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Research Paper:
Facebook User Psychology

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1 Abstract

2 Introduction

This research paper explores the role of gender and its effects relating to personal Facebook use. Facebook is one of today's leading Social Networking Sites (SNS) and the company reports that as of June 2014, their network serves 1.32 billion users per month (Facebook, 2014). Independent studies have also shown that SNS users were more likely to be using Facebook than any other SNS site (Hampton & Goulet, 2011; Hargittai, 2007; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). As Facebook expanded registration to users outside educational and professional institutions in September 2006 (Facebook, 2014), users were quick to adopt the technology at a fast paced rate (Mazman & Usluel, 2011). This adoption rate has triggered a multitude of scientific research "from widely different fields of inquiry", attempting to explain the phenomenon of Facebook (Caers et al., 2013, p. 983).

Differences in gender is a facet of SNS use that has been investigated by many researchers (Fallows, 2005; Haferkamp, Eimler, Papadakis, & Kruck, 2012; Hargittai, 2007; Joiner et al., 2014; Kimbrough, Guadagno, Muscanell, & Dill, 2013; Mathiyalakan, Heilman, & White, 2014; Mazman & Usluel, 2011). Men have been generally regarded as earlier adopters of technology compared to women, and the adoption of SNS such as Facebook has been no different. Pitkow and Recker's (1994) study showed that during the mid 1990's, 95% of Internet users were men, while research by Fogel and Nehmad (2009) demonstrates that men are also earlier adopters of SNS, finding that more men had established 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).

Eagly's (1987) theory of social gender roles introduces a framework to explain differences in gender, 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.

3 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.

3.1 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 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 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.

3.2 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 et al. (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.

3.3 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.

3.4 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.

4 Research questions and thesis statements

5 Data analysis and interpretation

6 Conclusion

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