

My Email Is Longer Than Your Email: Gender in Online Communities

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The internet is, at its heart, a network of information, designed to spawn communication and easy connections between sets of data. In this regard, it is a primarily feminine structure, despite the imposition of male hierarchical organization. While the network is out there, rhizomatic and widespread, the main interface - search engines - are a structure based on rankings and popularity. In other words, we navigate a feminine world by way of masculine strategies. We are, in a sense, organizing hunting parties in the search for potatoes. But does this affect the way women use the web, or the way men do?

Look at the internet revolution - instant messaging, chat room technology, email, search engines, the development of personal home pages, a proliferation of geocities websites and online diaries, blogs - and look at how they affect the behaviors of each gender that interacts with them. How it is used differently by men and women?

First of all, who is using the web? Statistics vary from year to year and from source to source, but according to a 2001 Nielsen/NetRatings poll, there were "53.33 million women actively used the Internet compared to 49.83 million men" [Roach, p.1]. However, an overwhelming majority of papers I have encountered use the statistic that only 40% of users are women. How are women using the web? According to a poll conducted net wide by British Marketing Researchers ICM, "86% of women use it to keep in touch with friends and relatives, while 80% of men use it for hobbies and interests" [Anon, p.1]. Given the natural feminine inclination for relationships, this is not at all surprising. (I should point out that I use the term "feminine" and "masculine" to represent patterns of behavior - and I do not resort to "male" and "female" as indicators of that behavior.)

Femininity is the gender of networks, traditionally seeking out relationships to others as a means of definition. The internet chat room is a relational technology,

designed to facilitate communication. The forums are constantly available and usually on going. Many of them have recurring personalities, making it similar in atmosphere to a bar or coffeehouse, with an emphasis on conversation, oftentimes with many regulars. These places tend to function as social networks, where people are able to discuss subjects of either specific or general interests. In many of these forums, the regulars tend to form an emotional network, where casual conversation can lead very rapidly to extremely open communication and the illusion of intimacy among people residing in widely disparate geographical locations. Since it is widely known that feminine psychologies tend to respond to relational and social situations, [Miller, 1981] geographical concerns seem to pose little problem for their widespread use of these forums. It is not surprising that women tend to overwhelm men in such rooms.

However, there is an interesting paradox that comes from looking at this phenomenon closer. For one, online communication is considered “less satisfying” than face to face communication by a larger number of people asked in a survey taken in 2000. [Cummings, 2002] However, more people are reporting that they are spending less time with those “offline” friends as a result of spending time online [Kraut, 1998]. While these numbers come from different studies, it does present enough information to question how these disparities could exist.

I contend that this data suggests that the feminine conception of connectedness could be seen as manifested in the desire for “access”. Chat rooms are very open and constant presences in most internet connected homes and offices, and the relationships tend to develop at a quicker pace given several factors. The time spent online, and the anonymity of the space, which serves to encourage openness and good faith. “The perception of trust, intimacy, and acceptance has the potential to encourage online users to use these relationships as a primary source of companionship and comfort” [Griffiths, 2001]. To me, the data suggests that the actual quality of a relationship may not be as important as the perceived availability of those relationships. While it is not to say that there is a substitution of quality for quantity, it may be accurate to say that maintaining one’s self within a larger context of a mailing list or chat room may serve as a comforting affirmation of one’s ability to do so, regardless of any situations external to that online context. As Miller puts it, “women’s sense of self becomes very much organized around being able to make and then maintain affiliation and relationships.” (Miller, 1976; referenced by Surrey, 1981.) A chat room could be accessed daily, to check up quickly on friends and colleagues, and to quickly affirm the status of those relationships. Could it be that this sense of self can be just as potent when it comes in the guise of less satisfying and less emotionally fulfilling online relationships? It is interesting to note that within a survey of online computer users, men were more likely to describe themselves as “lonely,” whereas women were more likely to describe themselves as “depressed”

[Jackson, 2001]. Women are using chat rooms with constant social affirmation, so loneliness is not an issue, but those relationships do not seem to be able to provide an actual fulfilling sense of self. The lack of authenticity and true connectedness within those relationships could be very depressing.

This does not contradict any evidence in regards to masculine relationships. Men are participating in online activities such as the aforementioned mailing lists and chat rooms, and in fact, they are doing so in a way that is strongly in line with what is now becoming the predictable standby of most masculine theory: They are arguing, oftentimes aggressively, and competing. One researcher, who followed a single mailing list on the subject of linguistics - an area of study without much opportunity for heated dissent - found that

A daunting 68% of the messages posted by men made use of an adversarial style in which the poster distanced himself from, criticized, and/or ridiculed other participants, often while promoting his own importance. The few women who participated in the discussion, in contrast, displayed features of attenuation - hedging, apologizing, asking questions rather than making assertions - and a personal orientation, revealing thoughts and feelings and interacting with and supporting others [Herring, 1994].

This would fall in line with the general consideration for competition in masculine relationships. The idea of distance is a strong factor in masculine relationships, which are traditionally considered to be more "active" friendships. An adversarial style of communication is a "doing" action - it engages the other in a debate and an argument, as opposed to a feminine framework of empathic and supportive communication. But it also reinforces the notion of the online space as one where the presence of openness and intimacy is threatened and unwelcome. Therefore, it is "safe" from the feminizing forces that could otherwise come through in a communication forum. Note that the online mailing list is different from a chat room. A mailing list allows for the monopolization of conversation, and is archived to a permanent record. Whereas in a chat room, conversations are temporal, and occur in a what I call a "chatter formation", in that all parties are capable of speaking at once, while a mailing list is one speaker at a time. This allows for an authoritarian posturing in any communication, and one can write with the assumption that the reader is giving the writer exclusive attention. A mailing list is also similar in its properties to the "public meeting space" which men seem to prefer in their friendships, notably because public spaces restrict the level of intimacy that one is expected to display in public [Walker, 1994]. However, while a chat room is usually a smaller space with people who are there to engage in communication, a mailing list has "lurkers", a set of subscribers who do not communicate and merely read. This adds an element of a "public" to the mailing list which is not as prevalent in a chat room. In this regard, a mailing list

is a kind of podium, but a podium where your face cannot be seen. This faceless, public forum, which is completely alien from any sense of intimacy, seems to encourage men to behave in a way that is even more masculine than they may be in a bar, coffeehouse or other meeting place. Perhaps because the entire nature of identity is so challenged by these factors, the entire system of masculinity is itself challenged. It is not enough to simply be a man online in order to be masculine - no one can see who you are, physically. Instead, all of one's masculinity must come through in behavior and means of communication. That this is exaggerated online may have to do with the illusions of intimacy that the web provides - because it is anonymous, there exists more freedom with regard to opening up or sharing one's feelings with strangers, making it a more threatening location to the male psyche.

I would now like to change focus to look at the phenomenon of the internet web page. One of the sharpest rising demographics for personal web pages seems to be teenage girls. According to research done by Media Metrix and Jupiter communications and reported in ABC news, a large number of teenage girls are creating expressive web pages as an extension of their online socialization. Girls are publishing online diaries and making themselves known on the web. This is in direct conflict with the general assumption of non-assertive femininity, particularly for adolescents. The dominant social construction for adolescents has been, as Miller points out, "that this is a time when girls 'contract' rather than expand" [Miller, 1981]. If girls are making web pages, doesn't this mean they are breaking through the gender barrier into a realm of self expression and assertiveness? I assert that they are. The online environment provides an opportunity to create new rules for communicating, and it is promising that this space is being taken advantage of.

In a very real sense, the existence of girls web pages on the net are evidence of a new niche for adolescent feminine assertiveness. Whereas the masculine-defined act of assertiveness draws on bringing attention to oneself, it is usually derived from elements of competition. The masculine assertiveness makes references to achievements, or, as we see in email exchanges, boasts of a superior intellect or some sort of superlative in the realm of ability. A feminized version of assertive behavior seems to emphasize expression but at little expense to others and with little regard for comparison or competition. A web page is less imposing than an online, public forum such as a mailing list. It is interesting to note that within the information technologies industry, mailing lists are known as "push content" whereas a web site is considered "passive" content. A web page does not come to you, instead, you have to seek it out - whereas emails are a "push" media which arrive, often whether you want them or not. This also gives the web page a strange sense of intimacy as compared to more aggressive mediums. Whereas any comments made to a mailing list are made in a social, group context, a

webpage is designed to be viewed by one person at one location, although it can happen multiple times per day, or hour. Nonetheless, looking at a web page is a solitary experience. Here, the feminine desire for intimacy comes through by way of a new kind assertiveness, in the presence of a "virtual intimacy." A web page is a very long, one on one conversation, distributed across hundreds to thousands of people.

It is again fitting that the flip side of this intimacy is the existence, and use, of online internet pornography, some of which utilize the same technologies women seek out for their conduciveness to emotional intimacy. In this space, men are using chat rooms and web sites in a sexual context. In chat rooms, women are looking for intimacy and men are looking for sex. While the phenomenon of "cybersex" streaks through both genders, there are differences in how genders engage with it. Most notably, men are drawn towards web sites in which photographs can be downloaded or exchanged, whereas women tend to be involved with more "intimate" or "relational" cyber sexual encounters such as chat rooms and one on one text messaging [Griffiths, 2001]. That men favor photographs reflects again on the notion of resistance to intimacy, but also works as a parallel to adolescent girls web diaries. From a feminine perspective, a website with personal content is made more intimate by the viewing conditions of such a site. There are invitations to engage in dialogue by way of multiple email links and guest book options, which turn the web site itself into a starting point for more intimate interactions. A masculine perspective places emphasis on different elements. For example, a pornographic image downloaded from a website is rendered even less intimate by its means of distribution. Newsgroups and sexualized chat rooms are still communications forums, only in these cases, they revolve around multiple men in a mutual observance of women in sexualized roles. This allows men to affirm their heterosexuality while engaging in social interactions simultaneously. Men can communicate with each other over the acquisition of pornography much as men will bond in the presence of a sex worker at a bachelors party or strip club [Schulz, p.397]. Connections are made through a desire to obtain or trade images, a social network which shifts itself away from intimacy. The images themselves are sexualized, but aside from the production of these images, women serve almost no role in the social aspect of these communities.

It should come as no surprise then that gender roles on and offline tend to follow suit with each other. What this proves is that, regardless of where these differences come from, they are adaptable. Even in a situation of total anonymity, there is still an element of self that must be asserted. In the case of the web, it is interesting to note that gender is one of the most basic elements of personality that comes through. With the advent of such a radical new forum for social relationships as the web, there seems to be some hope that it can lead to changes

in basic human behaviors. One such phenomenon was that of online gender switching, the idea that one gender could attempt to masquerade as the other when online. However, it is now reported that this has been overemphasized. According to research done at American and Australian Universities, “while 60 percent of the individuals in both studies said they had never tried gender switching, 21 percent reported they were currently gender switching. Another 19 percent had experimented with it but stopped” [Schwarz, 2000]. So, the status quo seems to be maintained. Based on this study, which included 400 online participants in a gaming scenario, the top reason for gender switching was not curiosity over gender differences, but merely for new approaches to gaming.

It appears that the internet, despite being organized by male hierarchies in its early histories, is still a more or less open forum in regards to gender. However, we should keep in mind that the feminine behaviors we see here are feminine behaviors adapted to these male structures. I would argue that even the early text messaging chat rooms were male oriented- consider that these rooms were pure text, with almost no capacity for emotion or creative expression. What has happened to the popularized versions of these systems has been the addition of graphical “emoticons” which allow the writer greater control over the tone of their text, as well as the options to change color and size of text. The addition of these features, on a time line, seems to correspond with the rise of adolescent girls in chat rooms and in instant text message conversations. Which way any possible correlation runs would make for interesting research. What might a feminist version of the internet look like, as opposed to a masculine system adapted to feminine uses? Would it enable more types of power for women, in regards to access, empathy, and ease of communication? Perhaps these questions will be answered by technology. For example, an increase in the presence of video phones, webcams and teleconferencing would open up the internet to a greater degree of intimacy, in creating a greater sense of “face to face” communication. Of course, this same technology is already being used in online web portals which range from open chat rooms to pornographic communities, both of which share the same name as a phenomenon: “Cam Girls.”

It could be said that the internet does not radically alter the nature of men and women, nor does it alter the relationships between men and women when they interact with each other. The dynamic of power between genders remains intact, and it remains to be seen whether technology can spark changes in these structures, or simply serve as another means of facilitating them.

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