

Viseu, Ana. (2000, March). Psychology.com: Demystifying the novelty of the internet interaction. *The Independent*, 23(24), 6.

[Patricia Wallace. (1999). *The psychology of the Internet*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press]

In the book *The psychology of the Internet* Patricia Wallace, a Professor at the university of Maryland, analyses human behavior in a variety of contexts that range from the all-familiar email, to synchronous or asynchronous, graphical or textual communication environments. The purpose of this survey is to highlight the specificities of online contexts, as well as the similarities between human behavior, online and offline. The result is an interesting and well-written book that offers an overall perspective on online behavior.

What makes this book so distinct from many others is the fact that for every phenomenon studied, from addiction to gender issues, a parallel is established between online and offline behavior. This premise is explicitly stated by the author who argues that “[e]ven though the Internet as a technology is a moving target, we humans behave predictably when dropped into certain kinds of environments”[1]. The link to everyday experience both demystifies the hype that everything is new on the Internet, and makes this book a good introduction for those who do not have much Internet experience. For those who do have some online experience this book provides an excellent overview of the research currently being conducted on online behavior.

In 1996, Reeves and Nass [2] published *The media equation*, in which they develop a similar argument which, I believe, validates Wallace’s approach. Reeves’ and Nass’

argue that media are social actors, hence, humans interact with media in the same way that they interact with one another. Although the rationale behind both claims is different, it overlaps in that both authors consider that the study of face-to-face human behavioral patterns is fairly indicative of the results of interaction in different contexts.

One of the recurring themes in this book is 'gender stereotypes'. How important is gender in an environment where nobody knows you are a dog? Well, apparently it is much more important than what could be expected. Wallace begins by stating that the "opposite sexes" metaphor is in itself a cultural stereotype that cannot be substantiated by empirical research. However, the author says, due to our tendency for cognitive miser [3] we are prone to look for first impressions and stereotypes, and are likely to maintain them. This affects online interaction in a number of ways, some more inoffensive than others. Consider, for example, the (supposed) female novice who gets more help than the male novice does. Or, situations where women are harshly criticized for using a dominant and assertive posting style, that is, for not behaving according to the conventional stereotypes. Or, the analysis of two professional mailing lists which shows that whenever women became unusually active in a previously male dominated discussion, men either avoided replying or diverted the subject focusing on a parallel issue. In other words, online behavior often perpetuates, rather than dissolves, traditional gender stereotypes.

*The psychology of the Internet* highlights the diversity of the online world without losing the connecting string to a more familiar experience: that of daily offline interaction. It covers a broad range of aspects, and does so with a clear writing style and exploratory character. However, if this is its main strength it is simultaneously its main weakness, for the ambition to cover such a broad scope makes it, at times, vague

and inconclusive. Nevertheless, I recommend this book to anyone interested in the social and cultural issues of the Internet.

[1] Wallace, 1999, p. 255.

[2] Reeves, B. & Nass, C. (1996). *The media equation: how people treat computers, television, and new media like real people and places*. Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications.

[3] Cognitive miser is a term coined by Susan Fiske and Shelley Taylor and refers to “our interest in conserving energy and reducing cognitive load” (Wallace, 1999, p. 19).

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