

Study 2: Comparison of Online Users and Nonusers

Michelle M. Weil, Ph.D. and Larry D. Rosen, Ph.D.

Overview

In an attempt to determine peoples' perceptions of online use, a sample of 326 people completed a short interview. Half the sample had never used an online service or the Internet while the other half had used one or the other or both. Of these Online Users, approximately half were "Light Users" (0-19 hours per month) while the rest were classified as "Heavy Users" (over 20 hours per month). Each subject completed a questionnaire that included: (1) their estimate of the percentage of people in the United States who were online at the time of the study (December 1995), (2) their estimate of the percentage of people in the United States who will be online by the year 2000, (3) the specific online uses of those who had been online, (4) demographic data and (5) a composite measure of psychological reactions to technology (see Study 1 for more details).

FIGURE 1: ESTIMATED PERCENTAGE ONLINE NOW (December 1995).

In late 1995 the best estimates were that between 10% and 14% of the population of the United States were using online services or the Internet. As is obvious from this figure, estimates from Nonusers and Light and Heavy Online Users overestimated the actual online percentage by a factor of more than two. This results was not surprising given the extensive media awareness created by companies listing their World Wide Web addresses in the print and television media as well as the new trend of including e-mail addresses and even web site addresses on business cards. What was surprising was that there was no difference in estimates between the groups. This suggests to us that the media is most likely responsible for these overestimates since that is a major factor in common to all three groups.

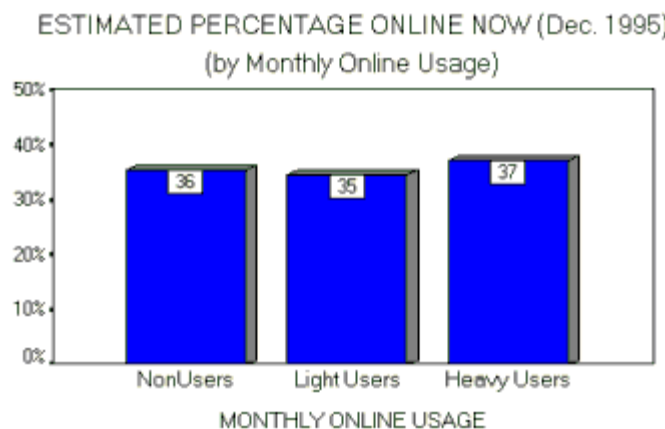


FIGURE 2: GENDER x ETHNIC INTERACTION

In assessing which factors were related to these overestimates, a series of factorial Analyses of Variance were performed. Only a single significant effect emerged to explain the differences - the interaction between gender and Ethnicity. As is obvious from this figure, although all groups overestimate the percentages, the largest overestimates come from the female Asian, Black and Hispanic subjects. For further discussion of the ramifications of these results, see our article in the Journal of Consumer Affairs listed in this web site. However, suffice it to say, that these are the same groups who are consistently at risk for being left out of the Information Revolution.

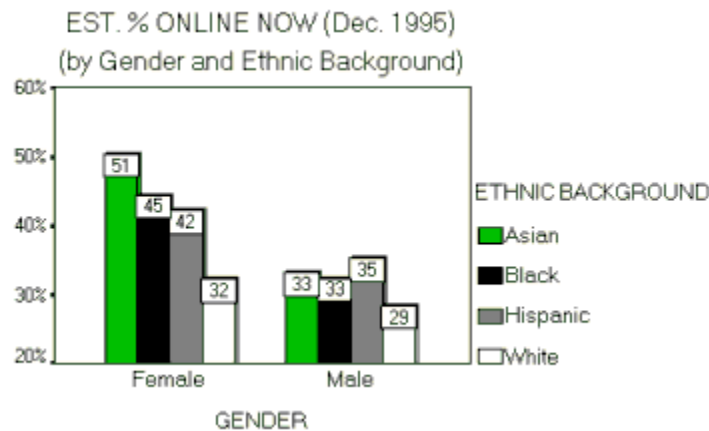


FIGURE 3: ESTIMATED PERCENTAGE ONLINE IN YEAR 2000

This figure shows that unilaterally, the three groups agree that nearly two-thirds of the population will be online by the year 2000. We can only wait and see if this prediction is true, but again, it is interesting that there are no between-groups differences. Whether you are online or not, you still guess around 60% + will be online in 2000.

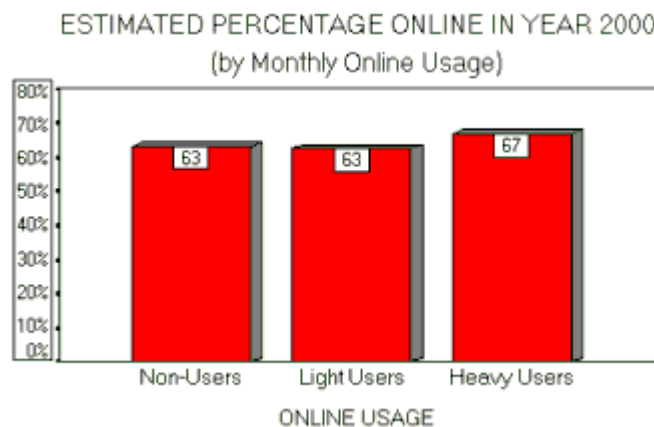


FIGURE 4: ESTIMATED PERCENTAGE ONLINE IN YEAR 2000 (by Ethnic Background)

This significant effect shows that Asian, Blacks and Hispanics are estimating that a larger percentage

will be online. For further discussion of the ramifications of these results, see our article in the Journal of Consumer Affairs listed in this web site.

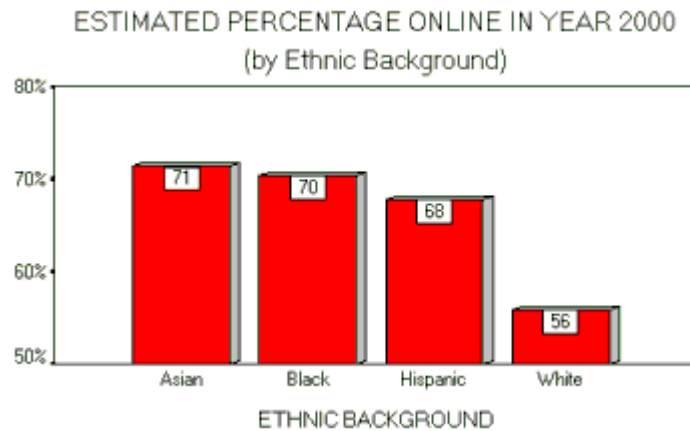


FIGURE 5: ESTIMATED PERCENTAGE ONLINE IN YEAR 2000 (by Gender)

This significant effect shows that women estimated more people would be online by the year 2000.

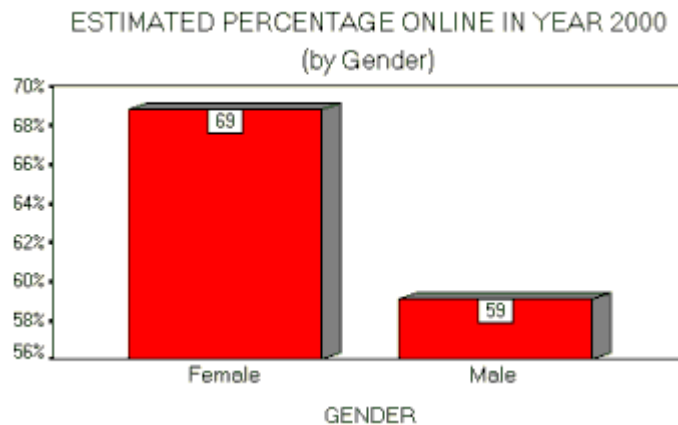
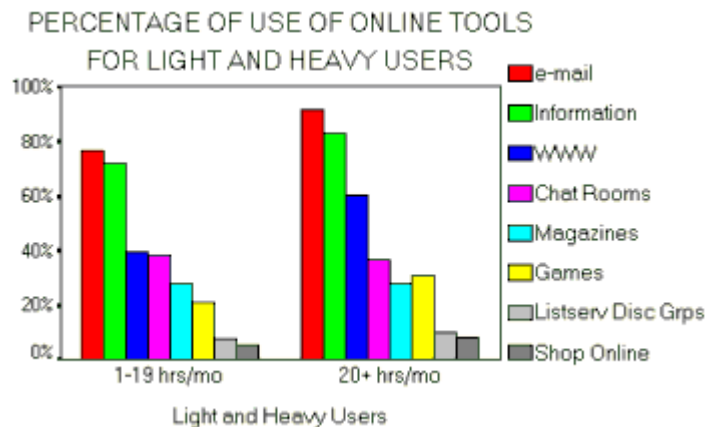
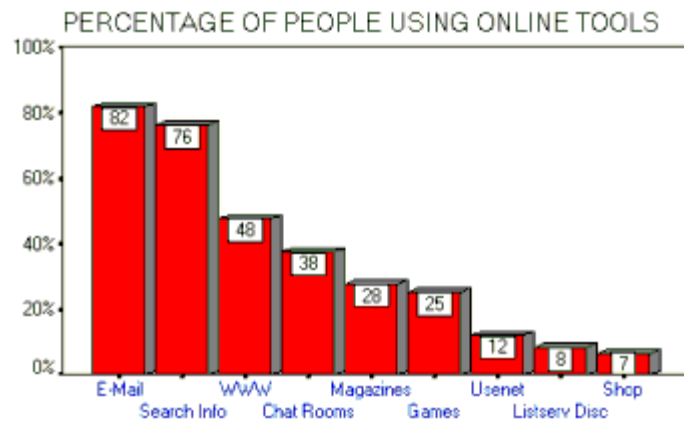


FIGURE 6 and FIGURE 7: PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE USING ONLINE TOOLS

The first figure (Figure 6) shows that most of those online are using e-mail or searching for information from the web's vast resources rather than shopping, playing games or participating in discussions (either live chats or mail list discussions). Figure 7 shows that there were few differences in online tools used by light and heavy users. In general, the only notable difference was that heavy users spent more time using the World Wide Web.



Conclusions:

These results demonstrate dramatically that people are vastly overestimating online usage. Since only one in ten or so are actually online, this suggests that the remaining 85%-90% of the population are misperceiving technology usage by a factor of two (and nearly three!). This has led, we believe, to a feeling that by most people that "everybody is online and I am the last on the block to get hooked up to the superhighway." We hear comments like this regularly in our lectures and consultations. In general, feelings like this have led people to feel inadequate, worried, and lost and have either forced people to make decisions about technology utilization that may not be well thought-out or led to stronger resistant reactions (as seen perhaps in the rise in popularity of technology bashing books and a reemergence of the Luddites). Worst yet, there appears to be a segment of the population who is even more at risk for these negative feelings. Instead of being "have nots", these people are becoming "know nots."

[Back to list of current research projects](#)