

# Online Life and Gender Dynamics

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## INTRODUCTION

The study of gendered interaction online grows out of studies of gendered interaction off-line and will probably be found to be a cultural variable changing with off-line gender behaviour in different social groupings. However, this does not dispose of the issues of gender's influences on online behaviour, or of whether gender behaviour online is transformed in relation to behaviour off-line.

The relevance of gender may vary in different contexts: with class, religion, place, proportions, type of online forum, topic of discussion, and so on. These contexts could overwhelm gender identities existing outside them and their effects need to be investigated. Power ratios between people of various genders may also vary within different contexts and cannot be assumed in advance. Gender both enables and restricts behaviour; it is neither merely positive nor merely negative.

In the West (at least), gender seems to be constantly in flux and interrogation, and it is not surprising if such interrogations and uncertainties occur online. Despite this interrogation, gender in off-line life seems to be treated as an essential part of a person's being or identity, and it guides reaction to others.

## BACKGROUND

### History and Attitudes to Computers and the Internet

Gender can influence the ways people interact with computers even before they go online. Studies of education consistently show boys being given preference accessing computers by parents and teachers (Rajagopal & Bojin, 2003). Female students may feel as competent as males in using computers while being more negative about their own involvement with computers (Herring, 1993; Sophia, 1993).

Turkle (1984) suggests that different social groups bring differing modes of interaction to computers and, as a result, find them more or less satisfying. Thus, women might attempt to negotiate with computers, while men might try and control them. Furthermore, computers are usually posited as non-emotional (Turkle), and this supposed lack might induce some people (particularly women) to find interacting with computers less satisfactory than it is for people whose aims are primarily "results oriented" (Sophia, 1993, pp. 16-17). Women, as the default carriers of emotions and performers of emotional labour in the West (Cheal, 1988; Erickson, 2005), could define themselves in opposition to computers, particularly when their usage of them was relatively uncommon. Similarly, rather than deal with the complexities of real humans, the definitively masculine or nonemotional male might flee to computers, particularly if his masculine definition is not adequate in other areas (Turkle, 1984). However, relevant gender conventions may change; at one time, programming was considered a branch of secretarial work and handled by women (Wacjman, 1991).

As the Internet was initially largely constructed and used by males, the social customs developed may well have made it harder for women to use or approach it. Such effects might have altered over time, especially given the increase of women using computers and the Internet. However, detailed historical research of such changes is rare.

### Type of Forum

Different types of online forums (i.e., mailing list, MOO [MUD (multiuser domain) object oriented], newsgroup, chat room, IRC [Internet relay chat] channel, blog) differ in the ways they structure communication and allow response or the use of power, and enable the ways in which gender can be an identifier. Some forums encourage people to play characters, or avatars, and some encourage people

to use their own names. Large MOOs tend to be governed by committee, whereas mailing lists tend to be governed by debate (both on- and off-list) and the decision of the moderator. Newsgroups tend to be governed by argument, confrontation, and people withdrawing when they have had enough. As a result of these structures and organisations, different forums produce different types of experiences and behaviour (Marshall, 2004). Research in one kind of forum may produce different kinds of results than research in other types of forums. For example, anonymity, gender ambiguity, or cross-gender impersonation seem much less pronounced on mailing lists than on MOOs or IRC.

Presence is ambiguous online with people only appearing present when they type, therefore it may be more common for males on MOOs to engage women in conversation and try and gain their opinions to make sure they are there than it is off-line where the presence of a listener is so much more marked.

## **Communication Patterns**

Susan Herring has carried out the most extensive studies of online interaction showing the replication of off-line communication patterns that tend to silence women or render women's talk marginal. In her early study of the discussion lists LINGUIST and Megabyte University, Herring (1993) found that women participated "at a rate that is significantly lower than that corresponding to their numerical representation." According to her research, "[w]omen constitute 36% of LINGUIST and 42% of MBU subscribers." Yet in a discussion on sexism, women constituted only 30% of posters. In more neutral discussions, only 16% of posters were women.

On three occasions, Herring (1993) found that "women's rate of posting increased gradually to where it equalled 50% of the contributions for a period of one or two days." Not enough information is given to discover whether this resulted from an increase in the number of women posting, or whether a few women became more active, or whether the number of men posting had declined. However, the reaction "was virtually identical in all three cases: a handful of men wrote in to decry the discussion, and several threatened to cancel their subscription to the

list." This certainly implies that some men could not cope with such a visible, or argumentative, female presence and did their best to stop it within the structural possibilities of mailing-list life.

Herring (1993) also claims there are distinctive gendered styles of interaction that reflect expectations in the off-line world. In order of decreasing magnitude, she found that men discussed issues, provided information, made queries, and wrote about personal things, while women wrote about personal things, made queries, then discussed issues, and least of all provided information. Herring also found that "the messages contributed by women are shorter ... a very long message invariably indicates that the sender is male," and that "messages posted by women consistently received fewer average responses than those posted by men ... [and] topics initiated by women are less often taken up as topics of discussion by the group as a whole."

This research suggests that women, and women's interests, were marginalised in the public activity of these groups, and that male dominance was replicated even without use of physical force and in an environment in which gender is claimed not to matter. However, when Herring (1994) looked at lists focused on "traditionally 'feminized' disciplines ... [she] found women holding forth in an amount consistent with their numerical presence on the list."

Herring did not investigate, except briefly, the ongoing interaction of male and female subjects; each utterance seems to be taken in statistical isolation. There is no investigation of overall trends or variation, or even of the ways in which people interact to coproduce the ambience of the list or recognise and reinforce gender.

Although many of Herring's results have been replicated (Herring, 2000), it is common for some parts not to be (Hatt, 1998; Savicki, Kelley, & Oesterreich, 1999; Savicki, Lingenfalter, & Kelley, 1996; Vaughn Trias, 1999), suggesting there may be other variables involved. It is only recently that Herring (2000) has suggested that different modes of Internet communication might have an effect. Engagement with such issues requires intensive fieldwork, rather than brief visits or abstract samples, because fieldwork better enables the researcher to know individuals and place them amongst local and wider social dynamics.

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