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Communicating in an IT Environment
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Literature review:
The role of gender in the use of Social Networking Sites

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1 Introduction

This literature review explores the role of gender and its effects relating to personal Social Networking Site (SNS) use. Men are generally regarded as earlier adopters of technology compared to women which is evident in findings by Pitkow and Recker (1994, p. 1), where 95% of Internet users were men. Kimbrough, Guadagno, Muscanell, and Dill (2013, p. 896) reiterate the view by declaring that during the first half of the 1990's, the Internet "was mostly regarded as a technological boy's toy".

Research by Fogel and Nehmad (2009) demonstrates that men are also earlier adopters of SNS, finding that more men had established SNS accounts before women. However, the trend has shifted, with recent reports indicating that women now represent the majority of SNS users compared to men (Duggan & Brenner, 2013; Hampton & Goulet, 2011).

As the Internet user gender gap disappears, it is more important than ever to understand the differences between genders and its effects relating to personal SNS use, so that current social networking sites and social networking sites of the future are able to service, and attract both men and women equally. This literature review will explore those differences as expressed in the body of current research literature, by analysing the role of gender in SNS use.

2 Literature Review

Fallows (2005) compared American male and female Internet users and found that men were more likely to use the Internet in general for information gathering purposes, while women were more likely to use the Internet for social applications to maintain current relationships. According to the literature in this review, this statement also translates to the use of SNS such as Facebook.

2.1 Social gender role theory and gender motivations

Eagly's (1987) theory of social gender roles introduces a framework to explain differences in gender, regardless of being online or offline, which underpins many cyberpsychology studies (Hum et al., 2011; Kimbrough et al., 2013; Tifferet & Vilnai-Yavetz, 2014). This theory characterizes men as "*agentic* providers" and women as "*communal* caregivers" (Hum et al., 2011, p. 1830). In other words, according to this theory, men tend to develop traits which lend to task-based activities, while women tend to develop traits which lend to social interactions. The theory of social gender roles is one of many frameworks used to explain the differences between gender in SNS and Internet use, which is evident in Fallows's (2005) generalisation that men use the Internet for information gathering purposes, and women use the Internet for social activities.

2.2 Male gender role and motivations

Widely cited research by Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008) was among the first to examine the impact of SNS on college students and observed that men, compared to women, were more likely to use SNS to find out about events, indicating that men spend more time than women performing information-gathering activities on SNS.

In support of this view, Choi and Kim (2014, p. 2) hypothesise that men have higher positive attitudes towards SNS advertising than women, as men are more likely to perceive such advertising as "useful information" due to their "information-oriented motivation". The presented evidence supports Eagly's (1987) social gender theory. On the other hand, Park, Kee, and Valenzuela (2009) argues by claiming that women were more likely to use Facebook Groups for obtaining information. However, this study only examines the use of Facebook *Groups* and not Facebook as a whole.

In comparison to women using SNS as a medium to maintain existing relationships, men have been found to use SNS as a tool for creating new relationships and expanding their networks (Mazman & Usluel, 2011). This view is supported by findings in research by Muscanell and Guadagno (2012), Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008) and Haferkamp, Eimler, Papadakis, and Kruck (2012), which illustrates that men are more likely to use SNS for dating purposes than women. These findings reiterate a difference in motivation of SNS use between genders.

2.3   Female gender role and motivations

In contrast, Mazman and Usluel (2011) and Muscanell and Guadagno (2012) both assert that women are more likely to seek out old friends on the network, and are more likely to utilise SNS communication tools to maintain existing relationships. To support this statement, Joiner et al. (2014) provides evidence that women are more likely to demonstrate higher emotional support in response to a friend's negative Facebook status update. Women are also twice as likely to respond publicly to a negative status update when compared to men (Joiner et al., 2014, p. 167). These statements lend to the hypothesis that women use SNS as a tool for relationship maintenance more than men, which align with Eagly's (1987) theory of social gender roles.

As the female gender role is more concerned with socialising than men, it could be assumed that women would have more friends within their SNS network. Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008) and Fogel and Nehmad (2009) found the contrary, demonstrating that men had more friends than women, which could support the theory that men use SNS to expand their networks more than women. Nevertheless, more recent research by McAndrew and Jeong (2012) found that women have more friends than men. The contradiction in findings could be due to the difference in time frames in which these studies occurred, and as Fallows (2005) suggest, women have since caught up to men in Internet connectedness. However, according to Tifferet and Vilnai-Yavetz (2014, p. 389), there are many studies that have conflicting conclusions relating to gender and network size, which warrants further investigation.

2.4   Limitations and challenges

It is worth noting that studies by Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008), Muscanell and Guadagno (2012) and Joiner et al. (2014) were limited to participants from a single American college comprised of first-year undergraduate students who provided self-reported estimates. Studies based on observed data have the potential to increase research reliability and enhance conclusive results when compared to studies based on self-reported estimates.

Interestingly, Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008) and Joiner et al. (2014) gathered data from respondents via paper questionnaires, as opposed to Mazman and Usluel's (2011) and Muscanell and Guadagno's (2012) online questionnaire method. Online questionnaires, while providing convenience and ability to reach a far greater number of participants compared to paper questionnaires, have the potential to skew results towards users who may spend more time online, possibly use SNS more, and have higher competency in SNS use, compared to those who spend less time online (Hargittai, 2007, p. 280).

Competency in SNS use, classed within "Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) Competency" measures by Ross et al. (2009, p. 579), was a variable largely ignored in most of the research within the scope of this review, which could "influence how much people use social networking sites" (Kimbrough et al., 2013, p. 898). Without the measurement of CMC competency, it is only assumed that all participants of such studies are equally skilled in the use and application of SNS, which certainly may not be the case, as Ross et al. (2009) suggests.

Haferkamp et al.'s (2012) study was based on randomly selected users from StudiVZ (2014), a German SNS for students. At the time of research in 2010, the majority of StudiVZ profiles were public and "used without privacy settings" (Haferkamp et al., 2012, p. 92), which allowed the study of observed data from participant profiles, together with self-reported online questionnaire results. Although Haferkamp et al.'s (2012) research utilized observed data from respondents from another country while using a completely unique SNS, the results were consistent with most of the literature in this review.

3   Conclusion

Kimbrough et al. (2013, p. 897) succinctly pointed out that while users have the ability to choose to behave in any way they wish online, men and women still conform to behaviour that is consistent with "social role expectations" from the offline world. This literature review has explored the differences between genders in the use of SNS, and has identified key differences in user motivation.

Studies have shown that men are more likely to perform information-based activities on SNS than women, which align with the social gender role framework introduced by Eagly (1987). Men are also more open to expanding their networks and use SNS as a tool to create new relationships, and more frequently use SNS as a dating platform than women.

Women on the other hand, have been found to use SNS to maintain current relationships, and are more likely to provide emotional support to their friends on SNS than men. Women are attracted to the socialising aspect of SNS, and recent studies have shown that women have a larger social network than men.

However, gender and its relation to SNS network size has been found to be a topic of debate. As indicated by Tifferet and Vilnai-Yavetz (2014), studies have reported conflicting results and require further investigation. The exploration of this domain will become the basis of subsequent analysis from this researcher.

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