

Chapter 56

Social Media and Gender Issues

Lynne M. Webb

Florida International University, USA

Nicholas Temple

Central Washington University, USA

ABSTRACT

Using Performance Theory as an explanatory basis, this essay explicates the performance of gender in social media beginning with the gendered history of digital technologies and an articulation of the social media venues' unique affordances for gender performance. Then, the chapter reviews the scientific research examining gendered online behavior in social media noting opportunities for enacting traditional sex role stereotypes and thus socializing others to do so as well as opportunities to enact equality and thus disseminating calls for liberation and increased equality between the sexes in all aspects of social life. Facebook, blogs, and online games are examined in detail as exemplars of specific social media sites of gender performance.

INTRODUCTION

Equity between the sexes has dramatically increased across the last 150 years. From the suffragist movement in the United States in the late 1800s to the United Nations' on-going human rights campaign for women (http://www.un.org/womenwatch/directory/human_rights_of_women_3009.htm), legal and social changes have led to increased professional and social opportunities for both men and women. Now that logging on to social media has become a daily activity for so many global citizens; researchers are examining how men and women engage in these online activities as well as how such engagement impacts equality between the sexes. This chapter reviews the social scientific examinations of gender issues in social media and thus discusses research related to biological sex, gender, sexuality, sexual preferences, and sexual identification. Such a review allows the reader to access the extent to which social media serve as sites of socialization into traditional gender roles as well as sites to enact equality and to disseminate liberation rhetoric.

One theory that allows understanding of how online venues provide opportunities for individual users to enact gender is Performance Theory. If users perform gender online, they have opportunities to

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engage in a wide variety of performances from traditional sex role behaviors to widely divergent, gendered behaviors such as gender-bending, and performances between these extremes. Below we offer a more in depth explanation of Performance Theory and its application to gendered behavior as a prelude to examining gendered behavior on social media.

Performance theory (Bell, 2008; Schechner, 2003) guides and informs our interpretation of the research reviewed in this chapter. Butler's theory of gender performativity (1990) argues that humans enact gender identities through expression and performance (Wood, 2009). Butler makes a clear distinction between biological sex and gender: whereas biological sex (male, female) is a mere accident of birth, gender is produced and maintained through cultural discourses of masculinity, femininity, and androgyny. Humans enact gender via multiple forms of expression within societal inscriptions of gender (Menard-Warwick, 2007). Performative theory posits that gender is not specifically something humans *have*, but rather, something they *do* (Menard-Warwick). Gender is an active expression of identity and an outward performance (Bell, 2006); the central claim of the theory states that without the performance of gender, there is no gender (Wood, 2009). Through performance, individuals may enact traditional sex roles and thus maintain the status quo. Conversely, innovators can perform gendered identities that represent increased equality between the sexes, such as stay-at-home Dad and female software designer.

We are not the first scholars to rely on Performance Theory as a viable explanation for social life. Drawing on the many traditions of performance theory (Bell, 2008), previous scholars examined performances across a variety of social concerns including gender (Hans et al., 2011; Morris, 1995) and identity (Litt, 2012) as well as across a wide range of settings including traditional mass media (Aleman, 2010) and social media (Hans et al., 2011; Litt, 2012).

Individuals perform various aspects of social identity simultaneously. For example, the first author of this essay performs as a married female professor on her BlackBoard account. Multiple aspects of identity *frequently* interact with and co-occur with gender, including biological sex, sexual orientation, sexuality, and sexual identity. These performances are so frequently associated, one with the other, that researchers often focus their investigation specifically on one of these *associated* aspects of gender identity in an attempt to gain insight into gender. Furthermore, researchers sometimes treat these associated aspects of gender identity (biological sex, sexual orientation, sexuality, and sexual identity) as if they are the same thing as gender. Unfortunately, much of the research examining gender issues in social media suffers from these limitations; many researchers report differences by biological sex or differences by marital status rather than examining issues of gender directly.

Additionally, it is important to note that additional aspects of social identity can shape gender performance. For example, race and class often limit and shape how individuals enact their feminine and/or masculine identities. Issues of race and class are important in and of themselves as potential influences on users' online behavior as well as influences on gendered behaviors. Unfortunately, race and class as aspects of identity performance, while very important and worthy of examination in and of themselves, are beyond the scope of this essay. Furthermore, it is important to note that much of the research on gender issues in social media examines the online behavior of white middle-class users.

The ever-changing nature of the Internet and the ability to freely navigate among online cultures permits the fluidness of gender to be realized and experienced (Bailey & Telford, 2007). The Internet can be viewed as a space with liberating potential, where gender can be performed in new ways (Hans et al., 2011); innovative identities can be imagined by online representation (White, 2003) and gendered scripts can be re-conceptualized (Bruckman, 1993; Kelly, Pomerantz, & Currie, 2006; Loureiro & Ribeiro, 2014). Such experimentation typically challenges mainstream conceptions of gender. Indeed,

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