

Autistic tendencies linked to compulsive Internet use

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The more autistic tendencies a person exhibits the greater the chance that he or she uses the Internet in a compulsive manner. NWO researcher Catrin Finkenauer from VU University Amsterdam has demonstrated this relationship scientifically for the first time. Compulsive Internet use can have a negative effect on a person's well-being and on the maintenance of relationships. Finkenauer published the research results today in the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. The multidisciplinary research could be realised thanks to a collaboration with the communication scientists Monique Pollmann and Peter Kerkhof, and psychologist Sander Begeer.

Finkenauer gave 195 [married couples](#) a [questionnaire](#) about the frequency of their [Internet use](#) and about the extent to which that Internet use is compulsive. Internet use is compulsive if the user is no longer able to exert control over his or her online activity. Based on propositions, such as 'Number plates and other series of information grab my attention' and 'I always like to do things in the same way each time', Finkenauer also established the level of autistic characteristics of the respondents. People who scored high for autistic characteristics were found to use Internet in a compulsive manner more often than people who exhibited few or no autistic characteristics. People with autistic characteristics did not necessarily spend more time on the Internet but the nature of the Internet use was often more problematic. Examples of compulsive Internet use are: carrying on using the Internet even though you wanted to stop, Internet use that results in [conflicts](#) with others and being restless if you cannot use the Internet.

Male-female difference

One year later the [respondents](#) were given the same questionnaires to complete again in order to measure differences over time. At both points in time, men scored higher than women for compulsive Internet use.

Women with autistic tendencies who a year previously had exhibited little compulsive Internet use, suddenly exhibited higher levels of this a year later. 'It might be the case that autistic characteristics are mainly a stimulating factor at the start of compulsive Internet use,' is the explanation that Finkenauer gives. 'As soon as the degree of compulsive Internet behaviour rises above a certain level then these tendencies no longer play a significant role.'

Not only just positive

Up until now it had been assumed that Internet use mainly had a positive effect on people with autistic characteristics. It enables them to communicate with others in a safe and structured environment without a lot of distractions. Finkenauer warns that it is important to monitor the Internet use of people with many autistic characteristics in order to prevent their use from damaging the contact they have with the off-line world. She believes that follow-up research is necessary to establish the exact nature of the relationship. 'For example, we would like to know if the relationship between compulsive Internet use and autistic characteristics is important for the type of activities that people undertake on the Internet,' says Finkenauer. She also wants to know to what extent people who have been diagnosed as autistic use Internet in a compulsive manner. The psychologist received a Vidi grant from NWO to carry out her research.

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