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Impact of the Internet on our lives: Male and female personal perspectives

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Available online 30 October 2007

Abstract

Gender differences in Internet access and usage have been found in a number of previous investigations. The study reported here extends this work by providing an analysis of the impact of the Internet on men's and women's lives. A content analysis of 200 postings from men and 200 from women, on the topic of "Has the Internet changed your life" invited by a news website, was undertaken then examined for gender differences. Results showed more women's postings mentioned having made new friends or having met their partner, renewing old friendships, accessing information and advice, studying online, and shopping and booking travel online, while more men's postings mentioned that the Internet had helped or given them a career, positive socio-political effects, and negative aspects of the technology. The results are interpreted as supporting the view that the Internet represents an extension of broader social roles and interests in the "offline" world.
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Keywords: Internet; Gender; Gender roles; Gender differences

1. Introduction

"The Internet is my job, my high street, my supermarket and my international social playground" (Female participant 63).

Usage of the Internet continues to increase worldwide. In the UK 57% of households now have access, in comparison to 46% four years ago (National Statistics, 2006). The

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Digital Future Project in the US has found that 78.6% of Americans went online in 2005, with an accompanying increase in the amount of time spent per week on the Internet (Centre for the Digital Future, 2005). A number of factors have been found to relate to access and use, including socioeconomic variables, demographic variables, and education (e.g. Bimber, 2000; Wasserman & Richmond-Abbott, 2005). One significant area of research over the last decade has investigated the impact of the Internet upon different social groups and inevitably work on gender differences has been at the forefront, with concerns about the presence and impact of a ''gender gap'' in Internet access and usage.

A number of investigators (e.g. Sherman et al., 2000) have investigated this gender gap in Internet use. Bimber (2000) found gaps in both access and use among US adults, and concluded that, while access differences can be accounted for by socioeconomic and other factors that affect women and men differentially, the gap in use was due at least in part to gender-specific factors such as the male stereotype of computers, cultural associations between gender and technology and gendered cognitive and communication preferences. However, there is growing evidence that the gender gap in access is closing or has closed with more women coming online, and that the gap in use of the Internet is still present but may also be closing (e.g. Cummings & Kraut, 2002; Ono & Zavodny, 2003; Wasserman & Richmond-Abbott, 2005). There continues to be a gender gap in usage in the UK: the latest figures from adults in a nationally representative sample of UK households show that 40% of women had never used the Internet in comparison with 30% of men, and 55% of women had used the Internet within the 3 months prior to the survey in comparison with 65% of men (National Statistics, 2006). In addition, there are further gaps in the frequency and nature of use that appear to remain (Odell, Korgen, Schumacher, & Delucchi, 2000; Ono & Zavodny, 2003; Wasserman & Richmond-Abbott, 2005).

One of the issues that was highlighted early on in investigations of the gender gap, concerns the negative effect of the link between the Internet and computer technology. This area grew from work on gender differences in computer attitudes and use more generally, which showed more negative computer attitudes (Durndell & Thomson, 1997; Whitley, 1997), lower female self-confidence and higher computer anxiety among females (McIlroy, Bunting, Tierney, & Gordon, 2001; Todman, 2000). The possibility raised in the literature was that girls and women were being discouraged from using the Internet because of its delivery via a computer interface, and because of the association of the kinds of operations required to interact with it with traditional masculine technology. Indeed, computer attitudes and Internet attitudes have been found to be linked (Liaw, 2002; Schumacher & Morahan-Martin, 2001), and experience using the Internet has been found to predict both (Liaw, 2002). Durndell and Haag (2002) found higher computer self-efficacy, more positive Internet attitudes, longer Internet use and lower computer anxiety among male than female students, and gender was independently linked to Internet experience. Similarly, Joiner et al. (2005) found that a significant relationship between gender and use of the Internet remained, after controlling for Internet identification and Internet anxiety. This may be due to a number of other factors, and Joiner et al. suggest that self-efficacy and expectancy of success may be fruitful areas to pursue. In addition, it seems that there are differential effects of experience upon anxiety in using the technology among men and women: Broos (2005) found that experience decreased anxiety among men but had little effect for women.

Alongside investigations of the gender gap in use of the Internet, there is a growing body of research on differences in the use of the Internet for different functions by males