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Men, women, and Web 2.0 writing: Gender difference in Facebook composing

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Abstract

While the nature of composition on Facebook has become a common topic of interest in composition journals, how gender identification affects Facebook use has not been studied. This study gives an overview of differences between women and men in Facebook usage based on a large-scale survey of first-year composition students about their Facebook use. Among the findings of the survey are that women tend to have had Facebook profiles for longer, use Facebook more, and are more thoughtful about their Facebook use. The researcher uses these findings to suggest drawing on previous studies related to gender and composition in the study of Web 2.0 technologies in computers and writing literature. The findings also suggest an exploration of gender and other identity markers may be fruitful when using social network sites in first-year composition classes.

Keywords: social network sites (SNSs); social networking sites (SNSs); Facebook; composition; first-year composition (FYC); college writing; gender; social media

Gender studies is an important part of the field of composition. Studies that deal with gender and writing have been very influential to the field (see Shari J. Stenberg, 2013, for an overview). Gender and other aspects of identity are frequently mentioned in scholarship in computers and writing journals, and collections relevant to computers and writing often include several chapters related to gender (see, for example, Kristen L. Arola & Anne Frances Wysocki, 2012). In recent years, however, explorations of gender difference have tended to be integrated into larger arguments instead of being a separate subject of discussion. One consequence of this is that gender differences have not been explored in detail in computers and writing literature since the advent of Web 2.0. Multiple recent studies outside of composition studies have showed that there are several differences in the ways men and women use the internet (Linda A. Jackson, Kevin S. Ervin, Philip D. Gardner, & N. Schmitt, 2001; Tanja Carstensen, 2009; Eszter Hargittai, 2010; Mariea Hoy & George Milne, 2010; Victoria J. Rideout, Ulla G. Foehr, & Donald F. Roberts, 2010), but few recent studies in composition studies took up this subject. A more detailed look at Web 2.0 technologies—such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or Pinterest—may demonstrate that men and women are *composing* in different ways on these platforms and may serve to join the conversations of gender difference and composing in digital spaces.

Past work in composition studies and computers and writing scholarship has shown such a difference. Elisabeth A. Flynn (1988) pointed to the differences in composing practices between men and women 25 years ago in her article "Composing as a Woman." While this article has occasionally been "criticized for being too essentialist, for suggesting

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that all women share a common essence" (Lance Massey, 2003, p. 239), Flynn did point out ways in which gender might be a significant factor in how women and men approach composition, potentially contributing to patterns of difference in composing practices, even if individual women or men might not conform to a single gender stereotype. There may be reason to believe that differences in composing practices between men and women are common in online composing as well. This is supported by Gail E. Hawisher and Cynthia L. Selfe (2003) as they explored writing in distance learning classes. They found that men and women wrote differently as they approached the online composition assignments. Cynthia L. Selfe and Gail E. Hawisher (2004) again reiterated this point when they found that the women in their study tended to use computers for work-related activities whereas men more often used computers as "toys" (p. 219-220). Nancy K. Baym (2010) put it very succinctly when she wrote, "gender differences persist online" (p. 67). A return to questions of gender difference in how men and women are composing online may show that how such differences continue to persist and join these previous conversations. Such a return may also demonstrate how differences in identity construction more broadly affect the ways in which users compose in newer digital technologies.

This study looks at one particular online space to explore these potential differences across gender in composing practices online. The study draws on data from a 2011 survey of first-year composition (FYC) students about their Facebook use. This survey showed that male and female FYC students do not use Facebook in the same ways. This finding demonstrated the importance of gender when composing on Facebook, but it also had two larger implications. The first is that research about Facebook and FYC may not be fully exploring aspects of identity and how these aspects shape composing practices when integrating social network sites (SNSs) into FYC classes. The second implication is that gender continues to be an important consideration when exploring composing done online. Future research may find it useful to consider gender specifically when looking at composing practices in Web 2.0 technologies.[1]

Composition scholars should draw on past scholarship to acknowledge the importance of composing practices in Web 2.0. In the data that follows, Facebook is used as an example of how gender may affect composing practices online.

1. The Importance of Facebook in FYC

Facebook is a ubiquitous communication medium for modern American students, much like telephones, email, chat, and cell phones have been in the past. Facebook has more than "a billion monthly active users" (Facebook, 2013), and some studies have suggested that as many as 99% of college students use Facebook (Reynol Junco, 2012). Considering the potential for Facebook as a rhetorical space, to overlook instructional possibilities for Facebook in FYC classes would be truly unfortunate (Stephanie Vie, 2008; Amber Buck, 2012; Courtney Patrick, 2013).

There is substantial reason to believe that Facebook can be an important tool in FYC classes. Facebook usage involves a number of literacy practices. These literacy practices are part of a complex constellation of skills called the "literacy of the screen" (CCCC, 2004). Together the "literacy of the screen" and the more traditional "literacy of print" work together to "enhance learning" (CCCC, 2004). That is to say that students must learn to write both in print and digital environments to be fully literate. There was clear support for the importance of digital literacy in the CCCC statement and support for the use of Facebook in particular across many publications related to composition (Vie, 2008; Jane Mathison Fife, 2010; Gina Maranto & Matt Barton, 2010; Deb Balzhiser et al., 2011; Kevin Eric DePew, 2011; Jean Reid, 2011; Ru-Chu Shih, 2011; Buck, 2012; Timothy J. Briggs, 2013; David T. Coad, 2013; Patrick, 2013; John Alberti, 2013). The main argument for using Facebook in composition classes was that Facebook served as a good example when developing critical (Vie, 2008; Maranto & Barton, 2010; Buck, 2012; Coad, 2013; Patrick, 2013) and rhetorical (Kevin Eric DePew & Susan K. Miller-Cochran, 2010; DePew, 2011) literacies.

Even if this support did not exist, there is one point that the teachers of writing should not overlook: our students are using Facebook to compose. As noted above, Facebook use is nearly ubiquitous among college students. Facebook is, at least partially, a space of composition: students are composing profiles, status updates, comments, and various multimodal texts that include pictures and links in addition to alphabetic text. While the written products may look very

[1] It is important to note here that the results of this study are not meant to represent all men or all women or to suggest that men or women "are" a certain way on Facebook. The results that follow are how a group of people are "doing" being a man or a woman on Facebook. That is to say, this is how first-year composition students are engaging in a specific kind of gender performance in a specific online space (Judith Butler, 2007). These results suggest a part of these students' identity construction online—a construction that would also include race, age, nationality, economic status, sexual preference, and so on—and what follows should be read in that context.