The Effects of Internet Use on Junior High School Students’ Loneliness and Social Support

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Abstract

Previous studies have shown that the Internet can have both negative and positive effects on psychological health, such as negative effects on loneliness and positive ones on social support. However, these studies have so far been conducted on adults, and there have been few studies on children. To examine the effects of internet use on children's loneliness in friendship groups, and the social support they receive from significant persons such as family or friends, we conducted a two-wave panel study of 298 lower secondary school students. The data obtained was then analyzed using structural equation modeling. The effects of Internet use were examined with respect to each Internet tool and each purpose. For internet use by tool, the participants were asked about the levels of their Internet use for: 1) email; 2) browsing web sites, BBS, or reading e-mail magazines; 3) making web pages; 4) posting messages on BBS or mailing lists; 5) chatting; and 6) playing online games. For internet use by objective, the participants were asked about their levels of internet use for: 1) classes; 2) homework or study; 3) hobbies or other favorite activities; 4) interpersonal exchange with cyber friends; 5) interpersonal exchange with family or offline friends; and 6) making new friends. As a result, internet use was found to have positive effects on the students’ loneliness in friendships and social support from their friends. More specifically, frequent email use reduced loneliness in friendships, and longer internet use increased social support from their cyber friends and offline friends. To describe the result of social support in more detail, frequent use of email increased social support from their offline friends. Meanwhile, the results indicated that frequent use of chat, BBS, website browsing, and web page making increased social support from their cyber friends. Similarly, frequent use of the internet for communicating amongst their cyber relationships notably contributed to increased social support from their cyber friends. The implications of these results for further research and practice have also been provided.

Key words

Internet use, social support, loneliness, junior high school students, causal relationships