

Internet access and new media

Indicator overview

VicHealth Indicators Survey

VicHealth Indicators are used to measure community wellbeing with a focus on social determinants of health.

Survey topic areas include: wellbeing, healthy eating and sedentary behaviour, use of green space and safety, smoking policy, alcohol, using of social networking, participation in arts activities and the community, social attitudes, and work, life and time.

Introduction

Australia has 11.6 million internet subscribers, and 11 million subscriptions to mobile handsets capable of internet connection (ABS 2011a). Across Australia, 74% of the population use the internet (ABS 2011b). Most Australians use the internet for personal reasons, including shopping, paying bills, and connecting with friends and family; however, a growing proportion of Australians are also using the internet for work and education-related purposes (ABS 2011b).

Social networking

Online social networking sites allow users to share ideas and information about activities, events and interests with other individuals and groups. They allow users to 'chat' with each other via email, instant messaging, video or voice chat, share photos and videos and post comments to online forums, blogs and discussion groups. In addition to well-known social networking sites such as Facebook (around 10 million Australian users) and Twitter (almost two million Australian users), an array of other sites cater to general or special-interest users (Cowling 2012).

While it has been suggested that internet use limits people's participation in their local communities, research into social connection through social networking sites suggests that most internet activities have either no impact on, or have a positive relationship with, local community activity (Pew Internet 2009). In particular, this research has found that internet users are as likely as anyone else to visit their neighbours in person, while those who use the internet frequently at work or who blog are more likely to belong to local voluntary associations, such as youth groups or charitable organisations. The use of the internet and social media is associated with participation in discussion networks that are likely to contain people from different racial and political backgrounds (Pew Internet 2009). Participation in traditional social settings, such as neighbourhoods, voluntary organisations and public spaces remains the strongest predictor of the overall diversity of people's social networks; however, internet use – specifically the use of social networking services such as Facebook – is also linked with connecting people from a wide variety of backgrounds (Pew Internet 2009). Furthermore, rather than reducing social skills and increasing people's sense of isolation, social networking sites have been found to facilitate the time people spend socialising with friends and family and increase participation in social activities (Australian Psychological Society 2010).

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Find out more

Institute for a broadband-enabled society, University of Melbourne.
www.broadband.unimelb.edu.au

The National Broadband Network, Australian Government Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy.
www.nbn.gov.au

Opportunities for social connection, VicHealth.
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