Explaining Differences in Internet Use

1. Universal Diffusion
   - **Claims**: What people get out of internet depends on the quality of their internet access, which is steadily improving over time.
   - **Predicts**: Differences in internet use will be accounted for by access-related factors; initial differences between users over time will decrease as their access improves.

2. Cumulative Advantage
   - **Claims**: Internet use & its outcomes vary according to one’s structurally determined preferences for different kinds of use.
   - **Predicts**: Differences in internet use will be accounted for by the user’s orientation towards the type of use in question; initial disparities will persist or increase as users convert early access advantages into capital-enhancing skills and tastes.

3. Opportunities & Costs
   - **Claims**: Structural factors may influence what people can choose to do online, but they are not the whole story; differences in internet use reflect the rational decisions users make once such constraints are taken into consideration.
   - **Predicts**: Differences in internet use reflect individual-specific structural and temporal constraints; internet use trajectories will be individualised and varied depending on user’s circumstances and how they adapt to them.

Analytical Approach

- 3-level linear random effects model – observations nested in students nested within schools (XTMIXED command in STATA 11)
- 4 covariate models added sequentially to assess key theories

Dependent Variables

- **How many HOURS PER WEEK, on average, do you spend doing the following?**
  - Using the Internet for chat/email (i.e. social internet use)
  - Using the Internet for homework (i.e. academic internet use)

Sample & Data

- Data from waves 1 & 2 of ‘Our Lives’ longitudinal research project
- Infinite-life cohort study investigating deinstitutionalization and reflexivity during late adolescence and early adulthood.
  - **Wave 1**: n=7,031 students (34% RR) in 208 schools
  - **Wave 2**: n=3,653 students (58% retention) in 224 schools
- Final analytic sample of 2,972 students in both waves

Discussion

- Since quality of access is more important for social use, remote students with poorer access are at a relative disadvantage here - this accords with the universal diffusion view.
- User orientation is more salient for academic use, which means private school students may consolidate their educational advantages online – supporting the cumulative advantage view.
- Social use is more time-intensive than academic use, which may compel users to structure their time use around the access context, doing other things online or in that vicinity.
- Academic use is less time-intensive, and more compatible with offline activities; in line with the opportunities/costs view, this meant less impetus to choose between offline and online activities.