

Chapter 35

The Online Feminine Mystique: Developing a Research Agenda for Women's Use of Social Media

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ABSTRACT

When the Internet was first commercialized and commonly utilized, men numerically dominated Internet use (Actman, 1995 and Johns, 1997). Over time, the population of Internet users has normalized and increasingly women are using the Internet at the same rate as men. This raises societal questions. Is social media conditioned to be more 'female-dominated' due to the focus on social aspects, traditionally seen as more feminine? This introductory chapter explores the technology use of women. Taking a perspective of providing a background, first, the literature related to women and technology and the dominant theoretical underpinnings is discussed. Then the authors investigate conditioning of women in careers, lifestyles and general technology use. This discussion of the academic literature is then reinforced through an analysis of industry based data, to understand how women are utilizing technology. The chapter concludes with an agenda for further research into the use of technology by women.

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INTRODUCTION

When the Internet was first commercialised and commonly utilised, men numerically dominated Internet use (Actman 1995; Johns 1997). Over time, the population of Internet users has normalised and increasingly women are using the Internet at the same rate as men. In fact, since social media has become commonly used, and smart phones have become de rigueur, increasingly women in developed countries are utilising technology in their careers and to manage their day-to-day interactions. This raises societal questions – have women been conditioned to believe that technology is male-oriented, and therefore not utilised it at the same rate as men? Is social media conditioned to be more ‘female-dominated’ due to the focus on social aspects, traditionally seen as more feminine?

This introductory chapter explores the technology use of women. Taking a perspective of providing a background, first, we explore the literature related to women and technology and the dominant theoretical underpinnings. Then we explore conditioning of women in careers, lifestyles and general technology use. This discussion of the academic literature is then reinforced through an analysis of industry based data, to understand how women are utilising technology. The chapter concludes with an agenda for further research into the use of technology by women.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Background to Women and Technology

While the number of women in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) education and workplaces in Western countries has remained stagnant or risen only modestly (Bandias & Warne 2009; Warne, Bandias & Fuller 2011; Ridley & Young 2012; Fisher, Lang & Craig 2013), women are entering social media space at greater numbers than ever before (Clifford 2014). For the purposes of this paper, we will define social media as a way to transmit or share information to a broad audience while social networking is an act of engagement where groups of people with common interests build relationships through community (Hartshorn 2010). Social media includes social networking sites (SNS). This paper explores issues associated with the gender and social media phenomenon. Johns and English (2014) and Gurak (1999) have identified that research in this domain is either sparse or outdated. This chapter seeks to provide answers by first reviewing the relevant literature, discussing gender and technology theories which inform research, before continuing the discussion into the marketing and tourism aspects of the research.

Eileen Trauth, a renowned Information Systems (IS) theorist, stressed in the editorial of the special issue on gender in the Information Systems Journal in 2012, that without appropriate theoretical grounding, findings are ad hoc at best and lack a contribution to the existing knowledge base. Three approaches dominate IS research to theorise the manner in which women and men use computers. One view, proposed in early gender studies is the essentialist argument which recognises that inherent or natural or biological differences determine reality. Researchers such as Turkle (1984), Spender (1995) and Venkatesh and Morris (2000) described the innate cognitive differences between female and male interactions with technology. Turkle (1984) used the core terms of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ to identify this gendered dichotomy. ‘Hard mastery’, or the need to control the computer, is associated with the masculine

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