



# Permanently online – Permanently connected: Explorations into university students' use of social media and mobile smart devices



Peter Vorderer<sup>a</sup>, Nicola Krömer<sup>b,\*</sup>, Frank M. Schneider<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Institute for Media and Communication Studies, University of Mannheim – Haus Oberrhein (602), Rheinvorlandstr. 5, 68159 Mannheim, Germany

<sup>b</sup> Seminar for Media and Communication Studies, University of Erfurt – Communication and Digital Media (ComDigMed), Nordhäuser Str.63, 99089 Erfurt, Germany

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 23 January 2016

Received in revised form

27 May 2016

Accepted 30 May 2016

### Keywords:

Mobile smart device use

Permanently online

Permanently connected

Mobile media use

Online behavior

University students

## ABSTRACT

**Background:** With the availability of mobile smart devices, many adolescents have developed the habit of being online and connected with other users almost all the time.

**Objective:** The aim of this paper is to provide a definition of being *permanently online* (PO) and *permanently connected* (PC) and to explore students' current PO/PC behaviors.

**Methods:** An online survey was conducted with 178 university students in Germany to explore the intensity of their PO/PC behaviors in various social situations, the differences in being PO and being PC, students' feelings about a possible loss of Internet access, and their online responding behaviors. We also shed some light on the associations between being PO/PC and various aspects of well-being, as well as between PO/PC and demographics and lifestyle.

**Results:** Smart device usage behaviors at night and behaviors in various social situations during the day indicate that PO and PC behaviors are occurring frequently. The results show that being connected to others (PC) seems to be more relevant to the participants than browsing the web (PO). Moreover, the participants expressed strong emotional responses about a temporary loss of Internet access. Coping behaviors in response to increasing number of incoming messages and permanent availability are reported.

**Conclusion:** This exploratory study demonstrates the relevance of the concepts of being PO and PC to students, and points out further research gaps.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

There can be no doubt that within a very short period of time—in fact, within only a few years—we have observed a rapid increase in the availability and use of dynamic online connections between individuals as well as between users and mass-media content. These connections are used primarily for inter-individual and in-group communication and interaction, for retrieving and using both information and entertainment, and for everyday problem solving. Given the affinity of younger people for innovative technology, the new mobile online communication practices are today particularly visible among adolescents and young adults (e.g., Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013; MPFS, 2013), but they also encompass children as well as older adults. This

“mediatization” (Hepp, 2013; Lundby, 2009) of our lives entails a hybrid of interpersonal and mass communication that, among many other things, has led to new forms of social relationships and social support (e.g., “Facebook friendships”, cf. Akbulut & Günüş, 2012), new manifestations of communicative behavior (e.g., cyberbullying), and new discussions about norms and expectations (e.g., standards for privacy) in almost all communication contexts that are part of this new networked world (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Castells, 2010; Vorderer et al., 2015).

One of the most striking consequences of these developments seems to be a fundamental change in how people deal with electronic media today: Instead of using it to receive or retrieve information and/or entertainment only at certain points in time and for a specific amount of time, many people have now developed the habit of being online and connected with others almost *permanently* (Quinn & Oldmeadow, 2013; Vorderer & Kohring, 2013). And while online, they sometimes do not even engage with explicit messages or tasks; they are just “there,” online and “together” with

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [nicolakroemer@gmail.com](mailto:nicolakroemer@gmail.com) (N. Krömer).

others (Turkle, 2011). Today, there seems to be hardly any social context, whether in public or in private spaces, where individuals voluntarily go and stay offline and disconnected. Instead, they stay in touch with one another as much as possible, whenever and wherever. This may be in the classroom, where students need (or feel that they need) to almost constantly split their attention between what their instructor is presenting and what is available to them on their smartphones, or at work, where the efficacy of labor is often compromised as employees try to juggle multiple tasks competing for their attention on their desktop or tablet computers (Kim & Byrne, 2011; Lim & Chen, 2012). The same dynamics occur in private social interactions as well, such as when one is sitting in a restaurant or at home, among a group of friends or even with a child or a romantic partner, or when watching television (“Social TV”, e.g., Ducheneaut, Moore, Oehlberg, Thornton, & Nickell, 2008). In situations where one is alone and the activity does not require much attention, like waiting in line, this kind of behavior appears to be most common. Moments of inactivity seem to generally disappear due to people reaching for their smart devices as soon as they have nothing else to do that requires their attention.

But in addition to this rather specific kind of online behavior while being alone, individuals in social situations now also seem to spend less time focusing solely on one communicative partner or message, instead shifting their attention between partners who are physically present and the screen of their mobile device, where a new message has come in or is expected. Furthermore, it appears as though these individuals do this despite the fact that they often do not even know who has sent them a message—or indeed, whether a message has even been sent at all. It almost seems as if they felt coerced into regularly and frequently checking their (potentially) incoming communication. In fact, research shows that a large part of mobile phone use is devoted to these sorts of “checking behaviors” (e.g., Oulasvirta, Rattenbury, Ma, & Raita, 2012). Interestingly enough, such “smartphone-related habits are not yet perceived as problematic” (Oulasvirta et al., 2012, p. 113), at least not by their users. Recent qualitative findings show, however, that users distinguish between a more positively experienced “extractive” mobile Internet use, through which they retrieve information in a controlled and a focused manner while guarding their presence in their physical environment, and a more negatively experienced “immersive” mobile Internet use, in which they feel dragged into online communication almost as if they were addicted to it (Humphreys, von Pape, & Karnowski, 2013, p. 500).

The aim of this paper is to take a closer look at the phenomenon of being permanently online and permanently connected, including previous research. We will first provide a definition of these constructs and show their relevance, and subsequently report the results of a survey on students’ permanent online behaviors.

## 2. Permanently online and permanently connected

Being permanently online and connected (PO/PC) is defined here along two dimensions: 1) As an overt behavior in the form of protracted use of electronic media and 2) as a psychological state of permanent communicative vigilance (cf., for a similar distinction: Walsh, White, & Young, 2010), where one dimension may exist without the other. Overt behavior in the form of the use of online services and of information technology that provide the technical basis for the constant availability of online content and online communication is a necessary component of being PO/PC. The second dimension of PO/PC distinguishes it from traditional forms of online use by referring to the subjective feeling of permanent availability and connectedness. This state of vigilance is directed both at the push and the pull functions of online media: Individuals with high levels of PO/PC show a high subjective motivation both to

react to incoming online content and to proactively monitor their online environment (Quinn & Oldmeadow, 2013).

PO/PC occurs in social situations where a person is steadily using electronic media (e.g., mobile smart devices). This includes situations in which this person is using online media while simultaneously being engaged in other social, communicative, mental-cognitive, or physical activities. Using online content (simultaneously to other activities) will be referred to as “*permanently online*” (PO). Engaging in online social interaction simultaneously with other activities will be called “*permanently connected*” (PC). The overt usage behavior and/or the psychological state of vigilance apply to both PO and PC, and can occur in combination or separately. For example, a user may be constantly thinking about potential incoming messages in a situation where he or she is temporarily without Internet access (vigilance toward being PC).

## 3. Causes and effects of being permanently online and connected

Previous studies have begun to investigate reasons why people are constantly online, as well as effects of being PO/PC for individuals’ well-being and for social interactions. For example, the use of online social networks was connected to perceived social support through online and offline relationships (Akbulut & Güneş, 2012). Effects research looked at outcomes of constant Internet use for work productivity (Lim & Chen, 2012), the maintenance of social relationships, or compromised attention spans (Oulasvirta, 2005). However, most of these studies focus on specific online behaviors like text messaging or the use of social network sites (SNS). We suggest a broader approach, comprising the more general concepts of PO and PC. Introducing these concepts allows the bringing together of research on various specific aspects that relate to the general permanent use of online media. So far, the phenomenon of constant Internet use has not been theorized sufficiently, and no definition has been provided to understand this phenomenon broadly. To enhance research and to close this gap, a general shared understanding of the phenomenon is a first step towards creating a bridge between studies looking into various specific aspects of permanent Internet use. We aim at both providing a theoretical understanding and first insights into the operationalization of PO and PC in an exploratory study.

Although some specific aspects of effects or reasons for permanent use have been investigated in online contexts, there has no distinction been made between PO and PC, and most studies only relate to one or the other. We suggest a differentiation between the use of online content (PO) and online interaction with other users (PC). The necessity of this differentiation results from the fact that PC relates to social interaction, while PO rather relates to information seeking or media content use. Thus, the two concepts greatly differ in the theoretical background that might explain usage reasons or consequences. Similarly, some studies exclusively refer to dimensions of overt online behavior, while others are concerned with the psychological component of vigilance. As a first step, we want to focus on the overt behavior.

The overall picture on reasons for PO/PC behaviors is still unclear. The studies that have investigated reasons for constant online use provided a number of different explanations for the need to stay connected with others via the Internet. Baumeister and Leary’s concept “need to belong” comprises the idea that “... human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 497). This concept has been applied to PC by Reich and Vorderer (2013) who claim that the users’ need to belong influences their use of SNS. Other relevant concepts used for an explanation of being PC include the “fear of

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6836816>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6836816>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)