
The Role of Gender on Social Network Websites

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Produced in Mary Tripp's Fall 2012 ENC 1102

In the last decade, social network websites (denoted throughout the paper as “SNWs”), such as Facebook and MySpace, have become booming sources of communication that strengthen peoples’ existing offline relationships. Many of our interpersonal needs such as trust, empathy, and support are satisfied through these media. When a user goes to make a profile for a specific SNW, he/she does it in a way that will connect him/her to whomever that user wishes. Modern research on this topic is hardly concrete, but it reveals the kinds of people and interests that are involved with SNWs (boyd and Ellison 129, Cardon et al. 56, Hargittai 285). It indicates different uses and perceptions between genders but does not include the *specific kinds of language* their users articulate compared to other electronic forms of communication, such as e-mail (Parks and Robertson 234, Gefen and Straub 392). Thus, the prior research fails to look at the prevalence of gender-marked language and gender-marked attitudes within SNWs compared to their uses elsewhere.

Men and Women as Two Different People

Men use considerably more gender-marked language than women, who prefer inclusive connotation. It is also asserted that this sexist language reinforces the superiority of men in our society (Parks and Robertson 233). This discovery about attitudes toward sexist language is best explained by one’s attitudes towards women (238). Gender is socially constructed in human interaction (Holmes and Meyerhoff 180), so with a considerable amount of users spending hours a day on these websites, how much does the interaction affect language related to gender?

Gender roles on SNWs mirror the expectations of the societies the users represent, since it has been a historically accepted idea that language and culture have a reciprocal relationship and constantly influence each other (Whorf 156). Gefen and Straub’s study on gender-marked language on electronic forms of communication says just that, but it is not enough to outright confirm the idea because it would be precarious to assume that a study on a function of the World Wide Web from 16 years ago is entirely relevant to SNWs today. Other studies reveal more about differences in gender on SNWs. For example, females are more interested than males in the status of others and in keeping tabs of activity of the people their connected with. In short, women try to look their best by comparing themselves to others, while men do not put other users’ thoughts and beliefs into consideration and do what they can to be dominant and competitive (Parks and Robertson 234; Gefen and Straub 392; McAndrew and Jeong 2364).

These prominent characteristics of gender separation can best be attributed back to childhood. An analysis on childhood interaction in *Subculture and Language* describes that boys grow up using priority to get their way, while girls use mitigating strategies and harmony to solve problems (Coates 2). As children, boys and girls grow up in same-sex groups and practically same-sex cultures (Gefen and Straub 392). We identify gender roles at a young age, and undoubtedly the characteristics unique to gender at those times have an impact on how we see gender roles as

adults. Like any community of practice (CofP), the first understanding of the concept of gender and gender roles through interaction has an effect on how one would perceive those same concepts in the future (Holmes and Meyerhoff 174).

As the stark majority of SNW users, young adults have worldly views that are more integrated with their elders' point of views, rather than from their views as children. Therefore, the types of attitudes and specific gender wording would be similar to adults in our society on those websites. Regardless, it is perplexing to understand just how much gender-marked language on SNWs reflects the user's views on sexism. In order to do that, it is essential to understand the people involved and their reasons for using SNWs in the first place.

Uses and Purposes of Social Network Websites

Implied by the aforementioned gender research, offline identities very much carry over to online behavior (Hargittai 277). For this reason, impression management enables one to construct a profile around their interests (and essentially who that person is), which is vital for maintaining the existing, offline relationships, and is the most important factor for using a social network. In fact, impression management is so important that sometimes users will misrepresent themselves, such as changing a profile picture to a celebrity or promoting others' perception of oneself. People in this user's social ties still identify the user yet now associate the characteristics of the picture with that user, and the perception of that user actually changes slightly in that regard. Thus, SNWs are primarily organized around people, not interests (boyd and Ellison 219).

The social network is represented as the social ties of the individual, and with 2/3 of the SNW population aged 14-24, establishing an identity is essential. Public features such as profiles, where the user gets to describe his/her interests and create their own theoretical framework of who they are, rather than a desired personality, make using these websites very attractive (boyd 123).

Despite being thought to have harmful effects such as distraction, loss of reality and social disability on the individual users, greater use of SNWs tends to lead to greater personal contentment, trust, and participation in civic and political activities among college students (Valenzuela, Park and Kee 893). Today teens face an open public life with the "possibility of unimaginably wide publicity" and it appears that all teens are unabashed by that idea (boyd 137). The only apparent limitation of what one has to say on these websites is credited to parents, since usually their original intents of using these websites are to monitor the behavior of their teenagers (Cheung qtd. in McAndrew and Jeong 2360). All of these factors facilitate the kinds of language recorded on SNWs; therefore, it is vital to look at the current implications of the boundless online public.

Social and Language Change from Online Media

Since the Internet can accomplish so many more tasks today than in the past, it is easy to assume that both a medium's capabilities and its content can influence a user's behaviors and attitudes (Valenzuela, Park, and Kee 894). But to what degree? Surely, the rise in SNWs could indicate a shift in society's norms for language and expectations of language. Freer speech and looser online restrictions could provoke more self-confidence, higher-level thinking, and increased offline social ties (Valenzuela, Park, and Kee 894; Cardon 55). Regardless, women and men communicate rather differently, and their perceptions and uses differ greatly through electronic forms of discourse (Gefen and Straub 393). In fact, just adapting to this electronic form of discourse renders a great difference between women and men. The "computer culture" was at first difficult for females to keep up with (Frankel qtd. in Gefen and Straub 393), yet now even as women are catching up to men with proficiency in use of technology, their uses continue to differ (Hargittai 278).

With the world changing at such a rapid pace, we must look at how these sites may contribute to language change in our evolving society. Social network relations are regarded as a principle vehicle of language change, so one could assume that the teen interaction on these sites could have a dramatic impact on the kinds of language we use offline and in the future (Paolillo, par. 2). While the connection between language and culture opens up this possibility, the long-term effects of interaction on SNWs are unknown. Language changes every day, and this paper will seek to discover how much of an impact SNWs have on changing the language—particularly gender-marked language—and how attitudes regarding gender are perceived compared to other forms of communication. Ultimately, the data collected could lead to a better understanding of our changing, technological world. It is certain that teenagers' social lives are changing rapidly to a point where no scholar can credibly predict where they are headed (boyd 138).

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After reviewing the aforementioned articles regarding this topic of conversation, the discovery upon how this study could add to the academic conversation was made. There is a gap in the research, particularly with the effects of the language and rhetoric of these websites, and through conducting primary research, that answer has been effectively sought out. By investigating the specific language of posts on SNWs and interviewing their users on these linguistic issues, there can be new discoveries or credibility given to the previous studies on this topic. Specifically, the purpose of the primary research is to explain the kinds of *gender-marked language and attitudes* on SNWs in comparison to other electronic forms of communication.

From the SNW entries that have been collected, the role that gender plays today should be better outlined and it will become clearer how its language is changing. Naturally, as people become more familiar with a medium's capabilities, they tend to become and perceive themselves as more comfortable. Users will tend to represent themselves on these websites more with "cool" rhetoric, even if it is exaggerated or false (boyd 129). With an open forum and freedom to say just about anything on something like Twitter, it is obvious that users, especially teenagers, will be more inclined to present themselves in a way where they hold themselves above who they really are.

Methodology

The study was conducted using two methods of instrumentation. For a two week period, posts were collected off of three popular SNWs (Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram) from 16 heavily active users (Male subjects A-H, Female subjects A-H) that were selected by randomization. With this data, key words and language that inhibit gender roles and gender-marked attitudes on these posts were analyzed. If a selected user regularly updates more than one of the chosen SNWs, their data from all of the websites these individuals post on were used. For example, Female Subject A is a popular user of Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, and her posts for these two weeks will be taken from all three of the websites.

There are two things that are interesting to note about the study. First, while we know that the majority of the ages of the users fall in between 16-21 (Cardon 56), Male Subjects D/G are well into their adulthood and will be used to compare the language of interest as a measure of how gender roles evolve with age. Also, a final website, MySpace, an older SNW, is vital to take into account because it can be used as a measuring stick of how social media has evolved over the last five years. Therefore, a male and female (subjects I and J) were also chosen for retrospective research from a previously popular SNW.

Throughout the period of observation, the second mode of experimentation took place, which consisted of sending out a brief interview questionnaire regarding the issues of gender-marked language and sexism. It will be crucial to find a link between the two different modes of instrumentation. If the users are truly aware of the issues and what they post online, then there should be a strong link between the two. Although honesty is not the essence of my research, it will be able to prove how realistic and truthful individuals act online, compared to offline forms of communication. Subjects A-H received three (3) questions, which are listed below, on their favorite SNW:

- Do you believe gender roles in society have larger/smaller importance today than in the past?
- Can social network websites change the perceptions we have and language we use on the outside world?
- Do you think people are more or less sensitive to gender-marked language on social network websites? Does it have an effect on what you post?

Findings

Overview of Data

While there were few clear cases of sexism and gender roles, particularly on Instagram, it seems that there is quite an inclusive, non-gender connotation on these websites. For example, while Male Subject E posted a picture on Instagram of himself inside a nice car full of money, there was no use of rhetoric implying it, yet it appears it is dominance over everybody versus exclusively females. This means that Male Subject E acted as expected but never had any specific language targeted towards it. He pacified the reasons for blatant sexist posts on SNWs, which he claimed, "People are less sensitive to sexism on social network websites. There are many accounts that are made to make jokes about sexism, but they usually aren't hurtful, only joking."

Identity, SNW used	Gender-Marked Post(s)	Key answer	Observations/comments
Female Subject A Twitter, Facebook, Instagram	Twitter: Bill Clinton should of brought Monica, then we'd all be warm Nawwwwmeannnnn?! (10/29)	"Although we live in a masculine society today, we are starting to see the balance of responsibilities; gender is no longer a determining factor."	Female users can confidently make sex jokes while still maintaining social standing as an equal. Users would not have regarded the joke any different had it been a male telling it.
Female Subject C Twitter, Facebook, Instagram	Twitter: Every time I wake up from a nap I just want to cry and go back to sleep (11/7)	"I feel that more and more is expected for women... to have careers but they are also supposed to handle being a full time mother, keeping up with looks, and clean the house along with their careers."	We would expect a female to post something such as that, and the answer solidifies the idea that gender roles still exist.
Female Subject E Twitter, Instagram	Instagram: Multiple pictures of herself with added beauty and promiscuity effects	"I don't usually post sexist posts but when I do they are out of humor and nothing offensive."	Gender-marked language was not evident in any posts; her pictures strengthens the notion that impression

			management matters most
Male Subject E Facebook, Instagram	Facebook: don't get mad at your girl for getting with your friends ! Get mad at yourself for going for girl that would get with your friends	“People are less sensitive to sexism on social network websites. There are many accounts that are made to make jokes about sexism, but they usually aren't hurtful, only joking.”	Agrees that males strive for dominance over his connected users; his posts were not sexist; however, he had the most posts (7) related to gender roles and/or gender-marked language
Male Subject G Facebook	None	“As one becomes aware of other's perspectives, out of respect and empathy, comments and responses to posts are done accordingly.”	One of the two subjects who are not in the range of 16-21; as an older user, there was no incidence of offensive language, especially referring to gender; made no distinction between genders in posts
Male Subject I MySpace (Posts dated from 2007)	MySpace: None	N/A	It is evident that five years ago, users were less open to even speaking of sexism, let alone joking about it. The rhetoric we use today on SNWs was not developed at the time and thus sexism is more subdued on MySpace.

Table 1: Sample posts and answers (to view all gender-marked postings and interview answers, see Appendices A and B)

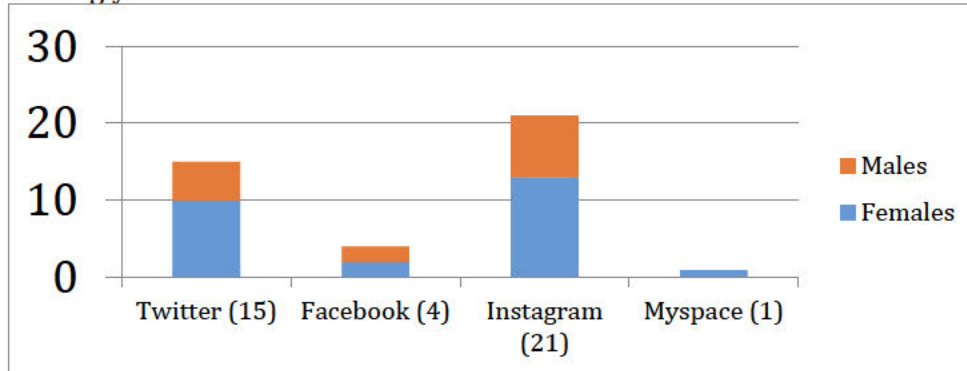
Attitudes toward Gender Roles

Users did not intend to spend their time taking gender roles into account when interacting with the opposite sex online. Whereas in face-to-face interaction, it is clear that a female can be just as influential nowadays because of these websites. Female A agreed to this idea, as she said, “Although we live in a masculine society today, we are starting to see the balance of responsibilities; gender is no longer a determining factor.” Gender roles from past generations have become nearly nonexistent and all across the board, the subjects agreed that in these changing times, women have more responsibility and are expected to do more, and with that comes a sense of respect and gratitude. Female C believes that there is “a different kind of sexism than there used to be.” Of course, there are expectations for both males and females, but it is obvious that from “being a full time mother, keeping up with looks, and [cleaning] the house along with their careers,” women are expected to do more today than ever in our society.

Social Networks Data

Overall, there is a minimal use of gender-marked language on Internet social media. As shown in Graph 1, over 50% of the gender-marked language came from just one source, Instagram, where users can strictly post and comment on pictures. Its immense popularity with teenagers, due to its closer sense of community, brings out the best of gender roles. While there is no written gender-marked language, we can apply language to pictures, where the subtleties of gender expectations are seen vastly in both males and females. Twitter, where posts are limited to 140 characters to those “following” the user, had about 1/3 of the gender-marked posts. Contrary to predictions, Facebook had little gender-marked language, most likely due to its unlimited access to

most pages and the wider range of users connected on the website. As mentioned, males and females perceive and use the Internet differently, so it is no surprise that females accounted for 25 incidents of gender-marked language, while males accounted for just 16. Lastly, the two older subjects (Male D and Male G) had no gender-marked posts, as Male G felt that, “As one becomes aware of other’s perspectives, out of respect and empathy, comments and responses to posts are done accordingly.”



Graph 1: Gender-marked language appearances of various SNWs

Evolution of Online Rhetoric

It turns out that gender roles on SNWs really come down to be what’s expected for that particular individual. Students, parents, celebrities, and athletes alike have a sense of belonging on these sites, and interests are so varied that would be hard to judge or to be condescending towards

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a belief that is different from one’s own. For the most part, there is a “collective consciousness,” or an unspoken set of principles and ideals on these sites that the majority of its members agree with. There were many answers about feeling comfortable reading offensive posts; however, if there was a truly sexist post in these websites for malicious intent, the users in this “collective consciousness” would be against it, regardless of their views (Ghatneker, par. 4). Just like in the real world, on SNWs users are doing what is considered acceptable and what entertains people within our social circles (par 8) As Female G puts it, “It’s the ‘trend’ to be accepting and if one is close minded on a social network they are often shunned.” The collective mind holds such a strong presence that even Male D admitted, “I’d be more likely to post

something slanderous if I knew only a certain audience viewed it.”

Conclusion

Users’ interests are changing so rapidly that we cannot predict what they are going to look like in five years, much less could not have predicted that it would look like this today. Social media posts are good indicators of the kinds of language and ideological shifts that society has. Female C pointed out, “Celebrities and presidential candidates are always trying to get their messages across on these websites, and even people can use them as ways to organize protests.” These online media reinforce the ideals and morals of people and when studied thoroughly, can tell one a lot about the kinds of people using them. Social media connects users to become more aware of global as well and Female G agreed by stating “social networking can definitely change the perspectives of many towards the outside world.”

The social hierarchy that regulates “coolness” online is the one present offline, and over time has caused users to be more apt to socialness online, rather than in person, by constructing more of their time to boost their popularity online through various strategies (boyd 129). Therefore, there is always pressure to maintain social status on these websites, which in turn, affects what the users post. Therefore, one would expect there to be a great deal of dominance and individualism from males, and a lot of support and collectivism from females on these websites, but there was not. We again credit this finding to the “collective consciousness” that dawns on the users because they know they cannot post whatever they wish. This is suggested by Female C, who stated confidently, “I still be careful what I post. I don’t talk to sexist people on here and even if I did I don’t think they would post how they truly felt.”

While I discovered the gender inclusiveness on these websites, my study only scratches the surface of a wide open field of research on language evolution due to online discourse, as it merely makes sense of the language on these websites and how teenagers use them. During my primary research, I came upon two repercussions that stem from users abusing the resources—the creation of fake accounts and cyberbullying. Both of these issues have caused major dilemmas for years and many researchers and advocates have attempted to stifle these problems on the limitless web. Users have the freedom to say anything, and with malicious intent, have caused thousands of cases of depression and suicide as a result. Another major caution with these websites is their immense ability to connect users instantly from anywhere in the world. The infamous “Arab Spring,” which is still taking place, provides noteworthy evidence for just how powerful SNWs really are. Facebook became an outlet for many Middle Eastern countries to organize protests to overthrow their governments, thus proving that with the increased access to technology and SNWs, citizens from all walks of life have the power to do just about anything.

For now, these issues are left unresolved and it is doubtful this research in that area would help terminate the issue. Further research should look more towards the change and long-term effects of these websites. Generally, these media are accepted and praised for their outstanding abilities to handle mass communication, yet there are always times when these websites get used for the wrong intentions. As they become integrated as a norm for modern and future communication, we must remember that there are implications for overusing them. The academic conversation should not stop at just what SNWs are capable of, but what the users are capable of doing on them.

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Appendix A: Interviews

Only 8 of the 16 subjects gave interviews, which were held on their most commonly used SNW.

- a. Do you believe gender roles in society have larger/smaller importance today than in the past?
- b. How much can social network websites change the perceptions we have and language we use on the outside world?
- c. Do you think people are more or less sensitive to sexism and gender-like attitudes on social network websites? Does it have an effect on what you post?

Female A

a. I believe gender roles have a smaller importance in today's society than they do the past. In the past certain activities and behaviors were only seen (and expected) from each gender. Ex: the male is the bread winner, the only one in the household bringing home the income and the female was expected, to cook and clean and teach their children how to behave in their expected gender role. In the late 60's early 70's we see the feminist movements coming to life, and the roles of the genders beginning to slowly change. Women were in the work force now, they were competing with men and now some of the men were the care takers of the home. Although we live in a masculine society today, we are starting to see the balance of responsibilities, gender is no longer a determining factor.

b. Social networks have drastically changed are world. I personally think they can be used for good, but most of the time they spread large amounts of ignorance and "we don't cares". One thing social networks have allowed is for the use of freedom of speech. They have also given a sense of "family" to activist groups and causes. It's changed our perceptions to believe that we must let everyone know what we are doing, when we are doing and it, and how. It's taken away privacy in my opinion. It's changed language, adding more slang.

c. I think people are generally less sensitive to sexism and other problems of ignorance on these websites. They are meant for positive, healthy communication and when those kinds of posts come about I think people just regard them as jokes, but if it's actually insulting people won't have it. I don't mind posting jokes like that since most people really don't care, but I would never mean it.

Female C

a. I think there is sexism in society today, but almost a different kind of sexism than there use to be. I think it's less of women are supposed to say home with the children and not have careers but more of the idea that women are supposed to handle careers and the family. I feel that more and more its expected for women to have careers but they are also supposed to handle being a full time mother, keeping up with looks, and clean the house along with their careers.

b. Social networks can change the way we think because of what people from the outside world post on them. For example, celebrities and presidential candidates are always trying to get their messages across on these websites, and even people can use them as ways to organize protests. We are more connected now than ever.

c. People don't care what gets said on Twitter as much as they used to but I still be careful what I post. I don't talk to sexist people on here and even if I did I don't think they would post how they truly felt.

Female E

a. I think gender roles have a smaller importance today than the past.

b. Social networking sites can greatly change our perceptions and language we use on the outside world because people become comfortable with what they see and say on the internet that when it gets translated to the outside world it may have mild repercussions.

c. I think they are less sensitive because on things like twitter sexist statuses often are humorous so it isn't taken offensively. I usually don't post sexist posts but if I do I do it out of humor and nothing offensive.

Female G

a. First of all, I believe gender roles have a smaller importance in society. The norms of the past, being that women take on the less intensive jobs that men do are constantly proving to be untrue. In the instance of family, many fathers are stay at home while the woman works...if its not a dual income household.

b. Secondly, social networking can definitely change the perspectives of many towards the outside world. I think specifically in terms of social and cultural aspects of society. Social networks can, in a way, force people to be more open minded and accepting of people of different races, sexual orientations, etc. Mostly because its the "trend" to be accepting and if one is close minded on a social network they are often shunned.

c. I think people act more sensitive so they can start an argument because when they start an argument on something like facebook, they have the screen to hide behind. and i try not to post things that would offend people so i can stay out of the argument.

Male A

a. Sexism is funny. But it probably isn't right... or nice. Sexism in social media is funny.

b. I don't think social networking websites change that much tbh. You may learn a lot more about certain people and people in general with their fb posts/statuses. You may also learn the new slang terms like YOLO or whatnot through those websites. But I think the outside world would still be relatively unchanged. We may be more at ease with each other because we know each other better from social networking, but that's it I believe.

c. I don't believe they do... People are less sensitive to sexism on social network websites. There are many accounts that are made to make jokes about sexism, but they usually aren't hurtful, only joking.

Male C

a. Gender roles are less significant now than before. Opportunities for role swap to occur has grown, and the liberal half of the nation is open to it.

b. They bridge communities that would otherwise never meet, erasing cultural borders.

c. Victims are more sensitive, perpetrators are more free to do it. I still maintain my status as non-prejudiced.

Male D

a. Gender roles make a huge difference. Girls do Hard core lurking on facebook. I dont. like 99% of girls (a guess) use tumblr or pintrest. i dont know any guys on those websites.

b. I think it may have something to do with our confidence. We will feel better if we have more friends or can get like 50 likes when we post a status. Our written language has changed. all the little LOL and BRB kind of stuff changes the way we write and spell. i think social networking has had a negative effect on our spelling. Mostly our written language though.

c. I think people are more sensitive to sexism on social networking sites because they know what they post will be viewed by a wide range of people, and that leads them to be more careful about their attitudes. Of course it affects what I post, I'd be more likely to post something slanderous if I knew only a certain audience viewed it.

Male G

a. Gender roles have varying importance depending on which segment of society one is involved with. We are a diverse group of people in the US and many are more open minded to equity in every aspect of society but others are seeing their world change and they do not like it. If you read the wiki article on Dr Altemeyer and Right Wing Authoritarians you will understand.

b. Social network sites change the language we use by introducing people to language that they haven't seen before. Like when I read slang, its introducing me to an entirely new type of vernacular. By these means, social networking sites facilitate rapid sociological changes.

c. Do I? Yes, I respond and look at things from many perspectives like gender, race, and special needs. As one becomes aware of other's perspectives, out of respect and empathy, comments and responses to posts are done accordingly. Do people? Some yes and some no, obviously. About one third of the population is characterized as right wing authoritarians as described by Dr Altemeyer. You can read about RWA on wiki. Consequently they think their opinions are divinely inspired or simply right and therefore need no moderation or empathy.

FG: Got 3 kills in Black Ops 2! :D Be Jealous! (11/15) Joke because women suck at CoD

MB: Think I need to get a gf so the gay community stops hitting on me #barkingupthewrongtree

ME: don't get mad at your girl for getting with your friends ! Get mad at yourself for going for girl that would get with your friends #lovingthecrew (11/13); No condom