

Observations

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Coming of Age on the Internet

In the mid-90s, it seemed that teens were sacrificing real relationships for superficial cyber-relationships with strangers. Is this still true? Social scientists are revisiting those early concerns, and some are coming to believe that the psychological benefits may now outweigh the detrimental effects. In a new report, Patti Valkenburg and Jochen Peter of the University of Amsterdam took a look at a decade of research on these questions, and they believe two important historical changes have altered the psychological landscape. First, the sheer number of teenagers now using the Internet has transformed the technology into a true social networking tool. Second, the newer communication tools also encourage building on existing relationships rather than isolating. In the 90s, the few teens who did spend time on the Internet tended to hang out with strangers in public chat rooms. The appearance of instant messaging and social networks like Facebook has changed all that, according to the psychologists. Today, more than 8 in 10 teenagers use IM to connect with the same friends they see at school or work. Recent studies document the positive effects of these technological changes. But what exactly is going on in the minds of the teenagers to produce this greater sense of well-being? Valkenburg and Peter believe that the 21st century Internet encourages honest talking about very personal issues — feelings, worries, vulnerabilities — that are difficult for many self-conscious teens to talk about. The psychologists have also shown that “hyperpersonal” Internet talk leads to higher quality friendships, which buffer teenagers against stress and lead to greater happiness.

Valkenberg, P. & Peter, Jochen. (2009) Social consequences of the internet for adolescents: A decade of research. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 18, 1-5.

[The Perils of Ageism](#)

Ageism is still rampant in America, and many older people themselves trade in unflattering stereotypes, including helplessness and incompetence. Such caricatures are not only false, they are also unhealthy. Research has shown that older people who believe in negative age stereotypes tend to fulfill them. And it may not just be the elderly who are harmed by ageism. A new study in *Psychological Science* suggests that young, healthy people who stereotype old people may themselves be at risk of heart disease many years down the road. Researchers Becca Levy and Martin D. Slade of the Yale School of Public Health, along with Alan B. Zonderman and Luigi Ferrucci from the National Institute on Aging Intramural Research Program, examined data on hundreds of men and women who have been studied for almost four decades as part of the Baltimore Longitudinal Study of Aging. The researchers examined the health histories of all the volunteers, focusing on cardiovascular disease, and they discovered that there was a striking link between ageism early in life and poor heart health later on. The scientists also looked at a subset of volunteers who didn't have any heart problems until after they were 60 — at least 21 years later — and found that these people were likely to have been negative about aging from early on. What this suggests, the authors write, is that people are internalizing stereotypes of old age when they are still

quite young — with far reaching consequences.

Levy, B.R., Zonderman, A.B., Slade, M.D., & Ferrucci, L. (2009) Age stereotypes held earlier in life predict cardiovascular events in later life. *Psychological Science*, 20, 296-298.