

Internet Use and Health. Exploring the role of Social Capital*

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Abstract

In this paper, we exploit the longitudinal dimension of the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) to study the effects of high-speed Internet on individual health, focusing on the role of social capital as a potential mechanism through which Internet access may affect health. We find evidence of a negative impact of high-speed Internet on physical and mental health. Individuals with DSL access tend to be 1.5 percent more likely to be in poor health compared to their counterparts without DSL Internet, 1.7 percent more likely to declare mental health problems, and to report higher levels of BMIs. Furthermore, they are 2.5 percent more likely to be in time pressure. Our mediation analysis suggests that social capital is indeed a key factor underlying the relationship between Internet use and health. While the increased availability of social capital brought about by high-speed Internet may provide a source of social support, it can simultaneously lead to a communication and social interactions overload. Using data from the German Time Use Survey (German TUS), we also show that playing video games, using PC or smartphones, watching TV or movies are correlated with a reduction in social activities and a more sedentary lifestyle, which in turn may explain the negative effects of broadband Internet on physical health.

JEL Codes: I10, O33, A13

Keywords: Internet, Health, Social Capital

*This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement n. 694262), project *DisCont - Discontinuities in Household and Family Formation*.

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