Chapter 17
A Study of the Relationship between Gender and Online Social Presence

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ABSTRACT

CMC has been considered a “democratizing” technology; however, research indicates that CMC does not automatically result in social equality, and points to the importance of social and cultural factors surrounding the adoption of technology. Research suggests that CMC may impose a disadvantage to females, demonstrating lower levels of social presence. This study assesses the predictive relationship between gender and online social presence. A total of 395 graduate students participated by responding to the Computer-Mediated Communication Questionnaire. Quantitative research designs and analyses were applied. This study concluded that online social presence is not related to gender; therefore, gender cannot serve as an effective predictor for online social presence. A female’s online social presence can be as high as a male’s. Effective strategies to improve online social presence for both genders are suggested. Additionally, this study raises the importance on gender equity in emerging social media.

INTRODUCTION

Both women and men actively participate in computer-mediated communication (CMC). Although both genders may actively participate in CMC, it is inappropriate to assume that both genders possess an equal level of online social presence. Formerly, men had more access and used more types of technology than women, but a shift to web-based computing eliminates some gender gaps (Crocco, Cramer, & Meier, 2008). Women seem to be gaining territory in online
communication. Based on the Pew Internet & American Life Project in 2005, the proportions of men and women communicating online were approximately equal, 68% men and 66% women (Fallows, 2005). The fact that females use CMC as actively as their counterparts does not guarantee that females have positive level of online social presence since degree of social presence is not related to the frequency of CMC use.

CMC is considered a “democratizing” technology; however, research indicates that CMC does not automatically result in social equality, and points to the importance of social and cultural factors surrounding the adoption and use of technology. Herring (1993) revealed gender differences in communication patterns in online discussions. In fact, based on gender issues in CMC research, literature suggests females may project lower online social presence than men. Wolfe (1999) found that postings of females were ignored in CMC environments while expository communicative styles of men may extrude the epistolary approach of women (Fahy, 2002), which resulted in reduced level of social presence for females. Social presence is a vital affective learning factor which influences online interaction (Garrison et al., 2010). The levels of social presence generated by each gender represent a critical subject of examination to ensure that both genders engage actively in CMC activities.

SOCIAL PRESENCE

Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (1999) defined presence as the ability of participants in a community of inquiry to project themselves socially and emotionally, as real people through the medium of communication being used. More specifically, social presence represents the degree of feeling, perception, and reaction of being connected by CMC to another intellectual entity through electronic media (Tu & McIsaac, 2002). It will influence online social interaction, and impact individual instrumental voice, value-expressive voice, and the group interaction process (Roberts, Lowry, & Sweeney, 2006).

Researchers argue that social presence may instigate, sustain, and support cognitive and affective learning objectives by making group interactions appealing, engaging, and intrinsically rewarding (Rourke et al., 2001). Cognitive learning evaluations suggest that the social presence of teachers is positively related to perceived learning (Russo & Benson, 2005) and perceived satisfaction (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997). When social presence is combined with a positive teaching presence, the groups examined demonstrated high levels of cognitive learning. In fact, Garrison et. al. (2010) emphasized on the importance of teaching presence on learners’ social presence, such as nonverbal and verbal communication. Skills of instructors enhance the social presence of learners. It is clear that higher social presence would lead to better performance on written assignments and encouraged greater interaction in group assignments (Polhemus, Shih, & Swan, 2001). When examining frequency of discussion dialogues, studies consonant with the results that higher social presence would initiate and maintain a greater quantity of interactions, responses, and lengths of postings (Russo & Benson, 2009).

Clearly, social presence has a positive relationship with affective learning because its foundation is socio-cultural learning. Russo and Benson (2009) concluded higher social presence would lead to more positive attitude toward courses while Gunawardena et al. (2001) indicated social presence facilitates the building of trust and self-disclosure within online learning environments.

CMC AND GENDER

Researchers have investigated equity and dynamics of CMC, regarding gender differences in online environments (Savicki, Kelley, & Lingenfelter, 1996; Savicki, Kelley, & Oesterreich, 1999; Jaffe,