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Gender Perspective, Information Behavior, and Wikipedia

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Purpose, research questions and importance of the study

The purpose of this study is to examine potential differences between the genders amongst college student's information behaviors of Wikipedia use. Particularly, this study explores the following research questions: 1) Is there a difference between male and female college students who use Wikipedia? 2) Are there motivational differences between male and female use of Wikipedia? 3) Is there a difference between male and female perceptions of the information quality of Wikipedia? 4) Is there a difference between male and female confidence in evaluating the quality of the information from Wikipedia? 5) Finally, what factors affect male and female students' use of Wikipedia?

The importance of the study lies in the following: first, it provides new knowledge of gender differences of uses, perceptions, motivations and confidence in evaluating information from Wikipedia, which may enhance our understanding of gender perspectives of information behavior in the web environment. Second, this study's findings may help educators understand gender gaps or differences between males and females in their web information behaviors, which may aid the development of appropriate educational interventions intended to narrow gender gaps.

Literature review

Recent studies indicate a closure of the gender gap in basic connectivity or access to the Internet (Fallows, 2005; Hargittai & Shafer, June 2006

). However, a number of studies demonstrate that other types of gender gaps persist, such as self-evaluation of web skills, computer self-efficacy, purposes of Internet use and a variety of online activities. More specifically, women tended to evaluate their online skills lower than did men, despite no apparent gender difference in the ability to find information on the web (Hargittai & Shafer, June 2006

). In a related study, boys had a higher perceived computer self-efficacy than girls (Ioanna Vekiri & Chronaki, 2008). (Enochsson, 2005) finding is consistent with the above studies regarding confidence or self-evaluation: Boys displayed their technological knowledge and used technology language more than girls who showed the same level of interest in technology. With respect to the purposes or motivations of Internet use, women tended to use the Internet more for communication, compared to men who use the Internet for entertainment and news information. Furthermore, women went online for a narrower range of topics, such as health and religion, while men were engaged in a broader range of activities (Fallows, 2005). Similarly, (Royal, 2008) examined two gendered sites that displayed stereotypical gender roles. The categories of home and family were frequently used in the sites targeted to women, while business, sports, and gambling were themes popular in the sites designed for men.

Researchers examined gender differences in online behaviors from the perspective of attitudes toward risks. For instance, in a study that examined file downloading behaviors among college students, (Gallaway & Gallaway, 2006) found that female students downloaded songs less than male students, possibly due to the concern of copyright law violation, although females listen to music more than their male counterparts do. Further, female students, compared to males, had a heightened perception of file sharing as potentially illegal behavior, and agreed more with the importance of complying with copyright law than male students. Other researchers observed similar patterns regarding the risks of online shopping. That is, women perceived a higher level of risk, or more concerns over the hassles of online shopping, than did men (Garbarino & Strahilevitz, 2004; Hui & Wan, 2007) despite no gender difference of online experiences (Hui & Wan, 2007). Finally, (Steinerová & Šušol, 2007) found that women had a higher proportion of licensed resource use to free resource use in comparison to men, which may be related to different gender attitudes toward risks or compliance laws.

Interestingly, yet, (Niederle & Vesterlund, 2007) reported contrasting evidence in their study. They reported that women displayed greater risk aversion in studies in the field of economics, while a meta-analysis of 150 risk experiments published in psychology literature showed no gender difference with some exceptional situations. Subsequently, employing a laboratory experiment, (Niederle & Vesterlund, 2007) examined whether men and women differed regarding their selection into a competitive environment. The study showed that despite little gender difference in performance, men tended to be overconfident in the tournament and entered the tournament twice as much as women. Based on their observations, they concluded that a gender gap in the tournament entry attributed to a gender difference in confidence rather than their different risk-aversion.

Taken all together, this literature review provides a number of insights into examining gender differences regarding Wikipedia use. Specifically, it is a question whether gender plays a role in the uses, motivations, perceptions of information quality and confidence in evaluating information from Wikipedia. The genders' perceptions and attitudes regarding web sites or online shopping, and their risk attitudes may be applicable to those toward Wikipedia, as Wikipedia may be perceived as another free website or a less conventional/authoritative resource.

Methodology

Data were collected using two web surveys regarding students' motivations, perceptions, uses of and confidence in evaluating information of Wikipedia at two time points. The population consisted of undergraduate students at a large public university in the mid-western United States. The study consisted of a set of two samples: One sample consisted of students who took any of eight courses in the summer of 2007, whose instructors agreed to allow their students to participate in this study; the other sample consisted of students who took an introductory journalism and mass communication course in the spring of 2008. A total of 237 students including some non-undergraduates participated in the study. Of the total 216 people used for the current study only undergraduate students were included in the sample.

The measurements of the study were developed or modified based on the literature of the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) approach (Ebersole, 2000; Stafford & Gonier, 2004), news credibility (Tsfati & Cappella, 2005) and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Compeau & Higgins, 1995). This poster session will present the major findings of the study.

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