

WEAVERS & WARRIORS? GENDER AND ONLINE IDENTITY IN 1997 AND 2007 V1.0

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Abstract

In 1997 the Internet was seen by many as a tool for radical reinterpretation of physicality and gender. Cybertheorists predicted we would leave our bodies behind and interact online as disembodied minds, and that the technology would reshape the way we saw ourselves. However, physicality has proved to be an inextricable part of all our interactions. Changing Internet technology has allowed Net users to find a myriad ways to perform and express their gender online.

In this paper I consider attitudes to gender on the Net in 1997, when the main concerns were the imbalance between men and women online and whether it was possible or desirable to bring the body into online interactions. In much of the discourse surrounding gender online, a simple binary was assumed to exist. I go on to consider the extent to which those attitudes have changed today. Through my own experience of setting up a women's community on Livejournal, and my observations of a men's community set up in response, I conclude that though traditional attitudes to gender have largely translated to the Net and the binary is still the default view, some shifts have occurred. For example, between 1997 and today there seems to have been a fundamental change in perceptions of women's attitudes to adversarial debate, and an increase in awareness of genders beyond the binary.

In addition, experience and preliminary investigation lead me toward a hypothesis that today's female-identified Net users are engaged in more conscious and active exploration and performance of their gender online than male-identified users are.

Keywords: [gender performativity, physicality, internet communities]

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Introduction

In the heady days of the mid-90s it was thought that the technology of the Internet would reshape how we understood and performed gender. Reduced to text on a screen, Net users would be known by their words alone. This was considered by many commentators as a chance to be free of the pecking-orders of everyday society, heavily influenced by physical attributes and gender. Much gleeful text was written describing how nerds could now speak up without thinking of their acne, and women could use electronic systems to take the floor at any time without fear of being perceived primarily as a sex object. The biggest Net enthusiasts dreamed of leaving physicality and gender behind altogether. As Kennedy *et al* put it: "...utopians had the fantasy that computer-mediated communication would facilitate pure interaction and community without any sense of gender or other social phenomena"². For example member of the FutureCulture mailing list wrote: "Concepts of physical beauty are holdovers from 'MEAT' space. On the net, they don't apply. We are all just bits and bytes blowing in the phosphor stream"³. In this view, gender was a phenomenon inextricably linked to biological sex and physical presence, and so would not accompany the user on to the Net – although as we will see later, behaviour can be strongly gendered even in a world of plain text.

As it turned out, the utopians' vision was indeed a fantasy. We cannot leave physicality behind, nor do most want to; there is no communication in the human condition that does not involve the body as an essential component and reference⁴. Gender, in particular, whether seen as inextricably linked to the body or independent of it, is still fundamental to how we use the Internet. Rather than fundamentally reshaping our understanding of gender, the technology has been reshaped, or reshaped itself, to allow users to perform their gender in largely traditional ways. As I will discuss later, the detailed profiles and avatar images of modern message boards and blog sites have enabled users to represent their physicality and their gender on the Net to a much greater extent than was possible in the late 90s. Users have done this with alacrity for the most part, with little indication that they want to leave "'MEAT' space" concepts

² Kennedy, T., Wellman, B., & Klement, K. (2005) "Gendering the Internet Divide", *IT & Society* 1(5): p. 89. <<http://www.stanford.edu/group/siqss/itandsociety/v01i05/v01i05a05.pdf>>.

³ Cited in Balsamo, A. (1993) "Feminism for the Incurably Informed", in Mark Dery (ed.) *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 92(4): 681-712, p 696.

⁴ See Argyle, K. & Shields, R. (1996) "Is there a Body in the Net?", in Rob Shields (ed.) *Cultures of Internet*, Thousand Oaks, Sage, 1996.

behind or to reconsider their own ideas of gender. Also, now that “the Internet has descended to earth”⁵ and become integrated into more aspects of our lives like shopping, banking and maintaining contact with relatives, we have a myriad of new ways to perform gender online. But even in 1994, when the FutureCulture post quoted above was made, the reality was very different and “[g]ender identity persists in the ‘phosphor stream’ whether we like it or not,” wrote Balsamo in response⁶.

In this paper I revisit research I carried out in 1997 on how people performed and perceived their own gender and that of others online, then go on to consider the situation today. Ten years is an eternity in the accelerated world of the Internet. What has changed and what has stayed the same?

1997: The Boys’ Club

During my time on the Cybermind mailing list, between 1996 and 1999, a regular topic of concern was the unbalanced ratio of male to female net users. In the summer of 1997 I gathered some figures in the hope of finding out how great the imbalance was. The answers were wildly conflicting. The now-defunct Dublin web consultancy NUA put the total number of female internet users at 42% – almost eight million⁷. Diane Reiner’s figure in her book *Person to Person on the Internet* was 37%⁸. However, Davidson’s figure was only 10%⁹. Whence this discrepancy? Unable to discover how these researchers had collected their data, I surmised that the 42% might indeed have been there, but keeping quiet.

Women on the Net were then something of a novelty. Due to the fact that the majority of Net access was still through university servers and within the computer industry, and due to the historical gender imbalance in the fields of computer education and computer science, in its early years the Net was a mostly male preserve. In the absence of women, the developing communication styles of Net discourse took on a stereotypically ‘masculine’ cast.

⁵ Kennedy et al, (2005: 89).

⁶ Balsamo, (1993: 696).

⁷ Survey results published in dot.ie magazine, Jun/Jul 1997.

⁸ Reiner, D., & Blanton, K (1997) *Person to Person on the Internet*, San Diego, AP Professional.

⁹ Cited in Fallon, H. (1997) *WOW – Women on the Web*, Women’s Education Research and Resource Centre, University of Dublin.

In electronic discussions, Herring found that men tended to write twice as much as women, and that 68% of their messages were adversarial in style. They also tended towards self-promotion and detachment from others. Conversely, women were more inclined to ask questions rather than assert facts; to reveal thoughts and feelings; and to take an interactive, supportive standpoint. They were also less inclined to take part in flame wars – online conflict made them uncomfortable, whereas men regarded it as par for the course. According to Herring, this gender split with regard to flame wars was due to women’s childhood conditioning to avoid conflict¹⁰. This difference in communication style is demonstrated by a passage from *Deny All Knowledge*, a collection of academic essays on *The X-Files* and its fans. A chapter by Clerc compared the atmosphere of two *X-Files* mailing lists with a broadly similar purpose, differing in terms of the sexual orientation of most of their members:

the difference between how men and women react to conflict and intimacy is clear when we compare two quotes, the first from a member of the Duchovniks [the David Duchovny Estrogen Brigade, fans of the actor who played *X-Files* hero Fox Mulder] and the second from a member of the GATB [Gillian Anderson Testosterone Brigade – fans of the actress who played heroine Dana Scully]:

Another thing that is perhaps unique to this kind of woman-centered list is the sharing of personal problems (job troubles, anorexia, bad break-ups, deaths) and the outpouring of support that occurs. There is never judgment, and rarely know-it-all advice, merely concern and care. I don't think I've ever seen a flame on this list.

This is more like a community of buddies than anything else – oh, we have our differences; hot buttons are pushed on a semi-regular basis it seems. Discussions are not limited strictly to GA, but have included in the past OS2/Warp?/Windoze 95 (I keep out of that, I'm a Mac man at home; at work I use a Sun workstation), cars, the right to bear arms and arm bears, taxes, baseball, football. Kinda like a guy club, where we can shoot the shit and not have to worry about always having to talk about X-Files or GA/DD/CC and the like... I guess I can sum it up as a male quilting bee¹¹,

Despite serving very similar purposes within a single narrow subculture, these lists were perceived and represented very differently by these two members. The second poster’s use of the term “quilting bee” to describe the GATB, a term we may associate with female social groups, is an interesting anomaly, but otherwise the two members’

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Clerc, S. (1996) “DDEB, GATB and Ratboy: Online X-Files Fandom”, in David Lavery, Angela Hague & Marla Cartwright (eds) *Deny All Knowledge: Reading The X-Files*, London, Faber & Faber, 1996:

descriptions of the lists conform closely to Herring's and other theorists' ideas of how groups of men and groups of women interacted online.

Another point to note about these lists is that their names made an explicit link between gender, biological sex and sexual orientation, seeming to consider them synonymous, or indeed not to examine the concepts at all. I found myself wondering whether there were any gay male Duchovniks, or gay female GATB members – though since the names of the groups specified the hormones considered to be synonymous with biological maleness and femaleness, it seems clear that the need to accommodate other sexual orientations besides heterosexuality had not occurred to the list founders. This hard link between biology, gender and sexual orientation was a common feature of the Net in 1997.

Later I will consider another pair of Internet communities active today, the Livejournal communities The Ladies' Loos (theladiesloos.livejournal.com) and The Company Of Men (thecompanyofmen.livejournal.com), again with broadly similar purposes and a similar gender divide, and consider whether or not a similar difference in atmosphere exists. I will also show how these communities' attitude to the relationship between gender, sex and orientation differs from the days of the DDEB and GATB.

Outside “woman-centred lists”, where flaming was more common, female users often chose to stand on the sidelines of verbal battles. While arguably a mature and sane course of action, it seemed to leave women (and less aggressive users in general) at a disadvantage. The introductory documents of many Usenet newsgroups stated that people were twice as likely to respond to a message they disagreed with than one they agreed with. Perhaps there was a relationship between this statistic and Fallon's statement that “topics initiated by women were less likely to be taken up by the group as a whole”¹². Involving yourself in flame wars was a sure-fire way to get yourself noticed. In answer to the question “I've been insulted! How should I respond?”, the Mailing List Etiquette FAQ said “Congratulations! You've never been properly welcomed to the Net until you've been flamed”¹³. Perhaps women were often ignored in online groups because of an unwillingness to engage in these conflicts.

¹² Fallon (1997).

¹³ The Mailing List Etiquette FAQ. Available at: <<http://www.gweep.ca/~edmonds/usenet/ml-etiquette.html>> (Accessed 13 November 2007).

Others in the silent majority of online women may have been keeping a low profile because of rumours or direct experience of online sexual harassment. It was a well-publicised issue at the time; articles about it were all over the print media, to an extent only matched today by stories of paedophiles masquerading as children online to win real children over. This could also go some way towards explaining the gender imbalance; the common media image of the Net as a den of perverts and stalkers may have discouraged or delayed some women from getting online and investigating for themselves.

Net harassment was a real problem, though not as bad as the print media suggested. In a survey of members of SYSTERS, a mailing list for women in technical careers, one-fifth reported having experienced it. Many women found that appearing on newsgroups or chat channels with a female name brought on barrages of unsolicited email from what Reiner coyly calls “lovelorn gentlemen”, described more bluntly online as “HNGs”, Horny Net Geeks. However, Sherman believes that the publicity of online harassment is a deliberate attempt on the part of the male-controlled media to keep women frightened away from the net, keeping it as a boys’ club. For her part, she experienced no harassment during eight years of internet use; she compares the net to a crowded urban environment with “dark alleys to avoid”¹⁴.

Reiner puts the onus of self-protection squarely on the female user: don’t hang out on the IRC channel #hotsex with a user ID like ‘Cutie Pie’ if you aren’t prepared for a flood of sexual propositioning. This suggestion is already somewhat reminiscent of the common argument that women who choose to wear miniskirts or walk alone are not taking enough responsibility for their own safety, but Reiner goes further: she suggests that women adopt a male or neutral online name – ‘William’ or ‘Thinker’, but not ‘DreamGirl’. “You will be surprised at how much more breathing-space you will have,” she writes¹⁵. This may account for the discrepancy in the 1997 net census figures. The women were there, but many studies missed them because they were invisible. (As we will see, the situation is very different today – on many social networking sites women seem more likely to choose an overtly feminine username than men are to choose a masculine one.)

¹⁴ Cited in Fallon, (1997).

¹⁵ Reiner, (1997).

However, even adopting a male or neutral online identity did not guarantee immunity from harassment. The main victim in the famous Mr Bungle MOOrape case, discussed in Julian Dibbell's *A Rape in Cyberspace*, was a female PhD student using a neutral character, "a Haitian trickster spirit of indeterminate gender... with a view to tasting in imagination the deity's freedom from the burdens of the gendered flesh" – who nevertheless "suffered a brand of degradation all too customarily reserved for the embodied female"¹⁶.

It's not hard to see why a female FutureCulture user said of women who made themselves visible on the Net: "If they've come this far, they are likely to be the more brave/bold/stupid type"¹⁷. Sardar describes the Net as being populated by the men who design and consume video games filled with guts, gore, tanks, thugs and Barbie-doll women¹⁸. The implication is that women can never feel at ease or be empowered in such an environment; people who play games featuring, as Slouka writes, "sorority girls on meat hooks"¹⁹ (as seen in Sega's 'Night Trap') will never take them seriously.

It's worth considering that when Slouka and Sardar made their comments, video games were still primarily a solo activity and any female characters encountered in the game would be those designed by the game creators. As I will discuss later, today online gaming has allowed millions of Net users, both male and female, to play together – cooperating as well as competing – in massively multiplayer environments like World of Warcraft. It would be interesting to explore whether this has had an impact on male users' attitude to women in computer games, and whether the influx of women in multiplayer gaming has had an impact on the atmosphere of the games themselves.

However, even then the conception of the net as designed and built by men of the Doom generation, based on and friendly towards their underlying assumptions, was only part of the story. The chance discovery of a pamphlet from the late 60s caused me to reassess my assumptions about women and computing. "Think of the women who program the great computers – when a mechanical memory on a reel of tape must obey

¹⁶ Dibbell, J. (1993) "A Rape in Cyberspace", *Village Voice*, 38(51): 36-42.

¹⁷ Cited in Balsamo (1994: 696).

¹⁸ Sardar, Z & Ravetz, J. (eds) (1996) *Cyberfutures*, London, Pluto: 24-6.

¹⁹ Slouka, M. (1996) *War of the Worlds – The Assault on Reality*, London, Abacus: 13.

the commands of a human memory stored a couple of inches under the latest hairstyle,”²⁰ it read. Digging deeper, I discovered writers like Sadie Plant and Helen Fallon who had analysed the underlying structures of the Internet and discovered that women had had a profound impact on its early history. They concluded that the Net was woman-friendly at a fundamental level, and as such it could offer unprecedented opportunities for women to express themselves in the future.

As the pamphlet rather patronisingly suggested, computing was indeed considered women’s work in the early days. The earliest computers were programmed and maintained by women – the Enigma machine during WW2, the ENIAC (Electronic Numerical Integrator and Computer) whose analysts were known as “the ENIAC girls”, and others. Leading lights of computing at the time included Betty Holberton, creator of the COBOL programming language, and Grace Murray Hopper, who received an honorary captaincy for her work on the IBM Mark 1.

The proportion of women in computing remained high till the 1970s, when the study of computing became strongly associated with that of maths. This was more an accident of history than a similarity between the two subjects: as computers were useful for number-crunching in maths problems, when a university acquired its first mainframe computer it would usually be installed in the maths department, so computer science departments grew up under the mathematical wing. As a result, many girls did not consider studying computing because of the image of maths as an intrinsically ‘masculine’ subject, an image encouraged by teachers and careers counsellors in many schools. The 1975 report by a study group to the Australian Schools Commission, *Girls, School & Society*, explored subject offerings and choices in New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland and expressed concern about the institutional barriers which discouraged or prevented girls from studying mathematics or science, recommending that special programs be put in place to redress the imbalance²¹. Today gender differentials in mathematics at school are dwindling. Though the decades of imbalance gave rise to many of our assumptions about women and computing, Plant shows that in the context of the whole history of computing they are an anomaly.

²⁰ Dudley, G. A. (1968) *Adventures in Memory*, Marple, Cheshire, Psychology Publishing.

²¹ Report by committee on social change and the education of women, chaired by K.R. McKinnon, (1975) *Girls, School & Society*, The Schools Commission, Canberra.

In her article “Weaving Women and Cybernetics”, she goes back to the first unbuilt computer blueprints, co-created by William Babbage and Ada Lovelace a hundred years before the building of the Mark 1 during WW2. Babbage designed the hardware; Lovelace, inspired by the programmable punch-card system of the Jacquard loom (suspected by some to have been invented by Mr Jacquard’s wife), adapted the weaving system to create the first software. “We may say most aptly, that the Analytical Engine *weaves Algebraical patterns*, just as the Jacquard loom weaves flowers and leaves,”²² she wrote. Plant quotes from a lecture by Freud in which he dismissively describes weaving as “the only contribution”²³ women have made to the growth of civilisation. If the information revolution has indeed been a direct consequence of developments in weaving, this is a choice irony.

Cyberfeminists, taking this history as their starting point, perceive the Internet as a fabric of nebulous lines of communication, crossing and recrossing to blanket the world and weave people together. The word “Web” itself is a strong female-friendly metaphor,²⁴ linked to the traditionally female activities of weaving and spinning. The Internet is also anarchic in nature, not controlled by any one entity or based on traditionally male, hierarchical “ladders of power”. Fallon also suggests a comparison between hypertext – fluid and nonlinear, multidirectional rather than “one-pointed”, offering many routes through the text rather than a single narrative thrust – and the “écriture feminine” proposed by theorists like Cixous. She writes, “We may be the last generation that views text as a linear sequence, moving, in the main, from left to right, in one rigid hierarchy”²⁵. In 1997, though they were still outnumbered, women were beginning to recognise the potential for affinity with the Net.

The discourse surrounding gender on the Internet in 1997 had its limitations. As mentioned earlier, a great deal of it focused on the experience of heterosexual, biological women. In most discussion on the subject, biological sex and gender were assumed to be synonymous. Gender was usually considered as a simple binary and

²² Cited in Plant (1995) “The Future Looms: Weaving Women and Cybernetics”, in Mike Featherstone (ed.) *Cyberspace, Cyberbodies, Cyberpunk*, Sage, 1995.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Chua, cited in Fallon (1997).

²⁵ Fallon (1997).

many researchers considered women to share certain essential qualities, for example a dislike of hierarchies.

One of a few online places where this was not the case was the Cybermind mailing list, where it was recognised that the world of gender online was far more complicated than the simple, stereotypical picture of confrontational frat-boys in the fray and timid, cooperative women on the sidelines that one might have got from a cursory inspection of USENET flame wars. Through research, discussion, prose and art, members were attempting to chart this new world. On May 18th 1997, Cybermind member and moderator Alan Sondheim posted a questionnaire about online identity, inviting list members to respond. The questionnaire included the following question: “Do you use an avatar at any time? Are your online names and gender the same as off-line?” The responses were mixed.

The majority of respondents answered that their avatars shared their gender. “Pretending to be female won’t change my condition,” wrote Jon Marshall²⁶. “Have toyed with it,” Rose Mulvale wrote, “but in the light of day it looks like too much work!”²⁷. Jerry Everard answered in similar vein: “Gender remains the same – it’s just easier”²⁸. The recurring theme that portraying yourself as a different gender took constant mental effort would seem to suggest that gender was still fundamental to the respondents’ self-concept, even in “the phosphor stream”.

However, some members used other-gender avatars not as a means of interacting with others but as alternative headspace – a sort of thought experiment – like Alan’s own female alter ego, Jennifer: “...I’ve never entered a MOO or talker or IRC as Jennifer – she’s more a site for theoretical exploration”²⁹.

A further group didn’t represent themselves as different genders, but thought it might be interesting to try:

²⁶ Jon Marshall, Cybermind, 19 May 1997.

²⁷ Rose Mulvale, Cybermind, 19 May 1997.

²⁸ Jerry Everard, Cybermind, 20 May 1997.

²⁹ Alan Sondheim, Cybermind, 19 May 1997.

Enok is Enok, but I sometimes feel I should like to have the identity of a female, talking freely to my female friends, making love to a female partner, and sometimes I wonder about how to make love to a man...³⁰.

Something like your becoming-jennifer is something I would like to explore in the future... there might be many unexpected faces behind what we call identity³¹.

Some opted out of the male/female binary altogether. Paula Davidson described how, when she started using her MOO of choice, she realised that no one could see any physical attributes.

I thought this was a great thing and would make it possible to see what communication could be like when gender, race, physical size and the like weren't relevant. So I took the gender spivak as an alternative to my real gender³².

Jon Marshall had created an avatar which was "not terrestrial", but pointed out that it remained unused.

Interestingly, though there were too few data points to tell whether it represented a general trend, more male list members expressed a desire to experience being female than vice versa. This is perhaps contrary to what one might have expected from the thinking at the time that women would relish the opportunity to present themselves as male.

The wide variety of responses and degree of thought put into them conveys the extent to which this issue was a preoccupation of the list. Members were constantly interrogating the sometimes turbulent relationship between their bodies and their online lives. Katie Argyle, in her article "Life After Death", movingly related the list's reaction to news of the death of member Michael Current – with a grief that was unmistakably physical³³. In his last mail to Alan Sondheim, shortly before his sudden death, Current himself wrote about an email correspondence with a Net acquaintance who was "concerned about the detachment of affect from the fleshbonesandblood"³⁴; he went on to picture

³⁰ Enok Kippersund, Cybermind, 19 May 1997.

³¹ Nicholas Nobile, Cybermind, 19 May 1997.

³² Paula Davidson, Cybermind, 20 May 1997.

³³ Argyle, K. (1996) "Life After Death", in Rob Shields (ed.) *Cultures of Internet*, Thousand Oaks, Sage, 1996.

³⁴ Cited by Sondheim, Cybermind, 20 July 1998.

his correspondent “sitting, naked, in a chair in the corner of his bedroom”, conscious of a sort of sexual pleasure that accompanied the intellectual discussion he and Current were having.

This type of post was a frequent feature of the list: members vividly describing their life of the body. There was sometimes a tone of frustration with the body’s frailty and limitations – as Caitlin Martin wrote:

I’m ambivalent about these markings – the silver in my hair stretchmarks episiotomy scars... [I] wonder if you will see me in the character who endlessly mutilates her meat in some desire to transcend it, to step outside of that which can be so easily marked³⁵.

But even when the posts expressed this desire for transcendence, they were anything but disembodied. One poster documented her love and sex life so intensely and arrestingly that to read about it as text on a screen was almost to experience it oneself. Another related how, in a women’s communal changing room after suffering an illness, she found fascination and beauty in the scarred, ageing and “lived” bodies of the other women – and thus her own. Awareness of the complexity of gender and sexuality permeated these posts, meditations on physical experience and desire.

However, alongside this approach to gender and sexuality – one grounded firmly in the body, seeking to involve the flesh in Net life – Cybermind was witness to wilder, more fluid interpretations, most notably in Alan Sondheim’s text-art pieces. These posts often used the limitations of ASCII text – character spacing, standard fonts and screen widths – to create patterns and textures. Out of the text appeared shifting, ambisexual avatars, penetrating and being penetrated, seeming to change gender smoothly with no need for explanation. The medium, the text itself, became sensual – an extension of the body, a new erogenous zone that didn’t fit into gender binaries or anatomy textbooks. Here is a dialogue between an unnamed character, possibly Alan himself, and Nikuko, one of his avatars:

- Would you please discuss something you remember about your life?
- Being hungry for men and women from a very early age. Wanting whatever I could get from them. Turning them inside-out. Fucking everyone

³⁵ Caitlin Martin, Cybermind, 10 April 1997.

I could... I wanted to be the inversion of the world, mapping one-to-one on my body, making myself into a universal model...

- How do you reconcile the people you hang around with?

- They understand me, bind me into each and every position. I reflect their desires, the desires of the universe... You have forgotten my name. I shimmer continuously as word after word is written or spoken.³⁶

In general, whether their approach was firmly embodied or free-floating, the members of Cybermind were consciously performing and exploring their gender online in ways that have informed and inspired my own thinking on the subject ever since; documenting, as Morrigan wrote:

...the moments when the glass,
 extended beyond its mass and smearing into viscosity,
 latexes the face
 and melts and moulds into masks³⁷.

The impression arising from all this is of an Internet which was generally (if incorrectly) assumed to be arranged to male specifications, where male preoccupations, hobbies and communication styles had the upper hand. However, it also had a steadily growing population of increasingly confident women, reclaiming their birthright as the cyberfeminists might have it, and an undercurrent of thinking about gender which broke away from the accepted categories. A decade later, how does the land lie? And are today's connected population expressing traditional gender stereotypes in their online lives, discovering that gender is more complicated than they thought, or using the Net to escape from gender altogether?

2007: Doing Technology, Doing Gender

The Internet is no longer a boys' club. Recent research shows that women are no longer outnumbered online. A Pew Internet report compiled by Deborah Fallows in 2005, from data collected by Princeton Survey Research Associates, showed that 67% of Americans had Internet access. This represented 66% of men and 68% of women. "Women slightly outnumber men in the Internet population because they make up a greater share of the overall US population," she writes³⁸. The numbers of men and women online in the

³⁶ Alan Sondheim, *Cybermind*, 15 June 1998.

³⁷ Morrigan, *Cybermind*, 9 June 1998.

³⁸ Fallows, D. "How Women and Men Use the Internet", *Pew Internet & American Life Project*, 2005: i <http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Women_and_Men_online.pdf>.

Western world have been more or less equal since 2000, and in China the divide is closing with dizzying speed: between 1997 and 2002 the proportion of Chinese Internet users who were female rose from 12% to 39%³⁹. The Pew Internet report found that younger women were actually more likely than younger men to be online – 86% of women between 18 and 29 used the Internet compared to 80% of men in that age group.

Also, while in the late 90s computer games were seen as profoundly woman-unfriendly in nature and a pernicious influence on the atmosphere of the Internet for women, today women outnumber men in online gaming. A recent survey by Nielsen Entertainment found that 64% of online gamers were women⁴⁰.

Thus, while the issue for Net researchers was once why fewer women were online, it has now become why and how women use it differently to men. “Concern over the Internet has moved beyond the simple issues of access: the haves vs. the have-nots,” say Kennedy et al. “Discussions of the digital divide need to go beyond only enumerating differences in access and use, to account for how disparities came to be and why they exist”⁴¹. According to Kennedy, women and men have different styles of Internet use. Women are more likely to use it for “kin-keeping”, maintaining a supportive network of friends and relatives, with a strong emphasis on email as the medium of choice, while men are more likely to use it for solo recreation – shopping and Web use. Kennedy makes a rather odd distinction between socialising, which she sees as the preserve of email, and Web use, which she regards as a mostly solo activity. This view disregards the plethora of social networking websites with many millions of users, which act as central points of contact for groups of friends and as engines for organising their offline social lives. (Myspace has 200 million users as of September 7, 2007, according to Wikipedia. Facebook, the new flavour of the month, broke 50 million active users in October 2007 and is growing fast.) Kin-keeping behaviour can be seen all over the online world, in a wide variety of online “places”. Here is the Livejournal user *chained_girl* describing the community on World of Warcraft, a massively multiplayer online roleplaying game which allows for cooperative play:

³⁹ Liff, S., & Shepherd, A. “An Evolving Gender Digital Divide?”, *Internet Issue Brief No. 2*, Oxford Internet Institute, July 2004: 1. <<http://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/resources/publications/IB2all.pdf>>

⁴⁰ Lombardi, C. “Women outnumber men in online games, survey finds,” *CNet News* (news.com.com), October 5 2006. <http://www.news.com/2100-1043_3-6123172.html>

⁴¹ Kennedy et al, (2005: 90).

There are 6 million of us.
 We span the world twice around.
 We are all genders, all races, all sexualities, all walks of life.
 We work in teams, together, for a common goal...
 We end up with accidental support networks, and find friends we trust.
 We cheer each other up when we have had a bad day.
 We cheer each other when we have done something awesome.
 We share.

We play World of Warcraft and sometimes, that is a truly awesome thing⁴².

The collaborative play and support networks on World of Warcraft show how much computer gaming has changed since Slouka's gloomy "sorority girls on meat hooks" assessment of the mid-90s. It is no longer a male preserve or just a solo recreation; the millions of female gamers have made it their own and are using it in ways that reflect Kennedy's findings. Kennedy seems to speak for many Net theorists today when she states: "when people do technology, they are also doing gender"⁴³ – in other words, if you are using technology, whether to conduct the business of your life or to express your identity, you are likely to use it in a gendered way.

Using the Net to escape from, disguise or disregard one's gender seems to be off the agenda for most users today, along with the idea that one can use it to construct a whole new identity. Huffaker and Calvert's 2005 study of teenage bloggers found that:

multiple 'public' faces were not the norm. Instead, our data suggest a tendency for adolescents to use language to create an anchor and a consistent public face as they engage in the very serious business of constructing a stable cohesive set of representations of who they are⁴⁴.

Those who deliberately disguise or misrepresent their gender seem to be met with active disapproval in many parts of the online world, suggesting that gender is still thought of as the chief determinant of a net user's personality, rather than "a holdover from MEAT space". Today's Internet technology has evolved to facilitate the performance of gender. On a MOO, in the text-based days, users entered information about themselves via a simple form with only a few fields. With screen space at a premium, you had the opportunity to specify your gender or leave it blank, describe your avatar in a few lines

⁴² chained_girl, "Just... wow?", 9 September 2006, chained_girl.livejournal.com. Accessed 13th March 2007. [Editor's note: All livejournal references come from <http://www.livejournal.com>]

⁴³ Kennedy et al, (2005: 76).

⁴⁴ Huffaker, D. A., & Calvert, S. L. (2005) "Gender, Identity, and Language Use in Teenage Blogs", *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 10(2): np. <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol10/issue2/huffaker.html>.

of text, and maybe insert a favourite quote. The rest of your self-representation depended on your interaction with other users. In contrast, the new communities, Web-based and with graphics capabilities, offer many opportunities to represent your physicality and particularly your gender. Social networking websites like Livejournal, Facebook and Myspace allow for rich, detailed user profiles featuring biographical details, interests, graphics and animations. I will now examine some of the ways in which gender is explored and expressed on Livejournal, a large social networking site with over 14 million users as of October 26th 2007⁴⁵.

The two most prominent and visible pieces of information on any Livejournal user are the icon – a small image chosen to represent the user – and the username. When an image of a person – real or fictional – is used as an icon, most users seem to select someone of the same gender as themselves. In my experience, when women use icons showing men (usually to show their allegiance to a TV show or a character they like) this causes little comment. However, in the rare case of a man using a female icon, other users may be confused or assume the male user is female. The user *verlaine* has an icon of silent movie star Lillian Gish, used when he is in a flirtatious mood, which has caused several online acquaintances to assume he is female. As with many other areas of gender-related behaviour, such as permitted items of clothing, the barrier between men and women seems to be permeable in only one direction. Women can adopt male signifiers, but not vice versa.

An analysis of usernames tells a somewhat different story. Again from personal experience, many Livejournal women choose a name which telegraphs their gender in a quite stereotypical way: diminutives, the word “little” in various languages, references to fluff and glitter, and innumerable variations on cats, other small animals, fairies and angels abound. Clearly the tyranny of “William or Thinker” is over. Only a few men use name components like these (my friend ‘kitty_goth’ is male) and for them it seems to be a consciously employed signifier of some degree of genderqueerness. In contrast, there are fewer usernames containing male names or stereotypical male signifiers (though the difficulty of coming up with a list of stereotypical male signifiers is telling in itself). A quick sample of 250 posts from the Latest Posts page, which collates all the publicly

⁴⁵ Figures from Wikipedia. Available at: <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Livejournal>> (accessed 14th November 2007).

viewable posts being made by users throughout Livejournal at a given moment, shows 42 (16%) usernames containing a female-specific word (e.g. “girl”, “belle”, “princess”) or female name; 21 (8.4%) usernames containing a male-specific word (e.g. “studly”, “sir”, “groom”) or male name; and 187 (74.8%) names which are broadly neutral. This last category includes a very large number of “female-associated” words and diminutives in usernames, often accompanied by a feminine-looking icon, but I resisted including these in the female category since I did not have time to investigate these users’ journals and user profiles to get a clearer idea of whether they identified as male or female⁴⁶.

A rigorous and wide-ranging survey of the relationship between gender and username choice on Livejournal is a tantalising idea, but lies beyond the scope of this paper. However, I am left with an (as yet inadequately proven) impression that Livejournal men do not tend to perform their gender as overtly or consciously as women. One might speculate that the women are “othering” themselves; that they feel the need to specify that they are female because on the internet maleness is still the default, and default states are the ones which go unmentioned. But the statistics on LJ users who maintain their journals (post with a certain degree of regularity) seem to suggest that femaleness is in fact the Livejournal default. Of 7,131,710 regular maintainers, 47.9% have ticked the box which identifies them as female; 23.3% have specified their gender as male; and 28.7% have left their gender unspecified⁴⁷. It would seem plausible that the unspecified group is made up of a similar proportion of males to females and that there are simply more women than men on Livejournal. However, though further study is needed to confirm or disprove this, it is my impression that the breakdown is more even and that the disparity represents a tendency on the part of female users to pay attention to and give significance to their gender, while male users seem to play it down, parody it or ignore it.

This dynamic can be observed on two Livejournal communities, in some ways a modern-day equivalent of the two X-Files mailing lists described earlier: The Ladies’ Loos, a women-only chat, advice and support community, and The Company Of Men, a men-only community created in response to the formation of the Loos. Founded at

⁴⁶ Livejournal Latest Posts page, <<http://www.livejournal.com/stats/latest.bml>>, accessed 13th March 2007.

⁴⁷ Livejournal Stats page, <<http://www.livejournal.com/stats.bml>>, accessed 13th March 2007.

about the same time, within the same social group (though both have expanded beyond it), with broadly similar purposes, similar word-of-mouth publicity and vouch-based membership, differing only in the gender of their members, they provide an interesting opportunity to observe how gender is performed on Livejournal.

The background of The Ladies' Loos illustrates several ways in which the experience of women on the internet has changed in the last ten years. The Ladies' Loos had existed for a long time – starting in the late nineties, when it was called The Factory – as a women-only area of the long-standing Mono bulletin board system (www.mono.org) before its formation on Livejournal. I left Mono in 2003 but missed the supportive atmosphere of the women's community, and in October 2005 I set up a Livejournal equivalent and spread the word among my friends. Most Livejournal communities have a short lifespan and few members, and I expected the Livejournal incarnation of The Ladies' Loos to be a small gathering of a few dozen friends and friends-of-friends. I was wrong: it proved wildly popular. Despite being advertised only by word of mouth and having a vouch-based membership policy which meant it was more difficult to join than the standard LJ community, over the next year it grew to over 700 members, only stopping there because memberships were closed for several months due to difficulties in moderating such a large and busy group. Memberships were opened again some months later and the community continued to grow. On the 12th of March 2007 it had 747 members; since the beginning of 2007 those members have made 1503 posts. The number of posts made in 2006 ran into the tens of thousands. In order to wrangle the crowds, the moderation team has grown from three at the outset to seven today.

Very early in the life of the community, a significant difference between the 90s-style Mono Loos and the Livejournal incarnation became apparent: the attitude to debate. Like the early writers about women on the net, and the members of the David Duchovny Estrogen Brigade, the Mono BBS Loos members thought of adversarial debate as an activity mostly engaged in by men. They regarded most of the internet as ridden with pointless testosterone-driven flame wars, and their community as a space safe from the “wanky” debate that characterised the rest of the board, where consensus and cooperation rather than argument could reign. In the community's new incarnation, it was immediately clear that debate was no longer thought of as a male preserve; quite the opposite. On the LJ Loos issues are hotly debated every day in threads running to

hundreds of comments. Though support is also given in generous measure, this is a very different place from the Mono Loos with its attitude that conflict is undesirable and also unfeminine. In fact, a frequently voiced opinion is that the debates and arguments are an inevitable result of putting so many women together. Between the heyday of the Mono Loos and now, people's underlying assumptions and generalisations about women and debate seem to have changed.

Huffaker and Calvert, in their study of female language patterns in blogs, had a similar impression of recent change. They expected young female bloggers' language use to reflect Robin Lakoff's findings of 1975. However, girls:

did not use more passive, cooperative, or accommodating language as Lakoff's work would suggest. One possible implication is that the language and the social interactions on the Internet are changing, perhaps because the participants are changing. That is, the latest wave of teenage females, at least female bloggers, may have different gender roles from those of earlier generations that Lakoff observed⁴⁸.

The wildfire spread of the word about the Loos, users' devotion to and investment in the community, and their behaviour within it once they're vouched in by a member, suggest to me that the community fulfils some hitherto unrecognised need in Internet-using women. Community members are keen to use it as a way of exploring how they perform their gender and relate to others of that gender. In early discussions about what we felt the community had done for us, many members expressed the opinion that to be a woman in computing or other "geeky" pursuits was to be estranged from the majority of womankind, and that the Loos was giving them the opportunity to examine and discuss what it meant to be a woman. This examination seems, broadly, to lead in three different directions.

For some Loos members, it has involved coming to terms with and learning to value femininity as it is commonly represented, as with the anonymous member who posted "In my womb lies hope for the future... I am beautiful, in all my shapes, forms and colours, inside and out"⁴⁹.

⁴⁸ Huffaker & Calvert, (2005: np).

⁴⁹ Anon, theladiesloos.livejournal.com, 28 January 2005. Accessed 13th March 2007.

For others it has involved integration of their gender with their lives and interests, where previously they had felt these things were somewhat at odds. motodraconis wrote that she was:

quite a blokey girl who's always found other women rather mystifying, and the fact that all my adult life has been in almost exclusively male-dominated fields wasn't exactly helping to solve that mystery so I joined this community to gain insight on my gender. It's rather good for that⁵⁰.

scy11a wrote, "[M]y experiences of girls (at work) is all about OK and Hello! magazines, what's happening in the soaps and planning their next trips to Lakeside shopping centre... But you guys all have so much more to say and share"⁵¹.

For this group of posters, two themes recur: first, that gender is not something that comes naturally but instead has to be consciously worked at – an idea I will return to when considering the men's community; second, that reaching an accommodation with one's gender is a healthy and rewarding experience that makes life run more smoothly. There is an implication that one must figure out where one fits into the gender map in order to be fully human.

For still others, however, experience of the community seems to have led to an increased chafing at the traditional bounds of gender and a realisation that the binary gender split is too simplistic – that gender is socially constructed and that there exists a multiplicity of possible interpretations. "I have no idea what it feels like to be 'a woman'," wrote meepettemu. "I just know what it feels like to be *me*. I have no idea what it feels like to be you, or what your experience of 'woman' is."⁵² "What IS it about you that makes you a woman?" the user chiller asked the community. "Popular consensus," responded j4⁵³.

My time as moderator of the Loos caused me to head in this last direction. The more the community grows, the more obvious it becomes that we no longer have anything which unites us all – not personality traits, shared experience or attitudes. Observing the life of the community, it is impossible to maintain essentialist views about how all women

⁵⁰ motodraconis, theladiesloos.livejournal.com, 11 March 2005. Accessed 13th March 2007.

⁵¹ scy11a, theladiesloos.livejournal.com, 11 March 2005. Accessed 13th March 2007.

⁵² meepettemu, theladiesloos.livejournal.com, 25 February 2005. Accessed 13th March 2007.

⁵³ j4, theladiesloos.livejournal.com, 28 January 2005. Accessed 13th March 2007.

think or behave. We are a motley collection of people who all happen to identify as women, in whatever way we interpret that for ourselves.

Another dramatic difference between the LJ Loos and the Mono Loos is in the area of attitudes to transsexuality. On Mono, biological essentialism reigned, rarely discussed or examined. Then a user transitioned from female to male. It was assumed that after the transition he would still want to be a Loos member; when he applied to join the men-only area, The Club, he was met with derision. The moderators declared, to general agreement, that as long as he had two X chromosomes he could never be a man. The situation was very different at the foundation of the LJ Loos. A month after the community started, a user asked if her transsexual friend could join⁵⁴. The many responses were unanimously in favour of admitting her and any other female-identified people, provided that they were living as women. There didn't seem to be any question whatsoever about the right course of action.

Now over to the Loos' opposite number, The Company of Men. This community was founded a few weeks after the LJ Loos began, by my then partner who disagreed with the exclusion of men from the Loos, fearing he was being discussed behind his back. Creating a men-only community was, as he saw it, a way of redressing the balance. There was a parodic, satirical quality to the community from the start, expressed even in its name, a reference to Neil LaBute's play in which several men conspire to brutalise a deaf woman.

Though advertised in a similar way to the Loos, with the same vouch-based joining mechanism, The Company Of Men didn't take off as the Loos had. On the 12th of March 2007 it had 74 members; between the start of 2007 and that date it had had 8 posts and in 2006 it had only 25 posts in total. Some of this lack of popularity could perhaps be attributed to an awareness within the immediate social group that the community was an act of jokey retaliation, not genuinely meant as a space for discussion, but I feel there is a stronger and more fundamental dynamic affecting the membership figures and posting rates.

⁵⁴ bopeepsheep, "Membership thoughts", theladiesloos.livejournal.com, 25th November 2004. Accessed 20th April 2007.

My partner expected me to be annoyed that there was a place on Livejournal I was excluded from, as he was excluded from the Loos. On the contrary, steeped in sociological theory about the crisis of British masculinity and the rampant confusion about what it actually means to be a man today, I was pleased that the men of my acquaintance had somewhere to discuss gender-specific issues and hoped the community might outgrow its original non-serious intent. However, when I earnestly explained this to male friends, their reactions were unexpected – and unexpectedly similar. They said they didn't feel the need for, or see the point of, discussions of masculinity. Most of those I asked about it seemed to feel that such exploration was either unnecessary or faintly taboo, whatever medium it was done through. "If you have to talk about it, you've already lost", one friend opined, albeit with tongue somewhat in cheek. This stands in stark contrast to the earlier quotes from Loos women who seemed happy to admit to a feeling that in some way they were doing gender wrong, and to say they were glad to have a safe space where they could work on figuring it out.

In her book *The Myth of Mars and Venus*, Deborah Cameron looks at research by Don Kulick on the training and support given to transsexuals during their transition. She describes how men transitioning to become women are offered voice, dress and behaviour classes to learn in detail what constitutes appropriate performance of gender, whereas women transitioning to be men are expected to work it out themselves. Kulick suggests that this is because "being a man is self-evident, whereas being a woman is a complex set of procedures with detailed and explicit instructions..."⁵⁵. In other words, men are still the default type of human being and women are still the Other, the gazed-at, the ones who are different. Women have to consciously work and strive towards achieving this Otherness, living up to the ideals of womanhood described by legions of male gazers over the centuries, whereas men can simply stay at the starting position; not accustomed to being examined the way women are, they don't feel that self-examination is relevant.

However, another interpretation is possible: that men and women are equally confused about gender, equally unsure whether they fit into the pigeonholes offered by society. The discrepancy springs from the fact that gender roles give women much more leeway to admit this confusion and seek solutions to it. Due to rigid and narrow expectations

⁵⁵ Cited in D. Cameron *The Myth of Mars and Venus*, Oxford University Press, 2007: 158.

that men be ‘red-blooded males’, admitting to any sort of gender confusion is still risky for men in many quarters.

The most striking difference between the Ladies’ Loos and The Company of Men is in the area of personal disclosure. Souls are routinely bared in the Loos and difficult personal issues are frequently discussed, from bisexuality to pregnancy (both hopes and scares) to domestic violence. In contrast, commentary on public posts in The Company of Men usually consists of long threads of witty repartee and playful insults between a few members, rather than engagement with the original issue. One currently public post stands out as different in tone, subject and communication style from all the rest. The user *addentry* describes seeing his childhood hero on the train and uses this as a jumping-off point to muse about hero worship of older boys and its similarity to “crushes”. He asks Company of Men members to tell him of their early “gay crushes”⁵⁶. The post is the only public one not to have received a single reply.

Similar threads on The Ladies’ Loos have racked up dozens of comments within hours. It may be that more disclosure happens in the private areas, but the post frequency is so low there that it doesn’t seem likely to be a significant amount. Instead, like some Loos members, Company of Men members seem to embrace stereotypes in a spirit of self-parody. References to breasts, fist fights and power tools abound. The flipside of the Loos attitude to conflict can be seen here: the stereotype The Company of Men embraces and/or parodies seems to be that men fight with their fists, while women fight with words. Worried about meeting his girlfriend’s ex, one member posts “Should I kick him in the nads?” In the conversation that follows, members offer advice on nads-kicking strategy, insinuate apropos of very little that the original poster wears dresses, and suggest “Tell him his boyfriend w*nks clowns”.

In summary, a more rigorous and quantitative investigation of the performance of gender on Livejournal seems called for, and I am investigating the possibility of carrying one out in future. However, my overall impression is that though LJ users’ essential ideas of what it means to be a man or a woman differ from those of Net users of the late 90s, and though awareness of transsexuality is higher than it was (thanks largely to Livejournal’s lively and vocal trans community), the gender binary is still the default interpretation, even when this conflicts with users’ life experience of more than

⁵⁶ *addentry*, thecompanyofmen.livejournal.com, 9 December 2005. Accessed 13th March 2007.

two genders. Also, there is an expectation that if a user includes gender representations in their online persona, these must not conflict with their real-life gender. On Livejournal, those who make a conscious effort to leave their gender behind or try a different one on for size are very much in the minority, and a distrusted minority at that. Other large social networking sites provide similar facilities for bringing physicality and gender into online life – notably Myspace, the music-heavy site popular with a young age group, which is well known for its strong emphasis on physical appearance and has spawned phrases like “Myspace hair” (carefully styled so it hangs diagonally over one eye).

However, in a handful of online places the old ideal of radical reinterpretation of gender still persists. The Barbelith message board at www.barbelith.com resembles the old text-based MOOs in its attitude to online persona creation. Its members do not use visual icons and the member profile pages are spare, allowing for only a few snippets of information, not including gender. The board even allows users to change their on-screen names once a month, which makes it more difficult for occasional visitors to work out who each user is. This encourages a small group of dedicated users and increases the emphasis on that old-school net ideal of “being known by your words alone”. In my thirteen-year experience of Internet communities, Barbelith is the place where gender issues are considered most rigorously and with the greatest awareness of their complexity. Neutral pronouns (like ‘ze’ and ‘hir’) are routinely used if the gender of someone being spoken about is in doubt, to avoid making assumptions. The core membership’s outlook on gender has a lot in common with and draws upon Judith Butler’s work on gender performativity and the socially constructed nature of gender. Members are encouraged to examine their received ideas about gender, as we see in the following exchange in a discussion about gender-neutral language. “And how do you identify as neither man nor woman, the odd hermaphrodite aside? A female who identifies as neither is still a female, presumably”, writes a user called Lawrence. One of the board’s most prolific posters, the user known as Tannhauser, or Haus for short (this is the core element of his changing usernames, which include ‘Tann Vennegoor of Hauserlink’, ‘Harmony Haus Captain’, and many other variations on the theme), responds with the palpable weariness of someone who has dealt with this query many times before:

Right. You very clearly are confusing sex and gender here... Which is fine.
Let’s go through slowly... *[He explains the difference between the concepts*

'man/woman' and 'male/female'.] Therefore, a *female* human being will generally be expected to identify as a *woman*. But a female human being who identifies neither as man or woman will, although female, not therefore necessarily be a *woman*. Is this genuinely a new concept?... Sex is hardwired, gender performative.⁵⁷

Barbelith is exceptional in this regard. It stays exceptional through conscious effort on the part of the regulars to keep the standard of discussion high. New arrivals often find Barbelith intimidating because of the regulars' uncompromising refusal to tolerate what they see as received ideas and unconscious prejudices. Meanwhile, regulars are determined not to let the board become the same as other message boards "out there", in the general mass of the Net where unclear thinking and knee-jerk debating styles reign.

What of Cybermind today? Though it lacks the intellectual fervour of its heyday, much as on Barbelith there is an atmosphere of a bastion of progressive thinking holding out against the seething mass of average Net-users. Some members have expressed distaste for the "uninteresting" explosion of social networking websites. A recent thread revealed that many Cybermind members still conduct their online lives via email-based technologies and avoid using the Web for communication⁵⁸. For those Net-users who question traditional ideas of gender and explore beyond them, the fact that the massive growth of the net has largely confirmed existing categories rather than freeing us from them may seem dispiriting. However, the growing awareness of other genders besides the binary among today's Livejournal users suggests that attitudes are changing, albeit more gradually than the Net pioneers predicted.

Conclusion

My return to researching gender online after ten years away has suggested many tempting possibilities for further study. A large-scale survey on Livejournal username choice is one; another is an investigation of men and women's attitudes to exploring their own gender online. All in all, writing this paper has raised far more questions than it has answered. However, some general trends emerge from the confusion of teeming websites and new communities.

⁵⁷ www.barbelith.com, thread title "Genderless/gender-neutral pronouns, 'he', 'she', 'them' and 'they', and broader gender issues in language", page 3. Retrieved 27th October 2006.

⁵⁸ Alan Sondheim, "Facebook, Second Life, Myspace...", Cybermind, 17th April 2007.

One easy observation is that the vast majority of Net users do not want to leave physicality and gender behind, as it was thought they might ten years ago. Instead, today's internet provides endless opportunities for considering how you perform your own gender and relate to others of your own gender, but for the most part the answers people are coming up with are not terribly adventurous or category-transgressing.

Women in particular seem to think of gender as the central fact of their personality. They seem to have a sense of "otherness" compared to men, though the otherness is conceptualised differently from that of ten years ago.

However, the idea that gender is complex and socially constructed seems to be creeping slowly into the public consciousness, as we can see from the growing awareness of transsexual and intersexed people, and the recognition of the differences between sex, gender and sexual orientation. Whether in the long run widespread Internet use will cause essentialist ideas and traditional gender roles to become further entrenched, or bring about change in the way we view gender, remains to be seen.

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