A Social Psychology of the Internet

David G. Myers
Hope College, Michigan, USA
Email: dmyers@hope.edu

[Abstract] Today's world is digitally connected. This connectivity offers many benefits, including enhanced social connections, e-commerce, and new relationships, including romantic relationships. The Internet is also enabling new methods of data collection and "big data" research. But social psychologists have also noted some costs, including deindividuation (enabling bullying), time diversion from face-to-face relationships, and, especially, self-segregation that leads to social polarization.

[Keywords] Social psychology, Internet, big data

Introduction

It is one of social psychology's biggest lessons: We human have a deep need to belong. We flourish when connected to others in close, supportive relationships. When isolated – as in solitary confinement – we suffer. We are social animals. In today's world, technology is connecting us in new and very big ways. In China, reports the World Bank, mobile phone users have soared from 30% of people in 2005 to 92% in 2014. Worldwide, Internet use has skyrocketed from few people in 2000 to nearly 45% in 2015 – and to fully half of people in China.
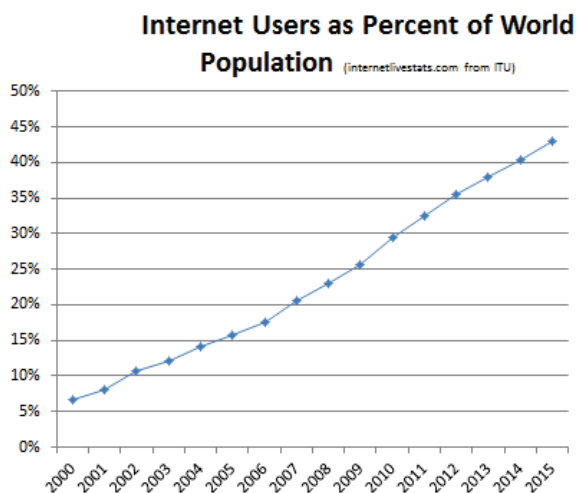
Figure 1. Internet Users (% of World Population)
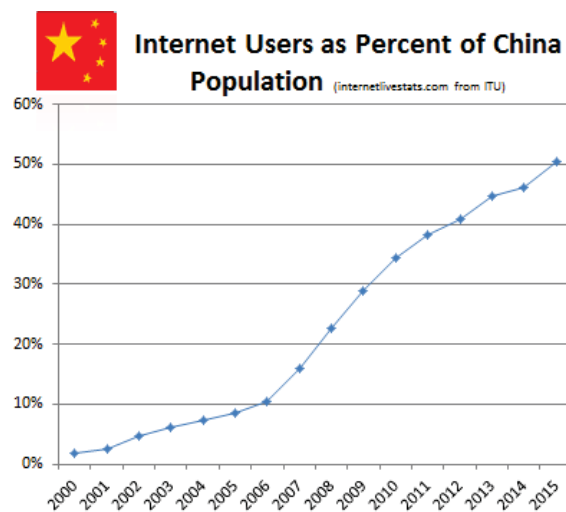
*Figure 2.* Internet Users (% of China's Population)

Facebook, whose mission is "to make the world more open and connected," now has 1.5 billion subscribers – 1 billion of whom, for the first time in late August 2016, used Facebook in a single day. QQ has more than 800 million users of its instant messaging service. In the United States, "a typical teen sends and receives 30 texts per day," reports the Pew Research Center (2015). Moreover, reports Pew, most teens prefer messaging – "fingered speech" –to phone calling.

The Internet's Social Benefits

"A more open and connected world is a better world," messaged Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg after that first 1 billion-user day. "It brings stronger relationships with those you love, a stronger economy

with more opportunities, and a stronger society that reflects all our values." Indeed, the Internet is shrinking the global village. E-commerce and telecommuting save us time. Digitally, we find more information than in any library. And, increasingly, people find their romantic partners online, especially if seeking same-sex partners:

Finding Love on the Internet
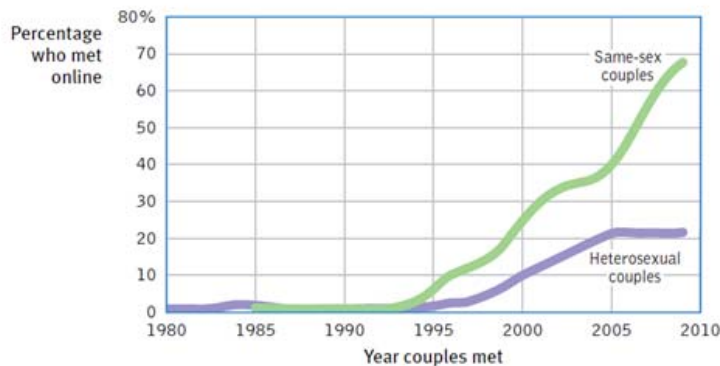
From Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012

Figure 3. Finding Love on the Internet

Although no online matchmaking scheme is particularly effective (Finkel, et al., 2012), Internet-formed friendships and romances are *more* likely to last (Bergh & McKenna, 2004). One reason for the greater durability of online romances is the greater self-disclosure they foster, with more attention to shared values and interests and less attention to looks and location (Joinson, 2001; Bargh & McKenna, 2004).

The Internet's Social Costs

The benefits of our digitally connected world do come with some risks and social costs. These include:

- *Deindividuation.* Faceless anonymity enables sexual exploitation, piracy, hate speech, and the meanness of cyberbullying.

- *Time diversion from face-to-face relationships.* Internet addictions to gambling and pornography may disrupt and drain time from healthy relationships and productive work.

- *"Slacktivism."* The effortless signing of online petitions or sharing of prosocial videos may substitute feel-good Internet clicks for real, costly helping.

- Perhaps the biggest social cost of the Internet, however, is its enabling of *self-segregation*, resulting in *group polarization*. With increased information choices, people selectively expose themselves to think-alike media and bloggers. As studies of group polarization repeatedly demonstrate, people in like-minded groups tend to reinforce their shared views and shift toward the extreme. The Internet echo chamber is a perfect example: It serves as a social amplifier that feeds and strengthens shared views. Sometimes this is for good, as peacemakers become more pacifistic and cancer survivors find mutual support. But sometimes it works for evil. Racists become even more racist. Conspiracy fears grow. Hostile people become terrorists. The bottom line: Separation + conversation → polarization. Thus, the Internet often deepens social divisions.

Internet-Enabled Research

For social scientists, the Internet offers a vast new field for research. Sixteen million people have responded to online Implicit Association Tests (measuring unconscious attitudes, at implicit.harvard.edu). ProlificAcademic.co.uk and Amazon Turk are enabling researchers to engage participants from well

beyond their own institutions. And "big data" archives are providing huge data samples. A few favorite examples follow.

Individualized Names

Social psychologist Jean Twenge and her colleagues (2010) report that the growing individualism of the United States is reflected in the increased uniqueness of first names – and the corresponding diminishing proportion of babies given one of the ten most common names.

Percentage of American Babies Receiving one of 10 Most Common Names (from **325 million** names in the U.S. Social Security archive, Twenge, Abebe, & Campbell, 2010)
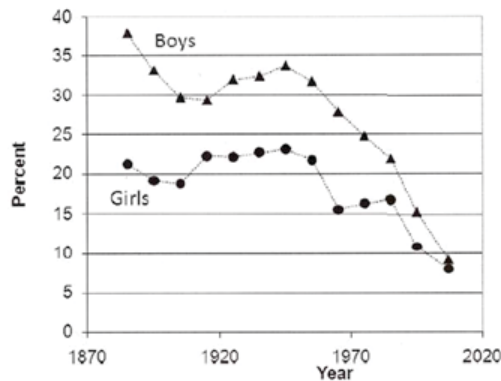
Figure 4. Percentage of American Babies Receiving One of the Ten Most Common Names

Baseball Aggression

Many laboratory studies have found increased aggressive behavior in hot environments. To explore the phenomenon in the real world, Richard Larrick and colleagues (2011) calculated the probability of a baseball pitcher hitting the batter, as a function of both the day's temperature and a possible revenge factor (whether, and how often, his teammates had been hit by the opposing pitcher during that game).

From 4,566,468 pitcher-batter matchups in 57,293 Major League Baseball games
Probability of batter being hit, as function of temperature and # of teammates hit by opposing pitcher earlier in the game
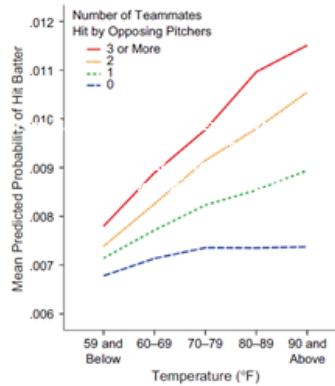
From R. P. Larrick et al., (2011)

Figure. 5. Probability of a Batter Being Hit, as a Function of Temperature, # of Teammates Hit by Pitchers

The History of Ideas

Google has digitized 5.2 million English language books, which we can search via ngrams.googlelabs.com. One sample search confirms that "homosexuality" is a twentieth-century concept, and that "sexual orientation" is a late twentieth-century term:
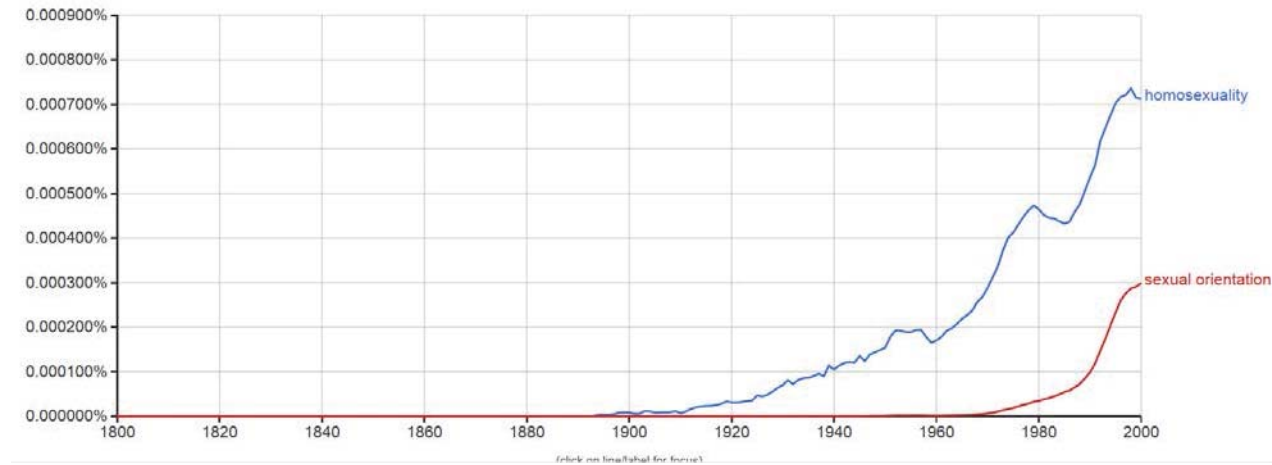

Figure 6. "Homosexuality" as a 20ᵗʰ Century Concept vs. "Sexual Orientation" as a Late 20ᵗʰ Centtury Term

Another sample search displays, again, the increasing individualism of the western world:
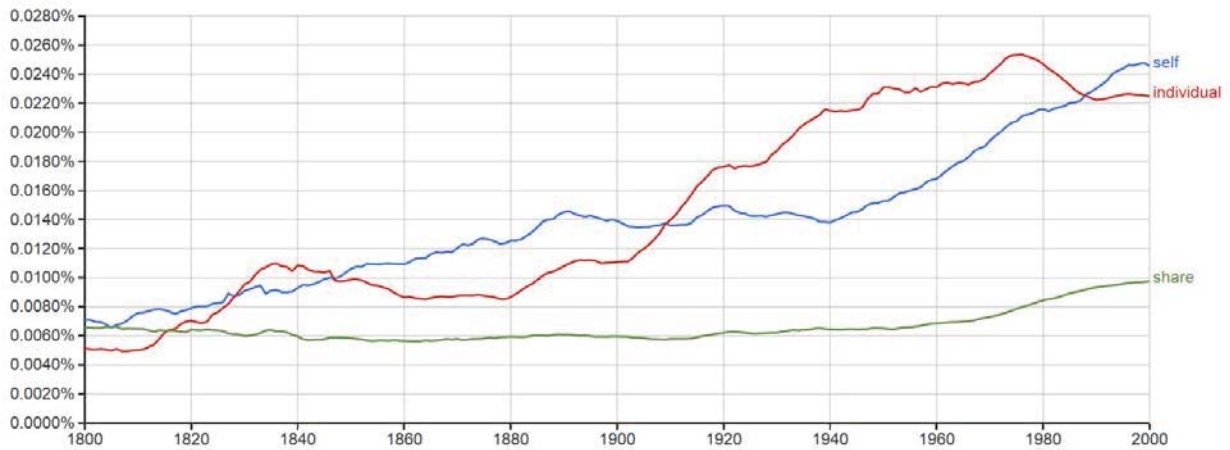

Figure 7. Sample Search Showing Increase of Individualism in the Western World

Facebook also offers an enormous data archive. One of its social scientists (Kramer, 2010) calibrated for me the relative frequency of positive over negative emotions in "billions" of Facebook posts, by day of the week. Other researchers confirmed the greater happiness of weekends, and of the evening hours, in 509 million Twitter messages.
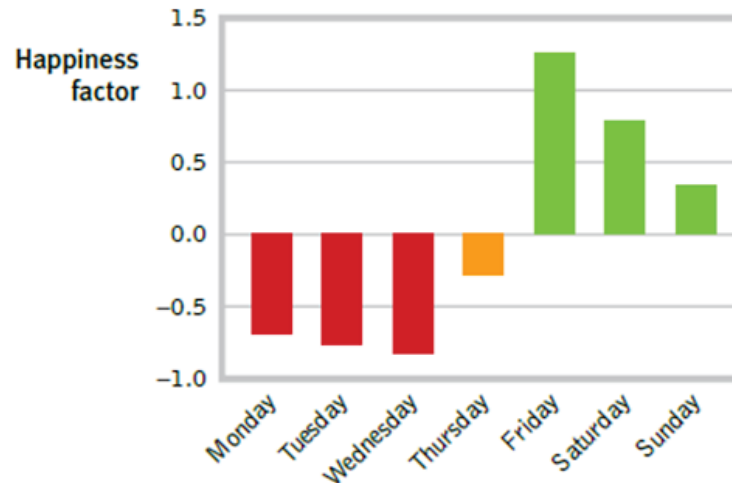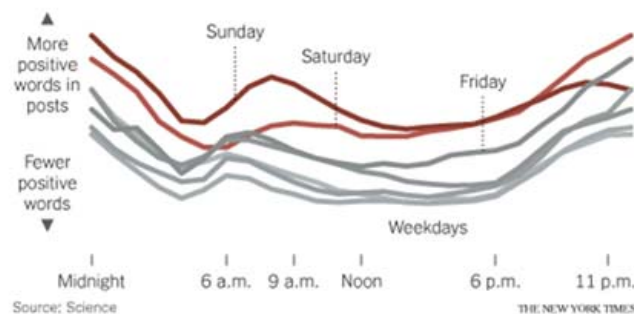
"Billions" of Facebook updates

Figure 9. Relative Frequency of Positive over Negative Emotions in "Billions" of Facebook Posts

Moods over days and time in 509 million Twitter messages

Data from 2.4 million people in 84 countries (Golder & Macy, 2011)

Figure 10. Moods over Days in Time in Twitter Messages

Big Data Survey Archives

The Gallup Organization surveys 1000 Americans daily and several hundred thousand people from across the planet in its "World Poll." And the U.S. General Social Survey (gss.norc.org) enables students to explore its surveys of more than 50,000 Americans since 1972. As an example from each, here are data showing that life satisfaction tends to be lower among people in highly religious *countries*…but higher among highly religious *individuals*. (For more examples of this "religious engagement paradox" see davidmyers.org/davidmyers/assets/ReligParadox.docx.) This is but one of several examples of how aggregate data (such as across countries or states) differ from data comparing individuals. The differences appear to be attributable to other uncontrolled differences among the countries, such as in income level (which is lower in highly religious countries).
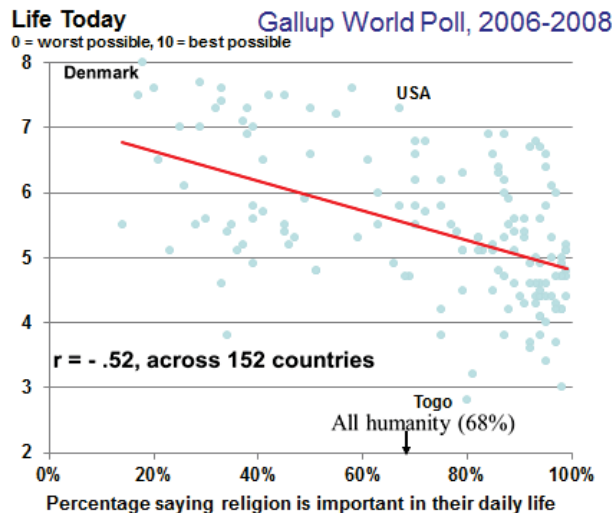
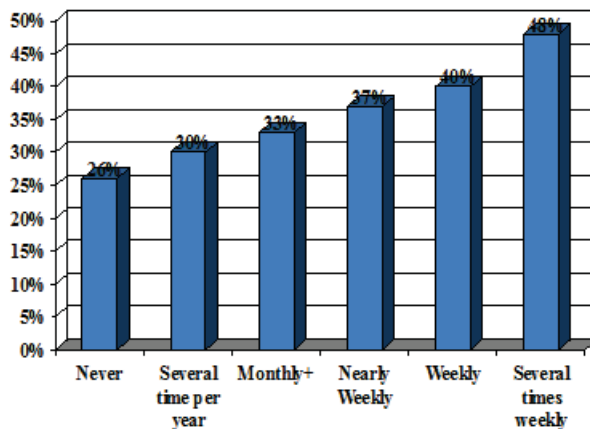*Figure 11.* Life Satisfaction among People in Highly Religious Countries

Figure 12. Life Satisfaction among Highly Religious Individuals

Questions for Future Research

Researchers have been exploring some interesting questions about the Internet and social relations:

1. Do social network sites make us more or less socially isolated?
2. Do people's social network profiles reflect their actual personalities?
3. Does social networking promote narcissism (self-focus and self-importance)?
4. How can people be helped to balance online and real-world time?

Conclusion

- Today's world, in China and beyond, is a rapidly evolving digitally networked world.
- With it come many benefits, including enhanced connections, e-commerce, and new relationships.

- But the online world also entails some costs, including deindividuation, time diversion, and self-segregation→social polarization.
- The Internet is enabling new methods of data collection and "big data" research.
- Interesting questions await further research.

References

Bargh, J. A., & McKenna, K. Y. A. (2004).The Internet and social life. *Annual Review of Psychology, 55,* 573-590.

Finkel, E. J., Eastwick, P. W., Karney, B. R., Reis, H. T., & Sprecher, S. (2012). Online dating: A critical analysis from the perspective of psychological science. *Psychological Science, 13,* 3-66.

Golder, S. A., & Macy, M. W. (2011). Diurnal and seasonal mood vary with work, sleep, and day-length across diverse cultures. *Science, 333,* 1878-1881.

Joinson, A. N. (2001). Self-disclosure in computer-mediated communication: The role of self-awareness and visual anonymity. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 31,* 177-192.

Kramer, A. (2010). Personal communication. Data Science. Facebook, Inc.

Larrick, R. P., Timmerman, T. A., Carton, A. M., & Abrevaya, J. (2011). Temper, temperature, and temptation: Heat-related retaliation in baseball. *Psychological Science, 22,* 423-428.

Pew (2015, April 9). Teens, social media & technology overview 2015. Amanda Lenhart report. Retrieved from www.pewinternet.org/2015/04/09/teens-social-media-technology-2015.

Rosenfeld, M. J., & Thomas, R. J. (2012). Searching for a mate: The rise of the internet as a social intermediary. *American Sociological Review, 77,* 523-547.

Twenge, J. M., Abebe, E. M., & Campbell, W. K. (2010). Fitting in or standing out: Trends in American parents' choices for children's names, 1880–2007. *Social Psychological and Personality Science, 1,* 19-25.