

Chapter 10

Gender Symbolism and Technology Uptake: A Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

The need to promote adoption of technology in general and Information and Communication Technologies, computers, and the internet in specific terms has increasingly become of interest. Observation is that while some potential users take on the innovation with much ease, others remain less enthusiastic, and some do not uptake at all. In addition, there are differences noted between male and female users. The reasons influencing the differences are not yet well explained but could be as a result of gender symbolism. The objective of this chapter is to review literature on gender symbolism and cite explanations supporting the influence of GS on differences in uptake.

INTRODUCTION

Several studies document that males not only have better access to computers and the internet than the females (Komerik, 2005) but also enjoy long hours online and also seem to be more enthusiastic about the use of computers and the internet (Agbonlahor, 2005; Brous, 2005; Hafkin & Tag-

gart, 2001; Huyer & Sikoska, 2003; Madanda, Kabonesa, & Bantebya-Kyomuhendo, 2007). In addition, differences are observed in the areas of interest among what the male and females do with the computer and the internet (BBC, 2007; Komerik, 2005; Nsibirano, 2006) although the findings are not conclusive enough to point out how differences in meaning formation and attachment to the technology could provide explanations for the disparities.

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In the study of the influence of gender symbolism (GS) and disparities on ICT uptake, analysis is made of the concept of “Gender Symbolism”. By definition, according to Harding, in (Cockburn & Ormrod, 1993) GS is the process by which meanings are assigned to everything in the world. Out of GS, the two very important variables that stand out are: meanings and values. In every day speech, and actions too the term “meaning” is used. However, each time it is used, it takes on different meaning. Ogden & Richards, (1923) identified 16 different meanings, which depend on the person using the term. Hence Berlos’ conclusion that meaning is in people. Each person or group of people, depending on their experiences create and define meaning(s) in their own specific and meaningful terms.

Several studies and scholars have explored the use of meaning. Among them are: Marketing studies, Agricultural technology adoption studies (Diederer, Meijl, Wolters, & Bijak, 2003), communication studies and literature--to show deeper analytical interpretations otherwise not given and in nursing care studies -- where the medical workers sought to understand the meaning to life of patients, whose life experiences had been interrupted by negative or threatening experiences like chronic or terminal illnesses and so required assistance in their readjustment and refocusing of the meaning of life (Skaggs & Barron, 2006). These studies found out that: Meaning is subjective (Heath, 2003), necessary in social processes and central to pursuing a life characterized as purposeful and goal directed. It is meaning that gives direction for one’s life as it directs and defines action(s) (Barbalet, 1999; Skaggs & Barron, 2006). The absence of meaning in an activity or circumstance leads to an experience of boredom (Barbalet, 1999; Skaggs & Barron, 2006). However, noted was the fact that meaning is not static but flexible (Heath, 2003). Meaning can be interrupted (Skaggs & Barron, 2006), re defined or even changed by experiences, through ones relations’ in society. Meanings do

not arise in solitude. So in the interrogation of meaning and gender symbolism, interaction or the relationship of individuals with the Innovation, in more specific terms with the computers and the internet in this case is very important. It is out of such interactions that some technology adopters have been seen to regress from use or adoption, although not many studies have investigated why there is withdrawal from use.

On the other hand values are objective, give structure and an element of rigidity to a person’s character. It is from the subjective meanings that social values are formed. It is values that help determine actions and behavior. Further, values can transform relationships. However, values could also change depending on the changes in a given society (Heath, 2003).

In reality, individuals mix meaning and value. The line separating the two is so thin that even the definition of either is not easy to comprehend. None the less, meanings have first to be formed, more often through interaction and relationship then the values will be formed, that then support actions of the said individuals. When existing values are affected by new developments, they could change and so give rise to new meanings being taken up by individuals. All in all, in a study examining the influence of GS on disparities in uptake, an individual and his or her interaction(s) in society (with technology) is very important as it enables the focus to be placed on experience, which experience brings out the details of actions and the resulting meanings and values. It is this perspective that did not come out well in the previous studies, which were also mainly quantitative. In addition earlier studies that interrogated meaning did not look at students and the use of ICT and were not done in an African setting.

Echoing the words of Miles and Huberman (1994) efforts to excavate meaning are best pursued through qualitative analysis. Therefore, this present paper seeks to underline the influence of gender Symbolism on the definition of meaning, and how differences in meaning definition could

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