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# Taking advantage of the Internet: A qualitative analysis to explain why educational background is decisive in gaining positive outcomes

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## ABSTRACT

This study takes a qualitative approach to studying how the socio-cultural context might foster beneficial Internet use for different educational groups. As the approach taken in digital inequality research is often a quantitative one, most studies yield primary determinants of obtaining positive outcomes that do not suffice in offering explanations for how digital inequalities arise. This study aimed to bridge this shortcoming by conducting qualitative interviews with 48 Dutch families that were selected on the basis of the educational level of their family heads, which were classified as either highly or less educated, and household characteristics (marital status and children). The results show that the highly educated are more likely to obtain positive outcomes in all fields of society than the less educated, but that they strive to diminish the influence of Internet use on their personal lives by disconnecting from the Internet whenever possible.

## 1. Introduction

For a long time, a large share of digital divide studies has focused on differences in Internet motivation and access (first-level digital divide) (e.g., [Compaine, 2001](#)). When access rates began to saturate in many Western societies, researchers started to study the differences in the digital skills that Internet users possess and the activities they employ online (second-level digital divide) (e.g., [Büchi, Just, & Latzer, 2016](#); [Hargittai, 2001](#); [Witte & Mannon, 2010](#)). More recently, differences in Internet outcomes became topic of investigation (third-level digital divide) (e.g., [Van Deursen & Helsper, 2015](#); [Wei, Teo, Chan, & Tan, 2011](#)), with the underlying idea that Internet access, skills and activities do not fully address what the Internet actually means in terms of outcomes. The differences in what people obtain from the Internet are likely to reinforce the gaps based on existing social stratifications ([Chen & Wellman, 2004](#); [DiMaggio & Garip, 2012](#); [Helsper, 2012](#); [Van Dijk, 2019](#); [Witte & Mannon, 2010](#); [Zillien & Hargittai, 2009](#)). Although it is important to unravel how differences in beneficial outcomes of Internet use arise, research is scarce.

In the current contribution, we use the theory driven corresponding fields model ([Helsper, 2012](#)) to map the tangible positive Internet outcomes obtained by different social groups. Educational level of attainment is taken as a starting point for differentiating between social groups, as education is an important indicator in all levels of the digital divide (e.g., [Blank & Lutz, 2018](#); [Scheerder, van Deursen, & van Dijk, 2017](#)). Furthermore, we step back from the predominantly quantitative approach in digital divide research. The guiding research question is: *How do families with lower and higher educational backgrounds differentially benefit from positive outcomes of Internet use?* We address this question by interviewing people with different educational levels to unravel if experiences

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with positive outcomes of Internet use and the meaning people attribute to these outcomes differ.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Corresponding fields model

Most of the studies addressing Internet outcomes are fragmented and focus on one individual outcome, for example, an increased number of social ties (Pénard & Poussing, 2010) or political participation (Sylvester & McGlynn, 2010). The terminology of the outcomes varies between studies (Blank & Grosej, 2014), making comparisons difficult. Although studying outcomes separately is helpful in bridging the third-level digital divide, looking at a broader range helps to provide a more comprehensive picture of how existing notions of inequality surface (Van Deursen, Helsper, Eynon, & van Dijk, 2017). This requires a theory driven approach which is often lacking in studies around Internet outcomes (Helsper, 2012). To study how people benefit differentially from Internet use, a classification of possible outcomes is needed. In her corresponding fields model, Helsper (2012) argues that social inclusion interacts with the domains of digital inclusion. The idea is that one's offline and online resources influence each other, as the chance to be included online is reflected by the offline resources one has. Therefore, the online fields of inclusion have corresponding fields in the offline world. Helsper (2012) refers to these fields as 'spheres of influence in everyday life as well as frames of reference for individual action'. Outcomes can be obtained in four fields that consist of a number of resources. The fields are the *economic*, *social*, *cultural* and *personal* (Helsper, 2012):

- Economic outcomes relate to an individual's income, property, employment and education. Examples include obtaining financial benefits through online investments or profiting from buying or selling products online. Additionally, finding a new job online or gathering knowledge via online courses belong to the economic field.
- Social outcomes concern ties with an individual or in(formal) and political networks and might, for example, manifest in new friendships built online, having online discussions about political or societal issues or acquiring a new membership to a club or society. Social outcomes may also be limited to looking up information, for example, about national government services. Additionally, when 'regular interactions' take place online, this is part of the social field, such as exchanging pictures or having daily conversations with family and friends via social media.
- Cultural outcomes have to do with one's identity and belonging, which are based on the shared norms and behaviors as learned through socialization, and indicate one's social status. Activities related to spirituality, religious content or getting to know different ethnicities are part of the cultural field, as is learning about the upbringing of children.
- Personal outcomes relate to health, leisure or self-actualization, and can, for example, manifest in new (digital) ways of entertainment or spending one's spare time, including activities related to mental and physical health. Think of enjoying music or TV episodes via online streaming services or tracking one's movement by means of applications. Self-actualization might occur through consulting others about problems or issues that are related to one's interests or finding new offline events to visit.

### 2.2. Educational background

Just as for the first- and second level digital divide, studies have begun to focus on the indicators of Internet outcomes to determine who is on the 'right side' and who is on the 'wrong side' of the third-level digital divide (Blank & Lutz, 2016; Van Deursen & Helsper, 2015; Van Deursen et al., 2017). To gain insight into the most important indicators of these divides, Scheerder et al. (2017) performed a literature review to identify potential determinants for the four fields of inclusion (Helsper, 2012). Although only a relatively small share of the determinants identified focused on the third-level divide, useful insights were drawn. The majority of determinants identified within the third-level digital divide are limited to socioeconomic and sociodemographic indicators, such as age, gender, employment status and educational level. Furthermore, these determinants were mostly studied in relation to positive outcomes in the (formal) social and economic field, while (indicators of) cultural and personal outcomes were largely overlooked. While this also goes for negative outcomes of Internet use (Blank & Lutz, 2018; Scheerder, Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2019b), here the focus will be on the positive outcomes as the possession of resources often forms the starting point of inequality research (Van Dijk, 2019).

Van Deursen and Helsper (2015) aimed to bridge the fragmented character of third-level divide research by surveying the indicators that determine the benefits in each of the four corresponding fields. They found that one's educational level is one of the most important indicators of differences in Internet benefits, as it was shown to be a significant determinant in all four fields, i.e., the higher educated obtain more positive outcomes than the lower educated in the economic, personal, social and cultural fields. This finding was expected as education has traditionally been decisive for offline social inequalities (e.g., Eikemo, Huisman, Bambra, & Kunst, 2008; Groot, Van Den Brink, & Van Praag, 2007). Educational level is known to be important in first- and second level divides and, as such, might have a sequential and strengthening effect on gaining online outcomes (Van Deursen et al., 2017). In addition, those who have difficulties with acquiring outcomes in one domain of society, often also have trouble with obtaining outcomes in other domains (Van Deursen et al., 2017).

Following the above, we expect that those who are socially disadvantaged by means of their educational level, will have more difficulties with obtaining benefits online compared to their higher educated counterparts. For example, children from less educated parents may not receive adequate support from their parents and siblings, whereas children from highly educated families receive support from parents, homework assistants, siblings, or other skilled users (Helsper & van Deursen, 2017). Furthermore, when the

informational use of the Internet increases, people with higher levels of education tend to learn more than less educated people, widening the gap between groups with different socioeconomic backgrounds (Wei & Hindman, 2011).

As previous contributions studying the third-level divide have taken a quantitative approach, little is known about *how* education affects benefitting from Internet use and what the actual consequences are for daily life. Based on previous findings we expect that people with different educational levels have different outcome experiences and attribute different meaning to the experienced outcomes. Understanding these experiences and meanings helps to unravel why some benefit more from Internet use than others, while opportunities in terms of having an Internet connection are similar.

### 2.3. Socio-cultural context

Applying a qualitative approach furthermore enables us to identify how one's socio-cultural context contributes to the way the Internet is used in daily life and how this might foster beneficial Internet use for different educational groups. Digital divide research often lacks empirical attention for the context in which Internet use is embedded (e.g., Jenkins, 2006; Iordache, Mariën, & Baelden, 2017), such as plausible explanations for why differences in positive outcomes exist. For example, those who are most in need of support while using the Internet have the least access to high quality support (Eynon & Geniets, 2016), while having help available in one's local support network often leads to higher Internet skills (Ferro, Helbig, & Gil-Garcia, 2011). Additionally, the uptake of new technologies is more common among those who encounter these technologies in their close surroundings (Haddon, 2000; Scheerder, Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2019a). Taking a qualitative approach allows for further elaboration on the outcomes. First, approaching the Internet user as a social actor in the home context, whose values, dispositions and daily practices determine how the Internet is integrated into his life, helps to unravel how positive outcomes are constituted. Second, there is room for discovering 'new' outcomes, in addition to the outcomes derived from theory. Questions contributing to our exploration are related to the socio-contextual influences that come with the Internet users' educational background, for example: Do participants (consciously) put a lot of effort in obtaining this outcome? Was this outcome previously obtained offline and if so: why now online? Do others contribute to obtaining this outcome in the form of help or guidance?

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Participants

A total of 47 families were recruited in the eastern part of the Netherlands, by means of a flyer designed for this particular study. Distribution took place online on several social media platforms as well as by making in person door-to-door requests, to address a diverse group of people and acquire an adequate representation of the Dutch population. Once participants subscribed for participation on the project website, they were contacted by telephone. Primarily, families were selected on the basis of educational level. The participants were classified as 'less-educated' when they had acquired an intermediate vocational education or below and were classified as 'highly educated' when their degree was higher than or above the vocational education level. When both a less- and highly educated parent or adult were selected, a family was classified as 'highly educated'. We aimed for equally distributed types of families over the less and highly-educated groups by considering household characteristics as determined by the following two variables: having children (living at home) and marital status (Table 1). These household characteristics were accounted for to find a larger variation of outcomes within the two educational groups. Having or not having children and marital status are important aspects in the Internet domestication process (Punie, 2005), which is likely to influence the extent to which one benefits from Internet use (Scheerder, Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2019a). In the less-educated group, the percentage of single-parents is higher than in the highly educated group, which is representative of the Dutch population (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2017).

### 3.2. Procedure

This study consisted of two rounds of semi-structured interviews (in Dutch) with the same families and household members. There were eight months in between the first and second round of interviews (this study was part of a larger study consisting of five

**Table 1**  
Composition of participating families.

	Less educated group (N = 24)	Highly educated group (N = 24)
Families with children living at home	15 (5)	16 (3)
1 child	3	5
2 children	5	10
3 or more children	7	1
Adult children (not living with parents)	7	4
Families without children	2 (2)	4 (2)
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>24</b>

Notes. Aggregate numbers for categories and overall grand totals are in bold. Number of single individuals and single-parent families are in parentheses.

interview rounds; the first and last were devoted to positive outcomes). Conducting single interviews might have overlooked life events that do not occur regular, such as seeking a new job or being ill. The first round of interviews served to make an inventory of positive outcomes that participants obtained through the Internet until then. In the second round, the occurrence of previously mentioned outcomes was again topic of discussion. Then, attention was paid to newly obtained outcomes.

Both (step-) parents, or the only head in single parent families, were interviewed at the participants' homes. Before the start of each interview, the research aim and procedure were explained. Then, the participants were asked to read and sign informed consent. Before every interview, the participants completed a survey (Appendix A in Supplementary file) based on potential outcomes in each of the four corresponding fields. The outcomes were derived from a questionnaire developed in the 'From Digital Skills to Tangible Outcomes'-project (DiSTO) (Helsper, van Deursen, & Eynon, 2015). The survey served as a take-off for the interviews. Following the first questions emanating from this input, participants could – in both the first and second round of interviews – add to the proposed list by numerating additional positive outcomes that had occurred to them. After discussing each achieved outcome, the participants were asked to elaborate on their satisfaction with these outcomes by answering the question: *how satisfied are you with this specific outcome?* The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 min. Participants were incentivized with a tablet computer per family, after completion of a larger project (with five interview rounds in total).

### 3.3. Analysis

Each interview was transcribed. The corresponding fields model served as the basis for a first coding scheme covering economic, personal, social and cultural outcomes (Appendix B in Supplementary file). All transcripts were coded within Atlas.ti. Each beneficial outcome was placed under one of the overarching categories and subsequently specified in subcategories, including emerging outcomes mentioned by the participants (e.g., economic – work-related). These (sub)categories were derived from the categorization as proposed in the DiSTO project questionnaire (Helsper et al., 2015). The findings translated from Dutch to English for final writeup. A second researcher was assigned to code 10 % of the transcripts to calculate intercoder reliability. A Cohen's kappa value of .83 was achieved, denoting good agreement between the coders.

## 4. Results

In this section, the differences between less (LEA) and highly educated (HEA) groups are discussed. The positive outcomes and the individual's satisfaction with these outcomes will be discussed following the classification of the corresponding fields model by classifying the benefits under the *economic*, *social*, *personal* and *cultural* fields. For some outcomes, participants mentioned that they didn't know how to put their satisfaction into words, because achieving those outcomes had become accustomed. We will further elaborate on this tendency in the limitations section.

### 4.1. Economic – income

Within the economic field, HEA-members obtain more types of financial benefits than LEA-members in several ways. In general, HEA-members are engaged in new types of investments and often perform actions regarding these investments on the Internet, which either involves new types of investments to which the Internet is inherent, such as buying and selling bitcoins, or traditional forms of offline investments for which the information gathering takes place online. While not all the outcomes of long-term investments by the HEA-participants were available by the end of this study, the most important difference is that LEA-members do not even start the information gathering or investment in the first place. Some HEA-members appear to be successful in gaining profits from (online) investments.

*'I simply invest to eventually take advantage, yes. From the pension I receive from my current job, I could afford a sandwich when I'm old. That is very nice, but I'd like to have a croissant' – HA3.*

*'Bitcoin remained stable since our last conversation. So, compared to the last time, it hasn't really improved. However, without those bitcoins, our financial situation would basically be 'worse', indeed. And of course, you're not going to start with bitcoins when your financial situation isn't that good anyways' – HA2.*

Additionally, many HEA-members compare their health insurance and energy providers every year, which saves them money and ensures that they are optimally insured. While some LEA-members also indicate that they compare their health insurance every year, their motivation is mostly to see if their insurance still covers the health services they expect to need. LEA-members seem to enjoy very few financial benefits when comparing their health insurance online, as they do not transfer to another provider 'if it is just for a few euros'. Other LEA-members do not make the comparison to switch annually because they are afraid that they will not be as well insured as they are with their current health insurance, or because they have had a negative experience with a previous switch. In line with these differences, HEA-members mostly mention that they are very satisfied with the outcomes of their financial activities online, but that improvement is always possible and so 'ten out of ten' will never be reached.

*'A financial benefit is a nice bonus, but the quality has to be good. In other words, I want to be well insured' – HA3*

*'We started at ONVZ; it is a good insurance company. It might differ in a few euros with another company, but one company offers this benefit and another that benefit. If the feeling with one company is right, you don't just switch to another anymore' – LA12.*

#### 4.2. Economic – property

Both educational groups seem to be accustomed to buying and selling online, with the exception of some elderly respondents or villagers who still prefer to buy offline to support local entrepreneurs or to obtain personal advice. Both HEA- and LEA-members go online to gain financial benefits by means of obtaining bargains and offers, or by making price comparisons between offline and online sellers for specific products or services. There are differences, however. For LEA-members, the price is often the main reason for shopping online (even if the price differences are small), while HEA-members mostly shop online because of convenience and saving time. HEA-members say they only choose to buy second-hand online if the financial benefit largely outweighs the new price, mostly because they refuse, on principle, to buy something for the new price, and the online purchase should not be at the expense of convenience or quality. For some LEA-members, buying second-hand online often is the only way to buy a product, as they can simply not afford new products, for example, furniture. In line with that, only LEA-members indicated that online bargains ensured that they have enough money left for other things, such as outings with their children. Selling belongings via online marketplaces delivers financial returns to LEA-members, while for HEA-members, the motivation is often to get rid of belongings to clean up their homes or to contribute to a more sustainable world. Many HEA-members, therefore, added that they only choose to sell online when the products are still worth a substantial amount, otherwise they prefer to give things away to, for example, thrift shops, so that they can avoid the inconvenience of online selling.

*‘Not only financially but also... It’s just: why would you pay full price? And on top of that, the sustainability and recycling of products is also something I highly value. They outweigh a possible financial benefit’ – HA10.*

*‘Now, with the Internet, I do buy things that I wouldn’t have purchased otherwise. I’m short of money, as I receive unemployment benefits, so I simply wouldn’t be able to’ – LA16.*

Lastly, mainly LEA-members indicate that they buy gadgets, must-haves or experiences via online auction websites. While they assume that they are saving some money this way, most of them mention that the products or services bought are things they come across and did not really need. HEA-members are a bit more critical and argue they do not believe they save money online because most things bought are not basic needs. While both groups appear to save by making price comparisons online, for HEA-members, the financial benefits are a nice extra, but the savings should not be at the expense of convenience or quality, while for LEA-members, the financial benefit often seems to be the leading motivation.

*‘It’s more like... searching for a hotel or a coming across a nice offer for a family outing. We’ve been to Apenheul < Dutch zoo > once, and we only paid 10 euros for a ticket. Those are just nice things that we can cut down. It’s not that I’m searching for it, you just encounter them on the Internet’ – LA5*

*‘We don’t really believe that we’re saving money. Maybe in comparison to offline purchases, but eventually, you do buy things online that you don’t really need’ – HA20.*

#### Economic – employment

Work-related Internet use differs between the two educational groups in the sense that for LEA-members, the Internet is often used for administrative purposes or supportive tasks, while HEA-members say they cannot perform their jobs without the Internet; it is inherent to their work and is also reflected in the work-related benefits they obtain. While several LEA-members complain about the fact that they had to get used to conducting their tasks via the Internet, HEA-members indicate they use the Internet to continuously improve their work, for example, through integrating new software or finding online solutions, for which their work activities are likely to become more efficient and effective. Approximately a quarter of the HEA-members even have ICT-related jobs, which means that they would not have a job – or at least not this particular job – without the Internet. HEA-members are not only engaged in continuous improvements to satisfy their employers, but they mainly seem to do so to keep themselves entertained and challenged. LEA-members do not seem to use the Internet to implement improvements on their own initiative. Finally, while there are entrepreneurs who indicate that they use the Internet to steer the success of their own company in both groups, only in the HEA were these companies covering a full-time job or a legal enterprise, such as an online embroidery shop, Instagram-advertisement, a courier company or a theater organization. LEA-members often engage in ‘less official’ enterprises online, such as trading car parts or selling handmade embroidery. Many more HEA- than LEA-members mention being very satisfied with what they obtain from the Internet when it concerns work-related outcomes, probably because many LEA-members still struggle with how to implement the Internet into their daily tasks. HEA-members indicate that they view the Internet more as a means to continuously improve their work, and so many of them also state here that there will always be more to obtain from the Internet.

*‘Well, I think, the Internet is such an ongoing thing; it’s continuously changing. Just when I think I should approach search engines this way, Google has changed the whole mechanism again. That’s really a weird and ongoing thing. You’re constantly learning. We both work in online marketing, and it never ends; it constantly changes’ – HA6.*

*‘A new app was just introduced at work for secure e-mails, but it doesn’t really work. So, we often handle matters the old-fashioned way, via the telephone. Well, that takes us even more time. [...] Sometimes I have my hands in my hair, it’s all going too fast at this age. I noticed that the young people in the department picks up these new things faster’ – LA12.*

The reflective attitude towards their jobs also returns in HEA-members’ search for new jobs; although the members of both groups use the Internet to search for new jobs when relevant, HEA-members also continuously update their profiles online for the future,

even when they are not explicitly looking for a new job. Via professional networking sites, such as LinkedIn, HEA-members create personal profiles as a means to introduce themselves to potentially relevant connections and to actively make and maintain contacts that might be useful in the future. Only a few LEA-members also use this type of professional networking site, and mostly not as proactively as HEA-members. While in both groups a handful of members indicated that they were seeking a new job online, only HEA-members succeeded during the course of the study.

*'Sometimes, I look at the website of the employment office, but jobs aren't available. Either you're too old or too expensive. Mostly, you don't even receive a response when applying online, for example' – LA16.*

*'Well, it is also a bit unconscious. Maintaining LinkedIn, for example, updating your information every now and then. So, if anyone ever comes across my profile, it looks good and the info is up to date' – HA10.*

Following work-related courses is something members of both groups do, but the difference is that HEA-members often propose certain courses or workshops to their management themselves, while courses are imposed on LEA-members. This difference seems most beneficial for HEA-members, as they actively work on their personal development. HEA-participants often mention that they find it difficult to distinguish between work-related and personal development because it overlaps so much.

*'Yes, at work, we were confronted with new developments. I thought it would be handy to know more of these. So, I looked up where I could follow a course on these developments' – HA24.*

*'I think I've got approximately 30 courses that are 'pending', courses that I should finish for work, but I just don't feel like doing it. There's enough to learn, but I just don't feel like it' – LA25.*

#### 4.3. Personal – self-actualization

The members also mention learning online on a more personal level. Starting with 'the Internet' as an information source, HEA-members indicate that the Internet aids them in continuously learning, which might range from searching for a small fact to following a full online course. When LEA-participants are asked if they learn via the Internet, they often answer by saying, 'not specifically, or not that I know of', implying a difference in the proactiveness of online learning. Online learning also takes place via courses or workshops found and followed online, which again is more often pro-actively initiated by HEA-members than by LEA-members. LEA-members do learn online, but very occasionally and mostly when there is an external incentive, such as in preparation for a newly acquired job. HEA-members, in contrast, often pro-actively search for a specific course or workshop because they want to work on their personal development. Oftentimes, these courses are targeted at acquiring new skills or learning something completely new. Some examples of this, as indicated by HEA-members, include starting a law study while being account manager or examining new ways of performing mindfulness. Lastly, for a few HEA-members, the Internet serves as a platform for self-expression, for example, through maintaining a blog-website. While approximately half of the HEA-members mention that they are very satisfied with what they yield from the Internet concerning personal development, some of them also indicate that there are always others who will obtain more from it. Additionally, only LEA-members mention here that they do not obtain personal development outcomes online, but that they are satisfied with the way it is.

*'Well, work-related, we might have learned new things via the Internet recently, but in the private sphere, we actually didn't' – LA4.*

*'I was searching for a course about child coaching, and the offerings were really broad. However, with my job and the business here at home, I didn't feel like following a course that demands going to school in the evening or the weekend. So, I put all those courses in a Word document, and then, I started selecting on the ones I could entirely follow online. Then, I looked at the price, but more so at the certification of the courses, those kinds of things. In this way, I found one that I could follow online, except for the exam. That's okay. So, in the first instance, this is personal development, but later on, who knows' – HA2.*

According to most LEA-members, the Internet helps to keep them informed about news items more often during the day and in receiving news quicker than before, while at the same time, allowing them to be selective in the type of news items that are relevant for them. Although most HEA-members seem to agree on the benefits of being selective and flexible in consuming the news currently, they add statements about the newsworthiness and veracity of news items, declaring that the Internet allows them the possibility to consult several sources to verify a news item before accepting it as the truth. Some also pinpoint this specifically in light of fake news. A handful of HEA-members also indicates that they stopped following a specific news source during the course of this study because they experienced an overload of (false) information that did not help them in becoming optimally informed about the news. A few HEA-participants indicated that they are worried about how the news provision of today influences people who take a less critical attitude towards the news, which is also reflected in the satisfaction with outcomes, as being highly satisfied with their news provision is indicated by the members of both groups, but only HEA-members state that they are still searching for ways to obtain the most out of this online service.

*'I do think I'm better informed about the news because of the Internet. I used to watch the morning news on TV, but they always only discussed a few items. When I'm browsing the websites of newspapers, such as De Telegraaf, they also seem to devote attention to smaller items, of which you might think: is this really newsworthy? However, yeah, in this way, you notice that online, you'll see a lot more of what happens in the world than on television' – LA15.*

*'I stopped following certain people on Twitter who didn't tell the truth; then, you're off for me. On the other hand, I also found some journalists who do present the news in a neutral, objective way and who dare to highlight it from different angles. There's always two sides*

to a story. If you're continuously only reading one side of the news, you'll eventually start to believe that it is the truth' – HA13.

#### 4.4. Personal – health

With regard to health-related activities online, both groups seek medical or health information online. However, some LEA-members indicate that they stopped doing so because the potential diseases and disorders they discover when Googling symptoms scare them. HEA-members seem to be better skilled in filtering this information, as they often indicate that the right sources should be consulted for medical information to be useful. For the ones searching for medical information, in both groups, the participants use the information found for reassurance. Only HEA-members appear to use the information found online to arrive well prepared at a visit to the general practitioner or even to prevent such a visit. After having visited a doctor, HEA-members use the Internet to answer questions, such as the following: what does the disease the doctor mentioned actually mean? Can I use this medicine in any case? Overall, LEA-members less often seem to obtain reassurance through online medical information.

*'It is by now perfectly clear to me that in the case of, for example, an ear infection, I have to search for treatment protocols of ENT-specialists. What are the options and what should I take into account? With that information, I go to a general practitioner, but the GP has no idea. He really has no idea. He comes up with really general antibiotics, while ENT-specialists don't use those anyway and agree on completely different treatments. In such cases, it helps me to say: 'I don't need those antibiotics, and for the intensive treatment, I'll wait a few more days'. [...] It is just a matter of consulting the right sources' – HA20.*

*'I do Google symptoms that concern myself. I know it's wrong to do so, but I often think: 'I've got these symptoms, what do they mean?' Often, you end up with something like a brain tumor or cancer, and the prognosis is you'll die. However, I still keep doing so, yes. That curiosity is something that's just inside human beings' – LA18.*

Both HEA- and LEA-members use the Internet as a facilitator for working on their mental health. Using health apps to monitor one's daily exercise or calorie intake is something the participants of both groups say that they do with the aim to become healthier. However, it seems that these health-related activities are only used over a limited time span and that the desired results do not remain for many of the participants. Only the few HEA-members that use the Internet and its applications as a new lifestyle seem to succeed in reaching their goals in the long term.

*'Yes, I sought information about improving my condition. However, we also discussed this the last time. I keep on doing it, did so countless times in the last 6 years, but I never persevere' – LA25.*

*'I was diagnosed with PDS, for example, and I just sought a really extensive online book with a lot of new theory. If I don't eat the right things, then I suffer from it in the long run. It goes well for a very long time, but at a certain point, I have to face the consequences. My intestines really have to recover, and then, tiredness comes with it. My resistance was very low at a certain point. So, we adopted a different lifestyle. So, yes, I did make better decisions about my health' – HA4.*

#### 4.5. Personal – leisure (entertainment)

Participants of both groups found new forms of entertainment since the Internet entered their lives and, for most of them, it is now their main source of entertainment. Both groups mention their reasons for preferring online entertainment, such as selectivity (e.g., which TV programs and series), flexibility (when and where to watch) and relaxation. The forms of online entertainment do not differ much between the two groups, although LEA-members, overall, seem to play more games, and HEA-members use online music streaming services more often. A surprising tendency that is mentioned by almost half of the HEA-members is the desire to reduce the time spent on online entertainment. Over the course of this longitudinal study, many HEA-members indicated that they quit one or more means of online entertainment because spending their spare time offline yields more mental rest and adds value to their relationships. While a few LEA-members also mention to sometimes desire a better balance between on- and offline entertainment, they do not act on it. When participants are asked if online entertainment has actually made them happier, approximately half of the LEA-members responds approvingly. A few HEA-members also agree with the statement, but independent from their (dis)agreeing answer, most HEA-members and some LEA-members add a nuance to their answer, as follows: 'happy' is too strong, but most of them agree that the Internet has brought them more types of entertainment and that some of those actually give them really happy moments, such as when listening to good (selective) music. Some LEA-members whom state that online entertainment has indeed made them happier are the ones who are home-bound or lonely and say that the Internet gives them a way to make it through the day.

*'It feels more like filling time than really... You know, last week, we went to a music concert, and then, your heart really gets touched. That's not something that will soon happen online. For me, the Internet will never fully replace the offline world and entertainment' – HA18.*

*'The computer has made it that I can now enjoy myself, here at home, on my own. Without that thing, I would really be lonely. Yes, I really am happier' – LA3.*

#### 4.6. Social – informal

In terms of maintaining social contacts or relationships using online channels, nearly all participants state that the Internet facilitates fast and more frequent moments of contact with friends and family. In both groups, this sometimes leads to the improvement of existing relationships, although this seems more common among LEA-members. Most HEA-members do indicate, however, that maintaining social contacts online leads to more involvement with the lives of family and friends because they are kept more up-to-date and it facilitates offline appointments. Most of them also say that online contact will never outweigh offline contact in terms of added value for relationships and that the Internet mainly serves for ‘quick and short’ contact moments. Why maintaining relationships online leads to better relationships for many LEA-members is often hard to put into words for the participants. Making new contacts online, in terms of friendships, is something that is only mentioned by LEA-members, while both groups use the Internet to find functional contacts, such as someone who can provide advice about rearing children or ICT-related problems. Using social media to maintain social contacts is something LEA-members continue to do, while a considerable number of HEA-members state that they have ‘cleaned up’ their accounts or friends list on social media, and some have even deleted their accounts. These HEA-members not only indicate that certain social media, such as Facebook, have surpassed their original purpose of maintaining social contacts, but also that the content found on these platforms increasingly annoys them. While a few LEA-members are also bothered by the changing content of social media, they do not go as far as to delete or clean up their profiles.

*‘I don’t think it adds much. I just call people, really old-fashioned. [...] The way I established it right now, I’m really content with it. So, I don’t have Facebook, I make minimum use of WhatsApp and I don’t use it for seeking contact. I just call. That’s my way to maintain contacts’ – HA21.*

*‘For example, in our church, there are new people who I lost out of sight of years ago. And now it’s easier to get into contact again via Facebook or Instagram. Sometimes, it leads to a visit or, recently, even a friendship’ – LA1.*

*‘We’re very tired lately because we’re going through a busy period [...], so we don’t feel like doing anything and we end up scrolling through our phones, and I watch Grey’s Anatomy, for example. Yes, that’s an issue lately. [...] However, luckily, we were aware of it. And we actually didn’t make use of a babysitter much. So, meanwhile, we have had some ‘job interviews’, and now, we’ve got a babysitter. I arranged it online by the way. So, we were aware that we needed a babysitter so that we could spend more time offline again, together’ – HA11.*

‘Being social’ by making a contribution to society is something that LEA-members express a desire for more than HEA-members. While HEA-members appear to be more actively seeking information to understand societal problems and to form an opinion about these questions, such as about political divisions, LEA-members seem more committed to contributing to society by doing something for others, and the Internet often facilitates this. For example, many LEA-members do volunteer work for their (children’s) sports club by maintaining the website or by organizing and promoting events online. The only exception to this difference is signing petitions, which is something members of both groups do. Oftentimes, HEA-members add that they are content with the way it is because they are not interested in contributing to society in this way, which corresponds with the offline tendency for HEA-members to be less social in this way and therefore more egocentric than LEA-members (Huisman, 2018). Additionally, the trend is reflected in the satisfaction rates that are given concerning societal involvement because, compared to other outcomes, many of the participants indicate that they do not get much out of using the Internet in this way, but that they are happy with that result. The majority of these participants belongs to the HEA.

*‘Maintaining the website for the soccer club, of course I get something out of it myself, but actually I’m doing it for others. I’m just content about it actually. I think that we just make good use of it, we reach people. Yes, it could be improved and we could make it all fancier, but I think it is going well, and that is what we hear back from others’ – LA13.*

*‘I don’t do anything with social involvement or contributing something to society. And that’s alright with me, let’s keep it that way’ – HA21*

#### 4.7. Social – formal

During the second round of interviews, municipal elections had just taken place in the Netherlands. Nearly all participants of both groups indicate that they used the Internet to prepare for the elections because they did not know who to vote for or felt ill prepared without using an online voting support system. Only a few older or religious participants, who are conservative in their voting, did not use the Internet because they do not need orientation. When using voting support systems, LEA-members indicate that they mostly just follow the suggestion given, while HEA-members demand more background information regarding certain political statements to check if they actually agree with the advice on the basis of the statements the political parties make.

*‘Yes, I did need a voting guide [...]. However, what I find difficult about it is that I search for more voting guides and they all give another result. So, to what extent should I then figure out where those differences come from and which statements do I think are important... because you should tick which statements are important according to you. So, yes, it took me some time. However, you can compare, per statement, what different parties think of those statements. In this, way I finally choose my top 3 and then which party to vote for’ – HA2.*

*‘Yes, I do know the area I’m voting for, but I’m not going to delve into all party programs. I just search for a few voting guides. [...] It was a confirmation of what I thought beforehand’ – LA4.*

HEA-members in general seem to benefit more from online public services, as they appreciate how they can access and use these services online instead of having to go to an office; therefore, they can save time, which allows them more control. Many LEA-



members indicate that they often need help to find what they are looking for on online governmental services because the website is not easy to navigate.

More LEA-members appear to coincidentally discover online that they are entitled to a particular benefit, subsidy or tax advantage, tax benefits that HEA-members do not discover because these are only intended for the poor that are living on benefits. On the other hand, some HEA-members do mention that they enjoy tax benefits that are accessible for everyone but are not generally known, such as reclaiming donations with their tax returns.

*'It appeared that there were extras available, which I never addressed. I found out when I was searching for something else. Well, really nice!' – LA22*

*'About that financial benefit; it is the refund of the donations that you've made in the past year. For the tax declaration. I read it somewhere and thought, 'I have to figure that out for our situation'. And it appeared that, indeed, we could get it back tax free. It's not much, but it is a financial benefit in the end' – HA10.*

#### 4.8. Cultural

Compared to the positive outcomes discussed in the prior domains, cultural outcomes appear to be less common. While some participants in both LEA and HEA indicate that they have learned things about or overthought differences between men and women, mostly they mention this as a consequence of the information they came across online by chance, especially in the time that the global MeToo-discussion emerged. Therefore, most of the participants classify this under the understanding of complex societal problems, thus belonging to the personal field, rather than the cultural field.

Information about parenting or upbringing is sometimes sought, mostly by women, in both groups. Mostly, this provides them with tips and tricks for problems or questions they encounter, such as the sleep issues of babies or breastfeeding toddlers. Convenience and time savings are again mentioned as the positive outcomes here, as some of the participants mention that 'when the problem would get severe or serious', they would still turn to their consultation office.

A few members of both groups mention they have traced their family history or background online and, in most cases, this leads to contentment or excitement about the information found, but in neither of the cases was the information sought deemed essential.

Finally, some HEA-members indicate that the Internet helps them in their cultural development by providing the participants with information about offline events, such as theater performances. These participants explain that, according to them, going online is not the way to work on personal development, but the Internet might inspire them to participate in cultural activities offline. Most LEA-members state that they are not interested in cultural development anyway, either online or offline.

*'Concerning cultural development, you have to be aware that you don't reside in what you already know. That does happen quite fast when you just seek for it online. Last week, I just picked something from the programming in the local theater. It doesn't always have to be a great success, but at least you're trying something else and you can form an opinion about it' – HA24.*

*'No, cultural development doesn't interest me at all' – LA23.*

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

Research on digital inequality over the last decade has typically used a quantitative approach. Mostly, indicators for having an Internet connection (first-level digital divide) or skills and usage (second-level digital divide) are considered (Scheerder et al., 2017). Recently, theory driven approaches for studying the tangible outcomes of Internet use (third-level digital divide) have appeared (e.g., Blank & Lutz, 2016; Van Deursen & Helsper, 2015, 2018). The current contribution adds to this development by taking a qualitative approach. This study sought to identify differences in the experiences and interpretations of Internet outcomes and the meaning attributed to these outcomes among members of less (LEA) and highly (HEA) educational groups. In general, the results show that both groups perform activities in all outcome domains, but that divergent approaches result in the less beneficial Internet use for LEA as compared to HEA-members.

HEAs are likely to be more successful in obtaining benefits in the personal, cultural and economic domains. In the economic field, on top of the financial benefits emanating from online price comparisons both groups enjoy, HEA-members reap financial advantages from investments that LEA-members don't consider. Prior findings revealed that the likelihood of online banking, including investments, increases with the educational level (Jiménez & Díaz, 2019). HEA-members showed a general interest in finance, of which the knowledge about and the willingness to invest seem to be a logical consequence. To the contrary, LEA-members often appear to lack interest and the necessary knowledge, especially in regard to new online developments such as bitcoin. This corresponds with the offline disparities in financial literacy among the less educated (Lusardi & Mitchell, 2007; Skagerlund, Lind, Strömbäck, Tinghög, & Västfjäll, 2018). Annual comparisons of energy suppliers and health insurances also yield relatively more economic advantages for HEA-members. LEA-members mostly don't take the risk of underinsurance by switching providers. As income inequality is traditionally associated with educational level (Gregorio & Lee, 2002), differences in online outcomes are likely to strengthen traditional economic inequalities. In the personal field, LEA-members are less successful than HEA-members regarding online (work-related) learning and health improvement, the latter possibly caused by LEA's relatively low level of eHealth literacy (Neter & Brainin, 2012). However, in terms of entertainment, HEA-members increasingly wish to 'obtain less from the Internet', while many LEA-members regard the Internet as (one of) their primary outlet for entertainment. While both LEA- and HEA-groups do not seem to obtain substantial online benefits in the cultural field, HEA-members do use the Internet to steer their offline cultural development. This

tendency mirrors offline differences, as cultural participation increases with level of education (Vander Stichele & Laermans, 2006). As such, offline disparities in cultural participation are also likely to be reinforced (Mihelj, Leguina, & Downey, 2019). Differences in benefits in the social domain are less prominent. Although both groups use similar applications, LEA-members yield more, because HEA-members emphasize that social media do not substantially contribute to maintaining relationships.

While it seems that LEA-members regard the Internet as an easy way to maintain and acquire relationships and enjoy the endless means of entertainment the Internet has to offer, HEA-members often like to disconnect from the Internet in regard to online entertainment or maintaining relationships. This does not seem to be a matter of skills or access, but of HEA-individual's urge to take the course of their (daily) life into their own hands and accordingly manage (the influence of) their Internet use, while LEA-members prefer to let things take their course. HEA-members' motives for their urge to disconnect extend Micheli (2015) findings in a study on class-based socialization, describing that upper-class adults regard the Internet as something to be used productively, with a clear purpose and for personal development. Though, LEA-members can't seem to afford such disconnection, as they have access to relatively little offline resources. HEA-members put less effort into online social connections because they typically have larger offline social networks (Groot et al., 2007). Additionally, LEA-members are traditionally less engaged in cultural participation offline, so when both groups refrain from cultural participation online, the offline disparities continue to exist. As another example, a family who wanted to disconnect more from the Internet because of their desire to invest in offline quality-time could afford to find a nanny (via the Internet) so that they could spend more time offline. Lastly, in relation to online investments such as bitcoins: while it might well be a matter of diverging interests between LEA and HEA, a lack of (economic) resources for the LEA to make such financial investments anyway could also (partially) explain differences in some outcomes. The desire and possibility to disconnect from the Internet seems to be guided by one's offline resources. While this tendency puts a nuance to the mechanisms discussed, it also confirms how offline and online disparities interact and might even be mutually reinforcing.

Throughout all fields, saving time and obtaining convenience appear to be a starting point for HEA-members' choice to perform a certain activity online and reap the corresponding benefits, while LEA-members take on a less reflective approach and don't consider their choice for the Internet as consciously: they just resort to the Internet as a habit or when it's the most obvious means to perform a task or activity. Differences in outcome experiences and interpretations are strongly linked to the individual's overall approach towards Internet use; LEA-members seemingly do not feel the need to lead in exploring the Internet in terms of its opportunities, while HEA-members have a proactive and reflective approach in seeking positive outcomes. HEA-members explore and adopt an application or ICT-development early when they see the added value for their own lives, therewith taking control over anticipated outcomes, while LEA-members do so when it is accustomed or even obligatory, such as with governmental services. LEA-members generally indicate that they are satisfied with what they yield from the Internet, while HEA-members are often less satisfied with the received benefits, as they state that there is always more to obtain. They are more inclined to search for beneficial ways to use the Internet. In this process of making tradeoffs, HEA-members often consider the benefits that they *want* to obtain, in which their offline resources play a crucial role. These different approaches can be linked to Bourdieu's idea of habitus (Bourdieu, 1984; Robinson, 2009) – the mental structure that people develop as they grow up in a particular social context. The habitus implies embedded dispositions that guide individuals to their own way of acting and thinking and develops dependent on structural variables such as one's educational background. Applied to ICTs, with the Internet in specific, one's habitus determines how the Internet is valued, acted upon and integrated into daily life (Cockerham, 2013; Van Eijck & Bargeman, 2004). In other words, the habitus influences how people domesticate the Internet, therewith determining how the Internet is, valued, appropriated and integrated into daily life (Scheerder, van Deursen, & van Dijk, 2019b), which ultimately defines how the Internet is benefitted from.

In addition to the fact that LEA-members generally have less offline resources as compared to HEA-members, online outcomes do not stand alone; the outcomes obtained, as stemming from forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1984), can be converted and beneficially reinvested, for example, when money (economic capital) is used to pay for education (cultural capital), which might deliver friendships (social capital) or a pay raise (economic capital) (Ignatow & Robinson, 2017). Such situations were also extant in this study. For example, a HEA-member who decided to start an online Masters in law studies in addition to his full-time job as account manager, met two offline requirements (resources) to start this study, i.e., a higher educational level and the money to pay for the tuition fee. By following this study, the participant indicated to have gained useful contacts (social capital), personal development (personal) and knowledge in a new discipline (economic capital). In the end, these resources might be invested to, for example, acquire a new job delivering a higher salary or to solving legal issues in the private sphere. Therefore, even if the HEA-members obtain relatively more outcomes in, for example, the economic field only, offline inequalities are likely to be exacerbated in other domains as well, affirming the occurrence of obtaining cross-domain benefits (Van Deursen & Helsper, 2018).

### 5.1. Limitations and future research

This study was conducted over a time span of eight months. Although a large number and variety of outcomes were found within the two groups, it is difficult to say if these outcomes can be generalized to larger populations, as this contribution is explorative in nature and was conducted in a highly developed country. As a suggestion for future research, the next step would be to conduct quantitative reproductions of this study to study the relevance of the outcomes found for different populations. Preferably, those studies would then be followed-up by exploration through qualitative studies again, to better understand the findings.

This study's aim was to explore a broad range of positive outcomes. For some of the participants in this study, it might be that because the Internet is now fully integrated into participants' lives, it is difficult for them to track down all the outcomes they obtain from Internet use, as some have become familiar and are no longer noticed. Although we tried to control for this tendency by letting participants fill out surveys beforehand and giving them the chance to add to the semi-structured interviews afterwards, another way

to do so might be by verifying the outcomes by means of quantitative survey studies.

In this study, educational level was used as a main indicator. Although the participants' socioeconomic status could be approached more comprehensively by, for example, taking into account one's profession (Shavers, 2007), it has been argued before that education is central to people's societal position, as it is a fundamental determinant of occupation and income (Lahelma, 2001; Ross & Wu, 1995) and mirrors people's (non-)material resources (Von dem Knesebeck, Verde, & Dragano, 2006). Therefore, similar outcomes and differences can be expected when follow-up studies include occupation or income. Although it is evident that an individual's educational level plays a role in causing differences in outcomes, education should not be considered as a straightforward predictor. The mindset and lifestyle that come with one's educational level seem to be, to a large extent, decisive for the outcomes one obtains. As the adoption of the Internet and its corresponding use and positive outcomes come together, the way one domesticates the Internet could offer extensive explanations for why these differences in outcomes exist (Silverstone et al., 1996).

Finally, although we hinted at some aspects of both social and digital impact mediators (Helsper, 2012), accounting more explicitly for them would further deepen the findings of our study. For example, some differences in skills were highlighted, which were mostly work-related and seemingly contribute to outcomes disparities. In addition to Helsper (2012) proposed impact mediators, we aimed to include satisfaction of online outcomes as an impact mediator, though it was difficult to measure: participants indicated that, for some outcomes, they found it hard to express their satisfaction, mostly because using the Internet was just another way for arriving at those outcomes, which has even become habitual. This applied to, for example, online governmental services and online banking. Therefore, we could only describe these value judgments for a part of the outcomes. Future research might benefit from including more social and digital impact mediators in a systematic way, as it will provide more explanations as to why the identified inequalities emerge.

## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary material related to this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2019.101426>.

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