet use and abuse. Quantitative studies that followed confirmed that loneliness was associated with both increased Internet use (Kraut, Patterson, Landmark, Kiesler, Mukophadhyay, & Scherlis, 1998; Lavin, Marvin, McLarney, Nola, & Scott, 1999) and compulsive use of the Internet (Loytskert & Aiello, 1997; Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2000; Young, 1998). However, the direction of this relationship is uncertain. Two opposing hypotheses have been proposed to explain the relationship between loneliness and Internet use: excessive Internet use causes loneliness vs. lonely individuals are more likely to use the Internet excessively.

### 1.1. Internet use causes loneliness

Those who accept the first hypothesis and view the Internet as causing loneliness argue that time online interrupts real life relationships. Internet use isolates individuals from the real world and deprives them of the sense of belonging and connection with real world contacts. Thus, loneliness can be a byproduct of excessive Internet use because users are spending time online, often investing in online relationships, which are artificial and weak, at the expense of real life relationships. Further, online communication fosters technological alienation, creating barriers between participants, even those who know each other in other contexts. The implicit assumption of those supporting this hypothesis is that online relationships are weak and superficial compared with those in real life.

Support for this argument is found in the HomeNet study, which documented increases in loneliness resulting from Internet use (Kraut et al., 1998). This study provided free or reduced cost computers, training, and Internet access for two years to 93 families consisting of 169 individuals. Participants allowed their Internet use to be monitored and provided self-reports on their psychological and social characteristics before beginning Internet use as well as at 1-year intervals after they began using the Internet. Participants’ reported loneliness at the beginning of the study did not predict amount of subsequent Internet use, but greater Internet use was associated with increased levels of loneliness. The authors attribute the increases in loneliness to decreases in family communication, social activities, happiness, and the

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