How Internet use may affect our relationships

**Characteristics of Internet use and personal and relational wellbeing**

According to the statistics the Internet plays a big role in our daily lives and possibly in our relationships as well. In the Netherlands, almost everybody has an Internet connection, and we spend a lot of time online. Research shows that Internet use can have both positive and negative effects on social relationships. However, much of the research is focused on adolescents, and what is missing is research about Internet use and romantic relationship in adults. Furthermore, it is important to take into account not just frequency of Internet use, but also how the Internet is used. For example, when examining the effects of relational and sexual satisfaction and the use of sexually explicit Internet material, it is important to take into account the main reason for use; alone and during masturbation, or together with a partner during sex. Furthermore, more and more research shows that compulsive Internet use is a growing problem and that compulsive Internet use better predicts negative consequences than Internet frequency. Previous research shows that compulsive Internet use predicts a decrease in relationship quality indicators, such as passion, intimacy, exclusion and concealment. This dissertation investigates the mechanisms through which Internet use affects romantic relationships, and takes characteristics of Internet use into account when researching these effects.

Previous research showed that compulsive Internet use and wellbeing are negatively related. In the second chapter we investigate the directionality of these effects, and extend the literature by focusing on adults rather than adolescents, in a five wave prospective survey among married couples. The results provide evidence that is more consistent with the suggestion that compulsive Internet use affects wellbeing negatively in adults, than with the suggestion that personal wellbeing affects compulsive Internet use. Compulsive Internet use predicts an increase in depression, loneliness, and stress over time. Although in the cross-sectional analyses we found a negative relationship between self-esteem and compulsive Internet use, longitudinally, no significant relationship occurred. Previous cross-sectional studies also show that self-esteem and compulsive Internet use were negatively related. Possible explanations for the absence of long term effects could be for example that adults’ self-esteem is most stable during adulthood. It is possible that because self-esteem among
adults is relatively stable, it is less susceptible to the long-term effects of CIU. Compulsive Internet use and happiness were reciprocally negatively related over time: compulsive Internet use predicted a decrease in happiness over time, and happiness predicted a decrease in compulsive Internet use over time. This result might imply that happiness functions as a buffer against developing compulsive Internet use.

In the third chapter we investigate compulsive Internet use and trust between partners. To be a trustworthy relationship partner, people need self-control. People use behavioural cues of others to gauge their level of self-control. Compulsive Internet use could be such a cue. In chapter three, we examine whether perceived compulsive Internet use affects perceived self-control and trust between partners. In an experiment we manipulated compulsive Internet use through descriptions of strangers, and found that participants judged strangers who described themselves as compulsive Internet users to have less self-control and trusted them less than strangers who described themselves as frequent, but non-compulsive, Internet users. Using data from a longitudinal dyadic survey allowed us to extend these results to romantic relationship partners. Furthermore, the longitudinal survey showed that low self-control does indeed increase compulsive Internet use. This illustrates that using compulsive Internet use as a cue for self-control could be a good strategy.

In chapter four, we investigate another mechanism through which compulsive Internet use could affect relationships. Perceived exclusion by the partner is a threat to the foundation of a loving and trusting relationship, and it decreases relationship quality. People are sensitive to signs of exclusion, and can detect even subtle cues. A lack of responsiveness and attention functions as such a cue. An online survey and a longitudinal dyadic survey showed that the more people perceive their partner to exhibit signs of compulsive Internet use, the less they feel that their partner is responsive to their needs, concerns and goal strivings. In turn, this perception of their partner’s (lack of) responsiveness serves as a cue for exclusion by their partner. Furthermore, the longitudinal survey showed that compulsive Internet users indeed behave less responsive to their partners over time.

In chapter five, we investigated the directionality of the relationship between use of sexually explicit Internet material and relationship quality. Sexuality is an important part of romantic relationships, and there are indications that people in relationships also use sexually explicit Internet material. Multiple studies have shown the negative relationship between use of sexually explicit Internet materials and relationship quality, however, the directionality of these effects remains unclear. Using the longitudinal dyadic survey, we found that within husbands, relationship adjustment predicted a decline in sexually explicit Internet material use, and sexually explicit Internet material use predicted a decline in relationship adjustment over time. Within wives, neither relationship satisfaction nor sexual satisfaction was related to the use of sexually explicit Internet materials over time. Across partners, husbands’ sexual satisfaction predicts a decrease in wives’ use of sexually explicit Internet materials over time. The results are discussed in terms of men’s and women’s primary reason for use of sexually explicit
Internet materials: men's primary reason for use of sexually explicit Internet materials is to use
is as stimulating material during masturbation, while women's primary reason for use of the
materials is to use it as stimulating material in the lovemaking with their partner.

The research in this dissertation shows that investigating the directionality of effects through
longitudinal research can paint a different picture than cross-sectional analyses might. The
research also shows that the effects of Internet use are not just apparent in the Internet user
him/herself, but that interpersonal effects can exist as well. Since the start of the longitudinal
dyadic survey among newlyweds in 2006, a lot has changed in our Internet use. More people
now have a high-speed Internet connection, the introduction of mobile Internet and the fast
adoption of smartphones made continuous Internet connectivity a reality, and the fast growth
in social media and social network sites has made digital media a part of how we interact
with friends, family and acquaintances. The research from this dissertation underlines the
importance of research on the influence of our changing use of the Internet on personal and
relational wellbeing, and our personal relationships.