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Chapter 25

Social Media and Gender Issues

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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 engage in a wide variety of performances from traditional sex role behaviors to widely divergent,

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-8310-5.ch025

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 *as-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, many scholars have argued that both male and female users communicate online in ways that “replicate and disrupt” established gender practices (Anderson & Buzzanell, 2007, p. 32).

The pervasive nature of the Internet in the Western world, with ubiquitous free wifi and the wide-spread use of social media, creates opportunities for a wide variety of gender enactments beyond work and family contexts and issues. Users’ sexual orientation, sexuality, and sexual identity can be displayed in numerous ways across multiple websites where users can gain audience for their performances and can find social support for both traditional (e.g., mommy blogs) and nontraditional performances (e.g., transgendered identities).

Additionally, the Internet, as mass medium, provides a space for gendered social issues to receive widespread attention. Social media sites allow information-provision, engagement, and discussion of ideas outside the status-quo gendered discourse. Thus, social media can provide forums for voices that are often overlooked or silenced in society (i.e., lesbian teens). Additionally, the Internet allows for networking and establishing a sense of connection necessary for movements enacting social change. For example, the materialization of modern feminism is “marked by the emergence of networks and contacts which need no centralized organizations and evade its structures of command control” (Bailey & Telford, 2007, p. 259). From this viewpoint, the Internet is a space of gender liberation where gender can be performed, conceptualized, and theorized in innovative ways.

The purpose of this chapter is to review the scholarly reports relevant to gender and social media, noting evidence of online gender performances, pointing out to the reader which social media venues offer unique affordances for gender performance as well as extent to which the performances represent enactment of existing gender norms and/or increased equality between

the sexes. Immediately below, a brief history of gendered online behavior is presented as preface to the review.

BACKGROUND

When the 21st century began, technology was predominantly male-dominated; primarily male engineers developed both the hardware and software of social media. Additionally, as early as 2000, in a sample of 185 users from 84 U.S. families, men reported spending almost twice as many hours per week online at home as women (Kayany & Yelsma, 2000). Because of these inequities, technological advancements can be viewed as masculine tools of power (Bailey & Telford, 2007). Despite steps to increase equity, men continue to dominate in specialized fields of technology such as software design (Anderson & Buzzanell, 2007) and many online venues are viewed as masculine (Taylor, 2004)—making the Internet appear to be a male-occupied space. Some feminists have argued that because of female exclusion, technology reflects a patriarchal hierarchy that produces tools of oppression detrimental to women (i.e., pornography; Podlas, 2000).

However, in the more recent era of technological growth, women comprise an increasing percentage of the Internet population. Since 2001, male versus female access to the Internet has reached parity (U. S. Department of Commerce, 2004). The data regarding relational use of online technologies is especially interesting. The 2000 Pew Internet and American Life project reported that women use the Internet to maintain relationships more than men. Among 713 college students, women were four to five times more likely than men to use social networking websites (Tufekci, 2008b). Women report more Facebook “friends” than men and report spending more time on Facebook than men, regardless of the size of their networks (Acar, 2008). Another recent survey of college students documented no differ-

ences between male versus female reports of the amount of time spent online communicating with romantic partners (Sidelinger, Ayash, & Tibbles, 2008). Furthermore, women and men spend equal time playing online games (Williams, Consalvo, Caplan, & Yee, 2009). Contemporary feminists view these multiple measures of online equity as indicating that the Internet can provide a space for women's empowerment and agency (Hans et al., 2011), given that it provides "unparalleled mechanisms for widespread dissemination and communication" (Bailey & Telford, 2007, p. 244). With the advent of Internet 2.0 and its emphasis on user-produced content, social media that facilitate online interaction among users have flourished (Lind, 2012); these venues offer users of both sexes a multiplicity of opportunities to interact and spread their ideas far and wide. Below the affordances of social media as venues for gender performance are reviewed. Then appears a review of the research on gender issues and social media with blogs, Facebook, and online games serving as exemplars.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND GENDER

Some feminist commentators praise the rise of social media, including websites such as Facebook, because they privilege expressiveness and social skills, traits often considered feminine (Zacharias & Arthurs, 2008). Indeed, women outnumber men in social media. One global study reported that 76% of online women use social media, as compared to 70% of online men (Vollman, Abraham, & Mörn 2010). Similarly, Junco, Merson, & Salter (2010) found that women spend more time on social networking sites than men. Feminists hoped that social media (websites that facilitate user interaction) would serve as spaces to empower young women to carve out their own identities that might counter mainstream media stereotypes; indeed, some hoped that women could construct new or altered definitions of what

it ultimately means to be a "girl" (Scott-Dixon, 2002; Koskela, 2004). They could do this by exchanging comments, building relationships, and exchanging social capital (Bailey et al., 2013; Senft, 2008) via social media. As a result of the potential offered by this relatively new media technology, Senft (2008) posited that diverse narratives written by girls themselves could begin to upset the dominant, stereotypical definitions of "girl" and perhaps even challenge gender-based constraints that hinder social equality.

Women are clearly enthusiastic in their use of social media technology, and have utilized it in meaningful ways to enhance their social lives (Bailey et al., 2013). There is a wide plethora of social media platforms to choose from, including (but certainly not limited to) Facebook, Tumblr, Google Plus, Twitter, Vine, and the wide array of online dating sites such as eHarmony. However, one key point to note about many of these sites is that they are both mainstream and corporate.

Corporate, mainstream websites tend to contain large amounts of advertising, and that advertising often portrays pre-existing stereotypes of what it is to be a "man" or a "woman". Given that women use social media in greater numbers and at a higher intensity than men, it seems likely that they bear more of the brunt of exposure to repeated messages reinforcing these gender norms. Evidence suggests that young women internalize the commercial images that they see in advertisements here and incorporate the stereotypes into their online social presentation to varying degrees (Ringrose, 2010). Ringrose concluded that "positioning the self as always 'up for it' and the 'performance of confident sexual agency' has shifted to become a *key regulative*" (2010, p. 176). Thus, women may experience a visual imperative to present the self as sexy on social networking sites. Girls in online spaces also reproduce other common stereotypes of femininity (Bailey et al., 2013). Often, they place emphasis on being attractive and having attractive friends (Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008), present themselves as eager

to please males (Kapidizic & Herring, 2011), and generally work to look like a happy, carefree, and sexy but not sexual.

Thus, social media has proved to be a “mixed bag” offering and at times encouraging the enactment of traditional gender roles as well as, at other times, providing opportunities to “give voice” to users’ unique ideas, including both men and women who may be uncomfortable communicating in face-to-face public venues. Despite its mixed reviews, social media in general offer multiple unique affordances that allow liberating gendered behaviors that are rarely readily available offline. Such affordances include as the following:

- Many venues offer *unfettered access to a mass audience* for the promotion of individual voices that might otherwise be silenced (such as gay teens) as well as public spaces for the organization of gendered social movements (e.g., the Arab Spring that advocated for increased women’s rights).
- *Gender-bending* occurs when biological males pose as female, biological female pose as males, or either sex poses non-gendered. Offline gender-bending occurs (e.g., cross-dressing), but gender-bending is more common online where fewer non-verbal cues are available to unmask the behavior. Samp, Wittenberg, and Gillett (2003) reported that feminine, masculine, and androgynous individuals were equally likely to engage in gender-bending. Online gender-bending allows for the critical examination of social constructions of gender and potentially contributes to the long-term destabilization of the way society currently constructs gender (Danet, 1998). The act of gender-bending allows individuals to gather skills, tools, and data to challenge rigid notions of gender and sexuality. The performance of an alternative gender

identity through online interactions can “defamiliarize” individuals with their real life gender role (Bruckman, 1993), allowing users to address their sexuality and to interact in ways that he/she would not be comfortable doing in offline, as well as to understand the way sexual politics work in society (Danet, 1998).

- Young, Griffin-Shelley, Cooper, O’Mara, and Buchanan (2000) defined *cybersex* as “two online users engaging in private discourse about sexual fantasies. The dialogue is usually accompanied by self-stimulation” (p. 60). Cybersex requires the articulation of sexual desire to the extent that would be most unusual in face-to-face encounter. Both married and unmarried men and women participate in cybersex (Millner, 2008), resulting in a wide variety of sexual encounters online. Multiple websites match partners who desire single-single dating, affairs between partners married to others, online sexual encounters, and so on. Cybersex covers a wide range of relationships including but not limited to cyber romances (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006) and cyber affairs (Young et al., 2000), yet many cybersex partners never meet offline. When and if they meet, the relationships are often of very short duration. In contrast, cyber partners who establish emotionally connected relationships often interact online for a very long time (Barta & Kiene, 2005). Thus, many social media sites offers opportunities to develop relationships with others who enjoy uncommon relational and sexual practices that users might be hesitant to explore in offline venues, including various polyamory practices (multiple loving partners) (Ritchie & Baker, 2006), homosexuality (Ashford, 2006; Walker, 2009),

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and exploitative relationships (Brookey & Cannon, 2009), as well as sexual practices beyond the status quo.

- Social media provides important information *tools for managing complex multi-faced lives* with both family and work responsibilities (Edley & Houston, 2011). Using online coordination, both men and women maintain demanding professional positions while they become increasingly engaged with their children's lives and care of older or disabled relatives.
- Because access to social media is free and relatively easy, many non-profit organizations maintain a social media presence. To facilitate working parents' success in enacting increased engagement in family life, educational, recreational, and health-care *organizations engage social media* as a means of information distribution and co-ordination (Atkinson et al., 2009; Palmen & Kouri, 2012). Additionally, nonprofit agencies that advocate for equality between the sexes (includegender.org), greater opportunities for women (now.org), and/or the rights of individuals engaged in nontraditional gender enactments (<http://transequality.org>) also maintain an online presence via social media.

The same affordances that facilitate liberation also present some noteworthy challenges to users. A partial listing of such challenges that relate closely to gender are noted below:

- *Hiring decisions based in part on users' online profiles* have become increasingly common. Given that online information exists almost indefinitely and given that any information posted online can be retrieved by an experienced corporate hacker, any hint of unconventionality in sexual or gendered behavior may have financial consequences for users.

- *Deception* is common in social media, as users can enact inaccurately positive self-presentations that are accepted more easily online than they would be offline (Gibbs et al., 2006). Women typically lie for safety concerns and men lie to boost their socio-economic status, but both sexes believe that lying about such factors allows for openness and honesty regarding the more important matters of their emotional experiences and sexual desires (Ben-Ze'ev, 2004). Gibbs et al. (2006) concluded that "the Internet is the medium for identity manipulation" (p. 169), including gender-bending.
- *Online dating* sites bring gender directly to the fore as the convention of dating is heavily tied to gender roles (Fulllick, 2013). Whitty (2007) argued that users on these sites are quite strategic in the ways in which they present themselves as they seek to attract the ideal romantic partner. Hancock and Toma (2009) report that both men and women exert a high level of control over their profiles in an effort to present their best possible or ideal selves (Toma & Hancock, 2011). However, Fulllick (2013) points out online daters are well aware that they are putting themselves out there for consumption in a consumption based culture, and as such must sell themselves. Part of "selling" involves mimicking how other media sell gender.
- *Internet infidelity* takes many forms—cyber affairs among them. According to Limacher and Wright (2006), "infidelity can be understood as a breach of trust between a couple, in which the secrecy and lies become the culprit in destroying the relationship, not necessarily the sex" (p. 314). Although the Internet can be used for factual sexual education, it also can be used for emotional and sexual maladaptive behaviors associated with cybersex (Millner, 2008). Some internet users spend up to 10

hours per week engaged in cybersexual relationships (Cooper, Boies, Maheu, & Greenfield, 2000). Biological sex “is a good predictor of motivation for infidelity” (Barta & Kiene, 2005, p. 341); women are more likely to engage in infidelity when they experience emotional dissatisfaction in their primary relationship; men are more likely to be sexually motivated.

- *Online pornography* is widely available on the Internet and the pornography websites are often formatted as social media to facilitate interaction. Multiple researchers have documented that adolescent and young adult males are more likely than females to view sexually explicit online content (e.g., Boies, 2002; Peter & Valkenburg, 2006). Men are more likely than women to seek visual sexual depictions as a means to experience sexual arousal for masturbation; women are more likely to seek out erotic narratives and chat rooms than men; women are less likely than men to self-stimulate when using online materials (Barta & Kiene, 2005). Men often think of pornography on the Internet as mere visual stimulation for masturbation with no emotional attachment (Limacher & Wright, 2006); however, female offline romantic partners often hold an alternative viewpoint. “Getting caught” using pornography can transform a safe and loving relationship into one of mistrust and distance. Wives who catch their husbands using Internet pornography typically perceive themselves as unpleasing to their husbands and experience emotional pain by the husband’s “involvement” with another woman.

In sum, social media offer multiple unique affordances that allow liberating gendered behaviors that are rarely readily available offline. However, such affordances come with some noteworthy challenges. To explain how gendered perfor-

mances occur in such environments the following sections of the chapter discuss in detail research findings relevant to three widely popular and well-researched social media: blogs, Facebook, and online games.

EXEMPLARS: FACEBOOK, BLOGS, GAMING

This section of the chapter discusses in detail how gender is performed in three prominent and well-researched social media venues: blogs, Facebook, and online games. Each venue is discussed in some detail to reveal its unique affordances that offer both opportunities and challenges to increased equality between the sexes.

Gender and Blogs

Because identity arises from “publicly validated performances,” users can enact gender identity through blogging (García-Gómez, 2009, p. 613). Bloggers present their performative gendered identities through both visual and discursive means (van Doorn, van Zoonen, & Wyatt, 2007) as they create and write their blogs. Via such performances, bloggers can enact a wide range of gendered performances from traditional sex-roles, such as expected behaviors in the “cult of femininity” on teen-agers’ blogs (Gomez, 2010, p. 135) or push the boundaries of permitted gendered behavior in repressive regimes (Riegert & Ramsey, 2013). From 2000 to 2005, the number of blogs grew from 100,000 to more than 4 million (Woods, 2005). Riley (2005) reported about half a million blogs in Australia and 2.5 million blogs in the U. K. In 2009, more than 12 million adults in the U. S. maintained a blog (Schechter, 2009).

From the beginning, scholars have characterized blogs as a powerful medium of communication (Kline & Burstein, 2005; Rodzvilla, 2002; Rosenberg, 2009; Woods, 2005), as blogs provide an individual mass media outlet for every blog-

ger. Because blog participants directly engage in knowledge production, and because blogs typically limit content to specific and narrow foci, blogs lend themselves to community formation. Blogs form online communities around a specific theme, idea, or industry activity (Droge et al., 2010; Vickery, 2010), where a “sense of community is developed through interactions with like-minded people” (Kaye, 2005, p. 76), such as bloggers writing on feminist business practices. Bloggers perform gender for their audience of readers via their writing; readers can become familiar and friendly with bloggers after reading their posts regularly and respond with their own performances of gender. Through blogging, authors invite audience members (typically fellow bloggers who write on the same or similar subject matter) to discuss, share, and support one another (Lopez, 2009). Thus, blogs have the potential to become sites of enlightenment and liberation.

- **Gendered Use of Blogs:** Twelve million Americans report blogging (Lehnhart & Fox, 2006); men and women blog approximately equally (Haferkamp & Krämer, 2008). In displaying online identities, almost all bloggers reveal their gender on their blogs (Kleeman, 2007). In addition to explicitly stating gender, blog creators employ various forms of nonverbal behaviors (e.g., colors, backgrounds, fonts, and pictures) that perform gendered identity. For example, a self-proclaimed “girly girl” could select a pink background for her blog.

Gender is performed quite distinctively in the context of blogs. Males are more likely to write filter blogs (Karlsson, 2007; Wei, 2009), containing primarily information external to the author such as news and political events; the blog content is “filtered in that certain items are discussed and others are excluded. Political blogs, for example, often link to the websites of traditional media

sources, such as newspapers. Filter blogs typically are written by men (Herring, Kouper, Scheidt, & Wright, 2004). Therefore, when traditional media outlets quote political filter blogs, as they often do (Tucker, 2009), the media outlets are usually repeating male voices (Herring et al., 2004). Similarly, more published academic research examines male blogs than female blogs (Lopez, 2009).

Gender can be performed via linguistic practices (Motschenbacher, 2009) and multiple studies document such practices by males:

- Herring and Paolillo (2006) found that filter blogs favored by men had more “male” stylistic features, such as statements and restatements of facts.
- Van Doorn et al. (2007) found that male authors carefully avoided being too “emotional,” focusing their blogs on information and ideas.
- In a study of British bloggers, Pedersen and Macafee (2007) report that men’s blog content focuses on sharing information, providing opinions, and highlighting links. This finding paints a gendered picture for how males share information through blogging—a picture consistent with typical ways males communicate in offline interactions. Tannen (1990) argues men engage in report talk, giving information and opinions as a means of gaining or sustaining status.
- Men evoke gender identities using facts and emotionless language versus women who employ expressive and inclusive language. Amir, Abidin, Darus, and Ismail (2012) reported finding such “differences in language use among teenage bloggers” (p. 105).

Medical blogs serve as a prime example of how men perform masculinity on blogs. Kovic, Lulic, and Brumini surveyed medical blogs, defined as “a blog whose main topic was related to

health or medicine” (2008, p. 2), and discovered that 59% of medical bloggers were male; 74% of the bloggers reported being motivated to post on medical blogs to share knowledge and skills, and 56% by the desire of gaining insights from others. (Respondents could choose more than one motivation; therefore the percent total exceeds 100%). Two-thirds of medical bloggers received attention from the news media about their blogs.

It could be argued that males were more likely to participate in these medical blogs because the nature of these blogs aligns with a masculine communication style, allowing the authors to perform their gender through their blogs. Because men are more likely to write filter blogs (Pedersen & Macafee, 2007; van Doorn et al., 2007), they also are more likely to be seen as credible bloggers (Armstrong & McAdams, 2009). In short, male bloggers are seen as information transmitters and form blogging relationships based on sharing of information and the credibility of that information.

Women, on the other hand, are more likely to write journal blogs, or diary blogs (Attwood, 2009; Karlsson, 2007; Wei, 2009). Such blogs describe personal life; their content primarily originates with the blogger rather than external sources. However, unlike traditional diaries, journal blogs do not have the connotation of privacy and instead seek an online, mass audience. Women are more likely to blog to document their lives, for self-expression, and to pass time (Li, 2007) than to provide information. For example, female bloggers write about their experiences with infertility (e.g., Turner Channel, 2010) and empty-nest syndrome (e.g., *The Pioneer Woman*, 2010).

Diary blogs are personal and emotion-laden, creating “readerly attachment” (Karlsson, 2007, p. 139). Journal bloggers invite their readers to identify with and relate to the author through comments (Webb & Lee, 2011). Readers who habitually read these blogs are more likely to be female (Karlsson, 2007), and the creation of support networks on such blogs is consistent with the communal, relational communication characteristic of women.

Female communication style allows women to share, create, and maintain relationships, bring others into the conversation, and respond to ideas (Wood, 2009). Through journal blogging, reading blogs regularly, and leaving feedback, women engage in rapport-talk, described by Tannen as “negotiations for closeness in which people try to seek and give confirmation and support, and to reach consensus” (1990, p. 25). Blogs can provide a shared emotional connection (Stavrositu & Sundar, 2008), where members of the blog community share life experiences and events. One blog feature that aids relationship building (van Doorn et al., 2007) is the ‘blogroll’ (a list of links that allows the user to add others’ blogs to their blogroll, creating a network of blogs sometimes called the “blogosphere”). The use of blogrolls “fosters a reciprocal relationship” where people add each other’s blogs to their blogrolls (p. 146).

The language of women’s blogs plays a central role in the performance of their gendered identities as the “features of ‘women’s language’ are powerful resources to linguistically index female identities” (Motschenbacher, 2009, p. 19). Teen girls’ diary blogs provide an obvious example of feminine gender performance via statements such as “I am a woman, not a girl!” and “Since I was a little girl” (García-Gómez, 2009, p. 615). Also, women’s language is more inclusive and expressive, passive, cooperative, and accommodating (Herring & Paolillo, 2006) than the language used by male bloggers. Women bloggers construct their gendered identities using sexualized imagery and words, often while talking about domesticity and taking care of the home (van Doorn et al., 2007). This juxtaposed mix creates a unique female gender identity combining traditional views of women such as the mother and sex object (Wood, 2009).

- **Female Empowerment via Blogging:** Women can experience liberation and validation through blogging (Hans, Lee, Tinker, & Webb, 2011), as “blogging’s ultimate product is empowerment” (Kline & Burstein, 2005, p. 248). Walters (2011) de-

scribed blogs as “a site for everyday activism” (p. 363). Although women may feel marginalized and underrepresented in the offline public sphere, blogs can empower women by emphasizing knowledge important to women and organizing groups of like-minded women in the cyber public-sphere (Stavrositu & Sundar, 2008). For example mommy blogs (i.e., blogs predominantly about family life written by women) serve as one venue for such organizing. Thousands of mothers embrace blogging as a form of communication, documentation, and socialization as well as a means of producing income (Neff, 2008); they blog to communicate about their families, to document their rites of passage as mothers, and to provide and receive advice on difficult challenges in private life. Thus, mothers are experiencing empowerment in the blogosphere and their efforts are enjoying increased scholarly attention (Camahort, 2006; Friedman & Calixte, 2009; Hammond, 2010; Kline & Burstein, 2005; Lee & Webb, 2012, 2014; Lopez, 2009; Moravec, 2011; Thompson, 2007; Webb & Lee, 2011).

Lee and Webb (2014) argue that mommy bloggers are redefining motherhood in the 21st century. In mainstream U. S. culture, motherhood is typically viewed as a private and domestic matter (Lopez, 2009). However, by chronicling maternal events in the public realm via blogs, bloggers redefine the meaning of motherhood. As mommy bloggers display their own online maternal identity, they typically present a very different picture from motherhood as presented in mainstream media. “Instead of the loving mother, we see women who are frazzled by the demands of their newborn baby, who have no clue what to do when their child gets sick, who suffer from postpartum depression and whose hormones rage uncontrollably” (Lopez, p. 732). Readers see blog-

gers’ “work in progress” identities as the authentic voices of maternity in the 21st century (Moravec, 2011)—voices that paint realistic pictures of child-rearing while “having a life” (Lopez, 2009).

- **Women’s Movements on Blogs:** Given that the traditional media misrepresented and underrepresented women, blogs provide a meaningful, alternative public platform for women’s voices (Stavrositu & Sundar, 2008). Indeed, female sexual liberation can be enacted via blogging. Attwood (2009) studied women’s sex blogs, and sex “blooks” (blogs turned into books). Attwood describes “blooks” as “the world’s fastest growing new kind of book” (p. 5). Through these blogs and blooks, female authors emphasize sexual openness, empowerment, and pleasure. In these venues, women authors redefine their sexuality and femininity by writing publically about what many people would consider the most intimate and personal form of social life.

Blogs provide a vital venue for gendered self-expression, especially in countries that limit freedom of expression (Monteiro, 2008). Some women in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan blog to enact their liberated identities and to publically critique repressive gender roles (Riegert & Ramsey, 2013). Some of these blogs provide forums for political activism, while others are centers of expression, featuring short stories and prose. One female blogger describes blogging as a haven:

Blogs don’t only give you the chance to hide, they give you another valuable thing: a space without a title. But what happens after a while of creating the blog you find yourself in the midst of what you once escaped. The pseudo name is no longer a curtain that hides you, but it becomes the name of the being exposed by the posts, one after the other. You gain an identity among your

neighbors in blogging—an identity made more defined and clear by every new post. I want to blog for ten years and remain, to the tenth year, thinking about this place as my own place where my rules apply, and that I could, if I desired, post blank posts. (p. 50)

These female bloggers find refuge, identity, and comfort in their blogs. When the blog quoted above was blocked by the Saudi Arabian government, its author began emailing new posts from her cell phone. Readers wanted to stay connected to the author, so they desired to read her posts however posted. Thus, blogging can give repressed women power and voice.

- **Video Blogs or Vlogs:** Vlogs, or video logs, allow users to post in video form (Molyneaux, O'Donnell, & Gibson, 2009) accompanied by text-based comments (Kendall, 2008). Most vlogs focus on personal content. In a study on Youtube vlogs, men posted vlogs more than women (Molyneaux et al., 2009). However, female vloggers were more likely to interact with other vloggers by asking questions and responding. The quality of vlogs also differs along sex lines. Vlogs created by men had better sound quality; women created more interactive vlogs with better image quality. Men vlog about public and technology-related topics; women vlog about personal matters. Despite gender differences in the content and creation of vlogs, both men and women reported feeling a part of the Youtube community.

Blogs and vlogs offer a gender performance platform that is open to the public, whereas other social media, such as Facebook allows users to carefully select the “friends” who will witness their gendered identity performances. With thousands of blogs competing for readership, users may prefer

posting on Facebook, a social utility with wider reach than any individual blog, and a documented faithful following.

Gender and Facebook

One of the most important social media trends of the past decade was the rise of the social media website, Facebook. Facebook, one of the fastest growing and most ubiquitous websites in the world, provides a variety of ways for users to display identity (e.g., Boupha, Grisso, Morris, Webb, & Zakeri, 2013), network (e.g., Webb, Wilson, Hodges, Smith, & Zakeri, 2012), and maintain relationships (e.g., Ledbetter & Mazer, 2014). A pure social media outlet, the site provides multiple ways to discover and locate known individuals, groups, and organizations; after finding these entities, users can interact or maintain privacy and simply follow their updates.

“Checking Facebook” can become “deeply integrated in users’ daily lives through specific routines and rituals” (Debatin, Lovejoy, Horn, & Hughes, 2009, p. 83). According to one survey of college students, 81% of Facebook users log on to the site on any given day (Sheldon, 2009) and they spend an average of 49 minutes per day on the website. Additionally, the site is synced with other social networking sites such as Twitter and Instagram so that users can post content simultaneously to multiple sites.

Unlike many social networking sites, Facebook provides a template to assist new users in the creation of their personal homepages, or their “profile pages,” as they are called in Facebook’s vernacular. Users are prompted to answer questions about demographic information (name, birth date, sex, job, where they went to school), popular culture interests (favorite TV shows, movies, quotes) and social information (relational status). However, the new user is never asked information about nationality, ethnicity, or race. Users can elect to provide as much or as little of this information

as they prefer, and can select privacy settings that determine who sees what information within and outside of their created Facebook network. However, the site prompts users for information that they did not provide initially, implying that a complete profile is ideal to the Facebook organization. Personalizing profile pages allows users to display identity and users can modify the content of their homepages at any time. Men and women also may differ in how they design and interpret profiles. In an analysis of profiles of 13 to 30 years old users, males and females were equally likely to provide basic profile information such as name, e-mail address, hometown and a profile picture (Taraszow, Aristodemou, Shitta, Laouris, & Arsoy, 2010). Perhaps for safety reasons, women were less likely to reveal locator information such as a home address and mobile telephone number (Taraszow et al., 2010).

- **Building Facebook Networks:** Users can send a “friend request” to any other Facebook user, and if accepted, the two users are listed as friends on Facebook. Female users are less likely than male users to accept friendship requests from strangers (Ongun & Demirag, 2014). Currently, Facebook reports that the average user has 130 friends (Facebook, 2011), but networks can vary greatly from one to five thousand friends. Kee et al.’s research (2013) documents the most users’ “networks” are actually comprised of tightly bound groups (e.g., immediate family or a close circle of friends) within large, diverse social aggregations (e.g., extended family or everyone-you-know-at-work).

While Facebook friendships can form entirely online, it is more often the case that a Facebook relationship supports a pre-existing offline relationship (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Haythornthwaite, 2005; Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2006). Facebook friends range from established

intimate relationships to acquaintances. Users perceive that when they are Facebook friends with offline friends and family members, the relationships improve with Facebook use (Waters & Ackerman, 2011).

- **Identity Presentation:** Users broadcast their gendered identities on Facebook via connectivity and narrative (van Dijck, 2013). The unique affordances of Facebook software facilitates connection and narrative, in part, by encouraging photo uploads, status updates, and check-ins. College students who engage in one of these activities such as posting pictures tend to do many more activities (Webb, et al., 2012); in short, users often go “all in” employing multiple connectivity devices. Users control the exact type and amount of information they display (Zhao, Grasmucks, & Martina, 2008), thus allowing them to craft positive presentations of identity to display to other users (Jones, Reiland, & Sanford, 2007).

Gender identity is displayed, in part, via pictures. Rose et al. (2012) found that the pictures uploaded to Facebook as profile pictures contain previously identified gendered traits. Specifically, males often upload pictures that make them seem active, dominant, and independent; females focus more on pictures that make them look attractive and dependent (Rose et al., 2012). Bailey et al. (2013) claim that the, “traditional ‘girl’ is well established in online spaces” (2013, p. 95), and other research points to the traditional “male” being present as well. However, Strano (2008) found that women often engage in impression management via their profile pictures more than men. Given the harsh judgment women receive for deviating from pre-existing gender expectations, this finding seems to make sense. While both men and women perform gender in social network spaces, women are under more pressure

to do so and to conform to what is shown to them through the advertising and other media.

As Garcia-Gomez (2011) noted, sexuality is one aspect of identity; she reported that female teenagers discursively construct sexuality on Facebook primarily via language used when relating to other girls. Observing the identity disclosure of other users can reduce uncertainty by allowing insight into potential responses, attitudes, and behaviors in future interactions (Sheldon, 2009). Researchers describe the users' payoff for self-disclosure in identity presentations as potential gain in "social capital" or the making of connections with potential "pay off" (Aubrey & Rill, 2013; Ellison et al., 2007; Jiang & de Bruijn, 2014). By self-disclosing, users gain social capital but potentially reduce online privacy (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008).

- **Privacy:** Because Facebook gathers data on its users from profiles and posting activities, the site has come under intense media scrutiny for its privacy policies and changes to those policies. An increased number of users modified their Facebook privacy settings following that media scrutiny (boyd & Hargittai, 2010). O'Brian and Torres (2012) report that over half of Facebook users they surveyed reported a high level of privacy awareness. Mohamed and Ahmad (2012) reported that female users were more likely than male users to increase privacy settings rather than rely on Facebook's default settings that allow for maximum information sharing.

Limiting visibility may allow users to feel more comfortable self-disclosing (Stritzke, Nguyen, & Durkin, 2004). Indeed, Debatin, Lovejoy, Horn, & Hughes (2009) reported that Facebook users "claimed to understand privacy issues, yet reported uploading large amounts of personal information" (p. 83). Tufekci's (2008a) survey results revealed

that users may employ a wide variety of methods to ensure privacy including the use of coded language, nick names, and adjusting post visibility via official privacy settings *rather than* limit the amount of information they disclosure. Indeed, users employ a wide variety of methods for managing privacy such as excluding contact information in profiles and untagging themselves in pictures (Young & Quan-Hasse, 2013). In sum, multiple studies document that Facebook users perceive themselves as knowledgeable about privacy issues and as savvy users who effectively maintain their desired level of privacy though both conventional and unconventional methods.

- **Gendered Usage and Performances:** Young adult men and women appear to use Facebook in equal numbers (Hargittai, 2008), but they may differ in how they use it. Women versus men spend more online time engaged in social networking (Acar, 2008). Female college students spend more time communicating with others on social networking sites than male college students (Acar, 2008). College women express affection on Facebook more than their male counterparts; additionally, they perceive Facebook affection as more appropriate than college men (Mansson & Myers, 2011).

College women received and accepted more friendship requests than men (Acar, 2008). College men reported using Facebook to locate and initiate relationships with potential dating partners, whereas college women reported using Facebook to maintain existing relationships (Sheldon, 2009). Among college students, both men and women were more likely to initiate Facebook friendships with opposite-sex users with attractive versus unattractive profile pictures (Wang, Moon, Kwon, Evans, & Stefanone, 2010).

How do strangers interpret the comments that friends write on users' profiles? Both male and

female college students viewed negative comments by friends on a user's profile about the users' moral behavior as influencing the profile owners' attractiveness (Walther, vander Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008). Specifically, the negative comments decreased the attractiveness of female profile owners and increased the attractiveness of male profile owners.

Any user can elect to create a sex-free or gender-neutral Facebook profile. In such situations, users must choose their language carefully because their talk style could reveal their gender (Thomson, 2006; Loureiro & Ribeiro, 2014). Furthermore, stereotypical content of messages also leads to deconstructions and assignments of online gender. For example, a user discussing cooking is likely to be decoded as female, whereas a user discussing sports is likely to be decoded as male. Once manifest, gender can play a role in user relationships on Facebook.

Facebook enjoys widespread acceptance among users world-wide; in contrast, a smaller number of users play online games. Nonetheless, interactive online games offer a commercial social media based on competition with a strong appeal and unique affordances for gendered performance such the necessarily to create an avatar to represent the self. In the next section we discuss these affordances and the resultant gender performances as we review the social scientific research about online gaming.

Gender and Gaming

In 2012, feminist activist Anita Sarkeesian began a project, "Tropes Versus Women In Video Games," to explore sexism in video games via multiple in depth videos. She launched a Kickstarter with the goal of raising \$6000 for her work, and instead raised 25 times that amount (Liss-Schultz, 2014). Because of her critique of the portrayal of women in online games, Sarkeesian received death threats and rape threats; she experienced attempts to collect and publically distribute her home address

and phone number. In 2014, she went into hiding in response to the sheer amount of misogynist hate she received (Campbell, 2014). Sarkeesian's experience exemplifies the popular attention that the topic of gender and gaming is currently receiving. While Sarkeesian's work focuses on the sexism in games in the popular sphere, academic research focuses on how the gaming experience itself is highly gendered in three ways: (1) who is allowed to enjoy video games, (2) how players may behave within the game, and (3) how those who play video games enact gender within the more "anonymous" digital environment.

Online gaming began as mechanized one-person card games such as solitaire, evolved into one-person video games such as early Mario, jumped to player-versus-machine game such as online chess in the 1990s, and then took the social-media leap to player-versus-player games with interaction between players, allowing users to select their opponents, discuss rules and potential rule violations, congratulate winners, and across-games, develop on-going relationships. With the advent of massive multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPG), the conversion from online games as diversion to online gaming as a social media was complete. Today, with real-time voice communication between players, users form teams, go on quests together, develop antagonist relationships with serial opponents and collegial relationships with fellow players from around the world. Given that many MMORPG are commercial and proprietary, other social media, such as Facebook, do not offer them as part of the possible ways for users to interact. Instead Facebook purchased and offers versions of simpler games that are far less expensive to own and operate.

As the technology and the culture of gaming progresses, it becomes more and more social; for example, games often have entire communities of message boards, Facebook pages, and other arenas of online communication devoted to them. Additionally, gaming is increasingly social itself. For example, Playstation Network and Xbox Live

both allow users to post images, videos, and commentary on their experiences playing the games. Other users respond to these postings, and people can develop friend lists. In this way, gaming has become a social medium.

Below, the chapter discusses how, in a very real way, gender is policed within the gaming subculture, both in terms of how the genders are represented in the games as Sarkeesian noted, and how men and women play the games. However, it is important to note that the literature reviewed below carries with it the implicit assumption that MMORPG is a more masculine space in which women are making inroads. While this be true of MMORPG, casual gaming such as Facebook games and games for smart phones have seen a very large influx of female gamers. These spaces do not see some of the misogyny directed at female gamers that is represented in many of the studies below. As such, additional research is needed to further clarify the increasing complex social media phenomenon of online gaming.

- **Portrayals of Gaming Characters:** As Olgetree and Drake (2007) argue, “gender differences in participation and character portrayals potentially impact the lives of youth in a variety of ways” (p.537). Unfortunately, such representations of gender can often be stereotyped and can lead to misleading expectations of gender identity, beauty standards, sex appeal, and even gender-related violence (Beasley & Standley, 2002; Dietz, 1998). Such stereotypes extend to the websites designed to promote the commercial MMORPG. Robinson, Callister, Clark, and Phillips (2008) reported that these websites portray female characters in highly sexualized ways and male characters far outnumber female characters. Perhaps gaming companies are simply identifying their base, as more men identify as gamers than women (Shaw, 2011). From promotion to execu-

tion, games identify males as the primary audience and imply a woman’s place within the gaming world. To participate, women must fill the position outlined for them or potentially face the kind of backlash Sarkeesian faced when she spoke out against these articulated gender roles.

- **Activities in Gaming Per Se:** The experience of playing the games is as gendered as the games themselves. Although women and men spend equal time playing online games (Williams et al., 2009), women largely perceive video games as gendered male (Thornham, 2008; Royse, Lee, Undrahbuyan, Hopson, & Consalvo, 2007). In an ethnographic study, Thornham (2008) found that both men and women play video games quite competently, but women ask for help and instruction as a means of eliciting social interaction from male gamers. Such requests offer male gamers the opportunity to demonstrate expertise. Both males and females in Thornham’s study played out specific gender roles when gaming. However, as more women have entered the realm of video gaming, they have adopted a multiplicity of roles. Yates and Littleton (2001) call upon researchers to examine how players construct the very act of gaming and how such constructions may impact and challenge their sense of self, including their own gendered identities. To answer this call, Royce et al. (2007) conducted a study about the levels of play in video games and how women approach this phenomenon in a medium that is clearly skewed towards male gamers. Their findings identified distinct attitudes towards gaming that corresponded with three different levels of play:
 - Female gamers who identified as power gamers due to their heavy amounts of play had no problems integrating video games and gender identity be-

cause they took far more control over the experience in the characters they created. These gamers valued choice and control, and seemed to choose characters that were feminine and sexy as well as strong. For these female gamers, digital games were not a problematic technology because they were able to embody femininity in their lives as they performed masculinity in their gaming behavior. The performance of gender was a choice for these women—a preferred negotiation with the technology. They felt empowered, rather than at the mercy of a gendered gaming experience.

- By contrast, the second category of moderate gamers identified by Royce et al. (2007) exercised control as well. However, instead of control over characters within the game, these gamers controlled the types of games they played. They enacted control at the environmental level. These gamers tended to reinscribe traditional gender divisions by assigning certain genres of games like fantasy and violent games to men, while they claimed ownership over what they perceive as more feminine games such as puzzle and problem-solving games.
- Finally, those women who identified as non-gamers perceived the entire gaming experience as a male one, and thus displayed no interest in it.

Nonetheless, it is “impossible for researchers to make ready conclusions about how digital games may operate as ‘technologies of gender,’ for they seem to operate in different ways for different women” (Royce et al., 2007, p. 560). Kerr (2003) concurs; she reported that women tend to contest and appropriate gaming technology for their own means.

- **Gendered Interactions between Gamers:**

The technology of gaming is always improving, however, and with improvements come new ways in which gender must be negotiated. Until this point, the discussion has for the most part focused on the relationship between the player and the game. Online gaming has become more and more of a reality, from MMORPG to console services that allow for many games to have a multiplayer element that can involve playing with anyone from within the nation and sometimes around the world. For example, Xbox Live, the service that allows Xbox players to connect and game with other Xbox players, recently reached 46 million subscriptions (Agnello, 2013); more than half of all Xbox owners have an Xbox Live subscription. With this service, and others like it, comes the ability to communicate orally via a headset (as opposed to textually, as has been more common with MMORPGs). Due to the general lack of a keyboard with consoles, oral communication is the preferred method of communication among users while playing. Such online gaming experiences have arguably moved gaming into the social media sphere.

With the rise of *interactive* online gaming comes the question of how players will perform beyond the games themselves and how they will interact with a vast community of people playing the same game. This is a far different, more dynamic performance than the living room gamers Thornham (2008) studied. At the same time, however, voices are easily identified as male or female, and thus a level of anonymity disappears. Williams et al. (2007) reports that in real-time voice chat, other gamers respond to voice as a gendered identity cue. Kuznekoff and Rose (2012) played neutral audio responses of a man speaking and a woman speaking while playing games on

the Xbox Live network; the female voice received three times more negative comments than the male voice or no voice at all. Many comments about the female voice contained specific gendered insults, such as “whore” or “slut”.

Williams, Caplan, and Xiong (2009) reported that male players were more verbally aggressive in general in some online multiplayer games than female players. Perhaps voice communication technology allows male gamers to be even more active participants in gendering the gaming experience. Furthermore, Gray (2012) noted that in promotional materials for the games, female characters are sexualized; now the anonymous male voice can and does hurl negative sexualized insults at female voices. Such behavior stands in contrast to Thornham (2008)’s living room gamers, where gender was enacted as a form of expertise within gaming. The verbal insults directed at women in an environment that allows for relatively anonymous voice communication may mark MMORPG as a contested gender space; here we have male voices attempting to bully and police gender roles for female voices.

Given that heavy female gamers seek to define their own gaming experience, conflict over the nature of the gendered gaming experience seems inevitable. As Kuznekoff and Rose (2012) point out, more research is needed in this area. They claim that, “past research has not fully examined the content generated by gamers and instead has focused on that content created by game developers” (p. 553). With online gaming, gamers communally create a large portion of their own experience, and as such the virtual gaming environment becomes a socially constructed space. Based on the research cited above, gender is an important part of that social construction.

- **Gender-Bending:** While voice chat has made it more difficult for gamers to mask their offline gender identity in online gaming spaces, it has not prevented gender-bending entirely. Given that MMORPGs

often rely primarily on text-based chat only, gender-bending while gaming has become quite common. Yee (2004) reported that, in massive online games, one out of every two female characters is played by a man. One reason male players cite for gender-bending is that female characters receive more assistance and free gifts while playing. Gender-bending requires a conscious, careful performance to avoid being outed, however (Motschenbacher, 2009; Remington, 2009).

Researchers have offered numerous rationales for gender-bending in cyberspace. Motivations themselves can be gendered, as they can reflect deferential treatment of men and women in contemporary American society. Men might gender-bend because they desire the attention garnered by a female identity (Danet, 1998) or because they desire the power achieved in misrepresentation or intentionally deceiving others. Women might gender-bend to be more comfortable enacting aggression or to enjoy the power typically accorded males. Additionally, adopting a masculine identity allows women to avoid online sexual harassment (Danet, 1998). Furthermore, gender-bending allows individuals to experiment with gendered social norms such as differing levels of self-disclosure. Because it is considered more socially acceptable for a woman to self-disclose at a high level than for a man, a man wishing to self-disclose extensively can assume the identity of a woman to avoid questioning. Users can gender-bend to “try on” new ways of communicating in their offline as well as online, personal relationships (Hans et al., 2011). Thus, gender-bending allows users to enact relationships in ways perceived as desirable online but undesirable in offline venues.

For those who adhere to traditional gender roles (i.e., biological males enact masculine behaviors, biological females enact feminine behaviors), gender-bending is unfathomable and confusing because gender-benders fail to fit easily or readily

into existing cognitive categories. “I log in and now I’m a woman. And I’d log off and I’m a man again” (Bruckman, 1993). Gender-benders display “improper” gender identity in a society that considers gender an important part of human interaction (Bruckman, 1993); thus, gender-bending can be viewed as a form of resistance (Rothman, 1993) that poses a threat to the social structure. Gender-benders can develop identity based on performance of unconventionally gendered representations and accordingly can be socially reprimanded and pathologized by evaluators (Plante, 2006).

Ibanez (2012) suggests that when users perform online gender and race different from their offline self, such performances can provide new knowledge of other people’s gendered identities. As mentioned above, however, more research is needed in the content gamers create for themselves within the gaming environment, and this includes the performance of gender. Much of the current research centers on the female experience in the masculine environment, and perhaps with good reason. The female experience offers an insight into how gender functions within gaming.

- **Performing Gender While Gaming:** Questions arise as to what it means to perform gender in an environment that is in every aspect gendered as masculine. Given that female gamers often perceive that they must conform to masculine expectations, even when controlling their own gaming experience. When masquerading as a woman, however, male players must conform to male expectations regarding women. This kind of performance would necessarily involve some tensions and heavy reliance on stereotypes – the very stereotypes perpetuated by the gaming medium. It is possible to resist sexual and gender norms in cyberspace, but unfortunately those very norms also can be and often are reproduced instead of challenged (Brookey & Cannon, 2009; Martey & Consalvo, 2011; Martey,

Stromer-Galley, Banks, Wu, & Consalvo, 2014; Stabile, 2014). In addition, created characters tend to be disproportionately male and white, meaning that females and minorities are underrepresented (Waddell, Ivory, Conde, Long, & McDonnell, 2014). This kind of lopsided representation can lead to skewed perceptions of offline social reality (Waddell et al., 2014).

There is no doubt that both men and women are playing video games. Some, such as Norris (2004), suggest that the hostile environment toward women within online video games might be a reason why more women are not playing them, but that environment does not preclude female participation entirely, or even mostly. Evidence of this diversity can be found in the recent debate over changes to the popular MMORPG *World of Warcraft* (WoW) that sought to eliminate sexist and gendered dialogue. Some gamers lauded the changes as a step forward, while others opposed the changes as the result of feminist killjoys (Braithwaite, 2014). Braithwaite concluded that those opposed to the changes sought to reinforce gender power dynamics. Similarly, Eklund (2011) noted that the study of gender within spaces such as WoW must involve an examination of sexuality; although heterosexual norms and rules typically apply within that online gaming space, there are opportunities for queer performance.

In other parts of the world, separate genres of MMORPGs are marketed to cater to different genders. For example, in Taiwan there are “Kawaii Online Role Playing Games” that target females and “Simulated Online Role Playing Games” that target males (Hou, 2012). While availability of targeted games demonstrates interest on the part of females, it also exemplifies gender roles being reinforced through specific targeting. How gender is performed in increasingly multiplayer gaming environments should be of great interest to scholars concerned with this continually evolving performance context.

Gaming, Facebook, and blogs each offer unique affordances for the performance of gender and each witnesses distinct types of performance. The three exemplars offer diverse models of how affordances impact performances as well as the diversity of gendered performances. The existing findings are interesting but more research is needed.

GAPS IN THE EXTANT RESEARCH AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The detailed review of the relevant social scientific research offers evidence that users perform gender in multiple social media venues and that some of those performances reinforce existing sex role stereotypes (such as the sexualized female avatars in WoW) while others promote increased equality (such as the liberation blogs). Additionally, the detailed descriptions of three specific social media clarified the notion of specific affordances; examples linked those affordances to specific kinds of gendered performances (e.g., women not listing cell phone numbers on Facebook). However, the exact links between affordances of specific social media and the types of performances they promote remains largely undocumented. Future research to address this knowledge gap would assist innovators in knowing where to invest their online efforts.

- **Gaps in Gender and Blogs Research:** Much has been written about what kinds of blogs male and female writers tend to create. As mentioned above, statistical evidence tells us who is writing what kinds of blogs. However, further research that examines blogs beyond the simplistic demarcation of filter versus diary blogs could prove helpful in understanding online gendered performances. As ideas of gender become more and more nuanced, so too must blogs as gendered spaces. Older bi-

naries may cease to apply or may apply in new and different ways. More nuanced research might include the following ideas:

- o Miller (1984) first articulated the notion that topical genre itself is used rhetorically as a form of social action. Miller's work offers one approach for investigating how blog genres themselves may be gendered and to address the question of how a much wider variety of blog types that are being used generically also can be employed to rhetorically construct and articulate gender. At the moment, filter blogs and diary blogs seem to reinforce existing gender norms and stereotypes, but are there genres of blogs that challenge such stereotypes?
 - If researchers examined blog genres that are not typically defined by gender, such as environmental blogs, they might (or might not) find evidence of gender performance. If such performances occur, how do they differ from those in clearly gendered spaces?
 - Does labeling a blog influence how potential readers see the blog *in terms of potential gendered performances* that are permitted there? For example, does labeling blogs "sexist" versus "liberation" versus "traditionally gendered" prompt readers to perceive an implied rhetorical invitation to engage in certain types of gendered behaviors?
 - Another area for possible research, stemming from the research into women's movements via blogs, is looking at blogs as digital but rhetorical spaces. Such research could examine questions such as how is this

space conceptualized and how it becomes gendered (or not) within such conceptualizations of the space.

- **Gaps in Gender and Facebook Research:** Rarely has gender been the focal point of research on Facebook. Instead, issues of gender tended to surface in studies about usage. Thus, we know that women use Facebook more than men but there are many other avenues of potential research. Below are a few suggestions for further exploration.

- Do expectations of privacy vary among the genders? The concept of privacy and perceptions of it on Facebook has been studied in some depth, but not with an eye towards gender. The few differences by biological sex that have emerged were incidental findings.
- Given that privacy, relationship building, and gender issues intersect on Facebook, more in depth examination of existing findings are in order. For example, females accept more friend requests; does this mean that privacy is of less concern? Or is “networking” of greater concern? Is there some other motivation?
- Many studies examine how users display identity on Facebook but rarely is gender the focus of such studies. Studies of ethnicity displays (Boupha et al., 2013) could be nuanced to include differential performances of gender.
- Facebook itself has recently included an increased array of sexuality options to choose from as users craft their profiles. Sexuality affords the opportunity to practice gender performance. Will users change their options, and thus their gender per-

formances, with the advent of these increased options? Will new users employ them or continue to favor traditional options?

- Users middle-age and older comprise the fastest growing age segment on Facebook. Thus, examining Facebook behavior affords researchers to opportunity to study gendered performances among an unstudied online population.

- **Gaps in Gender and Gaming Research:**

As mentioned at the start of the gaming section, there seem to be implicit assumptions in the literature of gaming as a masculine space. Much like the more traditional forms of social media (if any form of social media can be labeled “traditional”), gaming is a quickly evolving social platform. Females may dominate certain parts of the space, such as casual games, but research is needed to verify or disprove this idea, and to examine the performance of gender in new gaming spaces not automatically assumed “masculine”. Perhaps the assumption of gaming as a masculine space no longer holds true in light of newer gaming experiences. What are the experiences of the feminine gender in these frontiers? What is the masculine reaction to the new gaming spaces? How will gender factor into the social construction of these new spaces? How do race and gender intersect in social gaming spaces? These questions and more are the issues that should drive future research into the social medium of gaming.

- **General Directions for Future Research:**

In addition to the specific suggestions above, there are some obvious gaps in the research across multiple social media venues. Below three are highlighted:

- The increased linkages between social media, such as a Facebook status up-

date containing a link to a blog post, may further reinforce gender beliefs and behaviors; conversely, delivering the same message on multiple venues may prompt users to rejection of messages. The potential impact of social media linkages and their relationship to gender preferences is unknown and awaits exploration.

- The vast majority of research examining gender issues in social media focuses on women and women's experiences. There are reasonable and laudable reasons for this focus; nonetheless, with males comprising approximately 49% of the human specie, attention to their gendered performances will provide additional insights.
- Furthermore, research could track how gender performances evolve over time.
- Finally, the vast amount of research on gender and social media published thus far reports differences between the biological sexes rather than engaging more nuanced assessments of gender or concerns of sexual identification. Moving to more sophisticated conceptualizations and measurement will rapidly increase scholars understanding of online gendered performances.

SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the tremendous popularity of social media, especially among impressionable adolescents and young adults, it seems reasonable to continue researching these so called new media and to play close attention to performances of gender, race, and class in these online spaces. Conversely,

the same social media that elicit powerful, liberating gender performances also present many challenges, such as online deception. Therefore, social media engagement should be thoughtful but not avoidant.

Social media provide venues for interaction and performance. They are neutral. Users can employ social media to benefit and to harm themselves and others. Collectively, users, groups, and organizations can employ social media as instruments to maintain the status quo or to move in directions of positive change. Regardless of the users' goals, the following specific recommendations apply:

- Change agents who desire to promote increased gender equality should develop an online presence that spans multiple media. Employing multiple media simultaneously allows for the reinforcement of promoted ideas as well as the potential to reach multiple audiences. On these websites, they might offer models of preferred gendered performances as well as provide positive feedback to the positive performances they see.
- Similarly, agencies that assist men and women in their efforts to achieve equity might "advertise" their services on social media, especially on websites where equality is sorely lacking such as dating websites and online gaming websites. Providing information about their services in a place where those services are needed may lead to a significant increase in clientele.
- Finally, socializing agents such as educators, parents, coaches, and religious leaders might reasonably participate in social media as users so that they can appreciate their mentees' online experiences, especially as they pertain to societal and peer pressure to conform to gender and sexual expectations. When the time comes to educate young adults about the role of social media in sexualization and gender exploi-

tation, socializing agents can build their credibility by speaking from first-hand knowledge of social media venues.

CONCLUSION

The performance of gender is endemic to social media of all kinds, including blogs, Facebook, and online games. Some users employ social media venues to challenge existing gender stereotypes and to defy prevailing social norms; other users reproduce existing sex role stereotypes on social media—sometimes because gender performances are policed either by the software itself or by fellow users. Instead of challenging gender roles, many social media, such as online games, reconstruct them along familiar lines through corporate advertising and social pressure. In those cases, most of the pressure to conform is directed to women; at this point in time, the scholarly focus also lies with female users. However, more research on the phenomenon would establish the effect of the performance of gender in these spaces on both users and programmer.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Blog: Website where the owner (i.e., the blogger) posts content (text, pictures, links) related to a specific topic on a frequent and regular basis; posts are displayed in reverse chronological order and readers' comments are encouraged.

Gender (vs. Biological Sex): Whereas biological sex (male or female) is a mere accident of birth, humans enact gender via multiple modes of expression within societal inscriptions of gender as performed through words and actions.

Gender-Bending: Biological males pose as female, biological female pose as males, or individuals pose as nongendered.

Multi-Player Online Gaming: An online game in which the number of simultaneous players is unlimited.

Online Gaming: Games played exclusively on the Internet, such as World of Warcraft, and typically involve fiction, role playing and unusual skills.

Performance Theory: Butler's theory of gender performativity (1990) argues that humans create gender identities through expression and performance, typically within the confines of cultural expectations and limitations.

Relationship Maintenance: "Keep up with" and "stay in touch with" relational partners.

Social Capital: The making of connections with potential "pay off."

Social Media: Websites that facilitate user interaction.

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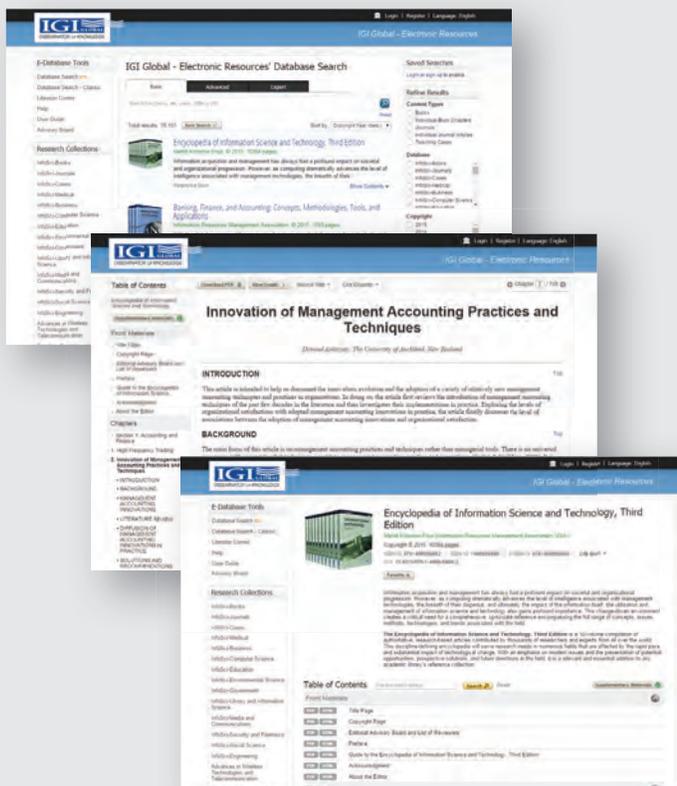
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