HOW INTERNET USE MAY AFFECT OUR RELATIONSHIPS
Chapter 1

General Introduction
The consumption of media is central to people's lives, and reports indicate a continuous increase (Okdie et al., 2014). This is especially true for peoples' use of the Internet. In the Netherlands, almost all households have Internet connections (95%), and in households of couples with children this even rises to complete (100%) Internet penetration (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2013a). Research by TNS-NIPO showed that in 2012 the 12.5 million Dutch people with an Internet connection each spend on average 69 minutes a day online (TNS NIPO, 2013). More than a quarter (25.7%) of the time we spend using media consists of consumption of multiple media sources simultaneously, for example, playing an online game on a mobile phone while watching TV (SPOT, 2012).

We use the Internet on many different devices. Personal computers and laptops are most frequently used (88%), but mobile phones (37%) and tablets (18%) are also used often (TNS NIPO, 2013). Couples with children report the highest use of mobile devices: for example, 62% of couples with children have a tablet (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2013b). People use the Internet at many different locations, amongst which at work (45%), at other people’s houses (29%) and while travelling (28%), but most overwhelmingly people us the Internet at home (92%) (TNS NIPO, 2013).

Given the ubiquity of the Internet in people’s lives, it is not surprising that during the last 20 years a lot of the academic literature has focused on how Internet affects people’s lives and their social relationships. Most of these studies have focused on adolescents. While there are good reasons to research Internet use effects on adolescent social relationships, there are also good reasons to research Internet use effects on adult social relationships, in particular romantic relationships. For example, individuals with high levels of Facebook use are far more likely to experience Facebook-related conflict with their partners, which then may cause negative relationship outcomes including emotional and physical cheating, breakup, and divorce (Clayton, Nagurney, & Smith, 2013). Furthermore, although online and mobile communication can be used to maintain contact with the spouse to facilitate family/household coordination, people generally report that mobile communication makes work-related stress worse and increases work-family conflict, because they feel they have to respond to work-related messages even outside of work (Turel, Serenko, & Bontis, 2011).

The numbers and studies described above show that Internet plays a big role in our daily lives, and that there are reasons to suspect that Internet use might affect adult romantic
relationships. The present dissertation aims to explore how the increasing use of the Internet affects marital relationships. Specifically, it examines whether and how Internet use affects how close relationship partners relate to each other and how it affects their personal and relational wellbeing.

**Internet Use and Social Relationships**

The potential advantages and disadvantages of Internet use have been the subject of a heated debate ever since the beginning of its widespread use in the mid 90’s. While some researchers highlight the benefits of Internet access, such as the ability to link people and places all over the world within seconds (e.g., Valkenburg & Peter, 2009a) and they use the Internet for social interaction more often than adults do. This article discusses the state of the literature on the consequences of online communication technologies (e.g., instant messaging), others emphasize its downsides, among others the idea that Internet use distracts from paying attention to people in one’s immediate physical social surroundings (e.g., Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001).

Early research on the social consequences of Internet use provided preliminary support for the so-called *reduction hypothesis*, which states that online communication hinders the development of meaningful social relationships (Kraut, Patterson, Lundmark, Kiesler, Mukopadhyay, & Scherlis, 1998; Locke, 1998). In a study among new Internet users, Kraut et al. (1998) found decreases in communication with family members, decreases in the size of participants’ social networks, and increased depression and loneliness within two years after the families got connected to the Internet. To explain their findings, which held mainly for their adolescent participants, the authors speculated that adolescents’ heavy use of the Internet for online communication led them to forsake strong ties with offline friends and family for weak ties with strangers online. However, in a follow-up study three years later, the negative effects of Internet use had dissipated (Kraut, Kiesler, Boneva, Cummings, Helgeson, & Crawford, 2002). Gross (2004) explains the difference in results in these studies (Kraut et al., 1998; Kraut et al., 2002) by describing changes in the way the Internet was used. Over the course of the two studies (Kraut et al., 1998; Kraut et al., 2002), more people got an Internet connection. Therefore, adolescents were able to connect to their offline friends online. In the beginning of this century, online communication shifted from chat rooms to instant messaging, and from communication with strangers to communication with friends and family. The increased possibility of communicating with friends and family explains why Internet use is no longer associated with declines in communication with family members and decreases in social network size (Gross, 2004).

More recent studies confirm that different Internet activities influence later relationship quality differently. One study followed adolescents over the course of one year and found that using instant messaging was positively associated with most aspects of romantic relationships and best friendship quality, while visiting chat rooms and using the Internet to play games and
for general entertainment predicted decreases in relationship quality with best friends (Blais, Craig, Pepler, & Connolly, 2008). Valkenburg and Peter (2007) found that, among adolescents, instant messaging, which they mostly use to communicate with existing friends, positively predicted 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 than face-to-face communication or communication through other media (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009a, b; Walther, 1996). Because online communication offers reduced visual, auditory, and contextual cues, adolescents are less concerned about how others perceive them, feel fewer inhibitions in disclosing information and disclose more. Yet other researchers suggest that although 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, people will still want to communicate face-to-face because the Internet lacks the richness of cues that face-to-face contact has (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Howard, Rainie & Jones, 2001; Wellman et al., 2001).

Internet use and its impact on social relationships thus seems to depend on the type of online activities. When Internet use reduces the time spent on communicating with friends and family, it may have negative effects on social relationships. However, when the Internet is used as a medium to communicate with friends and family, Internet use may facilitate good social relationships. Most of these conclusions about Internet use and social relationships are based on studies among adolescents. In the next paragraph we will describe why there are good reasons to examine how Internet use affects adult social relationships.

Internet Use and Adult Romantic Relationships
Most studies about Internet use and social relationships focused on adolescents, because in the early days of the Internet, adolescents were seen as the defining users of the Internet (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009a). They spent more time online, and used the Internet for social interactions more often than adults. However, more recent research showed that, at least in the Netherlands, the division of time spent on specific Internet activities among adults and adolescents has changed (SPOT, 2012). Adults spend more time on certain Internet activities than adolescents (e.g., sending messages using the Internet, using e-mail, surfing the web and playing (interactive) games on a game console). In other categories adults and adolescents spend an equal amount of time on online activities (e.g., playing a game using a mobile phone). There are good reasons to investigate Internet use and adolescent social relationships, for example because adolescent relationships are subject to more developmental change, and are therefore more vulnerable to deleterious influences than adult relationships (Englund, Levy, Hyson, & Sroufe, 2000). However, there are also good reasons to examine Internet use and adult social and romantic relationships. There are indicators that Internet use affects adult’s romantic relationships, for example because Facebook use predicts Facebook-related conflict, and in turn negative relationship outcomes (Clayton, Nagurney, & Smith, 2013).
Furthermore, adults are the largest group of Internet users in the Netherlands (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2013c). Therefore, there is a need to examine the relationship between Internet use and adults’ romantic relationships.

Having social and romantic relationships, and especially marital relationships, has been shown to provide health benefits, including lower morbidity and mortality (Braithwaite, Delevi, & Fincham, 2010; House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988). The quality of the relationship might be even more important than the quantity: single individuals report better health than unhappily married individuals (Holt-Lunstad, Birmingham, & Jones, 2008). Because relationship quality is important for physical health, it is important to investigate which factors influence relationship quality. One of these may be how relationship partners use the Internet. Therefore, in addition to studying the effects of Internet use on adolescents’ social relationships, it is also important to study the effects of Internet use on adults’ romantic relationships quality.

**The need for adult romantic relationship-specific research**

There are several reasons to believe the outcomes of research about adolescent social relationships and Internet use may not directly translate to the relationship between adult romantic relationships and Internet use. A clear example is that adolescents differ from adults developmentally. Emotional stability tends to increase across the adult’s life span (Brose, Scheibe, & Schmiedek, 2012) and self-esteem stability tends to increase gradually throughout adulthood (Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005; Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2003). Social skills change as development proceeds. As individuals get older, new social skills emerge: children and adolescents gain more skills and abilities, such as leadership skills, and develop more complex ways of organizing their behavior (Englund et al., 2000). Social skills and self-esteem are relevant when investigating Internet use and social relationships among adolescents, because research shows that emotionally unstable adolescents and adolescents with low self-esteem may develop a preference for online over offline social interactions. They experience this as a safer way of expressing themselves than, for example, face-to-face interaction, because in comparison, online communication offers reduced visual, auditory, and contextual cues (Caplan, 2003; 2006). Adolescents who lack social skills are especially likely to prefer online social interaction over face-to-face communication, and there are indications that online social interactions can help them establish online friendships and receive emotional support (e.g., Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2003; Shaw & Gant, 2002). Because adolescents and adults differ developmentally, it is unclear whether we might expect similar effects of Internet use on social relationships for adults as are found for adolescents. For example, because adults usually have higher self-esteem and better social skills (Englund et al., 2000), their online communication may supplement offline communication, and therefore strengthen social bonds and personal wellbeing. Adolescents, who usually have lower self-esteem and less social skills, might use online communication to replace offline communication, because online communication is perceived as a safer way to express oneself.
In this case, offline communication replaces offline communication, which is richer in visual, auditory, and contextual cues. If online communication replaces offline communication, social bonds and personal wellbeing might suffer. Therefore, online communication might not have the same effects for adolescents as for adults, which suggests that there is a need to study the effects of Internet use on adult social relationships as well.

Another reason why there is a need to examine Internet use and romantic relationships in adults, is because studies about adolescents typically consider other relationships than romantic relationship. In a study about adolescent romantic relationships, about half of U.S. adolescents reported having had a romantic relationship in the past 18 months, and this percentage increases during the teenage years (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009). Most studies about social effects of Internet use thus inevitably study friend-relationships. Friendships and romantic relationships have distinct characteristics that can be recognized even by young children (Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler, 1999). Friendships are characterized by affiliation (such as companionship), while romantic relationships are characterized by passion (such as infatuation, physical contact and intense emotions) and commitment (such as long term alliance and exclusivity). Because friendships and romantic relationships differ in their characteristics, Internet use might impact friendship and romantic relationships differently, especially when we talk about the long term romantic relationships that many adults are involved in. For example, sharing intimate feelings with someone online may not be a problem in a friendship relationship, while in a romantic relationship it might violate expectations of exclusivity (Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler, 1999). This underlines the need for research about Internet use and romantic relationships in addition to research on Internet use and friendship relationships.

Friendship relationships and romantic relationships also usually differ contextually: romantic partners cohabit with their partners more often than friends do, which may necessitate research about Internet use and adult romantic relationships specifically. While being online is often a social activity in itself, these social interactions typically do not occur with someone in the same location. The Internet can connect people in different locations, but can easily disconnect people in the same room: Online activities can keep people from engaging with their kin, and the Internet can draw people’s attention away from their immediate physical and social surroundings (Kraut et al., 1998; Wellman et al., 2001; Young & Rodgers, 1998; Yang, Choe, Baity, Lee, & Cho, 2005). Furthermore, cohabiting partners are more likely to perceive their partners’ online behavior, because they share a living space and are thus more often in the vicinity of their partners while they are using (mobile and other) Internet devices. Since Internet use can keep people from engaging with their kin and from paying attention to their immediate social surroundings (Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001), experiencing one’s partner’s Internet use may affect relationships in ways that are different from people who do not cohabit. Contextual differences, as well as developmental differences and differences in characteristics of the type of relationship between social and romantic relationships may thus
necessitate research about Internet use and romantic relationships specifically, in addition to the existing research about Internet use and adolescent relationships.

**Effects of Internet use on romantic relationships**

There are several indications that Internet use can be a disruptive influence on romantic relationships. For example, Nie and Erbring (2000) found that adults who spent more time on the Internet reported spending less time with family and friends. They explained this result by stating that time spent online cannot be spent offline with family and friends. Similarly, Mesch (2006) found that time spent online is positively related to family conflict, especially when the Internet is used for social purposes, such as instant messaging. Furthermore, although online and mobile communication is often used to maintain contact with the spouse to facilitate family/household coordination (Turel et al., 2011), people generally do not report that mobile devices improved their work-home balance. Rather, people report scanning their devices frequently outside of work hours, which typically leads to the decision to respond to some (if not all) of the messages received. In many cases people report that mobile communication made work-related stress worse and increased work-family conflict (Chelsey, 2005; Orlikowski, 2007; Turel et al., 2011; Wajcman, Bittman, Jones, Johnstone, & Brown, 2007).

In addition to the issue of time not being spent in the relationship but on the Internet, online content may also pose a threat to relationship quality. For example, in a sample of undergraduate students, Facebook was positively related to experiencing jealousy on Facebook (Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2009). Christofides et al. (2009) propose that social network sites expose people to information about their partner’s relationships and interactions, which they would not have access to without the help of the social network sites (e.g., photos of the partner standing close to a colleague). The information received through social network sites is often ambiguous and easily misinterpreted (e.g., a photo of the partner standing close to a colleague could be interpreted as if they were flirting, while it could also be that they were merely posing). Therefore, when people use social network sites to monitor their partner’s behavior, they become more jealous and experience less relationship happiness (Clayton et al., 2013; Muise, Christofides, & Desmarais, 2009; Tokunaga, 2011; Utz & Beukeboom, 2011). The jealousy that social network site monitoring creates may cause conflict and negative relationship outcomes including emotional and physical cheating, breakup and divorce, especially because excessive Facebook users are more likely to connect or reconnect with other Facebook users, including previous partners (Clayton et al., 2013). These findings indicate that Internet use might negatively affect relationship quality and functioning among adults.

Media effect studies have a longstanding tradition of examining the negative social effects of new media on the quality of social relationships (e.g., Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Kraut et al., 1998). However, considering that most of the research is cross-sectional, we should not exclude the possibility that poor relationships may also increase Internet use. Different communication
theories provide a framework for this directionality. Escapism theory describes that people may use media content as a mental retreat when they feel uncomfortable or troubled in the real world (Henning & Vorderer, 2001; Vorderer, Klimmt, & Ritterfeld, 2004). If people are in a bad relationship, they may want to escape from that reality more often, and use media content, such as online content, as a way to escape. Mood management theory predicts that people search for media entertainment to get in or maintain a positive mood (Zillmann, 1988). Experiencing negative affect within a relationship may motivate relationship partners to use the Internet to regulate their affective states and to get into a better mood. Thus, there are indicators that Internet use and adult romantic relationship quality may be related in both directions, which stresses the importance of conducting studies that take into account both possible directionalties.

**Characteristics of Internet Use and Romantic Relationships**

When investigating Internet use and romantic relationships, it is important to take Internet use characteristics into account. In this dissertation, characteristics of Internet use relates to how people use the Internet and what they do online. The focus of how people use the Internet in this dissertation lies on compulsive Internet use, and the focus of what people do online lies on sexually explicit Internet material use.

**Compulsive Internet use**

Past research has shown that compulsive Internet use is more indicative of antecedents and consequences of the Internet use than the mere frequency of use (e.g., Kerkhof, Finkenauer & Muusses, 2011; Tokunaga, 2011). An increasing number of academic papers suggests that compulsive Internet use is a problematic development (Meerkerk, 2007). Research indicates that a significant number 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 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). A meta-analysis provided support for the characterization of compulsive Internet use as the loss of control over one's Internet use, rather than a pathology in addiction (Tokunaga & Rains, 2010).

Compulsive Internet use is correlated positively with time spent on the Internet (Tokunaga & Rains, 2010), but it better predicts negative outcomes such as loneliness, depression, poor social skills, social anxiety, emotional instability, and academic and social problems than frequency of Internet use does (for reviews and meta-analyses see Byun et al., 2009, Chou, Condron, & Belland, 2005; Tokunaga & Rains, 2010; Widyanto & Griffith, 2006). Previous research has shown that compulsive Internet use is negatively related to and predicts a decrease in relationship quality (Kerkhof et al., 2011). Compulsive Internet use negatively predicts changes
in intimacy, passion and maintenance behavior over time. It also positively predicts changes in partner-specific exclusion and concealment over time. The literature however does not focus on mechanisms through which compulsive Internet use affects relationship quality in adult romantic relationships. This dissertation will address possible mechanisms through which these effects occur.

Sexually explicit Internet material use

Previous research has suggested that whether people use sexually explicit Internet materials by themselves or together with their partner, may dictate effects on relational and sexual satisfaction in relationships (Bridges & Morokoff, 2011). Sexually explicit Internet material is defined as material that is acquired via the Internet, which depicts sexual activity in obvious and unconcealed ways (Kelley, Dawson, & Musialowski, 1989). Sexually explicit Internet material is easily and seemingly anonymously available on the Internet (Cooper, Scherer, Boies, & Gordon, 1999; Freeman-Longo, 2000), and many people in relationships use sexually explicit Internet material (Bridges & Morokoff, 2011; Olmstead, Negash, Pasley, & Fincham, 2012). Relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction are important components of relationship quality in romantic relationships (Bradbury & Karney, 2010). In romantic relationships specifically, use of sexually explicit Internet materials and relationship and sexual satisfaction have been found to be related (e.g., Bridges & Morokoff, 2011; Olmstead, Negash, Pasley, & Fincham, 2012). Sexually explicit Internet material use by men is negatively related to their relational and sexual satisfaction (Daneback, Traeen, & Månsson, 2009; Maddox, Rhoades, & Markman 2011; Yucel & Gassanov, 2011), while sexually explicit Internet material use by women is positively related to their male partners’ relational and sexual satisfaction (Bridges & Morokoff, 2011; Maddox et al., 2011).

The literature however lacks investigation into long term directionalities of the relationship between sexually explicit Internet material and relational and sexual satisfaction, but instead mostly uses cross-sectional data. This dissertation will address possible long term directionalities of these effects, incorporate gender differences and discuss the findings in terms of their implication for possible mechanisms.

Psychological Mechanisms and Directionalities

Above we described how compulsive Internet use and the use of sexually explicit Internet materials may impact relationship quality. The present dissertation focusses on two important questions regarding the relationship between Internet use and personal and relational wellbeing. Firstly, some of the chapters in this dissertation focus on examining the psychological mechanisms through which compulsive Internet use and relationship quality are related. We study two mechanisms through which perceived partner compulsive Internet use affects perceptions of the partner’s self-control and responsiveness. Secondly, some of the chapters in this dissertation focus on examining the plausibility of the directionality of the
effects. Many of the studies investigating Internet use and personal and relational wellbeing use cross-sectional data. Therefore, they cannot make suggestions about the plausibility of the directionalities of the found relationships. In this dissertation we will use prospective data to gain insight into the plausibility of the directionalities of effects. We investigate the directionalities of the relation between compulsive Internet use and personal wellbeing of the compulsive Internet user among married adults. Also, we investigate the directionalities of the relationship between the use of sexually explicit Internet materials and relational and sexual satisfaction among husbands and wives. Finally, it is important to note that in this dissertation, we not only focus on the effects of Internet use on the Internet user him/herself, but also on the effects on the partner of the Internet user.

**Between Partner Effects**

While some of the studies described above assessed social effects of Internet use (e.g., Kraut et al., 1998), most studies about Internet use and romantic relationships rely on self-reports. However, people in romantic relationships are interdependent (Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). Relationship partners are mutually dependent on one another, and may be emotionally and behaviorally reliant and responsible to each other. There are indications that the technology use of one partner affects the other partner. For example, both Facebook use and mobile work communication increases conflict with the partner (Clayton, Nagurney, & Smith, 2013; Turel, Serenko, & Bontis, 2011). Also, sexually explicit Internet material use by women is positively related to their male partners’ relationship satisfaction (Bridges & Morokoff, 2011). Findings like these stress the importance of including relationship partners when investigating the relationship between compulsive Internet use and romantic relationship wellbeing.

Between partner effects may occur in a cyclical fashion, through partner perceptions. In one study, a mutual cyclical growth model was presented, in which partner perceptions affected the partner’s behavior (Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). In this study, Partner A’s dependence increased Partner A’s commitment, and Partner A’s commitment motivated Partner A’s pro-relationship behavior. Then, Partner A’s pro-relationship behavior increased Partner B’s perception of this behavior, Partner B’s perception of Partner A’s pro-relationship behavior increased Partner B’s trust, and Partner B’s trust made Partner B increasingly willing to become dependent, and so on. Thus, in this study, over the course of a well-functioning, long term relationship, one partner’s behavior was perceived by the other, which in turn affected their evaluation of the partner and the relationship (Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). It is possible that partners also perceive each other’s Internet use (such as compulsive Internet use), and that this affects their perception of the partner and the evaluation of the relationship. In the present dissertation, some possible cyclical between partner-effects are investigated, and there is a focus on the role of partner perceptions in determining the effects of Internet use by one partner on the other partner’s cognitions and emotions about the Internet user and the relationship.
**Focus on married couples**

The research described in this dissertation mainly focuses on intimate relationships among adults, using a sample of married couples. These married couples were followed from about two months after marriage until the fifth year of marriage. Interaction patterns in newlywed couples are still open to change, whereas these patterns become more set when couples have been together for a longer time (Carrere, Buehlman, Gottman, Coan, & Ruckstuhl, 2000). Furthermore, in the first year of marriage, relationship wellbeing is likely to decline (Bradbury & Karney, 2010). The early years of marriage are critical for the development of a stable marriage, and these developments can predict whether couples will divorce or stay together (Carrere et al., 2000). Because relationship quality in newlywed couples is susceptible to changes of the environment, and the development of their relationship during this time is crucial for the further development of their marriage, newlywed couples are especially suited to investigate changes in relationship well-being and Internet use.

**The Present Research**

This dissertation addresses how relationship partners use the Internet and how this relates to their personal and relational wellbeing. The focus of the dissertation is on compulsive Internet use and on the use of sexually explicit Internet material. The research described in this dissertation mainly focuses on intimate relationships among adults, using a sample of married couples.

In the second chapter, we examine the association between compulsive Internet use and personal wellbeing. Compulsive Internet use has often been linked to lower wellbeing, especially among adolescents (Chou, et al., 2005; Widyanto & Griffith, 2006). Yet, questions regarding the directionality of this association remain unanswered, especially among adult married couples (e.g., Armstrong, Phillips, & Saling, 2000; Ha et al., 2007; Sum, Mathews, Hughes, & Campbell, 2008). Chapter 2 aims to shed light on the directionality of the relation between compulsive Internet use and positive and negative wellbeing among married couples. Given that positive and negative indicators are partly independent of one another (Huppert & Whittington, 2003), and psychological wellbeing is considered a multi-dimensional construct, we examine both negative and positive indicators of wellbeing. The chapter also examines associations between one partner's compulsive Internet use and wellbeing, and the other partner's wellbeing.

As described above, compulsive Internet use has been shown to predict different indicators of relationship quality (Kerkhof et al., 2011). Questions remain however, as to whether and how compulsive Internet use influences the partner's relationship wellbeing. In two chapters of this dissertation (Chapter 3 and Chapter 4), we investigate partner effects of compulsive Internet use, and especially the social and psychological processes that underlie these effects.

In Chapter 3, we investigate the interplay between self-control, compulsive Internet use, and trust. Previous research (Righetti & Finkenauer, 2011) shows that people need self-control to
be a trustworthy partner, and that people infer others' level of self-control from behavioral cues. This perception influences how much they trust others. In the chapter, we investigate whether compulsive Internet use provides such cues. To investigate this mechanism, we look both at stranger judgments and the interpersonal judgments made within newlywed couples. Furthermore, we examine the role self-control plays in the development of compulsive Internet use. In the existing literature compulsive Internet use is conceptualized as a deficient self-regulatory process, which undermines Internet users' ability to monitor, judge, and adjust their own behavior (Kim, Namkoong, Ku & Kim, 2008; LaRose, 2001; LaRose, Eastin, & Gregg, 2001; LaRose, Lin, & Eastin, 2003; LaRose, Mastro & Eastin, 2001). This suggests that low self-control could contribute to developing compulsive Internet use. So far, the relationship between CIU and trait self-control has not been tested, and Chapter 3 aims to investigate this relation and to further our understanding of the compulsive Internet use concept.

While the Internet has the capability to connect people who are at different locations, it may also take attention away from people in one's direct physical and social surrounding. Previous research shows that people are sensitive to signs that they are being excluded, and can detect even subtle cues of exclusion (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Kerr & Levine, 2008; Pickett & Gardner, 2005). Some of these cues include not responding or attending to the other (Kerr & Levine, 2008). In Chapter 4, we examine whether and how compulsive Internet use affects perceptions of responsiveness, which might in turn affect perceptions of exclusion by the partner.

In Chapter 5, we zoom in on one particular Internet activity: Sexually explicit Internet material use. Several studies have established both positive and negative relations between the use of sexually explicit Internet material and relationship quality. Although the studies suggest that use of sexually explicit Internet material affects relationship quality, only a few studies can weigh in on the directionality of the relation between relationship quality (amongst which relational and sexual satisfaction) and sexually explicit Internet material use (Lambert, Negash, Stillman, Olmstead, & Fincham, 2012; Peter & Valkenburg, 2009). The studies show that in young adult romantic relationships, higher consumption of sexually explicit materials was related to lower commitment and higher infidelity (Lambert, Negash, Stillman, Olmstead, & Fincham, 2012), and that adolescents' sexually explicit Internet material use reduced their sexual satisfaction over time (Peter & Valkenburg, 2009). The studies use longitudinal and experimental data, however, they do not take the partner's relationship quality into account. In Chapter 5, we examine the directionality of the relation between sexually explicit Internet material use and relational and sexual satisfaction among newlywed couples. We look both at effects of sexually explicit Internet material use on the relationship quality of the person who uses the sexually explicit Internet materials, as well as on the partner of the person who uses the sexually explicit Internet materials. Furthermore, we discuss the findings in terms of the mechanisms that may underlie them.

Finally, in Chapter 6, the general discussion, we discuss the general implications of the findings reported in this dissertation, describe how we have furthered the research about
characteristics of Internet use on personal and relational wellbeing, and address important questions that remain or have come to light. We discuss possible future directions of research in this area.

To sum up, we believe that this dissertation extends the literature in some important ways. First, whereas much prior research has focused on the effects of Internet use on the social life of adolescents, the research reported in this dissertation focuses on the effects of Internet use on adults and adult romantic relationships, especially newlywed relationships. Second, the dissertation focuses on how people are using the Internet, specifically, compulsivity of the Internet use, and what they do online, specifically, use of sexually explicit Internet materials. Finally, in the chapters of this dissertation, we use different methods, amongst which a prospective dyadic survey and experiments. Because most of the studies investigating Internet use and personal and relational wellbeing use cross-sectional data, they cannot make suggestions about the plausibility of the directionality of the found relationships. By using prospective data, this dissertation is able to make suggestions about the plausibility of the long term directionality of the effects. Also, because relationship partners are mutually dependent on one another, and there are indications that the technology use of one partner affects the other partner, it is important to investigate not only effects of Internet use on the Internet user’s personal and relational wellbeing, but also on the partner’s cognitions and emotions about the Internet user and the relationship. By using dyadic data, the dissertation can examine both actor and partner effects.