

The Internet, well-being and social capital

Thriving in the Internet



Using data from a nationwide survey, Skarżyńska and Henne build a psychological profile of Polish "Internauts"

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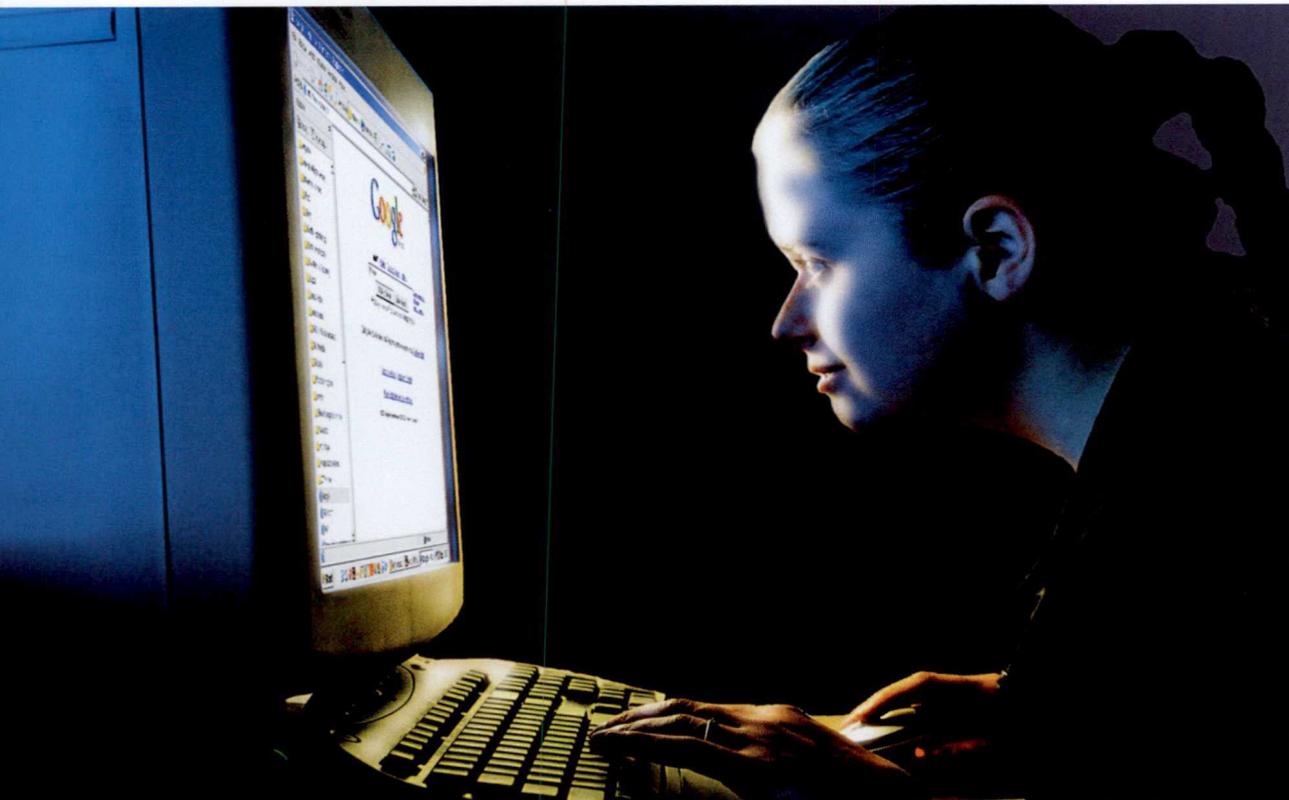
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The latest Polish research shows that Internet users have greater life satisfaction, more friends, and stronger social bonds than those who do not use the medium

An individual's psychological well-being is, for the most part, determined by the following factors: having contact with people, having friends and the sense of social support this entails, and having a generally trusting attitude towards people. These factors

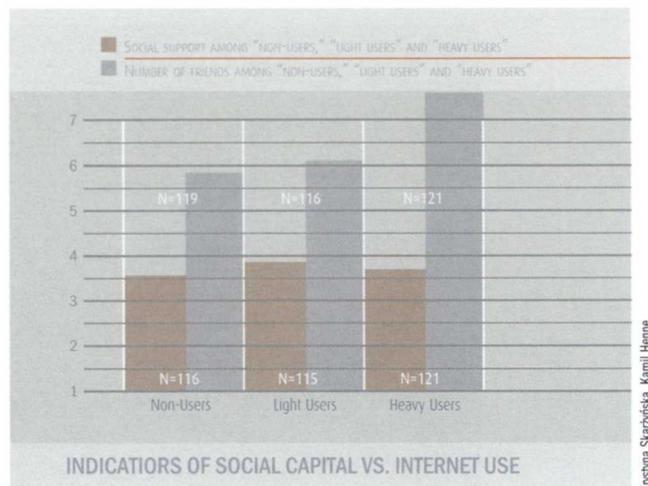
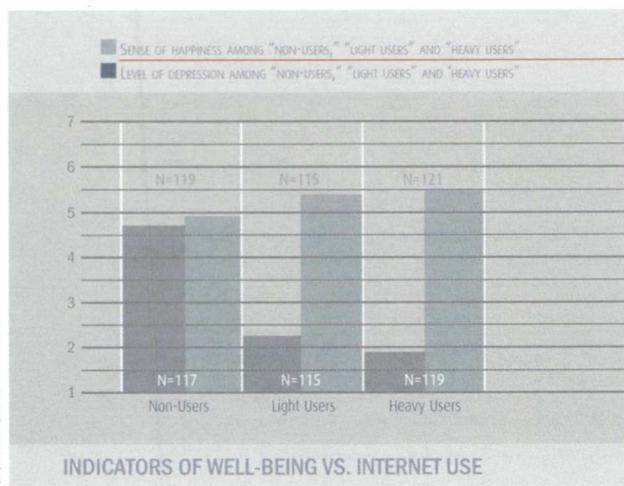
also comprise the "social capital" of an individual, group or society, and facilitate participation in voluntary associations and social organizations. A series of studies we carried out in the years 1998-2002 on various samples of young Poles invariably displayed a similar type of correlation: nearly half of the extent to which respondents reported that they were satisfied with their lives in contemporary Poland could be accounted for in terms of their interpersonal trust, social bonds, and number of friends.

A second series of studies we performed concentrated on the dependencies between people's preferred type of contact with others and their subjective well-being and social activeness. This is an important issue in light of the rapid rise of electronic media on the one hand, and the individualization of life on the other, developments that have caused direct contacts with other people to be increasingly



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In modern times, direct interpersonal contacts are being increasingly replaced by contacts via the Internet



replaced by media-based contacts – such as watching television, having telephone conversations, or using the Internet. We hypothesized that social capital is only generated by real contacts with other people, while media contacts act to undermine such capital. Yet our research did not confirm these expectations: young people who prefer personal, direct contacts were neither more satisfied with life, nor more trusting, nor more socially or politically active than those who preferred media-based contacts.

The Internet: good or bad?

Because the Internet is an increasingly more popular means of interpersonal contact, in successive studies we concentrated on investigating why people use this medium, and the consequences thereof. Psychologists are not in agreement about the impact Internet use has on the quality of social communication. On the one hand, the Internet permits more frequent contacts with a large group of individuals – in other words, it expands one's circle of friends, and also enables one to satisfy many important social needs: it builds emotional bonds with “invisible friends,” and it generates a sense of belonging, being understood, and having social support. On the other hand, it does filter out a significant amount of non-verbal information that is essential in establishing and maintaining satisfying interpersonal relations.

The first longitudinal research on the psychological and social consequences of using the Internet, carried out by R. Kraut et al. in 1998, reported that this means of contact exerted an unfavorable influence on individu-

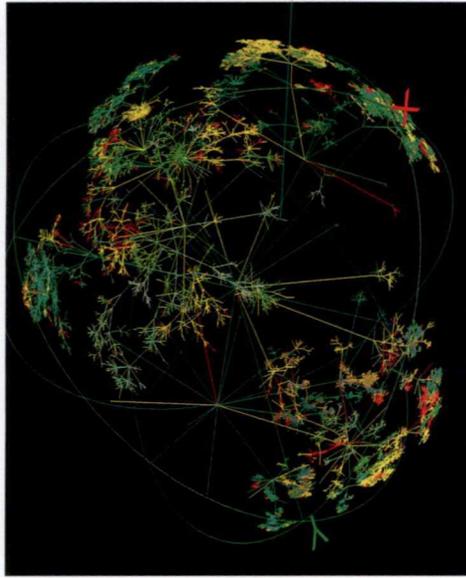
als' well-being and social relations. Those who spent more time contacting people on-line were shown to have a higher level of depression, a greater sense of loneliness, less direct contact with other family members, and less social activeness than those who invested less time in such intermediated relations. However, further research by the same authors, this time taking the psychological differentiation among individuals who utilize the Internet into account, showed that such Internet-mediated contacts had positive effects.

In one of our studies, we investigated whether frequent use of the Internet for contacting other people (participating in discussion groups and IRC channels) is associated with the level of social competence. We hypothesized that certain attributes of communicating over the Internet (e. g. the relative anonymity, the lack of direct contact, the subjective sense of security), which have been viewed by certain psychologists as presenting barriers to real, direct interpersonal contact, could be the basis for this medium's attractiveness to individuals who are afraid of such real relations. Pursuant to our expectations, individuals who frequently used the Internet did in fact turn out to be characterized by lower social competence than individuals who used the medium more rarely.

Happy Internet users

Our latest analysis, utilizing nationwide Polish data (N=9625) gathered via the “Social Diagnosis 2003” project, concentrates on the dependencies between the extent of individuals' Internet use and various indicators of their psychological well-being and social capital.

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Partial structure
of Internet
connections

Cooperative Association for Internet Data Analysis (CAIDA)

The results of this analysis seem to confirm the Internet's beneficial impact upon its users.

Our comparisons focused on groups selected from the nationwide Polish sample based on the intensity of their Internet use (measured in terms of the number of hours of use per week, broken down into "light users" - who use the Internet sporadically, 7-9 hours per week; "heavy users," who use it intensively, more than 21 hours per week, and "non-users," who do not use the Internet at all) and based on the longevity of such use (measured in terms of years). Each analysis controlled for the impact of socio-demographic variables (age, sex, education, income, and place of residence), as well as number of friends, all of these being characteristics that might exert an influence on the variables of interest to us: happiness and social capital.

The average level of happiness, as measured by means of the question "How do you evaluate your life to date?", proved to be better among Internet users than among non-users. Another indicator of people's sense of happiness, the rate of depression, was also significantly lower among Internet users. Particular attention should be drawn to the high level of well-being that characterizes individuals who utilize the Internet intensively. Similarly, the longer individuals have been using the Internet, the better they evaluate of their lives to date, especially as compared to those who do not use the Internet.

As far as social capital factors were concerned, we noted dependences similar to those

seen for indicators of well-being: Internet users report that they have significantly more friends and sense a higher level of social support than non-users do. In this case, the differences between the individual groups of users (classified by intensity and longevity of use) are also less significant, but a trend nevertheless holds: the more frequently an individual utilizes the Internet, and the longer this use has been going on, the higher their level of happiness and social capital.

We also demonstrated that "light users" and "heavy users" make use of the Internet in differing ways, and thus probably have different motivations for using the medium. While light users mainly access basic services (email and the web), heavy users clearly utilize more advanced services, such as discussion groups, IRC, and network games. The number of services accessed by light users is indeed lower (an average of 4, against 5.5 for heavy users), as is the number of individuals that light users reported they had recently contacted over the Internet (an average of 2.1, against 3.2 for heavy users). We can hypothesize, therefore, that differing means of utilizing the Internet satisfy different needs on the part of users (informational needs vs. social needs).

These results demonstrate that Internet-mediated contact need not entail a deterioration in the quality of interpersonal communication. We believe that both types of relations, direct and Internet-based, contribute to building an individual's well-being and social capital. Contacts over the Internet may be particularly important when an individual lacks relations with other people in the real world, or when these relations are of poor quality. ■

Further reading:

- Kraut, R., Patterson, M., Lundmark, V., Kiesler, S., Mukopadhyay, T., Scherlis, W. (1998). Internet Paradox: A social technology that reduces social involvement and psychological well-being? *American Psychologist*, 53, 9, 1017-1031.
- Skarżyńska, K. (2002). Trust, social bonds, sense of effectiveness, and living in democracy. Psychological predictors of life satisfaction and success in modern Poland (in Polish). *Kolokwia Psychologiczne*, 10, 199-211.
- Henne, K. (2003). Social competence, emotional intelligence, and involvement in the Internet (in Polish). *Psychologia Jakości Życia*, 2, 1, 111-130.