

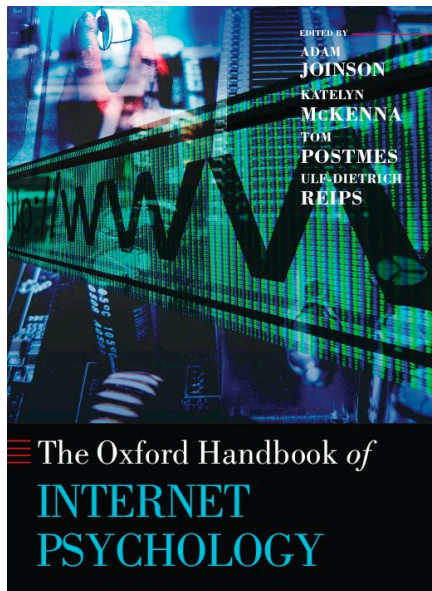


**Internet Psychology, a Very Personal Reflection:
Review of *The Oxford Handbook of Internet Psychology*,
Edited by A. N. Joinson, K. Y. A. McKenna, T. Postmes and
U.-D. Reips
(Oxford University Press, 2007)**

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When I began my PhD in 1987, I would never have predicted that something could come along that would revolutionise the way we work, interact, socialise and occupy our leisure time. However, the Internet has come



to play such a massive part in the day-to-day lives of so many people worldwide that we sometimes forget what life was like in those pre-Internet times. My own introduction to the Internet came about comparatively late in 1995 when I sent my first e-mail. I don't think I surfed the net until 1996. The strangest thing about all this was that I was writing articles and papers about the Internet before ever experiencing it myself!

In writing this essay review I have found it very hard not to put myself – or rather my own Internet-based research – at the centre of it. I read this book (Joinson, McKenna, Postmes, & Reips, 2007) with a very particular set of biases and as someone who has spent twelve years of writing and researching about the psychology of the Internet in my own particular areas of interest (more of which later at the end of this essay). I make no apologies for my first-person narrative or (what some may describe as) the somewhat ego-centred nature of my review in the latter half.

I would like to start my review by breaking a few conventions in book reviewing (and some may say that I have broken these already by writing in the first person in a somewhat non-academic style). I shall therefore start with the conclusion. *The Oxford Handbook of Internet Psychology* is an excellent book and I recommend it to anyone who has even a passing interest in psychological issues surrounding the Internet. It is the latest book in a fast growing literature on Internet psychology and is as good (if not better) than those that cover similar areas (e.g., Gackenbach, 2006). Joinson and colleagues have produced an excellent 500-page primer on many aspects of Internet psychology that will be enjoyed by those who already think they know everything about the area, and those who are dipping their theoretical toe in the water for the first time.

So why did I start with the conclusion? Well, if you read some of the comments to follow, readers may have been led to believe that I didn't like the book or was being hyper-critical of it. In short, my criticisms are so idiosyncratic that I do not want them to detract from what I see as a *must read* book in the area.

The book comprises 31 succinct chapters spread across five distinct sections ("Interaction and Interactivity", "Groups and Communities", "Personality, Self and Identity", "Psychological Aspects of Internet Use" and "Internet-Based Research"). I was unsure about the rationale for the five sections, but if I had been editing this collection, I would have put the section on Internet-based research at the beginning of the book as these chapters set out the parameters of actually doing research on (and using) the Internet. I wish I had read these chapters before I naively started researching excessive Internet use back in 1995! Of course, those of us doing Internet research (on the Internet and/or about the Internet) were learning as we went along. We tried to apply the research skills we had mastered offline to the online world. In this section we get some highly readable chapters on the methodology of Internet experimentation (Ulf-Dietrich Reips), the ethics of Internet research (Charles Ess), the use of online panels in psychological research (Anja Göritz), doing qualitative Internet research (Claire Hewson), technical considerations of Internet research (William Schmidt), and personality testing on the Internet (Tom Buchanan). What these chapters highlight is that although there are some methodological and data collection issues that are the same wherever the research is carried out, there are also a whole host of particular issues that relate to the Internet only and that anyone researching in the area needs to be aware (and take account) of these at all stages of the research process. If I was new to this area of psychological research, I think it would have been helpful to have read these critically evaluative chapters before going on to read about the research that *has* already been done.

The chapters in the first section of the book that dealt with "Interaction and Interactivity" issues on the Internet were generally well written. A number of these writings dealt with another major theme – namely trust on the Internet – such as trust and social interaction (Melanie Green), trust in mediated interactions (Jens Riegelsberger and colleagues), and trust in the development of online romantic relationships (Monica Whitty). If I have a quibble about this section, it's that perhaps Whitty's chapter concerning online relationships would have been better situated in the section on "Psychological aspects of Internet Use".

The chapters on "Personality, Self and Identity" were also well written and researched. These included overviews of self-disclosure and online privacy (Adam Joinson), computer-mediated communication and social identity (Russell Spears and colleagues), online impression management (Andrea Chester and Di Bretherton) and personality and individual differences (Yair Amichai-Hamburger). These chapters (in the main) were more theoretically driven than other chapters in the book but still made interesting reading nonetheless.

The section on "Groups and Communities" was diverse and covered areas such as the characterisation of online groups (David Brandon and Andrea Hollingshead), social networks and online communities (Caroline Haythornthwaite), online collective action (Tom Postmes), online discrimination and hate groups (Karen Douglas). There was also a chapter examining online social support groups (Martin Tanis) that I thought would be better placed in the section on "Psychological Aspects" nearer the chapter on the role of the Internet in health behaviour (Elizabeth Sillence and Pam Briggs).

The chapters in the section on "Psychological Aspects of Internet Use" were the ones with which I had most (personal) issues with. On one level, the section could be described as an illuminating *hodge-podge* of Internet aspects and issues that didn't quite fit in elsewhere into any of the other sections. For instance, there are chapters on being deceitful online (Jeffrey Hancock), online phantom emotions (Azy Barak), Internet abuse (Janet Morahan-Martin), and attitudes and social influence on the Internet (Kai Sassenberg and Kai Jonas). One of the chapters on Tokyo youth and leisure (although interesting to read) was basically a research study rather than an overview of a particular aspect of Internet use (Diane Schiano and colleagues). On another level I was disappointed to see a lack of coverage of areas that I am personally interested in. Maybe it means that areas of Internet use that I am researching are uninteresting or not mainstream enough.

Anyway, here comes the ego-centred part of my review. I'm sure I'm not the only person to do this, but one of the first things I did when opened the book was to look at the reference lists at the end of each chapter to see which authors in the book had made any reference to my work. Disappointingly (to me at least) I found only six references in the whole book. There was one reference to my work in the chapter on social interaction (i.e., Griffiths, 2000c), two references in the chapter on phantom references (i.e., Griffiths & Wood, 2000; Griffiths & Cooper, 2003) and three in the chapter on Internet abuse (i.e., Griffiths, 1998; Griffiths, 2001a; Griffiths & Parke, 2002). Furthermore, none of these citations were what I would call *core* to the arguments being made.

Given the hundreds of papers and articles I have written over the last 20 years I reached two seemingly inescapable conclusions. The first conclusion is that my research on Internet issues doesn't seem to be

particularly respected by the world's premier Internet researchers to warrant inclusion. The second conclusion is that my research areas didn't naturally fall into any of topics being overviewed. I'm hoping that it is the latter rather than the former as there are (I believe) major areas of research missing from the book.

Given that there were chapters on some very particular (i.e., narrow) areas of Internet use (such as online relationships and online hate crime) I asked myself why there weren't any chapters on activities that I (and many others) have done lots of research into such as Internet video gaming (e.g., Griffiths, Davies, & Chappell, 2003, 2004a, 2004b; Chappell, Eatough, Davies, & Griffiths, 2006; Grüsser, Thalemann, & Griffiths, 2007; Cole & Griffiths, 2007), Internet gambling (e.g., Griffiths, 1996, 2001a, 2003a; Griffiths & Parke, 2002; Smeaton & Griffiths, 2004; Griffiths, Parke, Wood, & Griffiths, 2006; Wood, Griffiths, & Parke, 2007), and Internet sexual behaviour (e.g., Griffiths, 2000a, 2001b, 2004). I was left wondering why some topics (like romantic relationships on the Internet) were given whole chapters whereas topics like Internet sex, Internet gambling, Internet video gaming, etc., were given nothing. I would argue that the sheer number of people who engage in online games like *World of Warcraft* worldwide should have warranted a chapter.

Some of these general topics like gambling and video gaming could (and perhaps should) also have been referred to in other chapters. For instance, the work we have done concerning online support groups for problem gamblers (e.g., Griffiths & Cooper, 2003; Wood & Griffiths, 2007a) could have been examined in the chapter on online support groups. In the chapters on Internet methodology there was little consideration given to data collection from specific sub-populations like those in my area of Internet video gamers (e.g., Wood, Griffiths & Eatough, 2004), Internet gamblers (Wood & Griffiths, 2007b) or Internet addicts (Griffiths, 2002). There is a whole literature on Internet addiction (e.g., Griffiths, 1998, 2000c, 2000b; Neimz, Griffiths & Banyard, 2005; Widyanto & Griffiths, 2006) that was discussed fleetingly in the chapter on Internet abuse. And speaking of Internet abuse, I was again surprised that that author somehow bypassed my own reviews on that very topic (e.g., Griffiths, 2003b, 2003c). I suppose I was left feeling that almost all of my work in the field had been sidelined.

Hopefully, you can see why I decided to put the conclusion at the start. I want to reiterate that from a completely objective perspective this is a really excellent book. When I read the book from my own personal research perspective I started to feel like the topics that I am interested in are somehow inferior to the topics discussed in the book. I am the first to admit that no book can cover everything. However, it would have been useful if the editors could have made some justification for the topics that were included, and perhaps just as importantly, the rationale for the ones that weren't.

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