



Guest Editorial

The Internet: New Challenges for Behavioural Researchers

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Internet use is a daily occurrence for many people around the world. In Australia, 59% of households have access to the Internet (Barr, Knowles, & Moore, 2003), with higher rates in younger age groups. It has been suggested that the Internet is having as dramatic an impact on our social lives as the advent of the telephone or television (Bargh & McKenna, 2004).

What makes the Internet so different from other communications media has been well described by McKenna and Bargh (2000). They suggest four major factors: anonymity, irrelevance of physical distance, lack of visual cues between communicators and the asynchronous nature of the communication. These factors could have both positive and negative effects. The combination of anonymity, lack of visual cues, and lack of pressure to immediately respond might allow the shy or socially-anxious individual to communicate when they otherwise might not. On the other hand, anonymity might well lead to deindividuation (Prentice-Dunn & Rogers, 1989), encouraging antisocial behaviour such as 'flaming', which involves angry, offensive, even vitriolic attacks on others in newsgroups. Again, in positive terms, the irrelevance of physical attractiveness and the opportunity to rehearse gambits and responses might be thought to lead more quickly to deeper self-disclosure. However, in spite of the potential offered for faster achievement of emotional intimacy (Spears & Lea, 1994), which may or may not be a good thing, there has been some evidence that the Internet is related to increased loneliness (Kraut et al., 1998; but see Kraut et al., 2002).

For researchers and practitioners interested in how behaviour has or may be changed, the use of the Internet provides a fertile field for examination. This issue of *Behaviour Change*, which encompasses several papers describing correlates of Internet use, germinated from a symposium on the social psychology of the Internet presented at the 32nd Annual Meeting of the Society of Australasian Social Psychologists in Sydney in 2003. The importance of trying to understand which variables affect current communication on the Internet should not be overstated. However, it is no easy task. Wallace (1999) describes several environmental contexts when analysing use of the Internet. They include e-mail exchange, the World Wide Web as an information resource, discussion forums — both synchronous and asynchronous — and text-based, virtual-reality environments. These contexts are developing their own conventions and expectations about the behaviour of those

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using them. There is a danger of making sweeping statements about use of the Internet as if it was a homogenous environment, which it obviously is not. The contributors to this special issue are aware of these dangers, and have been careful to ask what aspects of the Internet their respondents use. The articles in this issue focus on how and why people use the Internet, with particular emphasis on inter-personal interactions.

Donchi and Moore (this issue) address differences in online and offline friendships in relation to time spent on the Internet. Their sample consisted of 336 older adolescents at school or university, and measured not only number of online and offline friendships, but the quality of those relationships, time spent on various Internet activities, and the participants' self-esteem, and social, emotional and general loneliness. Confirming Moody's (2001) contention that Internet use has more complex outcomes than previously indicated, Donchi and Moore found opposite psychosocial effects on boys and girls, with high Internet-using boys likely to be lonelier than their peers.

Indeed, one concern expressed about adolescents' use of the internet is that time spent online is time away from the peer relationships that help develop mature identity (Parkhurst & Asher, 1992). The issues of adolescent identity and aspects of personality are examined by Mazalin and Moore (this issue). They surveyed 161 older adolescents and young adults, examining the associations between level of identity development, Internet use and social anxiety. Again, it seems that the males in the sample who were high users of the Internet were also more prone to deleterious psychosocial outcomes — they were less mature in their identity statuses and more socially anxious than either low Internet-using boys and similarly aged girls. Readers of *Behaviour Change* are likely to recognise the implications for interventions to address social anxiety or social isolation.

In contrast to anxieties about overuse of the Internet, Matanda, Jenvey and Phillips (this issue) are motivated by concerns about possible disadvantages of *insufficient* access. They examine predictors of Internet use: personality factors such as computer anxiety, situational factors such as loneliness and demographic factors such as age and education. Their results further confirmed the complexity of the effects of Internet use, as overall use could not be predicted from these factors. However, specific uses of the Internet could be predicted, confirming, for example, that using the Internet for entertainment was more likely for young lonely males; better-educated participants used it for communication; and that computer anxiety inhibited use of the Internet for information-gathering. The strong implication was that use was largely predicted by the pre-existing interests of the participants.

In contrast to concerns about access or inhibitions on use, Whitty (this issue) examines people's flirting behaviour both on- and offline. She was interested in the issue of perceptions and use of the body in Internet exchanges in regard to flirtatious behaviour. Her very large sample ($N = 5797$) found that people generally downplayed the importance of physical attractiveness online, with women tending to flirt by displaying nonverbal signals offline or substitutes for them online. Also, traditional expectations that males would initiate contact (Rose & Frieze, 1993) were maintained.

Underwood and Findlay (this issue) examine a further step in using the Internet for relationships, that of infidelity. Despite a relatively small sample of respondents who admitted to an Internet relationship that had the potential to affect an exist-

ing face-to-face marriage or de facto partnership, this study produced a fascinating picture of the dangers of this increasingly common phenomenon.

The final article, a research note by Forster (this issue) describes another development in research into the Internet. While earlier articles described implications of Internet use for individuals and for relationships such as marriage and friendships, Forster examines the concept of a sense of community arising from membership of an Internet group. Although preliminary, this research offers a tantalising glimpse of a possible response to the problems of the increasing isolation and fragmentation of modern society.

As the Internet is here to stay, it behoves us, as psychological researchers and practitioners, to understand its impacts on individuals and groups, both positive and negative. The studies in this issue shed light on aspects of these effects. The studies are important in examining specific uses of the Internet, rather than simply total Internet use (Matanda, Jenvey, & Phillips; Mazalin & Moore); in using more-detailed measures of social outcomes, for example, loneliness (Donchi & Moore); in examining interpersonal relationships (Whitty; Underwood & Findlay); and in looking beyond the individual or dyad to larger groups (Forster). The findings invite replication and extension. It would be particularly useful if the extension included studies of interventions for people for whom use of the Internet was problematic, and evaluation of programs that encouraged responsible use of the Internet for those who are presently reluctant users or nonusers.

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