

Gender and the Internet User

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INTRODUCTION

Civilization has seen an explosion of information technologies over the last one hundred years. The telephone, radio, television, and Internet have entered the lives of men and women at work and home, becoming the main forms of communication and entertainment. Unfortunately, early adopters and creators of these technologies were men. Women, working primarily in the home, were not exposed to these technological innovations until husbands or fathers brought them into the home. Oftentimes, wives and daughters viewed these “contraptions” as intrusive to the harmony of the home. Therefore, in order to appeal to the widest possible audience these information technologies were adapted, mostly by corporations, to appeal to women through aesthetically pleasing design, creative programming, and product marketing (Shade, 2002). By the end of the 20th century, the television emerged as the electronic hearth. Here the family gathered, shared their day, and engaged in entertainment or debate (Tichi, 1991). Today Americans are spending less time in front of the television and more time in front of the new electronic hearth—the Internet. The average American spends close to three hours on the Internet per day, exceeding the number of hours spent watching television by 1.7 hours (Nie, Simpser, Stepaniknova, & Zheng, 2004).

The Internet has followed a diffusion of innovation pattern similar to all its predecessors, beginning as a communication tool for white, male scientists to share ideas, eventually being adopted by young male “inventor-heroes” who manipulated and improved it. These improvements motivated white businessmen to use the Internet to improve profits and productivity, gather information, and entertainment. In the end the computer, and as a result the Internet, left the

man’s world of work and entered the woman’s domain of the home. Slowly, over the last ten years it has made a subtle impact on the lives of American women.

BACKGROUND

Over the first ten years of the Internet’s life researchers have attempted to answer a number of questions about equity of access, gendered use of the Internet (both psychological and cognitive differences), and the impact of these answers on society. This article provides an overview of the community of Internet users and discusses these gender differences. The answers may help realize the goal of a genderless virtual world where all citizens participate equally regardless of age, race, creed, or gender.

Demographic Data

Although IBM first introduced personal computers for the home in 1981, they did not become commonplace until after 1994 when Netscape introduced their Internet browser, Mosaic. During the first six years of its commercial life the design and use of the Internet was dominated by men (Bimber, 2000; Ono & Zavodny, 2003). Since then women have slowly surpassed men to account for 51% of the Internet population (Pastore, 2000). In 2004, 64% of all homes in the United States had Internet access (Harwood & Rainie, 2004). However, there are still age and gender disparities among Internet users.

In 2004 access by age group showed the largest group of Internet users to be 35 to 54 year olds (45%), followed by 18 to 34 year olds (37%), with 55+ being the smallest group at 18% (Mediamark

Research, 2004). By January 2005, the 18 to 29 year olds had surpassed 30 to 49 year olds as the largest age group of Internet users (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2005). There are virtually no gender differences in terms of the percentage of men and women using the Internet, until the senior population is analyzed. In 2003 the number of female seniors using the Internet reached 49%, up from 40% in 2000, but they still lagged behind senior males (Fox, 2003). One interesting gender difference deals with seniors who are *not* using the Internet. According to a survey conducted in 2002 of non-Internet users 61% of women vs. 49% of men said they would never use the Internet (Lenhart, 2003).

As for children, USC's Annenberg School found that 98% of online youth ages 12-15 used the Internet in 2003, up from 83% in 2000. This same study showed that 97% of online teens ages 16-18 used the Internet up from 91% in 2000 (Cole, Suman, Schramm, Lunn, & Aquino, 2004). A report published by the National Center for Education Statistics reported that 58.5% of children ages 5-17 used the Internet with no gender disparity (DeBell & Chapman, 2003). However, there are socioeconomic and access inequalities in Internet use. Those children living in households with higher family incomes and those with more highly educated parents were more likely to use computers and the Internet than those living in lower income households and with parents who were less well educated.

Internet Connectivity

While women's use of the Internet has reached parity with men there are still connectivity disparities concerning location (work, home, other), age of equipment, type of equipment, and connection speeds. A recent survey conducted by Mediamark Research indicated an equal percentage of men and women connect to the Internet only from work while a slightly higher percentage of women connect only from home, 51% women vs. 49% men (Mediamark Research, 2004). Another recent survey conducted by Pew in 2003 found that a gender gap existed between men and women who connected from other locations. Fifty-four percent of men vs. 46% of women connected from locations other than work or home (Harwood & Rainie, 2004). Men were more

likely to connect from a friend's house while women were more likely to use a library. However, of those over 65, 90% of them connect from home compared to 10% from work (Fox, 2003).

When one compares age, location, and gender we see no remarkable connectivity gap between boys and girls (DeBell & Chapman, 2003; Jones & Madden, 2002). The most recent and comprehensive survey, conducted in 2001 by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), shows that overall 78% of children ages 5-17 connect to the Internet from home compared to 68% who connect from school.

Aside from location, with home being the most convenient, the age of the equipment used to connect to the Internet is also important. Not surprisingly, women tend to have older and slower equipment. A 2001 survey by the U.S. Census Department found that on average women's computers were three years older than men's computers (U.S. Census Department, 2001). It also found that 44% of men owned a computer less than two years old vs. 37% of women.

Wireless, hand-held devices, like cellular telephones, PDAs, and pocket PCs are the next wave in information technology. These technologies are positioned to become an integral component of ubiquitous technology that provides instant access to information anytime from anywhere. Unfortunately, to date, they are disproportionately used by men with 65% men to 35% women (eMarketer, 2003).

The connectivity speed can often dictate the types of activities being conducted online. Multimedia presentations and images are large files that require a computer with enough memory capacity and the Internet connection bandwidth to view and download. Therefore, the online experience is better if the connection speed is faster and more robust. The latest connection type, broadband, is slowly overtaking the market accounting for 41% of Internet users. According to a 2003 survey by Nielsen/NetRatings, 52% of broadband subscribers are male compared to 48% female (eMarketer, 2003). This is good news for gender equity since the prevalent theory is that a quicker connection speed allows the user to explore the Internet for itself rather than for specific information.

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