Women's Online Skills Far Better than They Think

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Fourteen years after a talking Barbie doll chirped “math class is tough” and a barrage of criticism from women's groups forced the doll off toy store shelves, it is hard to imagine Barbie announcing, “my Internet skills are not so hot.” Yet a study described in the latest issue of “Social Science Quarterly” suggests that women are thinking along those lines.

The study -- the first to look at self-perceived online competence and its relationship to actual online ability -- finds that although women and men have essentially equivalent online abilities, females rate their own online skills significantly lower than do their male counterparts.

That lower self-assessment by women is consistent with existing research on women’s science and math abilities, according to Northwestern University researcher Eszter Hargittai, co-author of the study. “In those areas, too, the lower perceptions women hold about their own abilities often don’t translate into actual competence disparities,” she said.

“By underestimating their ability to effectively use the Web, women may be limiting the extent of their online behavior, the ways in which they use the Internet and, ultimately, the career choices they make,” said Hargittai, the assistant professor of communication studies at Northwestern University and co-author, with Princeton University researcher Steven Shafer, of the article titled “Differences in Actual and Perceived Online Skills: The Role of Gender.”

“Not a single woman among all our female study subjects called herself

an “expert” user, while not a single male ranked himself as a complete novice or ‘not at all skilled,’” noted Hargittai, a sociologist by training whose research at Northwestern focuses on the social and policy implications of information technology and the ways in which technology can contribute to or alleviate social inequalities.

Controlling for age, education and family income, and using in-person observation as well as traditional survey measures of skill, the researchers found that gender was NOT a significant predictor of efficient and effective online ability. Level of education, age and Internet experience, on the other hand, were meaningful predictors.

In 2001 and 2002, Hargittai observed in person and screen-captured in audio and visual files 100 randomly chosen subjects from New Jersey’s Mercer County as they engaged in a variety of assigned online tasks. The tasks included finding career or job information, accessing examples of children's art, locating tax forms, finding a car for purchase and listening to music online.

Of the 100 subjects aged 18 to 81 and with differing Internet experience and representing diverse occupations (real estate agents, service workers, medical professionals, office workers, students, retired individuals, teachers, unemployed people, policy analysts and blue collar workers), 49 subjects were male and 51 were female. Some reported using the Internet only a few minutes a week; others said they spent several hours online every day.

Overall, the success rate for completing the tasks was 84 percent. Most (94.3 percent) were able to find a museum site. Fewer than 3 out of 5, however, mastered what was found to be the most difficult of the tasks -- locating a Web site comparing the abortion positions of different candidates in the 2000 presidential election. Although users were given as much time as they needed to successfully complete each assigned

task, no single task was successfully completed by all of the 100 study subjects.

“If, as we found, the women in our study view themselves as less skilled than do men despite essentially equivalent skills, then women may be less likely to take advantage of the kinds of online content that could enrich or broaden their lives, whether it’s enrolling in an online class or finding up-to-date consumer information,” Hargittai said.

“Merely crossing the digital divide and spending time on the Web does not erase the possibility for disparities in utilization of the Internet,” the Northwestern University researcher emphasized. “That women significantly rank their skills lower than do men with basically equal skill levels has implications for the potential benefits -- or lack of them -- that female users may reap from what is an increasingly important medium.”

Hargittai and Shafer, who have focused on the user side of the Internet equation, note that research literature about the construction of the Internet suggests that the supply side of content -- the way the medium is structured and presented -- may favor male users. Future research, they say, must further investigate that finding and their own finding – one that seems robust across many male-dominated fields -- that women perceive their skills as unequal to those of men.

Source: Northwestern University