Loneliness and Internet use

Y. Amichai-Hamburger*, E. Ben-Artzi

Department of Psychology, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan 52900, Israel

Abstract

The Internet is becoming increasingly influential, but some observers have noted that heavy Internet users seem alienated from normal social contacts and may even cut these off as the Internet becomes the predominate social factor in their lives. Kraut, Patterson, Lundmark, Kiesler, Mukopadhyay, and Scherlis [American Psychologist 53 (1998) 65] carried out a longitudinal study from which they concluded that Internet use leads to loneliness among its users. However, their study did not take into account that the population of Internet users is not uniform and comprises many different personality types. People use the Internet in a variety of ways in keeping with their own personal preference. Therefore, the results of this interaction between personality and Internet use are likely to vary among different individuals and similarly the impact on user well-being will not be uniform. One of the personality characteristics that has been found to influence Internet use is that of extroversion and neuroticism [Hamburger & Ben-Artzi, Computers in Human Behavior 16 (2000) 441].

For this study, 89 participants completed questionnaires pertaining to their own Internet use and feelings of loneliness and extroversion and neuroticism. The results were compared to two models (a) the Kraut et al. (1998) model which argues that Internet use leads to loneliness (b) an alternative model which argues that it is those people who are already lonely who spend time on the Internet. A satisfactory goodness of fit was found for the alternative model. Building on these results, several different directions are suggested for continuing research in this field.
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1. Introduction

For many people, the Internet has become an essential part of daily life. They use it for such activities as shopping, as an information resource, discussion with other users, and in many other ways. It seems that there is no aspect of life that the

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +972-3-5318539; fax: +972-3-5350267.
  E-mail address: hambur@mail.biu.ac.il (Y. Amichai-Hamburger).

Internet does not touch. It is probably the recognition of the predominance of the Internet that has recently led psychologists to focus on this phenomenon.

Kraut, Patterson, Lundmark, Kiesler, Mukopadhyay, and Scherlis (1998) carried out a longitudinal study to examine the effects of the Internet on social involvement and psychological well-being. One of their main findings was that heavy use of the Internet is related to the experience of loneliness among users. These results are in keeping with those of other scholars in the field who also found that Internet use caused a negative reaction among users. For example, Brenner (1997) suggested that Internet use interferes with other activities and that it is also likely to lead to addiction. Stoll (1995) and Turkle (1996) showed that the use of the Internet is likely to result in social isolation.

Shapiro (1999) heavily criticized Kraut et al. (1998) over their choice of subjects for the study. She pointed out that the researchers had selected participants whose life-stage meant that social contact was likely to decline as a matter of course, regardless of their Internet use. One population of participants included families with high school students enrolled in journalism classes. The second group of participants was recruited from the Board of Directors of local community development organizations. The first group of participants included youngsters going to leave home in the near future, which in most cases affected their social network negatively. While the second group was of such a high social standing that, according to the principle of ''regression to the mean,'' their social connections within their community were likely to decline significantly in the near future.

Hamburger and Ben-Artzi (2000) raised two major objections to Kraut et al.'s (1998) study: (1) the omission by Kraut et al. (1998) that there is a wide diversity of services on offer on the Internet. Hamburger and Ben-Artzi (2000) pointed out that for a comprehensive understanding of the influences of the Internet on individuals' well-being, it is essential to consider the different services on the Internet. They divided the many possibilities on the Internet into three main services: social, work, and leisure. (2) In their study, Kraut et al. (1998) regard Internet users as a single entity, claiming that they all have the same motives and needs. Hamburger and Ben-Artzi (2000) argue that to study the impact of the Internet on individuals and society, it is a necessary preliminary to understand the personality of the user, since what is good for one user is not necessarily good for another. In short, Hamburger and Ben-Artzi argue that Kraut et al. (1998) ignored the richness of both user personality and Internet services.

1.1. Aspects of loneliness

Research has repeatedly identified two main personality tendencies related to loneliness: Extroversion and Neuroticism (Hojat, 1982; Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980). The extrovert is defined as a gregarious, outgoing personality, who enjoys company, needs stimulation, is spontaneous and a risk-taker as opposed to the introvert, who is quiet, thoughtful, content in his/her own company, and prefers smaller rather than larger gatherings. The behavior of the introvert may lead people to perceive him/her as unfriendly, uninvolved, and distant. The neurotic person is