

How has the internet affected personal relationships?

The development of the internet in the 21st century has been unprecedented. It has globally increased the connectivity of people and is being catalysed continuously by technological advancements, allowing people to communicate and share knowledge at a higher rate. The modern-day application and rise of social media have virtually allowed billions across the globe to interact with other people. The extent to which the internet has impacted personal relationships is a broad topic, which requires consideration from multiple perspectives. A single variable cannot disclose the full effect of the internet on relationships, and it is not discriminatory in its application, all ages, genders and cultures use the internet.

To formulate this argument, we will investigate the negative aspects of internet usage on personal relationships. One study investigated how inter-personal skills were related to internet usage, using an Internet Addiction Scale (IAS) on a sample of undergraduate students. They found that high internet usage was related to loneliness and skewed personal values. It discovered a link between higher internet usage and a reduction in emotional intelligence.¹ Intuitively, an increase in loneliness is a representation of reduced social interaction with people.

Additionally, another study defined emotional intelligence as the capacity to be aware of, control, and express one's emotions, and to handle interpersonal relationships judiciously and empathetically. They found lower emotional intelligence to contribute to a lower self-perceived quality of one's interpersonal relationships.² Relationships, simply, are one's close social connections and developing new relationships requires people to interact with others. The success in social interaction is dependent upon their social skills, with emotional intelligence being a factor of social skills. As such, lower social skills intuitively affect people's ability to develop relationships. However, these studies have small sample sizes, and inferring these sample results to a global population is highly likely to be

¹ Engelberg, E. and Sjoberg, L., 2004. Internet use, social skills, and adjustment. *Cyberpsychology & behaviour*, 7 (1), pp.41-47.

² Lopes, P.N., Salovey, P. and Straus, R., 2003. Emotional intelligence, personality, and the perceived quality of social relationships. *Personality and individual Differences*, 35(3), pp.641-658.

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inaccurate. Nonetheless, the studies do suggest a concept to keep in mind, being that internet usage may be affecting people's current relationships and their ability to develop new relationships.

Moreover, another group studied incidences within internet usage among adolescents. A significant finding was that the majority of adolescents who used the internet for Communication and entertainment introduced and interacted with their peers in a different manner to their in-person introductions. Additionally, obsessive internet users (1.1% of the sample) visited significantly more chat sites, pornographic sites and played more violent games. It found a relation between these games and anti-social aggression and aggression towards the self. In summary, the study noted that school grades decreased as obsessive internet usage increased.³ However, again, this study had a small sample size of 103 people, which means that the obsessive internet users totalled to 1 person. As such, it is comical to infer the findings of 1 person's behaviour statistically. Furthermore, one cannot link this unusual behaviour to obsessive internet usage and as such blanket internet-addiction to result in the above consequences.

All of these studies suggest that there is some relation between high internet usage and negative social aspects despite their small sample sizes. The effect of the internet on adolescents and children is perhaps of more concern primarily because at this stage of life; adolescents are developing into young adults. It is difficult to ascertain that the negative impact of high internet usage on adolescents will have a long term effect and follow through into their young adult years, but it is naïve to ignore that a 'short term' impact of sociability will not have any influence on their future relationships. For the most part, these studies help to suggest a balance of internet usage is essential. Internet addiction (IA) seems to be the primary issue of concern. One study which supports his hypothesis conducted a study on IA university students, which found a significant correlation between internet addiction and insomnia, stress, anxiety, depression and self-esteem ($p\text{-value} < 0.001$).⁴ This study, unlike the others,

³ Bayraktar, F. and Gün, Z., 2006. Incidence and correlates of Internet usage among adolescents in North Cyprus. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 10(2), pp.191-197.

⁴ Younes, F., Halawi, G., Jabbour, H., El Osta, N., Karam, L., Hajj, A. and Khabbaz, L.R., 2016. Internet addiction and relationships with insomnia, anxiety, depression, stress and self-esteem in university students: A cross-sectional designed study. *PloS one*, 11(9), p.e0161126.

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had a more significant sample size and is more suggestive of a statistical significance. This finding helps to support the theory that high internet usage harms personal relationships. Unfortunately, conditions such as anxiety and depression adversely have an impact on social skills and as such relationships. Addressing internet-addiction as a problem which affects personal relationships is somewhat more indicative than stating internet usage alone negatively impacts relationships. It is essential to highlight that the research within this field all looks at pathological internet usage and not 'normal' levels of internet usage.

To the contrary, the beneficial effects of the internet are essential to consider in this analysis. As mentioned earlier, the internet has aided people in Communication with others. A counter-argument to the negative impacts of the internet is that it positively impacts personal relationships. One supporting study examined 11000 observations of older-aged persons, and it found that the internet was a significant factor in assisting to reduce the incidence of loneliness in old age.⁵ While the crux of the prior argument was that internet-addiction was harmful in several social factors, the Lelkes study emphasises that social interactions act merely as complements rather than substitutes for in-person interactions. From this, we can deduce that the age of internet users may be a factor which influences the impact that the internet can have on personal relationships. Older aged people have multiple relations established already, with a significant fraction of their lives having no access to the internet. Perhaps the introduction of social media and the internet as been a useful tool for those with established relationships to continue them while to the contrary, it hinders those with limited social connections.

Another study found that in adults aged above 50 years old, the quality of life in such adults is higher in those who have social contact. Interestingly, for those entering retirement, access to social networks seems to aid people in keeping that social contact.⁶ As people age, their 'real-life' contact with people seemingly decreases. Furthermore, access to the internet has also been a factor of success

⁵ Lelkes, O., 2013. Happier and less isolated: Internet use in old age. *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, 21(1), pp.33-46.

⁶ Khalaila, R., & Vitman-Schorr, A. (2018). Internet use, social networks, loneliness, and quality of life among adults aged 50 and older: mediating and moderating effects. *Quality of Life Research*, 27(2), 479-489.

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for health intervention programs. As such, the article found that a higher quality of life was associated with internet usage. These findings correlate with what has been suggested earlier in this review, that the onset of social networking and technological advancements has improved one's ability to upkeep their social relationships. If we are to consider a factor as simple as immigration and travel, the internet plays a vital role in allowing such migrators and travellers to upkeep communication with families or friends that are not within immediate vicinity to interact "face to face". Though, even in that aspect, technologies such as 'FaceTime', 'Skype' and 'Zoom' has allowed the human race to keep interacting on a "face to face" basis.

Another question arises, being how the internet may affect children and their cognitive development, specifically social interaction. From the findings above, there seems to be a negative effect on children and adolescents. The studies state this to be a result of internet addiction rather than outright use. A literary review looked at the impact internet usage has on the social interaction development of children. It found that recent studies suggest that the reasons for using social networking sites tend to influence children's' relationships. Furthermore, the use of social networking to compensate for weak social skills was related to loneliness, but using these sites for establishing new relationships was related to lesser levels of loneliness.⁷

It seems that the internet ranges in its impact on personal relationships. The negative extent that the internet has in affecting the younger generations of the human population is more evident in the academic literature available. The contrasting argument says that the internet has aided the older generation in upkeeping relationships. High amounts of internet usage, namely internet addiction, seems to be the primary issue in negatively effecting personal relationships, with younger generations seeming to be more prone to internet addiction. The rate of internet addiction within younger persons makes sense as younger generations have exposure to devices which can access the internet at a very early age. The internet is undeniably crucial in the modern world and has socially connected millions of people, noting that there are adverse effects of internet addiction, it is difficult to determine that

⁷ Mills, K.L., 2016. Possible effects of internet use on cognitive development in adolescence. *Media and Communication*, 4(3), pp.4-12.

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internet usage simply equals a negative impact towards personal relationships. As such, from the viewpoint of analysing the internet's effect on personal relationships, we can conclude that it has an overall positive effect. Addressing the issue of internet addiction will solve the impacts that it has on relationships.

Additionally, we briefly mentioned the impact that the internet has on children's cognitive development. Based on the review, the childrens' reasoning behind the use of social media is what can affect personal relationships. While the review discussed the reasons for internet usage and the subsequent correlations they found, the review did not particularly establish that the internet has a direct impact on their relationships.

In conclusion, from the articles reviewed, we can conclude that the internet is an essential factor in our social relationships, and to a large extent, has positively shaped our modern-day sociability. However, we need to consider and acknowledge there may be a negative impact of internet usage and addiction in young persons regarding sociability. To blanket internet usage as 'bad' for social relationships is a narrow consideration. To acknowledge that the excessive use of the internet may have adverse social implications in specific demographics would be more appropriate.

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