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Online recreation: The relationship between loneliness, Internet self-efficacy and the use of the Internet for entertainment purposes

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Abstract

In this study, 150 undergraduates answered questions about their Internet usage and completed a loneliness and an Internet self-efficacy questionnaire. A factor analysis of the Internet usage items revealed three facets of online recreation, including, using the Internet for: computer-based entertainment, to facilitate offline entertainment, and for information about the entertainment world. Those who scored higher on loneliness were more likely to use the Internet for computer-based entertainment, as well as, use the Internet to obtain information about the entertainment world. Individuals higher in Internet self-efficacy were more likely to use the Internet for computer-based entertainment and to facilitate offline entertainment. Implications for the study of the psychological influences of the Internet are discussed in this paper.

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1. Introduction

Researchers over the last few years have been very interested in whether the Internet is detrimental to one's psychological health or whether, instead, it might enhance

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one's well-being. In the early stages, researchers emphatically argued that greater use of the Internet was associated with negative effects on an individual (Kraut et al., 1998). More recently, studies have found that the Internet, in contrast, can contribute positively to psychological well-being (Shaw & Gant, 2002). Arguably, these variations in results could be attributed to the changing nature of the Internet, the greater numbers of individuals who use it, as well as its increased accessibility, affordability and availability. However, it might also be the case that we are asking the wrong questions. Researchers have contended that cyberspace is not one generic space (Whitty & Carr, 2003) and that instead of considerations of the Internet as a whole we should focus our attention on the individual aspects of the Internet. In line with this way of thinking, we were interested in what types of leisure services lonely individuals are more likely to access online. However, in addition to loneliness, we were interested in people's ability and confidence in using the Internet.

In what has become a well known study, Kraut and his colleagues (1998) made the claim that greater use of the Internet was associated with negative effects on an individual, such as decreases in the size of one's social circle, and increases in depression and loneliness. In Kraut et al.'s longitudinal study, households who had never accessed the Internet prior to the study were provided with a computer, a free telephone line and free access to the Internet. During the course of the study, they tracked changes in psychological states over time. As stated above, this study found a significant relationship between heavy Internet usage and loneliness. Kraut et al. argued that since initial loneliness failed to predict subsequent loneliness, the most likely explanation was that the increased use of the Internet was what caused the increase in loneliness. In other words, Internet usage was taking up time that could be better used for more psychologically beneficial interactions offline. Kraut et al. made the claim that online weak ties were being established which were of poorer quality compared to the types of relationships and strong ties already established offline.

Kraut et al.'s (1998) 'HomeNet Study' has been widely criticized. One of the major criticisms made was that they only used 3-items from the UCLA to measure loneliness and their Cronbach's α of .54 was clearly poor (Grohol, 1998). Morahan-Martin (1999) also points out that the sample size was too small and not randomly selected. Perhaps a more important criticism, however, is that Kraut et al.'s findings might only explain novice Internet users (LaRose, Eastin, & Gregg, 2001). Moreover, as LaRose et al. (2001) have maintained, self-efficacy might be an important variable to consider. The individuals that spent more time online in Kraut et al.'s study might have been simply ineffective users of the Internet and the stress in trying to work out how to use this new technology might have caused them to become more depressed.

Interestingly, in the 3-year follow-up to the HomeNet study the same researchers found that almost all of the previously reported negative effects had dissipated (Kraut et al., 2002). Instead, higher levels of Internet use were positively correlated with measures of social involvement and psychological well-being. Perhaps such results might be explained by LaRose et al.'s (2001) claim that it is also important to consider self-efficacy. Could it be that the participants in the HomeNet study became more Internet savvy over time which, in turn, altered the way they used the Internet?

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