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Gender Differences in Internet Use and Online Relationships

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ABSTRACT

The Internet continues to change the way we communicate. It has become a predominant means of communicating and maintaining interpersonal relationships. The face of the Internet has also changed. Once the domain of male users, the Internet is now closer to being equal in terms of male and female users. Our study examines gender differences in Internet use and online relationships. We found that men reported spending more time online than did women. Men were also more open to romantic online relationships. However, there were no significant differences between men and women in regard to their experience with online relationships or how they perceived such relationships. The implications and limitations of our results are discussed along with directions for future research.

INTRODUCTION

As of 2007, nearly 70% of Americans were online – an increase of over 120% since the year 2000 (Internet World Stats, 2007). With its ever-expanding presence and accessibility, the Internet continues to change the way we communicate. A decade ago, the Internet was used primarily for information seeking and entertainment (Valkenburg & Soeters, 2001). Today it is a predominant means of communicating and maintaining interpersonal relationships. The face of the Internet has also changed. Once the domain of male users, the “gender gap” in Internet usage has all but disappeared (Fallows, 2005). Given the dynamic nature of the Internet, and its users, it is important to regularly examine any demographic differences that remain – particularly in terms of online relationships.

Most people now use the Internet to help maintain existing relationships (Gross, 2004). However, online communication with strangers is still fairly common (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005). In one study, 35% of Internet users reported having formed a new relationship, either of a professional, friendly, or romantic nature, online (Bonebrake, 2002). In another study, 41.8% of respondents said they have used the Internet to seek new relationships (Boies, 2002). For many people, the nature of online communication makes the Internet an appealing means of establishing new relationships.

While online, people are generally more likely to give and receive social support (Whitty, 2002), display less social anxiety (Scealy, Phillips, & Stevenson, 2002), and disclose more personal information about themselves (Whitty & Gavin, 2001). The perceived sense of intimacy and acceptance online relationships often provide may encourage users to rely on these relationships as a primary source of companionship (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997). However, the quality of online relationships has long been questioned.

The anonymity the Internet provides can affect online relationships in several ways. Users typically have more control over self-presentation, and this may lead some to hide or lie about important personal information (Bonebrake, 2002). However, several studies have shown that online communication tends to facilitate self-disclosure (Whitty & Gavin, 2001). This exchange of personal information can, in turn, greatly increase intimacy (Brehm et al., 2002). Thus, online relationships often become “hyperpersonal” soon after they develop (Wallace, 1999). A number of studies suggest that online relationships are impersonal and shallow (Kraut et al., 1998; Moody, 2001). However, other studies have shown that online interaction can enhance relationships and improve communication (Kiesler, 1997; Shields, 1996).

There is also some debate over the extent to which gender differences in Internet use still exist. Although the ratio of men to women online is equally distributed (Yan, 2006), studies have found that their activities online are quite different. Weiser (2000) noted that women’s Internet use is driven by a need for interpersonal communication (chatting, sending email) and educational purposes, while men tend to use the Internet for building web pages, pursuing sexual relationships, reading the news, and playing games. In a recent study, Boneva, Kraut, and Frohlich (2006) found that women are more likely than men to use computer-mediated communication to keep in touch with friends, family, and coworkers. However, gender differences in online usage may not be as sizeable as they once were (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005).

The purpose of our study was to examine gender differences in Internet use and online relationships. Consistent with previous studies, we did not expect to find differences between males and females regarding the importance they place on Internet usage in their daily lives, or in the time they report spending online. However, because women appear to be more inclined to use the Internet for relationship building (Boneva, Kraut, & Frohlich, 2006; Weiser, 2000), we expected women to be more likely than men to form online relationships and to rate these relationships as more serious and meaningful.

METHOD

Participants

Two hundred and forty (61% female and 39% male) students enrolled in an introductory psychology course at a large urban college participated in this study for partial course credit. The mean age of participants was 21.89 ($SD = 5.83$) and ranged from 17-49 years. Participants were of various ethnicities (40% White, 25% African-American, 11% Hispanic, 13% Asian, 3% Middle Eastern, and 8% other).

Design and Procedures

As part of a larger study about online sexual harassment, participants completed a survey about their Internet use and online relationships. The survey asked participants if they have a computer with Internet access at home, how much time they spend online each day, and how important the Internet is in their daily lives. Participants were also asked if they ever had an online romantic relationship (and if so, how serious and meaningful this relationship was), if they ever had an online friendship (and if so, how close this friendship was), whether they would consider “dating” someone online, and whether they preferred to communicate with people online or in-person. Responses were measured dichotomously (yes/no) or on a scale of 1 to 7, with “1” being low on the scale and “7” being high.

RESULTS

Nearly all participants (96%) had a computer with Internet access at home. The mean number of hours participants spent online daily was 2.22 ($SD = 1.64$). Participants reported that the Internet was important in their daily lives ($M = 4.87$, $SD = 1.73$). However, most participants (89%) preferred communicating face-to-face rather than online. Only 16% of participants reported ever having an online romantic relationship. However, 28% said they would consider “dating” someone online. Those who had online romances did not consider them to be very serious ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 1.87$) or meaningful ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 1.89$). The majority of participants (89%) reported having had an online friendship. However, participants were generally indifferent about the closeness of these friendships ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 1.57$).

Next we examined if any gender differences exist in Internet use and online relationships. Overall, men ($M = 2.51$, $SD = 1.89$) reported spending more time online than did women ($M = 2.05$, $SD = 1.44$); $t(234) = -2.14$, $d = .274$, $p = .034$. Men ($M = 5.16$, $SD = 1.64$) also reported that the Internet was more important in their daily lives than did women ($M = 4.70$, $SD = 1.89$); $t(237) = -2.04$, $d = .260$, $p = .043$. There was no significant difference between men and women in regard to ever having an online friendship, $\chi^2(1, N = 238) = 2.64$, $V = .105$, $p = .105$; or an online romance, $\chi^2(1, N = 237) = 0.74$, $V = .018$, $p = .785$. However, men were more likely to consider dating someone online, $\chi^2(1, N = 205) = 4.29$, $V = .145$, $p = .038$. Men were also more likely to prefer communicating online rather than in-person, $\chi^2(1, N = 239) = 5.30$, $V = .149$, $p = .021$.

Of those who reported having had an online romance, there were no significant differences between men and women with regard to how serious ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.52$ vs. $M =$

3.50, $SD = 2.06$ respectively; $t(36) = .788$, $d = .276$, $p = .436$) or meaningful ($M = 2.64$, $SD = 1.01$ vs. $M = 3.50$, $SD = 2.25$ respectively; $t(36) = 1.35$, $d = .493$, $p = .187$) they rated the relationship. Likewise, of those reported having had an online friendship, there was no significant differences between men ($M = 4.24$, $SD = 1.38$) and women ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.70$) in how close they believed the friendship was, $t(144) = -1.46$, $d = .245$, $p = .149$.

DISCUSSION

Contrary to our hypotheses, we found statistically significant differences between men and women in regard to the importance they place on Internet use and the amount of time they spend online. Men rated the Internet as being a more important part of their daily lives and reported spending approximately 30 minutes a day longer online than did women. These results suggest that the “gender gap” in Internet use may still exist to some extent.

Most participants reported having had an online friendship; however, only 16% reported having had an online romantic relationship. In general, participants did not believe either type of online relationship was serious or meaningful. Contrary to our hypotheses, we did not find significant gender differences in regard to these results. However, we did find small to moderate effect sizes for these analyses. Because relatively few participants ($N = 37$) reported ever having had an online romance, we attribute these null findings to a lack of statistical power. Men were, however, significantly more likely to report that they would consider “dating” someone online and that they prefer communicating online rather than in person.

Several important limitations to our study should be noted. The participants in this study were all college students from a large urban college, and we recognize the possibility that their Internet use and behavior may be different than that of the general population. For example, people who live in rural areas, where there are arguably fewer opportunities for social interaction, may be more likely to use the Internet for forming relationships. The nature of these online relationships may also be different from what we observed. This study should be replicated with a geographically diverse non-student sample. Furthermore, because we used self-reports of behavior, the possibility of social desirability effects should be considered. Some people may be embarrassed by their online relationship activities, so participants may have been tempted to misrepresent themselves in a more favorable light. Additionally, the survey questions regarding online relationships did not differentiate between relationships that were entirely, primarily, or partially online. This is a distinction that should be made clear in future research on this topic.

Despite the limitations of this study, certain trends cannot be ignored. Although men spent more time online and attribute more importance to Internet usage, the differences between men and women, though statistically significant, were small. When it comes to relationships, at least for now, face-to-face connections prevail. The vast majority of our participants preferred communicating in-person rather than online. However, with more people entertaining the possibility of online dating, it would be a matter of interest to investigate in a future study the long-term success of close romantic relationships that were initially established through online communication.

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AUTHOR NOTES

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