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Literature review:
Factors and attitudes that shape personal use of social media

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1 Introduction

This literature review focuses on research which examine the demographic differences relating to SNS use, with particular attention to the role of gender. Men are generally regarded as earlier adopters of technology compared to women. This is evident in findings by [Pitkow and Recker \(1994\)](#), where 95% of Internet users were men, while [Kimbrough, Guadagno, Muscanell, and Dill \(2013, p. 896\)](#) declares 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 vanishes, it is more important than ever to understand the differences between genders and its effects relating to personal SNS use, so that current social network sites and social network sites of the future are able to service 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: Gender roles in SNS use

[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 online or offline behaviour, which underpins many cyber-psychology 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 can be used to explain the differences between gender in SNS use, such as [Fallows's \(2005\)](#) generalisation that men use the Internet for information gathering purposes, and women use the Internet for social applications.

2.1.1 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 \(2014, p. 2\)](#) state 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”. Such 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 iterate a difference in motivation of SNS use between genders.

2.1.2 Female gender role and motivations

In contrast, Mazman and Usluel (2011) and Muscanell and Guadagno (2012) both assert that women were 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 notion that women use SNS as a tool for relationship maintenance more than men. The evidence presents a difference in motivations of SNS use between genders which align with Eagly’s (1987) theory of gender social roles, as cited by Kimbrough et al. (2013).

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. Nevertheless, more recent research by McAndrew and Jeong (2012) has found that women have more friends than men. The contradiction in findings could be due to the time frames in which these studies occurred, and as Fallows (2005) suggest, women have since caught up to men in Internet connectedness.

2.2 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 lead to an increase in research reliability and more conclusive results than 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, which can provide convenience and 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, otherwise classed as “Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) Competency” 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.

Choi and Kim’s (2014) research provides a unique perspective in the role of gender in Facebook use, comparing the relationship of self-presentation on brand-related word-of-mouth and gender’s moderating effects. According to Choi and Kim (2014), only a small amount of research has been completed in the area of brand-related word-of-mouth on SNS. However, this study was limited to participants from the same country, providing self-reported estimates. The study was also limited to respondents within the ages of nineteen to thirty-nine, as Choi and Kim (2014, p. 3) claims that age bracket represented the “primary Facebook user population”.

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

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 generally more predisposed than men to provide emotional support to their friends. Women are attracted to the socialising aspect of SNS, and recent studies have shown that women have a larger social network than men. These key differences are also consistent with social gender theory.

All but one study within the scope of this review used self-reported data from their respondents. Haferkamp et al.’s (2012) research included observed data, and although the results were consistent with findings from other studies, there is insufficient literature within this review to conclude that self-reported data and observed data will yield similar results. There are opportunities to conduct further research based on observed data, however questions regarding user privacy would have to be raised, with the amount of personal information available on SNS.

CMC competency as a variable was not found in any of the studies relating to

gender in this review. Ross et al. (2009) measured CMC competency, however the research focused on the effect of personality on SNS users and did not exhibit any correlations between gender.

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 identified some motivational differences in the use of SNS and mapped them to gender role expectations with the aim of better understanding the differences between genders in SNS use.

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