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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Relational Consequences of Compulsive Internet Use: A Longitudinal Study Among NewlywedsPeter Kerkhof¹, Catrin Finkenauer², & Linda D. Muusses²

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This article examines how compulsive Internet use and marital well-being are related to each other. We suggest that they are negatively related and explore whether compulsive Internet use predicts marital well-being or vice versa. The relation between compulsive Internet use and marital well-being is tested in a two-wave prospective study among 190 newlywed couples. The results suggest that (a) compulsive Internet use predicts marital well-being, and not vice versa, (b) that this is a within- rather than a cross-partner effect, and (c) that the frequency of Internet use may be positively related to marital well-being. The results are discussed in terms of the mechanisms that underlie the link between compulsive Internet use and relationship quality.

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More and more people have broadband connections in their homes that give them continuous access to the Internet. For example, almost all (94%) South Korean households have a broadband Internet connection. The same is true for 74% of Dutch households, 68% of Japanese households, and 51% of U.S. households. Compared with other groups, married-with-children households report the highest use of new technologies: Two-thirds have broadband Internet, 93% own a computer (58% own two or more computers), and 95% of all these households own at least one cell phone (Kennedy, Smith, Wells, & Wellmann, 2008). In 76% of these households, both spouses are online (OECD Broadband Portal, 2009). This study aimed to explore how the increasing availability of fast Internet access affects marital relationships. Specifically, it examined whether and how Internet use affects how close relationship partners in households relate to each other.

According to recent studies, large numbers of people find it hard to regulate their time spent online and even develop symptoms of compulsive Internet use: Internet use with addictive characteristics, including withdrawal reactions when Internet use is impossible (e.g., unpleasant emotions), lack of control over Internet

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use (e.g., use of the Internet despite the intention or desire to stop or to decrease the use), and cognitive and behavioral preoccupation with the Internet (Van den Eijnden, Meerkerk, Vermulst, Spijkerman, & Engels, 2008). Empirical findings show that compulsive Internet users are lonelier, have poorer social skills, and are more depressed than noncompulsive Internet users (for reviews, see Chou, Condrón, & Belland, 2005; Widyanto & Griffiths, 2006).

The large majority of studies on compulsive Internet use has been conducted among high school and university student samples (Byun et al., 2009). To our knowledge, there are no studies that examine the effect that compulsive Internet use may have on the quality of marital relationships. In a recent overview of research on the impact of problematic (mainly sexual) Internet use on couples, Hertlein and Webster (2008) found only eight studies, none of which included both relationship partners. Moreover, all eight studies were cross-sectional and did not allow for conclusions about the direction of the effects of problematic Internet use and relationship quality. Given the prevalence of the use of new technologies in married households, the lack of studies on the effects of compulsive Internet use among married couples is surprising. Additionally, studying the effects of compulsive Internet use among couples gives us an insight into one of the oldest questions since the rise of the Internet: How do online activities affect the quality of (intimate) social relationships?

Internet use and the quality of social relationships

Given the quick rise of Internet connections, it is not surprising that the potential advantages and disadvantages of Internet use have been the subject of a heated debate. Whereas some highlight the benefits of Internet access, such as 24-hour access to information on almost any topic and the ability to link people and places all over the world within seconds, others emphasize its downsides, among which the excessive use and addictive properties of Internet use figure prominently (e.g., Beard, 2005).

In the literature, different uses of the Internet have been linked to different social outcomes. Several recent studies support the so-called stimulation hypothesis: Internet use may enhance the quality of social relationships because certain applications make it easier to communicate with friends (e.g., instant messaging [IM]). Among adolescents, Valkenburg and Peter (2007) found that IM, which adolescents mostly use to communicate with existing friends, positively predicts well-being, time spent with existing friends, and the quality of these friendships. The authors explained this effect by showing that online communications tend to be more self-disclosing (the Internet-enhanced self-disclosure hypothesis; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009a, 2009b). Other researchers suggest that the Internet allows people to stay in touch with family and friends or extend their social networks, and that e-mail increases their level of communication, but that the Internet does not function as a substitute for face-to-face contact (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Howard, Rainie, & Jones, 2001; Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001).

The reduction hypothesis (Kraut et al., 1998; Locke, 1998) states that online communication hinders the development of meaningful social relationships. Indeed, several studies have shown that using the Internet for entertainment or to communicate with strangers is negatively related to the quality of social relationships. For example, in a longitudinal study, Blais, Craig, Pepler, and Connolly (2008) followed adolescents over the course of 1 year and found that using the Internet for entertainment negatively affected the quality of both romantic and best-friend relationships over time. Earlier, Nie and Erbring (2000) found that people who spend more time on the Internet report spending less time with family and friends. They explained the result by the inelasticity of time: Time spent online cannot be spent with family and friends. In line with these findings, Mesch (2006) found that time spent online is positively related to family conflict, especially when the Internet is used for social purposes (e.g., playing online games with friends, chatting with friends online, and participating in online group discussions). Not all studies find the effects proposed under the reduction hypothesis, however. In an often-cited study among new Internet users, Kraut et al. (1998) found declines in communication with family members, declines in the size of participants' social networks, and increase in depression and loneliness within 2 years after the families got connected to the Internet. However, in a follow-up study 3 years later, these effects had dissipated (Kraut et al., 2002).

Katz and Rice (2002) argue that both the utopian and dystopian views of the Internet's influence are too extreme and propose to view the Internet as a syntopia: People's physical and social situation and history influence their actions and what they do and learn online spills over into their real-world experiences. Relationships are shaped and developed in an ongoing process that takes place both online and offline. The data used by Katz and Rice show that neither a utopian nor a dystopian are able to accurately describe this ongoing process.

The studies described mainly the aim to describe the determinants and effects of access to the Internet and the frequency of using the Internet. They typically do consider people's capacity to self-regulate one's Internet use. Compulsive Internet use is correlated positively with time spent on the Internet (the average correlation is .39, according to a recent meta-analysis by Tokunaga and Rains, 2010). Several studies have shown that the inability to regulate one's Internet use is positively correlated with loneliness, depression, poor social skills, social anxiety, emotional instability, and academic and social problems (e.g., marital and family problems) (e.g., Amichai-Hamburger & Ben-Artzi, 2003; Beard & Wolf, 2001; Caplan, 2002; Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2000; Scherer, 1997; Young, 1998; Young & Rogers, 1998; for recent reviews and meta-analyses see Byun et al., 2009; Chou et al., 2005; Tokunaga and Rains, 2010; Widyanto & Griffiths, 2006).

In the earlier literature (e.g., Young, 1998), Internet behavior with addictive characteristics was commonly referred to as Internet addiction, but because one is not addicted to the Internet itself but rather to the application with which the user is involved, compulsive Internet use is a more appropriate term for the overarching set of addictive characteristics that can be experienced with all Internet-mediated

applications (Meerkerk, Van den Eijnden, & Garretsen, 2006). Tokunaga and Rains's (2010) meta-analysis provides support for the characterization of compulsive Internet use as the loss of control over one's Internet use, rather than a pathology in addiction.

With prevalence figures ranging from about 1% (Nichols & Nicki, 2004) to almost 40% (Leung, 2004), it is unclear exactly how many people are compulsive Internet users. It is clear, however, that the role of the Internet in daily life has increased exponentially, will continue to do so, and that more people will likely become compulsive Internet users (Meerkerk, 2007; Van der Eijnden et al., 2008). Good relationships, especially good marital relationships, buffer psychological problems (for a review, see Baumeister & Leary, 1995) but, given the high penetration of new technologies into multimember households, are likely to be particularly vulnerable to compulsive Internet use. Despite the central role that marital relationships, or more generally, adult long-term intimate relationships, play in people's well-being, research on compulsive Internet use has neglected this kind of relationships and has instead focused largely on adolescents' personal and social well-being.

The central aim of this project is to illuminate the role of compulsive Internet use in marital relationships. Specifically, we will examine the bidirectionality of the link between compulsive Internet use and relationship quality in a prospective study with a large sample of newlywed couples. Examining the directionality of the link between compulsive Internet use and relationship quality is particularly needed because theoretically both paths are possible.

Explaining the link between compulsive Internet use and relationship quality

Although direct evidence is lacking, there are theoretical reasons to suggest that compulsive Internet use may decrease the quality of close relationships. Research on close relationships shows that validation and caring are basic requirements for the maintenance of harmonious, long-lasting relationships (Reis & Shaver, 1988). People in close relationships need to feel confident that their partner cares about them and will be responsive to their needs across time and different situations (Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Murray, 1999). When one partner uses the Internet compulsively, he or she might be less responsive to the other's needs. Because the partner is unable (or unwilling) to forego his or her immediate self-interest, namely, using the Internet, for the good of the relationship and/or the partner, both partners should experience a decrease in relationship satisfaction, commitment, and communication between both partners.

Similarly, the investment model of commitment (e.g., Rusbult, 1983) emphasizes a lack of attractive alternatives to the current relationship partner as a key factor in the maintenance of close relationships. Research confirms that the availability of attractive alternatives reduces relationship commitment and satisfaction and thereby increases the risk of relationship breakup (Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992; Lydon, Menzies-Toman, Burton, & Bell, 2008; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). Abundant dating sites on the Internet have made it easier to get in touch with people looking for a relationship. Exposure to these sites may make it easier for people to imagine

alternative relationships (Frost, Chance, Norton, & Ariely, 2008), thereby lowering satisfaction and commitment with the current relationship. Also, the partners of compulsive Internet users may easily imagine that the Internet is used to look for, or engage in, alternative relationships or affairs. Empirical studies provide support for this suggestion. To illustrate, Christofides, Muise, and Desmarais (2009) found that the use of Facebook is positively related to experiencing jealousy on Facebook. To explain this finding, the authors propose that social network sites expose people to information about their partner's relationships and interactions, which they would not have without the help of the social network sites. Learning about these relationships and interactions of their partner may make people jealous. This jealousy is not unwarranted: Cooper, McLoughlin, and Campbell (2000) report that Internet infidelity is becoming more common. Greenfield (1999) reports that almost 42% of compulsive Internet users report that they engaged in an affair while being online.

There are many activities on the Internet that could be considered emotional or physical infidelity (e.g., sharing emotions with others online via chat; cybersex or pornography). Although couples have to decide which online activities are acceptable to them and what they consider infidelity (Hertlein & Piercy, 2006), and seem to agree more than random strangers about what kind of behavior is acceptable and what not (Helsper & Whitty, 2010), using the Internet for sexual purposes is likely to be detrimental to relationships. Indeed, several studies found that the consumption of pornography makes people rate their own sexual relationship less satisfying over time (Peter & Valkenburg, 2009; Underwood & Findlay, 2004; Zillmann, 1989).

Using the Internet for sexual purposes is a predictor of compulsive Internet use (Meerkerk et al., 2006). Estimates are that 50% of all compulsive Internet users engage in sexual activities (Greenfield, 1999) versus 20% among noncompulsive Internet users (Cooper, Scherer, & Mathy, 2001). Thus, to the extent that compulsive Internet use is the result of using the Internet for sexual purposes, this may lead to lower sexual satisfaction in the primary relationship and subsequently to lower relationship quality.

Alternatively, poor relationships may increase compulsive Internet use. Communication theories suggest that people may use media content as a way to escape from a bad relationship (Vorderer, Klimmt, & Ritterfeld, 2004) or to regulate their affective states (mood management; Zillmann, 1988). Escapism is described as a mental retreat for people who feel uncomfortable or troubled in the real world (Henning & Vorderer, 2001; Vorderer et al., 2004). Mood management theory (Zillmann, 1988) predicts that people search for media entertainment to get in or maintain a positive mood. Experiencing negative effect within a relationship may motivate relationship partners to use the Internet to escape from this unpleasant situation and to get into a better mood. For example, the Internet use may be used to withdraw from a situation in which one is criticized by the relationship partner (demand/withdraw pattern; Caughlin, 2002; Christensen & Heavey, 1990).

Research on self-regulation in relationships suggests that poor or high-maintenance relationships, in which partners have a difficult time coordinating their

efforts (e.g., interactions with many misunderstandings), deplete people's capacity at exerting self-control (Finkel et al., 2006). Because self-control is crucial in resisting temptations (e.g., Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004), and because compulsive Internet use is characterized by a loss of control over one's (online) behavior (Van der Eijnden et al., 2008), high-maintenance or poor relationships should increase compulsive Internet use by depleting people's self-control. Thus, theories from different domains predict that having a troubled relationship causes people to increase their Internet use.

With a few notable exceptions (e.g., Kraut et al., 1998, 2002; Meerkerk et al., 2006), existing research on compulsive Internet use is mostly cross-sectional and focuses on adolescents and young adults. To our knowledge, there are no prospective studies that focus on adult intimate relationships and Internet use. It hence remains unclear whether compulsive Internet use deteriorates people's marital relationships or whether people in unhappy marriages are prone to develop compulsive Internet use. Thus, the first aim of this study is to examine the bidirectionality of the link between compulsive Internet use and relationship quality.

Examining the relational impact of compulsive Internet use

Although some studies assessed social effects of Internet use (e.g., Kraut et al., 1998), they rely on self-reports. Yet much of what people do and think does not depend on who they are but on whom they are with. Only a few studies included relationships as a factor by interviewing both partners in a relationship to understand the antecedents and consequences of Internet use. Chesley and colleagues did not find effects of Internet use but did find that women's negative effect was influenced positively by their husbands' information technology use, presumably because information technologies helped reduce the negative effects of spillover from work to family (Chesley, 2005, 2006; Chesley, Moen, & Shore, 2003). Findings like these stress the importance of including relationship partners when studying the impact of compulsive Internet use on relationship quality. For example, compulsive Internet use may take away attention, time, and interest that people would otherwise invest in their partner (cf. Kraut et al., 1998), reducing not only the Internet user's relationship quality but also his or her partner's relationship quality because the partner may feel neglected and not cared for when the Internet user opts to be on the Internet rather than spending time with him or her. The second aim of this project therefore is to examine the impact of compulsive Internet use on both partners in a large sample of newlywed couples.

Research overview

The overarching goal of this project is to illuminate how compulsive Internet use and relationship quality affect each other. In a two-wave, prospective study among 190 newlywed couples, we investigated our research question. The interrelationship of compulsive Internet use and relationship quality should be particularly relevant

in the context of relationships that are exposed to developmental changes. We focused on newlywed couples because patterns of interaction in newlywed couples are open to change (Behrens & Sanders, 1994; Hawley & Olson, 1995), and their most important developmental task is to learn how to communicate successfully and to constructively negotiate solutions to conflicts (Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Jamieson, 1984). Furthermore, relationship well-being is likely to decline during the first year of marriage (Tucker & Aron, 1993). Thus, newlywed couples are especially suited to investigate changes in relationship well-being and compulsive Internet use. Importantly, the dyadic nature of the study allows us to investigate whether and how compulsive Internet use of one partner affects the relationship between both partners, in that we can examine both actor effects (e.g., John's compulsive Internet use reduces his relationship quality) and partner effects (John's compulsive Internet use reduces Mary's relationship quality) (e.g., Cook & Kenny, 2005; Kenny, 1996).

At both data collections, both partners reported the frequency of their Internet use and rated their compulsive Internet use and their relationship quality. To capture different aspects of relationship quality that may be affected by compulsive Internet use, we included indicators of general relationship satisfaction (i.e., dyadic adjustment, commitment, and frequency of conflict), partner-specific feelings (i.e., intimacy, passion, and relational exclusion), and partner-oriented behavior (i.e., maintenance behaviors concealment and disclosure). For each dimension of relationship quality, we included both positive and negative scales to increase the robustness of our findings. We predicted that compulsive Internet use is linked to relationship quality. Given that the literature does provide clear theoretical suggestions regarding the direction of the effect of compulsive Internet use on relationship quality, we explored both directional effects. Moreover, we tested whether people's level of compulsive Internet use negatively affects their partners' relationship quality. The innovative aspects of this project are fourfold. First, by assessing frequency of Internet use and compulsive Internet use simultaneously, we will be able to not only disentangle the two types of Internet use but also examine their unique and combined effects on relationship quality. Second, to our knowledge, this study is among the first to examine the development of compulsive Internet use and relationship quality among adults in a longitudinal design. Third, by simultaneously considering Internet users and their partners, this project allows us to examine the true social impact of compulsive Internet use on close relationships. Fourth, by assessing different aspects of relationship quality, this project allows us to identify those aspects of relationship quality that are particularly vulnerable to the effects of compulsive Internet use.

Method

The data used for this study are derived from Waves 2 and 3 of the VU University Panel on Marriage and Well-Being, a longitudinal study among newlywed couples in the Netherlands. The study was approved by the ethics committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Education. This study investigates the influence of personal

dispositions, behavior in the relationship, and partner perception on marital well-being in the first 3 years of marriage. Participants completed a large battery of questionnaires under the supervision of a trained interviewer. Only scales relevant to this article are described in the following sections. Unless stated otherwise, the scales we used did not refer to any time frame (e.g., “during the last half year. . .”). For a more detailed description of the study, see studies by Finkenauer, Kerkhof, Righetti, and Branje (2009) and Finkenauer, Wijngaards-de Meij, Reis, and Rusbult (2010).

Participants

Of the 199 newlywed couples who participated in the first wave, 190 couples participated in the second and third wave of the longitudinal study (95%) in which our key variables were assessed.¹ The first measurement phase for this study took place 1 year after marriage. Couples had been romantically involved on average for 5.77 years ($SD = 3.07$) and had been living together for an average of 3.81 years ($SD = 2.31$). Partners were aged between 25 and 40 with averages of 32.07 ($SD = 4.86$) for husbands and 29.20 ($SD = 4.28$) for wives. Nearly all the couples (98.5% of the husbands and 96.4% of the wives) were Dutch.

Procedure

Participants were recruited via the municipalities in which they got married. The municipalities were average-sized Dutch cities mostly in the south of the Netherlands. Selection criteria were that (a) for all participants this was their first marriage, (b) at the first data collection, couples had no children from this marriage or from previous relationship partners, (c) both partners were between 25 and 40 years old, and (d) couples were heterosexual. The first data collection took place on average 1 month after their marriage (for more information, see Finkenauer et al., 2009; Pollmann & Finkenauer, 2009). Nineteen percent of the couples who had received a letter of invitation to participate in the study agreed to participate. This response rate is similar to other studies recruiting participants from public records in the United States (e.g., Kurdek, 1991).

The data reported here are based on the second and third data collection among this sample. The data collections took place in the spring of 2007 and 2008. At both data collections, both members of the couple separately filled out an extensive questionnaire at home in the presence of a trained interviewer. The interviewer's presence ensured that partners independently completed the questionnaires. The questionnaire took about 90 minutes to complete. At each data collection, after they completed the questionnaire, couples received 15 Euros and a small gift (a book at Wave 2 and a pen-set at Wave 3). To increase commitment, we also sent birthday cards to each participant. Also, participants were able to get updates about the progress of the study via the study Website.

Measures of Internet use

To assess the *frequency of Internet use*, both partners reported how many days per week they used the Internet for private purposes (as opposed to using the Internet for

work). The answers were multiplied by scores on the question how many hours per day during these days they used the Internet for private purposes. This resulted in a score for the frequency of Internet use, ranging from 0 to 210 (hours). Theoretically, the measure should have a maximum value of 168 (7 days in a week * 24 hours in a day). Consequently, the few participants who scored higher than the theoretical maximum probably misunderstood the question. Therefore, for the cross-sectional, longitudinal, and partner effect analyses, outlier values (10 for Wave 2 and six for Wave 3, scoring higher than 3 SDs above the mean) were replaced with the value of three SDs above the mean, for both the second and third waves. Recoding the outlier values did not change the results.

Compulsive Internet use was assessed using a shortened version of the Compulsive Internet Use Scale (Meerkerk, Van den Eijnden, Vermulst, & Garretsen, 2009). The original questionnaire contained 14 items, rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very much*), has shown high reliability in previous studies, and contains items about loss of control, withdrawal symptoms, and conflict with regard to the use of the Internet. We used a 5-item short version. The items are "How often . . . (a) do you find it difficult to stop using the Internet when you are online? (b) do you continue to use the Internet despite your intention to stop? (c) do you prefer to use the Internet instead of spending time with others (e.g., partner, children, parents, and friends)? (d) are you short of sleep because of the Internet? and (e) do you feel restless, frustrated, or irritated when you cannot use the Internet?" ($\alpha = .61$ for wives and $\alpha = .77$ for husbands). Compulsive Internet use and frequency of Internet use were correlated both in Wave 2, $r(361) = .20$, $p < .001$, and Wave 3, $r(348) = .22$, $p < .001$. The item scores were averaged to yield a score for compulsive Internet use.

Measures of relationship quality

General relationship satisfaction

We used the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976) to assess *relationship adjustment*. The DAS taps components of couple functioning such as agreement regarding important values (religion and decision making), conflict management, and expressions of love and affection (Spanier, 1976). The scale includes four subscales: Dyadic Satisfaction, Consensus, Cohesion, and Affectional Expression. Kurdek (1992) confirmed the reliability and validity of the overall scale and each of the four subscales with both heterosexual and homosexual couples ($\alpha = .84$ for wives and $\alpha = .86$ for husbands). The item scores were summed to yield a commitment score. We used an 8-item scale measure of relationship *commitment* (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998); sample items are "I feel psychologically attached to my partner," "I want to continue the relationship with my partner," using 7-point scales ranging from *completely disagree* to *completely agree* ($\alpha = .91$ for wives and $\alpha = .90$ for husbands). The item scores were averaged to yield a commitment score. To assess *frequency of conflict*, participants indicated for each of 15 issues how frequently they and their partner fought or argued about each issue (1 = *never*, 5 = *frequently*). The issues were adapted from Kurdek (1994) and included, for example, financial matters,

ex-partners, alcohol use or smoking behavior, distribution of household chores, and appearance. Responses were averaged to yield a conflict score; higher values indicated more frequent conflict ($\alpha = .85$ for wives and $\alpha = .88$ for husbands).

Partner-specific feelings

Intimacy and *passion* were assessed using the Intimacy and Passion subscales of the Perceived Relationship Quality Components Questionnaire (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000). Both scales consist of three items and both yielded satisfactory reliabilities (intimacy: $\alpha = .83$ for wives and $\alpha = .83$ for husbands; passion: $\alpha = .92$ for wives and $\alpha = .91$ for husbands). The item scores were averaged to yield intimacy and passion scores. To assess feelings of *relational exclusion* in the marital relationship, we used three items: "How often do you experience a lack of companionship in the relationship with your partner?" "How often do you feel excluded from your relationship?" "How often do you feel separated from your partner?" These items tap the extent to which partners experience isolation and loneliness in the marital relationship (Finkenauer et al., 2009). Partners rated themselves on a 5-point scale (1 = *never*; 5 = *very often*) and their responses were averaged to yield an *exclusion score* with higher values indicating greater feelings of relational exclusion ($\alpha = .85$ for wives and $\alpha = .86$ for husbands).

Partner-oriented behavior

Three measures were used to assess behavior within the relationship. To assess *maintenance behaviors*, we used 26 items from the Relationship Maintenance Strategy Measure (Stafford & Canary, 1991). Maintenance strategies are behaviors that partners engage in to maintain or increase relationship quality, including positivity ("I attempt to make our interactions very enjoyable"), openness ("I encourage my partner to disclose thoughts and feelings to me"), assurances ("I show my love for my partner"), social networks ("I like to spend time with our same friends"), and sharing tasks ("I do my fair share of the work we have to do"). In our study, participants rated whether they had enacted the behavior in the last week (0 = *no* and 1 = *yes*). Responses were summed in a maintenance behavior score ($\alpha = .65$ for wives and $\alpha = .76$ for husbands) such that higher values indicated that participants had enacted more maintenance behavior. To assess *disclosure*, we used the relationship-specific disclosure scale (Finkenauer, Engels, Branje, & Meeus, 2004). Participants rated to what extent they disclose information (e.g., personal habits, deepest feelings, and what they like or dislike about themselves) about themselves to their partner (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*). Overall, the scale showed high internal consistency ($\alpha = .89$ for wives and $\alpha = .89$ for husbands) and disclosure ratings are averaged to establish the relationship-specific disclosure score; higher values on these scores indicated greater disclosure toward the partner. To assess concealment toward one's partner, we used the partner-specific concealment scale (Finkenauer et al., 2009). Example items are: "There are lots of things about me that I conceal from my partner," "I'm often afraid I'll reveal something to my partner I don't want

to,” and “I have a secret that is so private I would lie if my partner asked me about it.” Participants rated all items on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *extremely*). For results on the validity and reliability of the scale, see studies by Finkenauer, Engels, and Meeus (2002) and Finkenauer, Frijns, Engels, and Kerkhof (2005). Each partner’s ratings were averaged to establish a concealment score; higher values indicated greater own concealment from partner ($\alpha = .79$ for wives and $\alpha = .81$ for husbands).

Results

Strategy of analysis

We present our findings in three sections. First, we present descriptive information on our data. To this end, we conducted a series of descriptive analyses of variance. To deal with the interdependence in our data, the analyses considered couples as the unit of analysis.

Second, we investigated the cross-sectional links between Internet use and relationship quality. To deal with the fact that we had multiple predictors in a dependent structure, we analyzed the data with multilevel regression analysis (Hox, 2002). This type of analysis is designed for nested data. In our study, the data provided by a given individual at the two waves of data collection are not independent (i.e., data collections are nested within individuals), and the data provided by the two partners in a given relationship are not independent (i.e., data from the partners in a relationship are nested within couple) (Kenny, Kashy, & Bolger, 1998; Olsen & Kenny, 2006). In our analyses, the scores of the two partners are treated as nested within the same dyad (Hox, 2002). Following the recommendations by Kenny, Kashy, and Cook (2006), we do not distinguish wives from husbands but treat partners of each couple as if they were indistinguishable (while controlling for the effects of gender).

To analyze our data, we used the SPSS mixed procedure. This procedure is comparable with the SAS mixed procedure (Campbell & Kashy, 2002; Singer, 1998) and provides the same parameter estimates and tests of significance (Peugh & Enders, 2005). All variables were standardized prior to analysis.

Finally, to examine the link between Internet use and relationship quality, we performed residualized lagged analyses to examine the power of *earlier* Internet use (relationship quality) in predicting *later* relationship quality (Internet use). Throughout this article, we use Time 1 (T1) and Time 2 (T2) as labels for the two different waves of data collection. These analyses entail controlling for earlier levels of the criterion (Internet use and relationship quality, respectively).

We also performed auxiliary analyses to examine possible main effects or interactions involving participants’ sex. Significant or marginal ($p < .10$) main effects for sex were observed for 37% of the possible main effects. Therefore, we included main effects for sex in all analyses. Only 5% of the possible interactions with sex were significant or marginally significant. Given that these interactions were scattered and inconsistent, we dropped these effects from the analyses.

Development over time and sex differences

To examine sex differences and development over time, we conducted a series of repeated measures analyses of variance with sex (husband vs. wife) and time (Time 1 vs. Time 2) as repeated measures factors. We first examined overall main effects and interactions involving each independent variable and then performed follow-up tests of simple effects to explore the form of significant interaction effects.

Internet use

The analysis on compulsive Internet use yielded a main effect for sex, $F(1,177) = 21.10$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .11$, and a significant Sex \times Time interaction, $F(1,177) = 8.09$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .04$. As can be seen in Table 1, posthoc analyses yielded that compulsive Internet use tended to decrease among men, $t(183) = 1.96$, $p = .05$, but increased among women, $t(181) = 2.17$, $p = .03$. For Internet frequency, a main effect for time, $F(1,155) = 6.62$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .04$, indicated that the frequency of Internet use decreased over time for both men and women (Table 1).

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics

| | Husbands | | | | Wives | | | | Range |
|-----------------------------------|----------|-----------|----------|-----------|----------|-----------|----------|-----------|--------------|
| | T1 | | T2 | | T1 | | T2 | | |
| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | |
| Internet use | | | | | | | | | |
| Compulsive Internet use | 1.78 | 0.65 | 1.71 | 0.59 | 1.49 | 0.49 | 1.54 | 0.46 | 1.00–4.6 |
| Frequency of Internet use | 12.73 | 17.57 | 8.65 | 9.60 | 12.39 | 14.82 | 9.96 | 11.52 | 0.00–79.9 |
| General relationship satisfaction | | | | | | | | | |
| Adjustment | 111.77 | 9.71 | 110.78 | 11.09 | 110.33 | 11.03 | 110.56 | 9.81 | 27.00–137.00 |
| Commitment | 4.58 | 0.44 | 4.50 | 0.47 | 4.65 | 0.42 | 4.59 | 0.45 | 2.63–5.00 |
| Frequency of conflict | 1.65 | 0.42 | 1.62 | 0.45 | 1.66 | 0.42 | 1.68 | 0.42 | 1.00–4.00 |
| Partner-specific feelings | | | | | | | | | |
| Intimacy | 4.50 | 0.50 | 4.40 | 0.52 | 4.50 | 0.47 | 4.46 | 0.52 | 2.67–5.00 |
| Passion | 3.81 | 0.79 | 3.64 | 0.87 | 3.80 | 0.73 | 3.61 | 0.75 | 1.00–5.00 |
| Partner-specific exclusion | 1.49 | 0.51 | 1.51 | 0.62 | 1.55 | 0.54 | 1.61 | 0.65 | 1.00–4.00 |
| Partner-oriented behavior | | | | | | | | | |
| Maintenance behavior | 18.52 | 3.48 | 18.51 | 3.85 | 18.41 | 3.69 | 19.10 | 3.29 | 3.00–26.00 |
| Disclosure | 4.17 | 0.58 | 4.12 | 0.59 | 4.36 | 0.49 | 4.35 | 0.48 | 1.57–5.00 |
| Concealment | 1.70 | 0.63 | 1.73 | 0.72 | 1.53 | 0.59 | 1.54 | 0.62 | 1.00–4.17 |

General relationship satisfaction

For adjustment, no significant effects emerged. For commitment, a main effect for sex, $F(1,187) = 4.21$, $p = .04$, $\eta^2 = .02$, indicated that women reported a higher commitment than men. Also, a main effect for time, $F(1,190) = 4.41$, $p = .04$, $\eta^2 = .02$, indicated that commitment decreased over time. For frequency of conflict, no significant effects emerged.

Partner-specific feelings

Both intimacy, $F(1,187) = 8.02$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .04$, and passion, $F(1,187) = 28.21$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .13$, decreased over time.

Partner-oriented behavior

For maintenance behavior, we observed a main effect of time, $F(1,188) = 4.27$, $p = .04$, $\eta^2 = .02$, which was qualified by an interaction between sex and time, $F(1,188) = 5.16$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .03$. Posthoc tests revealed that men's maintenance behavior remained stable over time, $t(188) = 0.24$, $p = .98$, whereas women's maintenance behavior increased over time, $t(188) = 2.80$, $p = .01$. Consistent with the existing literature (e.g., Finkenauer et al., 2004), women reported greater levels of disclosure toward their partner than men, $F(1, 182) = 21.06$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .10$. For concealment, a main effect for sex, $F(1,182) = 9.72$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .05$, indicated that men reported greater concealment than women overall.

Cross-sectional analyses

To examine whether relationship quality is related to Internet use, we calculated *multiple-predictor models*, regressing a criterion (each indicator of relationship quality separately) onto sex, compulsive Internet use, and frequency of Internet use. Because one might argue that the effects of compulsive Internet use may get stronger when combined with a high frequency of Internet use, we included an interaction term of both variables. For these regression models, using Time 1 data, we tested the general model that Internet use is negatively related to indicators of relationship quality.

As can be seen in Table 2, the analyses consistently revealed that compulsive Internet use is negatively related to relationship quality. Across all three relationship quality domains, compulsive Internet use, above and beyond frequency of Internet use, contributed to explain variance in the respective indicators of relationship quality in the predicted direction. Specifically, for general relationship satisfaction, it was negatively related to adjustment ($B = -.206$, $p = .000$) and commitment ($B = -.126$, $p = .024$), and positively related to frequency of conflict ($B = .188$, $p = .000$), indicating that more compulsive Internet users reported lower adjustment in the relationship and commitment to their partners and more frequent conflicts with their partners. Frequency of Internet use, however, was positively related to adjustment ($B = .099$, $p = .046$), indicating that more frequent Internet users report higher adjustment than less frequent Internet users.

For partner-specific feelings a similar pattern emerged. Compulsive Internet use, but not frequency of Internet use, was negatively related to feelings of intimacy

Table 2 Cross-Sectional Multilevel Regressions (Time 1)

| | Intercept | Sex | Compulsive Internet Use | Frequency of Internet Use | Interaction |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|---------|-------------------------|---------------------------|-------------|
| General relationship satisfaction | | | | | |
| Adjustment | .326* | -.219** | -.206** | .099* | -.029 |
| Commitment | -.115 | .081 | -.126* | .004 | .012 |
| Frequency of conflict | -.121 | .097 | .188** | -.052 | -.035 |
| Partner-specific feelings | | | | | |
| Intimacy | .033 | -.023 | -.136* | .009 | -.009 |
| Passion | .083 | -.066 | -.129** | .080 | .021 |
| Partner-specific exclusion | -.344* | .249** | .188** | -.022 | -.065 |
| Partner-oriented behavior | | | | | |
| Maintenance behavior | .133 | -.083 | -.039 | .089 | -.058 |
| Disclosure | -.387* | .256** | -.182** | .099 | -.043 |
| Concealment | .245 | -.163 | .213** | -.108* | .009 |

Note: Sex is coded 1 = men and 2 = women.

(* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.)

($B = -.136$, $p = .013$) and passion ($B = -.129$, $p = .007$) and positively to feelings of exclusion ($B = .188$, $p = .001$), indicating that more compulsive Internet users felt less intimate with their partner, less passionate about their partner, and more excluded by their partner. For partner-oriented behavior, compulsive Internet use was negatively associated with disclosure ($B = -.182$, $p = .001$) and positively with concealment ($B = .213$, $p = .000$), indicating that compulsive Internet users, but not frequent Internet users, disclose less to their partners and conceal more information from their partners. Interestingly, frequency of Internet use was negatively related to concealment ($B = -.108$, $p = .046$).

Longitudinal analyses

Internet use predicts relationship quality

To investigate the predictive power of Internet use (both frequency and compulsivity) on relationship quality, we performed residualized lagged analyses (Kenny et al., 2006). We used the same models as described above but predicted each indicator of relationship quality at Time 2, controlling for each indicator of relationship quality at Time 1. Given that these analyses examined effects on Time 2 criteria controlling for Time 1 levels of the criterion, they assess change over time in a given variable. These analyses are challenging because Internet use needs to explain variance in relationship quality above and beyond stability in relationship quality across time, which was high (correlations between indicators at Time 1 and Time 2 ranged from $r = .55$ to $.78$).

The residualized lagged analyses reveal the impact of Internet use on change in relationship quality because they control for Time 1 relationship quality (i.e., Time 1 level of the criterion). As can be seen in Table 3, a surprisingly consistent

Table 3 Residualized Lagged Analyses Predicting Relationship Quality from Internet Use

| | Intercept | Sex | Criterion T1 | Compulsive Internet Use T1 | Frequency of Internet Use T1 | Interaction |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|-------|-----------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------|
| General relationship satisfaction | | | | | | |
| Adjustment | -.035 | .013 | .613** | -.032 | -.034 | .055 |
| Commitment | -.179 | .125 | .650** | .007 | -.019 | .033 |
| Frequency of conflict | -.205 | .136 | .727** | .038 | -.033 | -.038 |
| Partner-specific feelings | | | | | | |
| Intimacy PRQC ^a | -.051 | .041 | .518** | -.117* | .047 | -.004 |
| Passion PRQC ^a | .098 | -.069 | .649** | -.098* | .107** | .006 |
| Partner-specific exclusion | -.213 | .143 | .488** | .112* | .003 | -.002 |
| Partner-oriented behavior | | | | | | |
| Maintenance behavior | -.163 | .115 | .605** | -.091* | .041 | .002 |
| Disclosure | -.266* | .169* | .642** | -.067 | -.029 | .050 |
| Concealment | -.052 | .033 | .752** | .173** | .052 | -.006 |

Note: Sex is coded 1 = men and 2 = women.

^aPerceived Relationship Quality Components Questionnaire (Fletcher et al., 2000).

(* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.)

pattern emerged. For indicators of general satisfaction, compulsive Internet use did not predict change in adjustment ($B = -.032$, $p = .448$), commitment ($B = .007$, $p = .863$), or frequency of conflict ($B = .038$, $p = .337$). For partner-specific feelings, however, it predicted change for all three indicators. Specifically, compulsive Internet use at Time 1 predicted a decrease in intimacy ($B = -.117$, $p = .013$) and passion in the relationship ($B = -.098$, $p = .014$) and an increase in feelings of exclusion ($B = .112$, $p = .018$). It is noteworthy that these effects of compulsive Internet use were observed over the course of a 1-year period and above and beyond preexisting levels of partner-specific feelings and frequency of Internet use. Interestingly, we found that frequency of Internet use was related to an increase in passion in the relationship ($B = .107$, $p = .006$).

For partner-oriented behavior, compulsive Internet use predicted a deterioration of the relationship quality. Specifically, compulsive Internet use at Time 1 predicted a decrease in maintenance behaviors ($B = -.091$, $p = .043$) and an increase in concealment toward the partner ($B = .173$, $p = .000$). It did not significantly affect changes in disclosure toward the partner ($B = -.067$, $p = .126$). Again the negative impact of compulsive Internet use on partner-oriented behaviors emerged above and beyond stability effects and frequency of Internet use.

Relationship quality predicts Internet use

We reasoned that compulsive Internet use has deleterious effects for relationships because it decreases relationship quality over time. Although this reasoning is plausible, and the above reported analyses provide support for it, we cannot rule out that a bad relationship increases Internet use over time, for example, because people want to escape the unhappy relationship (Vorderer et al., 2004) or use the Internet to distract themselves and change their mood (Zillmann, 1988). We conducted a series of residualized lagged analyses to examine the plausibility of this suggestion by regressing compulsive Internet use at Time 2 on sex, frequency of Internet use, compulsive Internet use at Time 1, and each indicator of relationship quality separately. We conducted similar analyses for frequency of Internet use in which we controlled for frequency of Internet use at Time 1 and compulsive Internet use at Time 1. No effects were found and none of the analyses yielded support for the suggestion that relationship quality influences later Internet use.

Partner effects

Cross-sectional analyses

We also conducted analyses to explore whether people’s Internet use affected their partner’s relationship well-being. To this end, we regressed Partner B’s relationship quality on Partner A’s Internet use. As can be seen in Table 4, no effects of compulsive Internet use, frequency of Internet use, or their interaction emerged.

Table 4 Multilevel Regression Analyses Examining Partner Effects of Internet Use (Time 1)

| | Partner A | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|---------|-------------------------|---------------------------|-------------|
| | Intercept | Sex | Compulsive Internet Use | Frequency of Internet Use | Interaction |
| Partner B | | | | | |
| General relationship satisfaction | | | | | |
| Adjustment | -.140 | .092 | .086 | -.067 | .050 |
| Commitment | .299 | -.208* | -.082 | -.034 | .077 |
| Frequency of conflict | -.590 | -.005 | -.020 | -.002 | .015 |
| Partner-specific feelings | | | | | |
| Intimacy | .114 | -.082 | -.028 | .029 | .008 |
| Passion | .014 | -.001 | .029 | -.005 | -.058 |
| Partner-specific exclusion | .079 | -.042 | .097 | .015 | -.020 |
| Partner-oriented behavior | | | | | |
| Maintenance behavior | .026 | -.010 | -.023 | .059 | -.066 |
| Disclosure | .636** | -.427** | -.054 | .022 | -.040 |
| Concealment | -.576** | .381** | .067 | .024 | .023 |

Note: Sex is coded 1 = men and 2 = women.

(**p* < .05. ***p* < .01.)

Table 5 Residualized Lagged Analyses Predicting Relationship Quality in Partner A from Internet Use of Partner B

| | Partner A | | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|-----------------------------|--------|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------|
| | Intercept | Criterion T1 (Partner A) | Sex | Compulsive Internet Use T1 | Frequency of Internet Use T1 | Interaction |
| Partner B | | | | | | |
| General relationship satisfaction | | | | | | |
| Adjustment | .066 | .771** | -.046 | -.043 | .020 | -.042 |
| Commitment | .183 | .644** | -.112 | .008 | .024 | -.023 |
| Frequency of conflict | .225 | .762** | -.130 | -.023 | .078* | -.039 |
| Partner-specific feelings | | | | | | |
| Intimacy PRQC ^a | .191 | .534** | -.129 | -.041 | -.002 | .002 |
| Passion PRQC ^a | -.032 | .660** | .019 | -.012 | -.049 | .005 |
| Partner-specific exclusion | .192 | .495** | -.126 | -.036 | -.019 | -.010 |
| Partner-oriented behavior | | | | | | |
| Maintenance behavior | .290* | .618** | -.212* | -.063 | -.033 | .018 |
| Disclosure | .290* | .651** | -.207* | -.015 | -.007 | -.004 |
| Concealment | -.116 | .778** | .068 | .049 | .024 | .004 |

Note: Sex is coded 1 = men and 2 = women.

^aPerceived Relationship Quality Components Questionnaire (Fletcher et al., 2000).

(* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.)

Longitudinal analyses

To explore whether Partner B's Internet use affected change in Partner A's relationship quality, we conducted residualized lagged analyses by regressing Partner A's relationship quality at Time 2 on Partner B's gender, compulsive Internet use, frequency of Internet use, the interaction of compulsive and frequent Internet use, and Partner A's relationship quality at Time 1. As can be seen in Table 5, only one effect emerged. Partner B's frequency of Internet use was associated with an increase in Partner A's frequency of conflict ($B = .078, p = .044$).

Discussion

The overarching goal of this project was to illuminate how Internet use and relationship quality affect each other. The findings indicate that compulsive Internet use, rather than the frequency of Internet use, is negatively related to all aspects of

relationship quality assessed in our study. For relationship satisfaction, compulsive Internet users reported lower adjustment and commitment and a greater frequency of conflict. For partner-specific feelings, compulsive Internet users reported lower feelings of intimacy and passion and more feelings of exclusion than less compulsive Internet users. Finally, for partner-oriented behavior, compulsive Internet users report more concealment and less disclosure.

One important goal of this research was to examine the development of compulsive Internet use and relationship quality among adults in a longitudinal design. The longitudinal design allowed us to examine whether a factor assessed at an earlier time point predicts changes in a criterion at a later time point, thus allowing for conclusions about the directionality of the link between Internet use and relationship quality. The results revealed a clear pattern suggesting that compulsive Internet use decreases relationship quality: Compulsive Internet use predicted change in partner-specific feelings and behavior over time. Specifically, more compulsive Internet users reported less intimacy and passion and more partner-specific exclusion over time. They also reported engaging in less maintenance behavior and more concealment over time. We found no effects for disclosure and the indicators of general relationship satisfaction. Importantly, we found no support for the suggestion that relationship quality affects compulsive Internet use. Thus, our results suggest that compulsive Internet use has deleterious effects on relationship quality.

Another goal of this research was to disentangle the effects of frequency of Internet use and compulsive Internet use and to examine their unique and combined effects on relationship quality. Surprisingly, the few effects of frequency of Internet use we found suggest that frequent Internet use for private reasons is conducive to relationship quality. Specifically, more frequent Internet use was associated with greater adjustment and less concealment from the partner. Similarly, in the longitudinal analyses, we found that frequency of Internet use was related to an increase in passion in the relationship. No significant interaction effects between compulsive Internet use and frequency of Internet use emerged. These results suggest that it is neither the frequency of the Internet use that is problematic for close relationships nor the combination of frequency and compulsive Internet use but uniquely the compulsive use of the Internet that is problematic for relationships. The reason why frequent Internet use is positively related to relationship quality, while compulsive Internet use is negatively related to relationship quality is still unclear. It may be the case that when using the Internet for private reasons, partners use the Internet together or use the Internet to communicate with each other. Future research needs to examine these possibilities and identify the mechanisms that explain why frequent Internet use for private reasons is positively related to relationship quality.

One of the innovative aspects of this research is the dyadic nature of the sample. By simultaneously considering Internet users and their partners, this project allowed us to examine whether Internet use affects relationship quality through partner effects. No partner effects emerged in the cross-sectional analyses, and only one effect occurred in the longitudinal analysis: Partner B's frequency of Internet use

was associated with an increase in Partner A's frequency of conflict. The results of the cross-partner analyses suggest that the negative effects of (compulsive) Internet use on relationship quality occur mainly within the individual. The partner who compulsively uses the Internet experiences a decrease in relationship quality over time. We found no evidence for the idea that compulsive Internet use by one partner diminishes the quality of the relationship for the other partner. It seems that a person's compulsive Internet use affects his or her perception of their own feelings and behavior toward the partner. They perceive their own relationship satisfaction and feelings and behavior toward their partner as less positive over time.

Different processes may explain these effects. Relationships are based on cognitive, affective, and behavioral interdependence between partners (Reis & Rusbult, 2004; Rusbult, Arriaga, & Agnew, 2001). Both partners affect each other, their thoughts, feelings, goals, behavior, and well-being. This interdependence promotes a variety of prorelationship behaviors that are necessary to maintain and persist in the relationship (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998). Because people who are compulsive Internet users mostly use the Internet independently of their partner, they can be assumed to experience less interdependence with their partners over time. Also, compulsive Internet users "prefer" to spend time on the Internet rather than with their partner. Although giving priority to the Internet may not be a deliberate choice, given the addictive features of compulsive Internet use, it may inform compulsive Internet users on how they feel about their partner. Self-perception theory proposes that people infer their own attitudes and beliefs from observing their own behavior as if they were a third party (Bem, 1972). It is possible that when compulsive Internet users perceive themselves preferring to stay on the Internet rather than spending the time with their partner, they infer that they have less positive feelings for their partner and that they are less willing to invest in their partner and in their relationship.

One might wonder whether compulsive Internet use affects intimate relationships in other ways than other technology-related compulsive behaviors, most particularly watching television. Like Internet use, television watching has been described as an addiction for some people (e.g., McIlwraith, 1998). However, there are distinct differences between consuming these two types of media (Andreassen, 2001), and we believe there are several reasons why compulsive Internet use may have more detrimental effects on relationship well-being than compulsive television watching. First, while being online is often a social activity in itself (e.g., chatting), these social interactions typically do not occur with someone in the same location. The Internet connects people in different locations but can easily disconnect people in the same room (Kraut et al., 1998). Although watching television is also becoming a more solitary activity (Andreassen, 2001), for people in the same location, it is still much more of a social activity than being online.

Second, the Internet is ubiquitous, much more so than television. We use the Internet for watching the news, for reading work-related e-mail, for booking a vacation, for buying concert tickets, and for looking up an address and the shortest way to get there. When online, for any reason, all of the Internet's temptations are

present, and one may easily end up doing something entirely different than one was planning to do. Because it is almost impossible to completely avoid using the Internet, regulating one's online behavior is complicated and challenging.

Third, online content is qualitatively different from television content. For example, while there is typically no pornography on regular television channels, online porn is abundant, often free, and easy to find. The Internet is used for social activities, for gambling, and for many other activities that may easily spin out of control. The role of the user, when consuming this content online, is much more active, while at the same time, he or she experiences fewer distractions such as television commercials. This makes Internet use more involving than watching television and its effects on the user are presumably more intense (Andreassen, 2001).

Strengths and limitations

Before closing, we should acknowledge several strengths and limitations of this work. One limitation is that we have not provided evidence for the proposed mechanisms through which Internet use and relationship quality might be related. In this research, we have found evidence pointing in the direction of a path from compulsive Internet use to a decrease in relationship quality. Mechanisms we proposed for this link were a decrease in time spent with the partner, perception of diminished responsiveness, heightened awareness of available attractive alternatives, and the use of the Internet for sexual purposes. Further research should focus on these mechanisms, using both longitudinal and experimental designs.

Further research should examine the possible role of personality traits such as trait anxiety or depression. Both traits are positively related to compulsive Internet use (Van den Eijnden et al., 2008; Young & Rogers, 1998) and may make people evaluate their relationship more negatively than is actually warranted (Watson & Pennebaker, 1989). Therefore, trait anxiety or depression may play an important role in the onset of the effects of compulsive Internet use on relationship well-being.

Although our results suggest that compulsive Internet use is the cause for decreases in relationship quality, the opposite might still be true. Our research was conducted among newlywed couples and covered a period of 1 year. Although we assessed relationship quality with a large variety of indicators, and these indicators showed sufficient variance, it is possible that relationships were too happy to cause escapism through Internet use. In the same vein, it is possible that Internet use accelerates relationship deterioration. For example, as a result of conflict and disagreement in the relationship, partners may become more sensitive to or perhaps discover excessive Internet use. Furthermore, it is possible that Internet use is more susceptible to short-term variations in relationship quality, such as, for example, when partners exit a disagreement or try to distract themselves from stressful interactions with their partner.

Finally, although we alluded to the fact that the effects of (compulsive) Internet use may vary across the type of Internet use, we have not addressed the question of what it is that husbands and wives are doing on the Internet and how this matters for the relationship. For example, Valkenburg and Peter (2007) showed that using the Internet to communicate with strangers has negative effects on adolescent well-being but

that these negative effects do not generalize to using the Internet for communication as such. Meerkerk et al. (2006) showed that using the Internet for erotica is related to compulsive Internet use, but their research also showed that these effects do not generalize to using the Internet for surfing, finding information, or writing and reading e-mail. Several other studies have shown that the type of Internet use matters and should thus be taken into account in future research on Internet use and relationship quality.

Several strengths of this work should also be acknowledged. The findings are noteworthy in that they rest on data obtained from both partners in ongoing relationships. Also, the sample size was considerable. Importantly, all partners shared a household, thereby making Internet use a relevant behavior in the relationship. Finally, the measures we used tapped a variety of different aspects of relationship quality, including measures assessing both positive and negative aspects of relationship quality. The convergence of findings, using diverse measurements, promotes confidence in our findings regarding compulsive Internet use and relationship quality.

Conclusions

This work investigated the role of (compulsive) Internet use in relationship quality. We advanced predictions regarding the directionality of the influence of Internet use and relationship quality, and we distinguished between frequency of Internet use for private reasons and compulsive Internet use. Using longitudinal data from a considerable sample of married couples, we observed consistent support for the link between compulsive Internet use and all aspects of relationship quality. Importantly, we found that compulsive Internet use predicts decreases in partner-specific feelings and behaviors. This research thereby enhances our understanding of the impact of new technologies on close relationships. Additionally, it highlights the need to investigate how new technologies may affect people's psychosocial well-being and how the use of new media sometimes spirals out of control and becomes compulsive. Bargh (2002) rightfully stressed the need to study the mechanisms between being on the Internet and possible outcomes (see also Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). Our findings extend these suggestions to study the mechanisms underlying compulsive and frequent Internet use and relational well-being. Studying the antecedents and consequences of Internet use within the context of relationships can shed light on the microdynamics of how new media affects well-being and allows us to explore its social effects.

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Note

- 1 Overall, only five couples that participated in the second wave failed to participate in the third data collection. We used full information maximum likelihood (Enders & Bandalos, 2001) procedures to estimate models with missing data. Across waves, the large majority

of couples (>75% had no missing values). The pattern of missingness was also completely or close to completely at random (abbreviation MCAR), with the exception that when men were no longer participating, wives' data were also more likely to be missing Little's (1988) MCAR test. Because our data are MCAR, we can obtain consistent results with missing data by performing the analyses we would have used had there been no missing data. We hence used maximum likelihood estimates of the parameters computed as though the missing data had been filled in.

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互联网沉溺对婚姻的后果：对新婚夫妇的纵向研究

【摘要：】

本文探讨沉溺互联网和婚姻幸福的关联。我们认为二者呈负相关，并探讨了沉溺互联网是否能够预测婚姻幸福，或反之。本文通过在对190对新婚夫妇之间进行的两个阶段的前瞻性调查研究了沉溺网络与婚姻幸福之间的关系。结果表明：（一）沉溺互联网能够预测婚姻幸福，而反之无效。（二）这种效应存在于夫妻内部而不是夫妻之间。（三）互联网的使用频率可能与婚姻幸福呈正相关。本文就沉溺互联网和婚姻质量关系的潜在机制进行了讨论。

Les conséquences relationnelles d'un usage compulsif d'Internet : une étude longitudinale auprès de nouveaux mariés

L'article examine les liens entre l'usage compulsif d'Internet et le bien-être conjugal. Nous suggérons que ces deux éléments sont inversement proportionnels et nous cherchons à savoir si l'usage compulsif d'Internet prédit le bien-être conjugal ou si c'est plutôt l'inverse qui se produit. La relation entre l'utilisation compulsive d'Internet et le bien-être conjugal est testée dans une étude prospective à deux vagues auprès de 190 couples récemment mariés. Les résultats laissent entendre a) que l'utilisation compulsive d'Internet prédit le bien-être conjugal alors que l'inverse ne se produit pas, b) que cet effet s'applique à l'individu même et non à son partenaire et c) que la fréquence de l'utilisation d'Internet peut être proportionnelle au bien-être conjugal. Les résultats sont commentés en regard des mécanismes sous-tendant le lien entre l'utilisation compulsive d'Internet et la qualité de la relation.

Die Folgen zwanghafter Internetnutzung für partnerschaftliche Beziehungen: Eine Langzeitstudie unter frisch verheirateten Paaren

Dieser Artikel beleuchtet, wie zwanghafte Internetnutzung und eheliches Wohlbefinden miteinander zusammenhängen. Wir vermuten, dass sie negativ zusammenhängen und untersuchen, ob zwanghafte Internetnutzung eheliches Wohlbefinden vorhersagt oder umgekehrt. Die Beziehung zwischen zwanghafter Internetnutzung und ehelichem Wohlbefinden wurde anhand einer zweiwelligen Studie mit 190 frisch verheirateten Paaren untersucht. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass (a) zwanghafte Internetnutzung eheliches Wohlbefinden prognostiziert und nicht umgekehrt, (b) dass dies ein singulärer und kein partnerübergreifender Effekt ist, und (c) dass die Häufigkeit der Internetnutzung möglicherweise positiv mit ehelichem Wohlbefinden zusammenhängt. Die Ergebnisse werden mit Blick auf die Mechanismen die dem Zusammenhang zwischen zwanghafter Internetnutzung und Beziehungsqualität zu Grunde liegen, diskutiert.

Relational Consequences of Compulsive Internet Use: A Longitudinal Study Among Newlyweds

강박적인 인터넷사용의 상대적 결과들: 신혼부부들 사이의 종적연구

요약

본 논문은 어떻게 강박적인 인터넷 사용과 결혼생활만족도가 상호간에 연계되어있는가를 연구한 것이다. 우리는 이들 두가지 요소들이 부정적으로 연계되어 있다고 보았으며, 강박적인 인터넷사용이 결혼의 만족도를 예측할 수 있는지, 또는 결혼의 만족도가 강박적인 인터넷사용을 예측할 수 있는지를 조사하였다. 강박적인 인터넷사용과 결혼 만족도 사이의 관계는 190 쌍의 신혼부부들사이의 2주파 전망으로 테스트 하였다. 결과들은 1) 강박적인 인터넷 사용은 결혼의 만족도를 예측하였으나, 그 반대는 성립하지 않았으며, 2) 이러한 결과는 파트너 효과내에서 나타났다. 그리고 3) 인터넷 사용의 빈도는 결혼의 만족도와 긍정적으로 관계되어 있을지 모른다는 것을 보여주었다. 결과들은 강박적인 인터넷 사용과 관계 질 사이의 연계를 강조하는 구조라는 측면에서 논의되었다.