Don't be so sure he's the expert

Despite online skills pretty much the same as men's, women still rate themselves less capable.

By Melissa Healy, Times Staff Writer
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We're over that "boys are better than girls in math and science and here's why" debate, right? After all, the computer offers a whole new medium for academic and career skills. Its very newness should put men and women, boys and girls, back on an even footing when it comes to developing and assessing our skills and pursuing careers. Right?

Maybe not, says a new study appearing in the June issue of Social Science Quarterly.

In 2001 and 2002, Northwestern University sociologist Eszter Hargittai put 100 people of different ages, education levels and ethnicities through a test of online computer proficiency, and then asked her participants to rate their skill at navigating and harvesting information from the Internet. Fifty-one of the subjects were women; 49 were men.

Hargittai, who studies the social demographics of computer use, discerned a few expected patterns: that younger subjects and more-educated subjects had better online computer skills, and rated themselves as more proficient Internet users, than older ones or those with more limited education. But as she continued to sift her data, Hargittai noticed something she had not set out to find: that although the online skills of men and women were roughly equal, women, as a group, rated their proficiency significantly lower than did men. Men, who as a group were no more skilled at plying the Internet than women, rated their skills, on average, a couple notches above.

"Not a single woman among all our female study subjects called herself an 'expert' user, while not a single male ranked himself as a complete novice or 'not at all skilled,' " Hargittai noted. The study is the first to look at self-perceived online competence and its relationship to actual online ability, and Hargittai says she sees a replay of the he-versus-she math-and-science contest, in which women concede defeat even before an objective score has been tallied.

Hargittai went back earlier this year and tested and interviewed almost half of the subjects who participated in her 2001-02 study, after they had accumulated five more years of Internet use. Although men's and women's relative skill remained roughly equal to each other, five more years of experience had not changed men's higher regard for their own skills.

In the original study, Hargittai gave subjects a number of online assignments and then assessed their skill. The tasks included finding career or job information, accessing examples of children's art, locating tax forms, finding a car for purchase and listening to music online. The 2006 update asked participants to track down the medical definition of lactose intolerance and find recipes for someone suffering from the condition.

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Just as in the realms of math and science, where perceived gender differences appear to become self-fulfilling prophecies, she fears women's lower confidence levels with the Internet will put them at a disadvantage relative to men in the digital age.

"By underestimating their ability to effectively use the Web, women may be limiting the extent of their online behavior, the ways in which they use the Internet and, ultimately, the career choices they make," said Hargittai, assistant professor of communication studies at Northwestern University and co-author, with Princeton University researcher Steven Shafer, of the article titled "Differences in Actual and Perceived Online Skills: The Role of Gender."