Gender and cultural differences in Internet use: A study of China and the UK

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Abstract

This study investigates differences in use of, and attitudes toward the Internet and computers generally for Chinese and British students, and gender differences in this cross-cultural context. Two hundred and twenty Chinese and 245 British students' responses to a self-report survey questionnaire are discussed. Significant differences were found in Internet experience, attitudes, usage, and self-confidence between Chinese and British students. British students were more likely to use computers for study purposes than Chinese students, but Chinese students were more self-confident about their advanced computer skills. Significant gender differences were also found in both national groups. Men in both countries were more likely than women to use email or 'chat' rooms. Men played more computer games than women; Chinese men being the most active games players. Men in both countries were more self-confident about their computer skills than women, and were more likely to express the opinion that using computers was a male activity and skill than were women. Gender differences were higher in the British group than the Chinese group. The present study illustrates the continued significance of gender in students' attitudes towards, and use of computers, within different cultural contexts.
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1. Introduction

Incorporating information and communication technologies (ICTs), particularly the Internet, into teaching and learning in higher education has become an important issue in both economically developed and rapidly developing countries, and in this research study Britain and China represent such regions. Despite the economic agenda driving the adoption of the Internet, little cross-cultural educational research has been done on its use, although surveys such as those of Pelgrum and Plomp (1991) have assembled comparative data about educational policy and computer use since the early 1990s. Cross-cultural comparisons are needed to give a better understanding of students' use of the Internet in different national cultural backgrounds. The Internet may be a global technology but students work in local/national contexts, and have differences in other aspects of their identities; one of the most important of which is gender identity.

Gender differences in the use of computers have been well documented in the last two decades (Brosnan, 1998; Comber, Colley, Hargreaves, & Dorn, 1997; Durndell, Macleod, & Siann, 1987; Kirkpatrick & Cuban, 1998; Kirkup, 1995; Meredith, Helen, & Woodcock, 1998; Scragg, Smith, & Geneseo, 1998; Shashaani, 1993, 1997). Where researchers have looked for gender differences in the use of computers they have found them. In this research we examine whether, in a selected sample of university students in China and the UK, there were equal opportunities for women and men to use computers and the Internet, and whether the opportunities were taken. Most research on gender differences in use of the Internet has been done in Western countries. But, If gender is a social construct one cannot presume that it will be expressed in the same way everywhere. Therefore studies of gender differences in Internet use in different cultural contexts need to be carried out.

This paper reports research carried out with higher education students studying in China and Britain, which investigated their attitudes towards using computers and the Internet and their Internet usage patterns, to explore what, if any, gender differences were observed between the two countries/cultures. It reports on only one particular aspect of the research: a questionnaire survey carried out with samples of male and female undergraduate students in the 18–23 age group.

2. Background to the research

There has been a great deal of research on gender differences in access to and use of computers and more recently of the Internet. This body of research is too great to be summarised effectively in this paper, but findings seem to suggest certain consistent trends. Despite having generally positive attitudes towards computers, women's attitudes are more negative than those of men, and they have higher computer anxiety than men (Comber et al., 1997; Kirkpatrick & Cuban, 1998). There is abundant evidence that women's use of, and liking for, computer technology is less than that of men (Brosnan, 1998; Collis, 1985; Durndell et al., 1987; Meredith et al., 1998). Even when given equal access to computers, women use them less than men do (Kirkup, 1995; Scragg et al., 1998; Shashaani, 1993, 1997). Research with young adults shows that information technology, as an activity, was found to be male stereotyped. Women are less likely to be attracted to computer courses and to a computer-related career; Durndell and Lightbody's research (1993) suggests that