A preliminary study of college room-bound male students: Concept exploration and instrument development

Chien Chou [a],[*], Huan-Chueh Wu [a], Mei-Hung Wang [b]

[a] Institute of Education, National Chiao Tung University, 1001 Ta-Hsueh Rd, Hsinchu 30010, Taiwan, ROC
[b] Center for General Education, National Chiao Tung University, 1001 Ta-Hsueh Rd, Hsinchu 30010, Taiwan, ROC

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

From time to time, cases of over-dependence on the Internet have been observed on college campuses. Some students, especially male students, remain connected to the Internet as long as they are awake. In Chinese, the emerging term 宅男 (chai-nan) is used to describe this kind of young man, meaning "room-bound male," who seldom leaves his residence and stays online with few interruptions. Thus far, the term 'room-bound male' has become a popular component of Taiwan students' slang, society's common conceptions of technology-savvy youths, and media coverage of these youths, but how people, especially college students, exactly perceive room-bound males is still unclear.

The purposes of this study are to explore this emerging concept and possible underlying dimensions of room-bound males in the college-campus context, to examine college students' perception of this concept, and to construct an instrument—the Image of the Room-bound Male Scale (IRBMS)—for measuring these dimensions. Based on an exploratory factor analysis of 533 valid responses, the results indicate that respondents expressed significantly stronger agreement with the described dimensions of computer activities, social life, and eating habits than with the described dimensions of adult hobbies, clothing styles, and computer use. The results also indicate that female students were in stronger agreement with the statements regarding all six IRBMS dimensions than were male students; and that freshmen and sophomores were in stronger agreement with the statements regarding the dimensions of computer hobbies, social life, and eating habits as well as with the overall IRBMS than were juniors and seniors. Respondents who evaluated themselves as non-room-bound were in greater agreement with the descriptions of the adult-hobbies dimension than were respondents who evaluated themselves as room-bound. Interpretations of these results, future research directions, and implications for educators are discussed.

© 2011 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

With the rapid development and the growing popularity of network technology, college students around the world—including those in Taiwan—now have easy access to the Internet and use a variety of network applications in their learning and daily lives. It seems that the Internet is not only an information superhighway, but also a new interpersonal arena in which young people can enhance their knowledge, opportunities, and social experiences.

Indeed, it is clear that the Internet has become an important aspect of campus daily life, and college students have more access to and make greater use of the Internet than any other generation (Lloyd, Dean, & Cooper, 2007). However, from time to time, cases of over-dependence on the Internet have been observed on campus. Some students, especially male students, remain connected to the Internet as long as they are awake (Chou & Hsiao, 2000; Sharpira et al., 2003). Harnessing the Internet's communications and social-networking tools, these students can accomplish many, if not most, of their academic and daily-life tasks (e.g., interacting with professors, chatting with friends, doing homework, playing games, watching movies, ordering pizzas). With the exception of going to the bathroom and occasionally attending classes, these students seem to stay planted in front of their computers in their residence hall all day long. Therefore, these college students seem to follow a life style different from that of most college students.

What do college students, especially male students, do with the Internet on campus? Past research (e.g., Bressers & Bergen, 2002; Jones, Johnson-Tale, Millermaier, & Pérez, 2009) has shown that male students have used the Internet more for entertainment purposes (e.g., checking sports scores, playing games, watching videos) and have had more access to adult-type information than their female counterparts. Although both male and female college students considered Internet use to be substitutable in some cases for social interaction, male students were more likely to conclude that the Internet takes time away from their other social activities (Jones, Johnson-Yale, Millermaier, & Pérez, 2009). Some studies have also shown that, overall, male college students spend a considerably greater amount of time on the Internet than female students (Anderson, 2001; Bressers & Bergen, 2002), and are more likely to stay online overnight than female students (Jones et al., 2009). It seems clear that, in general, the Internet-use patterns of male college students may differ from those of female college students regarding the purposes of Internet use, Internet activities, content/information viewed online, time spent online, and so on. However, it is not so clear whether there exists a subset of college male students who live in, and seldom leave, their dormitory room in order to connect themselves to the Internet all day long. If such a subset exists, then we would like to know more about what these male students are doing online, how they live their daily lives, and whether other factors (e.g., gender and grade-level) make any differences therein. Such knowing would help educators more adequately and adaptively guide these male students to a better college life.

In Chinese, we already have the emerging term 宅男 (chai-nan) to describe this kind of young man, meaning "room-bound male" (RBM), who seldom leaves his residence and stays online with few interruptions. Thus far, the term 'room-bound male' has become a popular component of Taiwan students' slang, society's common conceptions of technology-savvy youths, and media coverage of these youths, but how people, especially college students, exactly perceive room-bound males is still unclear. Bennett, Maton, and Kervin (2008) recently argued that much of the current debate about the term 'digital natives' (i.e., young people who spend their entire lives surrounded by all kinds of digital toys and tools) represents an academic form of "moral panic" and that episodes of moral panic are often couched in the dramatic language of news media; in turn, these researchers suggested that society would greatly benefit from a more measured and disinterested approach to investigating both "digital natives" and their implications for education. Much the same scenario applies to the term 'room-bound male'. Without a clear picture of the room-bound male or a valid instrument to measure people's perception of him, it is difficult to further investigate these males' prevalence, their lifestyle, or any other social-psychological factors that might be causes or consequences of the phenomenon.

The goals of this study, therefore, are to explore the concept and underlying dimensions of the room-bound male in the context of Taiwanese college campuses, to examine college students' perception of this concept, and to construct an instrument—the Image of the Room-bound Male Scale (IRBMS)—for measuring these dimensions. It is worth noting that although the "room-bound" phenomenon may also occur with female college students, the term 'room-bound female' is relatively less obvious or popular in the lingo of Taiwanese youth and young adults. Therefore, the present study is focused only on male college students.

2. Literature review

2.1. Terminology and concepts related to the room-bound male

The Chinese term for room-bound male—宅男 (chai-nan)—originally derives from the Japanese slang term おたく (otaku), which refers to young people who are obsessed with sub-culture activities such as reading comics or playing computer games and who might stay home almost all the time (Wiki, 2010). Chai-nan is a relatively new term and its definition could not be found in any printed/published dictionary—only in Wiki. It is interesting to note that, somewhat reflective of the Internet-based nature of chai-nan, Wiki is an application of socially collaborative meaning construction that is distinguishable for its mutability. Therefore, the definition of 'chai-nan' from Wiki can provide us a basic understanding and a starting point for further investigation.

In English, similar terms might be 'nerd', 'geek', or 'anorak', some of which have conventionally described a person who passionately pursues intellectual activities, esoteric knowledge, or other obscure interests rather than social or popular activities (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2010) and which, more recently, have described a person who passionately pursues such activities as they relate to cutting-edge technology and sub-culture activities. It is worth noting that these stereotypes usually have a negative connotation. However, whether or not 'chai-nan', the Chinese term for room-bound males, is a relatively *negative* description of a certain group of men remains unclear and merits further study.

In English, the term 'cocoon' surfaced in past literature to describe the environment surrounding people who spend their lives being (over)engaged in a certain technology. For example, Treuer and Belote (1997) have expressed their concern about "cocooning," in which people withdraw from social environments and use technology to avoid direct interaction with peers, thereby perhaps impeding psychological development. For college students, the concept of cocooning can refer to students who retreat to their computers (or more specifically, the Internet) and isolate themselves from campus activities. Therefore, the terms 'room-bound' and 'cocoon' seem to share a certain connotation to some degree.

2.2. Students' Internet use, health, and lifestyle

Because this study focuses only on the relationship between technology use and a particular life style, some past related studies are reviewed here. Ho and Lee (2001) discussed the lifestyles of Hong Kong computer-using adolescents (who would have been in grades 7, 9, and 11 in the US system). The main findings indicate that the *boys* who were playing computer games tended to lead a more sedentary lifestyle than their girl counterparts; the boys exhibited lower levels of physical activities, of relaxation activities (other than computer games), and of self-perceived social support.

Also focusing on Asian adolescents, Kim et al. (2010) placed 853 South Korean junior high school students (7th–9th graders) into one of three groups: high-risk Internet users, potential-risk Internet users, and no-risk Internet users. The results show that the high-risk Internet students tended to eat smaller meals, to have a smaller appetite, to skip more meals, and to snack more than the potential-risk and no-risk groups. Further, the results indicate that the high-risk group's average diet quality was poorer than the diet quality attributable to the potential-risk group and the no-risk group. The researchers found, as well, that the high-risk group reported greater irregularity in sleep patterns and more episodes of sleep disturbance than the no-risk Internet group.