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CONSEQUENCES OF DIGITAL DIVIDES: HOW INTERNET USE AFFECTS SOCIAL WELL-BEING

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With the diffusion of the Internet in modern societies came a plethora of research on differences in Internet access (first-level digital divides) and use (second-level digital divides). While much research has been conducted on socio-demographic differences concerning Internet access, digital skills, and specific uses of the Internet (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Celeste, & Shafer, 2004), the consequences of these digital divides remain largely unclear. The significance of digital inequality research lies in the implicit assumption that effective Internet use enables participation in networked publics and yields personal, social, and economic advantages. A key challenge, however, has been the identification of relevant outcomes of socially differentiated Internet use in everyday life (Van Deursen & Helsper, 2015). This paper argues that social integration and subjective well-being are key outcomes to consider and contain potential as the object and basis of public digital-information policies. How do Internet skills and different usage types affect individuals' social well-being?

The intention to measure an individual's mental health more generally has given rise to an interdisciplinary research tradition concerned with conceptions of well-being going beyond purely economic definitions. *Subjective* well-being in the eudaimonic tradition represents an individual's self-assessment of their well-being (Keyes, 2014); *social* well-being as a subtype is further specified as a reflection of "positive social health" and represents an individual's perception of their positive functioning in life (Keyes, 1998).

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Social integration, social acceptance, social contribution, social actualization, and social coherence constitute the components of social well-being (Keyes, 1998). Moreover, individuals' perceptions of their positive functioning in a social context seems to be a factor for the success of a society as a whole. Individuals with more connections in social offline networks tend to be more engaged in online networks and vice versa (see Van Dijk, 2013); as both networks provide access to valuable resources to increase life chances, effective Internet use may increase social well-being. The concept of social well-being is especially useful in research on Internet effects, since on the one hand various online services enable and facilitate social interaction, and on the other hand preference for online social interaction over face-to-face can lead to negative outcomes of Internet use (Caplan, 2003).

Empirically, this paper addresses the question of how Internet use variables predict social well-being. The study uses nationally representative survey data from Switzerland (N=1121) collected in 2015. A latent variable structural equation model ($\chi^2(128)=302.18$ ($p<.001$), CFI=.952, RMSEA=.04, SRMR=.04) tested the effects of three different types of Internet use, Internet skills, and feelings of belongingness to the information society on social well-being. Additionally, the model controlled for the socio-demographic variables of sex, age, and level of education. The preliminary results show that Internet use for informational, entertainment, or social purposes, as well as Internet skills, do not have a direct effect on social well-being. However, the perception of belongingness to the information society—which significantly depends on Internet skills and Internet use for informational purposes—positively predicts social well-being. One of the main insights of the article is that different types of Internet use have different effects on social well-being. Furthermore, Internet skills have proven to be an important indirect predictor of social well-being. In order to broaden the results, differences between Internet users and non-users in terms of well-being will be further analyzed. The current structural model will also be tested in multiple age groups to detect potential differences in the effect of Internet use on perceptions of belongingness and well-being in different life stages.

This article makes three main contributions to the research on digital social well-being. First, the data used for the empirical analysis is representative of a country with high Internet penetration and thus allows reliable and nationally generalizable statements; the results also have value for other Western social democracies where the Internet is crucial for everyday functioning. Research on the effects of the Internet on subjective well-being so far lacks studies that are based on population-level data and include validated measures. Second, the model includes users' Internet skills, which is essential in light of the fact that insufficient skills seem to prevent users from engaging in beneficial online activities (Nimrod, 2014). Against the background of the knowledge-gap hypothesis and the fact that more educated people use the Internet more frequently for informational purposes (Büchi, Just, & Latzer, 2016), Internet skills are an important factor for social well-being. Third, this article studies different types of Internet use and their effects on subjective well-being since previous research has shown that the amount of Internet use as a one-dimensional concept is insufficient in research into Internet effects (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). A differentiated operationalization of several types of Internet use allows for more fine-grained findings.

An additional asset of the data collected via computer-assisted telephone interviews is that it also contains extensive information about people who do not use the Internet, not only concerning their well-being and integration into the information society, but also about their reasons for not participating in the networked information society. This article is also particularly relevant to the current academic debate on subjective well-being since it focuses on its social component which has been neglected thus far. The results of this study not only illustrate the consequences of existing digital divides, but also have broad policy implications since they contribute to the empirical basis of evidence-based policy-making regarding the promotion of Internet use and skills development.

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