

*Attitudes towards Meeting in Real Life via the Internet in Japanese University
Students*

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Introduction

In recent years, a number of crimes regarding meeting in real life have been reported in Japan in which victims and perpetrators had previously met via the Internet.

According to National Police Agency (2010), 730 young people in Japan became involved in a dangerous situation or the victim of a crime because of getting to know someone online. Considering the recent increase in the use of smartphones and other forms of personal Internet access among youth, this rise in cases may be the result of expanding opportunities to communicate with others online. Recruit Shingakusouken (2013) investigated smartphone ownership among high school students and found that approximately 55% of students in Japan already used this technology for communicating with school friends and forming new relationships. Most students also reported that they had already communicated with strangers online.

One of the contributing factors to this complex issue is personal attitudes towards meetings via the Internet. Although many news reports have discussed the risk of crimes associated with meeting Internet acquaintances in real life in Japan, younger people are relatively more permissive and accepting of these meetings compared with other generations. Watanabe (2006) explored these beliefs among youth aged 15 to 17 years using a survey that included a question about whether meeting someone through the dating site is forbidden. While some youth were permissive and accepting, others mentioned that meeting using of dating site was bad and said that had never done so. Thus, attitudes toward meeting others via the Internet vary among individuals. Furthermore, such individual differences is crucial factor in predicting the meeting behaviors with Internet acquaintances in real life.

Purpose of the Present Study

The purpose of the present study was twofold: (1) to examine an actual prevalence of meeting Internet acquaintances offline in university students and the kinds of applications used by students who do so and (2) to develop a scale to measure attitudes toward meeting via the Internet.

Method

Two hundred and fifty-two university students (139 male and 113 female; average age = 19.68 years) in Japan participated in a questionnaire survey and completed a questionnaire consisting of 21 items related to attitudes towards meeting in real life people whom they knew only via the Internet. Students were also asked whether they had experienced meeting an online acquaintance in person. Those who reported this experience were asked which applications they used to get to know that person on communication online from options such as Facebook, Skype, and dating sites.

Results

Fifty-four students (21.4%) reported having met in real life someone they had met initially via the Internet. There were no sex differences in terms of these encounters (29 female and 25 male). Additionally, they met in real life after corresponding through Twitter (20.6%), SNS like Facebook and Mixi (17.6%), email (13.2%), free

phone applications like LINE and Kakao Talk, Skype (5.9%), bulletin board systems (BBSs; 4.4%) and others (27.2%). Only 1.2% had previously corresponded via a dating site before the real-life meeting.

An exploratory factor analysis using maximum-likelihood extraction with promax rotation was conducted for examining the structure of the scale consisting the 21 items.

In the result, five factors were extracted: (1) Interest in meeting via the Internet, (2) Convenience of online dating, (3) Risk awareness with meeting via the Internet, (4) Normative consciousness, (5) Anonymity of online dating. These cronbach's alphas ranged between .67 and .83. Arithmetic mean and standard deviations of these five factors and relationships among them were shown at Table1.

An independent t-test was also conducted to compare scores on the above five factors between students who had met in real life people whom knew only via the Internet (n = 54) and students who had not experienced these meeting (n = 198). Results showed that scores for "interest in meeting via the Internet" was higher in students who had met such people than in students who did not. At the same time, scores for "risk awareness for meeting via the Internet", "normative consciousness" and "convenience online dating" were low for students who had such meetings. Scores for "anonymity of online dating" did not differ between the two groups. These results were shown at

Table2.

Table 1 Means, standard deviations, and relationships among attitudes towards meeting via the Internet

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	2	3	4	5
1. Interest in meeting via the internet	2.54	1.05	.27**	-.20**	-.30**	.26**
2. Convenience of online dating	2.26	0.93		-.06	-.11	.34**
3. Risk awareness with meeting in real life	3.93	0.71			.40**	-.02
4. Normative consciousness	2.88	0.86				-.03
5. Anonymity of online dating	2.99	0.87				

***p* < .01

Table 2 Means (standard deviations) and results of t-test replication for the attitudes

	Having experience	No experience	<i>t</i> -value	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Interest in meeting via the internet	3.48 (0.80)	2.28 (0.95)	8.44 **	.47
Convenience of online dating	2.02 (0.95)	2.32 (0.92)	2.12 *	.13
Risk awareness with meeting in real life	3.75 (0.77)	3.97 (0.68)	2.13 *	.13
Normative consciousness	2.45 (3.56)	2.99 (3.44)	4.22 **	.26
Anonymity of online dating	2.94 (3.24)	3.01 (3.27)	0.45 <i>n.s.</i>	.03

** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Discussion

In the present study, we sought to understand the prevalence of meeting in real life people known via the Internet and found that about one out of every five students has ever experienced this type of meeting. Interestingly, most students did not use dating sites to meet others, even though these sites have the objective of providing matchmaking services to users. Instead, most students has the experience after communication using relativity familiar applications in daily life such as Twitter and SNS. These findings demonstrated that meeting in real life people known only via the Internet may happen to anyone using of the popular methods.

We also extracted five attitudes regarding meeting via the Internet as background factors related to meeting online acquaintances offline. T-tests revealed that persons who engaged in offline meeting were more interested in meeting people via the Internet. Meanwhile, people who had not done so previously had risk awareness and normative consciousness towards developing a relationship via the Internet, and found meeting via the Internet more useful for making new relationship than people who had the experience. These findings show that risk awareness, normative consciousness, and convenience of online dating were key determinants of whether individuals met others via the Internet. Convenience of online dating includes literacy for the meeting. Therefore, perceiving online dating as more convenient may work as a deterrent against meeting others via the Internet.

This study provides new findings and fundamental information regarding meeting Internet acquaintances offline in Japan. Two limitations of our study deserve consideration in future research. First, our sample consisted of university students in a specific area. Future studies should collect data from students from a broader range of countries as well as from different educational school stages for determining the generalizability of our findings. Second, the scale we used regarding attitudes towards meeting online acquaintances offline seems to be divided into cognitive and affective

components. Although interest in meeting via the Internet can be considered an affective element, other emotions such as guilt and anxiety may be importance. In future studies, we may have to revise the affective component of our scale to include items measuring such emotions.

References

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