

Internet use is associated with greater wellbeing, global study finds

Publication Date: 2024-05-12

Author: Nicola Davis

Section: Technology

Tags: Internet, Internet safety, Psychology, news

Article URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/article/2024/may/13/internet-use-is-associated-with-greater-wellbeing-global-study-finds>



Spending time online is often portrayed as something to avoid, but research suggests internet use is associated with greater wellbeing in people around the world. The potential impact on wellbeing of the internet, and social media in particular, has become a matter of intense debate. “Our analysis is the first to test whether or not internet access, mobile internet access and regular use of the internet relates to wellbeing on a global level,” said Prof Andrew Przybylski, of the University of Oxford, who co-authored the work. Przybylski said previous findings had been limited by poorly conducted studies, a focus on North America and Europe and research chiefly looking at concerns about such technology, particularly in relation to young people. “It would be really good to be able to target advice and tools and regulation to protect young people in particular, but that evidence simply doesn’t exist in a way that would be useful for those ends,” he said. Published in the journal *Technology, Mind and Behaviour*, the study describes how Przybylski and Dr Matti Vuorre, of Tilburg University in the Netherlands, analysed data collected through interviews involving about 1,000 people each year from 168 countries as part of the Gallup World Poll. Participants were asked about their internet access and use as well as eight different measures of wellbeing, such as life satisfaction, social life, purpose in life and feelings of community wellbeing. The team analysed data from 2006 to 2021, encompassing about 2.4 million participants aged 15 and above. The researchers employed more than 33,000 statistical models, allowing them to explore various possible associations while taking into account factors that could influence them, such as income, education, health problems and relationship status. The results reveal that internet access, mobile internet access and use generally predicted higher measures of the different aspects of wellbeing, with 84.9% of associations between internet connectivity and wellbeing positive, 0.4% negative and 14.7% not statistically significant. The study was not able to prove cause and effect, but the team found measures of life satisfaction were 8.5% higher for those who had internet access. Nor did the study look at the length of time people spent using the internet or what they used it for, while some factors that could explain associations may not have been considered. Przybylski said it was important that policy on technology was evidence-based and that the impact of any interventions was tracked. “If we’re to make the online world safer for young people, we just can’t go in guns blazing with strong prior beliefs and kind of one-size-fits-all solutions. We really need to make sure that we’re sensitive to having our minds changed by data,” he said. Dr Shweta Singh, an assistant professor of information systems and management at the University of Warwick, who was not involved in the study, said safe internet or harmless social media did not exist yet. “As much as I love to agree with these findings and really wish they are true to totality, there is unfortunately counter-evidence and arguments which suggest that is not necessarily the case,” she said,

noting reports that cases of “sextortion” in Canada had reached a new high, with teenage boys particularly affected. Prof Simeon Yates, of the University of Liverpool, said there had been much focus on online harms, but there were also benefits, though there was more nuance in both than the latest study had been able to capture. “Just because people are quoting a higher level wellbeing, it doesn’t mean therefore that no negative things are happening to them online,” he said.