Online Relationship: Findings from an Investigation Conducted in a Collectivistic Culture

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Abstract

Internet usage has grown tremendously in recent years. It is undeniably one of the most popular mediums for communication purposes. The Internet facilitates development of relationship. Given the increasing easy access to the Internet around the globe, would the medium then be the ideal technology to reduce isolation while providing ample opportunities for many to cope with difficulties encountered in face to face interaction for instance? Is there any relationship between shyness and online relationship? What are the social consequences of this technology that enable one to form relationships - - whether real or imaginative?

This study, conducted in a collectivistic culture, investigates whether shy individuals were more likely to establish online relationship and their preference for such relationship. A secondary purpose was to determine whether there are any gender differences among the shy and non-shy in terms of their choice for establishing online relationship. Implications of the findings will be discussed.

Keywords: Internet, technology, online relationship, shyness

1. Introduction

The Internet is a gigantic resource. It is changing many aspects of people’s daily life. Whether in sending or receiving electronic mail, seeking or providing social support, conducting research or completing business transactional activities including e-banking, purchasing, online auctions and stock trading, human communication based on the Internet is increasing.

Indeed, Internet usage has grown tremendously in recent years. More people spend more time and seemed do more things on the Internet compared to a decade ago. The advancement of technology will certainly see more people doing more things on the Internet in the future. Thus, investigating the impact of the Internet on interpersonal communication is one of prime importance and warrants attention.

2. Interpersonal Communication Activities on The Internet

According to Cummings et al. (2002), interpersonal communication is an important use of the Internet, if not its most important use. Sending and receiving electronic mail, searching for information, exchanging information and seeking or providing social support are among some of the common activities on the Internet. Some Internet users seek others out with the intention of
forming relationship through the exchange of email, instant messaging, chat rooms, bulletin board and other facilities available for establishing and continuing friendship. Some use the Internet to help others, to ask advice about problems, or to engage in small talk (Lowes, 1997; Wellman, 1997). Others get connected in order to have companionship or a sense of belonging to particular groups of online communities, or to socialize with others around the globe.

The Internet has been a useful and beneficial medium. As an alternative to face-to-face communication, the Internet provides more opportunities for teacher-student interactions outside the classroom environment. It is also a more efficient means for completing research assignments compared to traditional methods. While the Internet brings about numerous advantages, conflicting views abound. For example, the Internet is taking away time from studies among college students who are increasingly turning to the new media for communication. Internet users are also spending less time with friends or family members than non-users (Nie et al., 2002). The lower quality of online conversations might displace higher quality face-to-face and telephone conversations as Internet users omit social niceties which promote or maintain social relationship (Cummings et al, 2002).

Nevertheless, the Internet is opening new options for communication especially for the disabled and the minority groups. However, is the Internet the ideal technology to reduce isolation while providing ample opportunities for shy people to cope with difficulties encountered in face to face interaction for instance? Is there any relationship between shyness and online relationship? What are the social consequences of this technology that enable one to form relationships - - whether real or imagine? Review on literature relating to shyness is provided in the next section.

3. Shyness

Shyness is a source of social anxiety which interferes with an individual’s ability to relate effectively with others and to function in social situations (Jones & Russell, 1982). Shy individuals have difficulty initiating social interactions, feel uncomfortable in the presence of others, and are more inhibited compared to extroverts. They often desire to be with other people and to participate in social activities and encounters. However, they lack the confidence and/or the ability to behave in more extroverted ways (DePaulo & Dull, 1989). In fact, “the behavioral problems associated with shyness are accentuated when the shy person also wants to be with other people” (Briggs & Smith, 1986, p. 55).

Various studies indicated that shy individuals migrate to the fringes of social interaction (Arkin & Grove, 1990; Gilmartin, 1987), fear others’ disapproval (Bernstein, Stephenson, Snyder, & Wicklund, 1983; Duggan & Brennan, 1994; Miller, 1995), and view themselves as less socially competent (Kowalski & Leary, 1990) more often than those who are less shy. Shy individuals are also more likely to feel lonely (Cheek & Buss, 1981), anxious (Aspendorf, 1987), and depressed (Cheek, Carpentieri, Smith, Rienda, & Koff, 1986) compared to non-shy individuals. In addition, they have lower self-esteem (Briggs, Cheek & Jones, 1986), spent less time talking, averted their gaze more, and engaged in more self-manipulations that indicated nervousness (Cheek & Buss, 1981), and are more likely to perceive their bodies as too fat and unattractive and are dissatisfied with their weight (Page, 1990a). Shy adolescents are less physically active, less likely to exercise, are more hopeless, and more likely to maintain tendencies toward an eating disorder than those who are not shy (Page, 1990a). Earlier studies by Zimbardo, Pilkonis, and Norwood (1974)
also found that the shy did not like being shy (86%) and consider shyness a real “problem” (63%). Super-shy adolescents also suffer significantly greater impairment than shy adolescents (Page, 1990a).

In terms of gender differences, shyness had more dysfunctional behavioral implications for males than for females in cross-sex dyadic social encounter (Bruch, Gorsky, Collins & Berger, 1989). Shy male adolescents were significantly more likely to use illicit substances compared to those who were not shy (Page, 1990b). There is also report of an increase risk of marijuana, cocaine, amphetamines, and hallucinogenic substance use among shy adolescent males but not among the female adolescents (Page, 1989).

While literature suggest the tendency to be shy for some individuals at least, may be due to an underlying genetic basis (Daniels & Plomin, 1985; Kagan, 1989), unrealistically high personal and social standards can lead individuals to experience social anxiety and shyness when they are creating favorable impressions as judged by outside observers (Bandura, 1969). In environment where classroom participation is considered as vital for effective learning, shy students avoided contribution to classroom discussions, did not seek help from teachers and advisors when they are having trouble, and have a more negative attitude toward school than non-shy students (Friedman, 1980).

The literature not only revealed that shyness can be a serious social and physiological problem. Available data suggests that shyness is associated with and perhaps has implications in the development of several personal and social problems (Zimbardo, 1977). Additionally, shyness may be more widespread than is commonly believed. Besides, students who are shy may encounter more disadvantages during their student life and beyond. Clearly, shyness which is defined as “discomfort, inhibition, and awkwardness in social situations, especially with people who are not familiar” (Buss, 1984, p. 39), deserves attention because of its prevalence among college students. As the Stanford group of researchers (Zimbardo, Norwood, and Pilkonis) suggests, the mere knowledge of how widespread shyness is might help people feel less isolated and embarrassed.

The present study assessed shyness of students enrolled in a large private university in Thailand. This group of respondents is of particular interest because they are from a collectivistic culture and are likely to establish online relationships as they 1) have access to computer facilities - whether at home, at the university or at other convenient locations; 2) have adequate knowledge and confidence to use the Internet; and 3) have adequate skills to surf the World Wide Web to find necessary information for their research or personal success.

Given that the Internet facilitates development of relationship (Katz & Aspden, 1997), and easy access to the Internet enable shy individuals opportunities to cope with difficulties encountered in face to face interaction, this study investigates whether self-perceived shy students are more likely to establish online relationship. A secondary purpose was to determine whether there are any gender differences among the shy and non-shy in terms of their choice for establishing online relationship. It was hypothesized that high self-reported shyness would be associated with preference for online relationship. It was also hypothesized that online relationship will be more significant for male students who are shy than for female students.

4. Method

4.1 Subjects

The subjects for this study were 377 students (138 males, 239 females) who
completed a questionnaire in class. Subjects consisted of students enrolled in a large private university in Bangkok, Thailand.

4.2 Instrument
A specific questionnaire was devised for the purpose of this research. The questionnaire asked students to indicate their level of agreement with 60 statements that best described themselves. The level of agreement was rated using a five point Likert-type scale ranging from “strongly disagree (1)” to “strongly agree (5).” The statements were based on literature reviewed. Some examples of statements are listed in Appendix 1. The questionnaire also contained ten demographic items such as gender, age group, country of origin, participation in clubs/activities in and outside of the university, access to Internet, usual location for accessing the Internet, number of years in the university, as well as faculty and major.

4.3 Procedure
Names of instructors and number of students enrolled in each section of a business computer course were identified. Consent and assistance in the distribution and collection of the questionnaires during the first week of the semester were then obtained from the respective course instructor. The corresponding number of questionnaire was placed in envelopes with the section and instructor’s name clearly printed on it. The envelopes were then distributed to the respective instructors. Students who were absent from the class meeting were not included in the survey. Twenty-two empty and forty partially completed questionnaires were discarded. A total of 377 completed returned surveys (86%) were used in the analysis.

4.4 Analysis
Frequencies and mean responses were run on each variable. Factor analysis was conducted to identify the main factors in the study. Separate frequencies and mean responses were assessed for the males and females participants to provide descriptive information about the sample. In some cases, Pearson Chi-square and t-tests were used to compare the characteristics of the groups and factors. Pearson correlations were performed to assess the association among the factors.

5. Results
The majority of the subjects are female (63.4%) and between 18 to 20 years old (64.7%) with age ranged from <=18years (2.7%) to >26 years (0.8%). About 89% of the students were Thai nationals. The subjects were primarily associated with the Faculty of Business Administration (69%). A majority of the subjects has access to Internet at home (91.2%). The subjects reported that they usually use Internet from home (79.6%), at university (11.7%) and other convenient locations (8.8%). Slightly more than half of the respondents participated in clubs or activities in the university. Slightly more than half of the subjects (56.7%) have been studying in the university between one to two years, and almost one-fourth of the subjects were undecided about their major (28.9%) at the time the study was conducted.

Four factors emerged from the factor analysis. They were online (online relationship), shyness (self-perceived shyness), ego (egoistic), and SS (social skill). Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics of the factors in the study. The mean score of the four factors online, shyness, ego, and SS respectively were 2.64 (S.D.=0.789), 2.88 (S.D.=0.610), 2.75 (S.D.=0.548) and 2.48 (S.D.=0.822). Results revealed the mean of shyness as the highest among the four factors.
Table 1

Descriptive statistics of factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online</td>
<td>377</td>
<td>2.640</td>
<td>0.789</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shyness</td>
<td>377</td>
<td>2.879</td>
<td>0.610</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ego</td>
<td>377</td>
<td>2.750</td>
<td>0.548</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SS</td>
<td>377</td>
<td>2.484</td>
<td>0.822</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The mean scores of the factors online, shyness, ego, and social skill for the males respectively were 2.60 (S.D.=0.939), 2.99 (S.D.=0.632), 2.69 (S.D.=0.592) and 2.57 (S.D.=0.878). The mean scores of the factors online, shyness, ego, and social skill for the females respectively were 2.66 (S.D.=0.689), 2.81 (S.D.=0.588), 2.79 (S.D.=0.519) and 2.44 (S.D.=0.787). The differences in the score can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2

Descriptive statistics of factors by gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>2.603</td>
<td>0.939</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>239</td>
<td>2.661</td>
<td>0.689</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shyness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>2.995</td>
<td>0.632</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>239</td>
<td>2.813</td>
<td>0.588</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ego</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>2.688</td>
<td>0.592</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>239</td>
<td>2.787</td>
<td>0.519</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analysis of variance on the four factors online, shyness, ego and social skill were conducted to detect differences in gender for both the male and female students. According to the results, shy males are more likely to report online relationships than females. There is also correlation of shy males with social skill. This is shown in Table 4. There is no correlation of shyness and online relationship for the females. However, there is correlation of online relationship with social skill. Correlation of shyness with social skill also exists for the females. This is shown in Table 5. Shyness is correlated with online relationship significantly for males (p=0.043) but not significantly for female (p=0.058).

6. Discussion

The aim of the study was twofold: first, to examine the relationship between shyness and online relationship, and second, to examine whether there are any gender differences among the shy and non-shy in terms of their choice for establishing online relationship. It was hypothesized that high self-reported shyness would be associated with preference for online relationship. It was also hypothesized that online relationship will be more significant for male students who are shy than for female students.
Table 3

Correlations of factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Online</th>
<th>Shyness</th>
<th>Ego</th>
<th>SS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pearson</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.188**</td>
<td>.035</td>
<td>.094</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.504</td>
<td>.070</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Shyness |        | 1       |     | .492**|
| Pearson | .188** |        | 1   |     |
| Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) |        | .000    | .088| .000|

| Ego      |        | .035    |     | .035|
| Pearson  | .035   | .008    | 1   | .493|
| Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) |        | .504    | .881|     |

| SS       |        | .035    |     | 1   |
| Pearson  | .035   | .492**  | .035|     |
| Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) |        | .504    | .000| .493|

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 4

Correlations of factors for males

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Online</th>
<th>Shyness</th>
<th>Ego</th>
<th>SS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pearson</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.284**</td>
<td>.042</td>
<td>.042</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.626</td>
<td>.626</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Shyness |        | .284**  | 1   | .024|
| Pearson | .001   |        |     | .500**|
| Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) |        | .779    |     | .089|

| Ego      |        | .042    | .024| 1   |
| Pearson  | .042   | .024    | 1   | .072|
| Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) |        | .626    | .779| .402|

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

The results presented here provide support for the hypothesis. Shyness is related to online relationship. In other words, students who are shy have a preference for online relationships. Pearson correlation coefficients indicate a positive relationship among shyness and online relationship. The more shy the students, the more likely they establish online relationship. Correlation of
shyness also exists for social skill. This suggest that shy university students who lack confidence and social skills in face to face interaction have preference for computer-mediated communication and hence form on-line relationship.

In terms of gender differences, male students who reported shy also reported online relationships but not the female students. Online relationship is more significant for shy male students but not significant for female students. The result seems to suggest that female students establish online relationship when they perceived themselves as having low social skills but not the male students. On the other hand male students are more likely to establish online relationship when they perceive themselves as shy.

The results suggests that shy individuals cope with the difficulties they encountered in face to face interactions by going behind the computer screen to form online relationships. What is unclear is whether the online relationships can help the shy individuals to cope with their shyness effectively off-line. But given past research, it seems plausible that shy individuals overcome the difficulties faced in initiating social face to face interaction by establishing their relationship online. As they maintain their relationship online, they get more confident with their communication with the other party. Consequently, they might consider bringing that relationship off-line at a later stage if they choose to do so. In this case, the shy use the Internet as a tool to cope with their personal situations and circumstances, especially in establishing initial contact.

This study found shy university students to have preference to establish online relationship particularly with strangers. This indicates that the shy students are more comfortable to communicate with strangers compared to people whom they know off-line. One reason may be due to the fact that they establish the online relationship to cope with their personal situation while benefiting from the anonymity the Internet can provide.

In addition, shy students perceived themselves to have low social skills. This finding supports our earlier assumptions that shy students with low social skills would use the Internet to form relationship. Indeed, the online relationships provide them companionship and intimacy which they lacked in their off-line lives. Whether these shy individuals spend less time in interacting with others in face to face situations, whether the online relationship will have any positive social consequences in their lives, and whether there are any mediating factors that cause the shy to establish online relationship awaits future research.

The limitations to the present research should be noted. First, the majority of participants were Thai nationals from Bangkok. Cautious generalization of the findings across student population and other collectivistic culture is necessary. Future studies will benefit from comparing shy university students from diverse population, and cultures as we expect changes in relationship patterns, preference as well as motivations for establishing online relationship. Additionally, future research should examine the longitudinal study on the impact of online relationship on shy users’ social life, social activities, and social abilities to better understand a more complete set of their social behavior.

Second, the reliability and validity of the present survey instrument had not been previously tested. Although the items were based on literature reviewed, future researchers may benefit by employing multiple tested scales for their study.
7. Implications

Shy university students seem to feel safer or more comfortable in online interactions with strangers. The greater sense of anonymity and control over the impression formation (Jacobsen, 1999) and less performance pressure (Roberts, Smith, & Pollock, 2000) while communicating online provide important implications in terms of how shy individuals socialize. On the one hand, the shy may be helped to overcome their situation. On the other hand, although opportunities to interact with strangers (especially those of the opposite sex) are irresistible coupled with the fact that online relationships rarely stay there, educating the shy on the dangers lurking in cyberspace may be a necessity.

8. Conclusion

The findings indicate that shy university students have a preference to interact with strangers compared to people they know off-line when they are online. The results suggest online relationship may have an impact on those who are shy as well as those who may have difficulty coping with their face to face communication. The anonymity, absence of evaluative feedback which accompanies face-to-face interaction, and control over their disclosure and image management seemed to make the shy students feel less inhibited to development online relationships. Thus, Internet is seen as a tool providing opportunities for social interaction besides opportunities for forming close and meaningful relationships with other people. This is not inconsistent with previous research.

The results of this study also provide further support to McKenna et al. (2002) claim that the shy are “somewhat more likely to feel that they can better express their real selves with others on the Internet than they can with those they know off-line” (p. 28). We have argued that the shy establish online relationship as a way to cope with their personal situation. Further research is needed to examine the intervening variables between shyness among university students and online relationship.

9. References


consolidation and change (pp. 121-138). New York: Routledge.


Appendix 1

Examples of statements listed in the questionnaire

It does not take me long to overcome my shyness in new situations.

I have trouble looking someone right in the eye.

I don't have the social skills necessary to maintain a smooth relationship with others.

I have a tough time making new friends.

I find it easy to say "hello" to someone whom I do not know.

I find it difficult to smile to someone whom I do not know.

I find it easy to have a relaxed open posture in various social situations.

I like to constantly talk about myself.

I usually have to force myself to go to a social gathering.

I want to be closer to other people but I don't know how.

I am satisfied with the face-to-face communication with most people I come into contact with.

I am a shy person most of the time.

I find it easier to have online relationship than face-to-face interactions.

I establish online relationship with others because I do not want to feel lonely.

I have many online relationships.

Most online relationships I have are with people I have not met before.

I prefer to develop closer online relationships with strangers than with real people whom I meet.

I trust the people I meet online more than those I meet in person.