Internet Use and Study Habits by Gender – How Students Use the Computer Lab

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Abstract

Colleges currently work hard to provide students with computer access on campuses so they can do research, write papers, and complete assignments. The goal of this observational study was to find out if students were using the computer lab for study purposes or for recreational use, and how that differed by gender, thus indicating whether males or females used their time more wisely, had better study skills, and assess the risk factor for Internet dependence. Students at Evergreen Valley College (EVC) were observed in the library computer lab at several different times throughout the day to see if they were chatting, surfing, emailing, researching, or working on assignments. The results of the observation showed that students use the lab more often for recreational activities and males were engaged in non-academic activities significantly more often than females.

Introduction

The study habits of males and females on college campuses have been widely studied, in part because colleges try to improve student success and retention rates. A recent study done in Iowa by a nationally recognized consulting firm specializing in higher education (Noel-Levitz, 2007), indicated that first-year females bring stronger study habits to college, whereas first-year males bring more confidence to their math and science classes.

The Internet provides access to a vast amount of information for college students, as well as a wealth of activities not related to college study. When used as a tool for content study, it is a powerful resource that has faster, easier, and broader access to interdisciplinary information than traditional libraries (Kasper, Loretta, 2002); However, the free, unlimited access to the Internet has become problematic for a growing number of college students (Potera, Carol, 2006). New terms like “Internet addiction”, Internet dependence”, and “pathological computer use” have
Researchers doing a number of studies (Anderson, Keith, 2000). “Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD) is characterized by seven basic diagnostic criteria, among them increasing tolerance of long online hours, withdrawal, and unsuccessful efforts to control Internet use” (Ferris, as cited by Briggs, 2005). Out of all Internet users, 28% are full-time college students (Young, as cited by Anderson, 2000). Ten percent of college students surveyed in one extensive study (1,078 college students were surveyed) fit the criteria for Internet dependence. Of the 106 that fit the criteria for Internet dependence, 93 were male. One reason college students are highly susceptible to excessive Internet use, and particularly males, is because the anonymity of the Internet provides a sense of security, and a person can make up personas and have virtual relationships without taking risks associated with actual human relationships (Kandell, Jonathan, 1998).

The EVC campus has more than six computer labs open for students at many different times of the day, seven days per week, even Sundays. The problem is that students often use these labs for purposes other than for studying, doing research, writing papers, or doing homework assignments. Even during classes that are held in computer labs, students are chatting, surfing, emailing, or playing games. Both male and female students engage in these activities. One study was done at UNC-Chapel Hill College to discover if the students primarily used the computer labs for academic or non-academic use. The results showed that students used their personal computers for non-academic, social, or recreational purposes, but they used the computer labs primarily for academic study (Howell, Matthew, 2007); However, another study showed that 48% of college student computer gamers said that their time spent gaming kept them from studying some or a lot, and an additional 9% said they played games to avoid studying (Jones, Steve, 2003). The gamers may or may not have been using college-provided computers
to play games.

This observation was done to see if gender played a role in whether students in the computer lab were using their time to do legitimate college work or for recreational purposes. The null hypothesis is that both male and female students will have equal participation using computers for doing college work and for recreation, will possess equal levels of study skills, and will have equal risk levels for Internet dependence. An alternative hypothesis is that females will have a higher incidence of using computers for college work than males, and, therefore, have better study skills and be less at risk for Internet dependence.

Method

Participants

The participants were EVC students in the Educational Technology Center computer lab located on the second floor of the Library. They were any students using a college-provided computer, possibly including faculty and staff, since they often take classes. Students using personal computers were not part of the study.

Procedure

The observations took place between Tuesday, October 30, and Thursday, November 1, 2007. The computer lab was observed at 9:00 AM, 11:00 AM, 2:05 PM, and 2:25 PM. The total number of students using computers was recorded, then the male and female students were observed and the number of each using the computers for the following criteria was recorded: Legitimate computer use was defined as researching the Internet for college, writing a paper, doing homework, and academic, not otherwise specified, use. Non-study related computer use was defined as surfing the Internet for recreation, gaming, chatting or emailing, and non-academic, not otherwise specified, use.
Results

One hundred and eight computer users were observed, 46 males and 62 females. Twenty percent of the males were doing legitimate academic work and 80% were engaging in non-academic activities. Thirty percent of the females were doing college-related work and 70% were doing other non-academic things. Chi-square analysis revealed that the percentage of females doing academic work was significantly higher than the males, $x^2(1, n = 108) = 3.89, p < .05$.

The results for both male and female students showed that a high number of students (70%) were engaged in activities not related to school, as shown in Table 1. Surfing, not academic related, was the most popular activity, with females (45%) more so than males (37%). A greater number of males (22%) were engaged in email or chatting than females (15%). Males (17%) were more often gaming than females. Only one student was observed gaming (.02%).

Table 1 Percentages of student doing academic and non-academic work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Participants</th>
<th>academic</th>
<th>Non-academic</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Males 46</td>
<td>9 (20%)</td>
<td>37 (80%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females 62</td>
<td>23 (37%)</td>
<td>39 (63%)</td>
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</table>

Discussion

The significance test ($p < .05$) supported the hypothesis that male students are more likely than females to be using the computers in the lab for non-academic purposes, and therefore have poorer study skills and are more at risk for Internet addiction than females. This observation confirmed the results of the study done by Anderson, and other studies that found college males more susceptible to Internet addiction. At the University of Texas at Austin, of the 381 students who used the Internet, 13% were classified as Internet dependent, and of those, 71% were men and 29% were women (Scherer as cited by Kubey, Lavin, Barrows, 2001). My study only
showed that male students are at greater risk than female students to be Internet dependent; additional studies, perhaps in the form of a survey, will need to be done in order to determine the level of Internet addiction at the EVC campus. This study did not support the findings of Howell, however, who discovered that students used the computer labs primarily for academics and their personal computers for recreation.

This study also supports the findings of Noel-Levitz, who found that first-year females had better study skills than first-year males. However, another study done with men and women in a chemical engineering program at the University of Ottawa indicated that although the women studied twice as much as the men, the performance on exams was not significantly different (Jovanovic, as cited by Hickman, 2002). Therefore, having good study skills is not necessarily an indication of better performance. The relationship between gender and study skills is an issue that deserves further research.
References


Kubey, W., Lavin, M., & Barrows (2001, June). Internet Use and Collegiate Academic


