



## The depiction of communication technology in film: Differences by gender and across time 1970–2010



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### ABSTRACT

The use of technology and how we communicate has changed over time. The present study explores how communication is depicted in film and how this differs by gender and across time. The sampling frame consists of the highest grossing films from 1972 to present day. Data support the proposition that there is more technology based communication in film across time. More men than women are portrayed with technology in film. Furthermore, when women interface with technology, they have a higher incidence of utilizing technology for personal use while men tended to use technology for business purposes. We argue that gender differences in use of technology that is portrayed in film shape personal and societal notions about appropriate gender role construction vis-à-vis technology. Importantly, this research supports the social constructionists theory of technology in society demonstrating how images and messaging can craft specific perceptions of technology and its use.

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Films are an important part of society representing a significant art form [1,16]. Movies are cultural products and viewers apply their interpretations of film to their everyday lives [25,1]. Little research has focused on how film depicts the way people use technology to communicate. Much work explores the depiction of substance use in film, gender representation, and sexual content [27,28]. Doring (2006) [29] explored gender representation in the mobile phone advertisements of popular magazines. If films can be used as social and cultural evidence, then the shift of technology in films is reflective of the trend of technology use within society.

How technology use is depicted in film, and how this differs by gender, may also shed light on theoretical debates about gender and technology. Ref. [21] maintains that two

theories aim to frame our understanding of technology, especially how women feel about being involved with information technology, and gender. Essentialists suggest that, in light of biological differences between the genders [14], fixed biological differences shape how women and men interface, understand technology, and desire to participate in technical work. On the other hand, social constructionists [2] believe that while technology may be perceived as a “male” pursuit, which may be at odds with the construction of a feminine identity, this relationship is in flux and not inherent in our biology [4,5,23]. We argue that how technology use is framed in film may shape how women and men perceive their appropriate role as regards use of technology. For example, if men are depicted using technology in film more frequently than is true for women, individuals may develop the notion that technology is a male domain. Social messages depicted in film, especially top-grossing film seen by many, may well shape the social

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construction of what we believe are our appropriate gender roles with regard to technology.

How we use technology has changed rapidly over the recent past. Technologies are developed and applied, Ref. [22] argues, so that “we can do things not otherwise possible, or so that we can do them cheaper, faster, and easier” (4). Over time technology has become more complex as well as more accessible. The phone was first introduced in the United States in 1876 and the introduction of the first computer in 1946 [13]. The capabilities of mobile devices are constantly improving. The ways we communicate with each other have become intertwined in many aspects of our lives. Technology has become a part of our personal and professional lives more than ever before [30]. In 2009 alone, there were 70 million new subscribers that joined a social network [24]. We now have the option to use social networks such as “Twitter”, “MySpace”, “FaceBook”, and “Instagram” to communicate with friends and family as opposed to calling or writing a letter. Giddens (1990) [31] proposed the theory of modernity (1990) as a way to understand how technology has changed modern life focusing on the concept of distance in time-space. Prior to the Information Revolution, communication was confined to a specific locale. Communication was slow via written and sent mail, typed documents with carbons, or landline phones with no other capability than dialing another individual. Now we are able to communicate across national borders with ease and are capable of receiving instant feedback. With recent advances in technology, one may have live conversations with others, and view them as if you were in the same space, around the globe. This work explores how communication technology is depicted in film across time and by gender.

There are fundamental differences in how men and women use technology [7,9,18]. Ref. [15] found that women were more familiar with communication-related technologies, while men focused on entertainment technologies and control devices. Women talk more frequently on the phone and spend more time than men on their phone calls [25]. Ref. [10] argues that women nurture close interpersonal relationships, and establish their intimacy with others who live in distant locations, through the telephone. Women use interpersonal media, like mobile voice call and text messaging, to maintain personal relationships [10]. Chang (2010) [32] makes the argument that men tend to use the mobile phone for business while women use the phone more for socialization. Women are also known to e-mail and text message more than men, but men use voice calls more than women [10]. Ref. [21] explores how to theorize about the presence of women in the field of information technology.

Women and men use the Internet equally but the way they use it differs. Ref. [10] reported that women are more likely to use the Internet as a tool for activities and men are more likely to use the Internet as play or something to be mastered. Women are more enthusiastic about the Internet when they perceive it as a means for personal and contextualized conversation rather than technology [10]. When it comes to social networks, half of bloggers are female and they update their blogs more frequently than men [33]. How gender differences appear in the use of

communication technology, as such technology continues to develop and change across time, will be important to track.

The complexity of technology is advancing at an unprecedented pace. Technology that uses wireless communication is rapidly improving. Most portable devices now have access to the Internet. According to RCR Wireless News, in the next decade the Internet will migrate from computers to mobile devices [19]. Many cell phones have access to music, the Internet, and the capability to take pictures and record videos. Ref. [8] suggests that activities such as online shopping, having a virtual assistant, and the ability to keep more precise health records are examples on how technology is changing over time. As the online revolution trend takes shape, we will see an influx in social networking sites and more people texting. Ref. [6] found that social networking was the fourth most popular online activity. How the use of communication technology shapes human interaction, feelings of connectedness, traffic safety are issues that merit further investigation.

In light of the technological revolution that has taken place over the recent past, it is important to track how the use of communication technology has been displayed in film. Technology is becoming more intertwined in our personal and professional lives with the use of cell phones, the Internet, computers, social networking sites, and e-mail. Communication technology has changed the way we communicate with one another. Films are important cultural artifacts and represent trends in the whole of society. Through film, viewers can see how technology has changed across time. What type of technology is depicted in film dates the product. The type of technology shown in film, whether it is public phone booths, land phone lines, typewriters, cell phones, computers, or fax machines, makes a statement about the historical period as much as cigarette use or personal appearance. Indeed, the Information Revolution has transformed our culture just as the Industrial and Post-Industrial Revolution impacted society [11]. In light of past work, three hypotheses will be tested. (1) We expect that the use of technology will be depicted in film more frequently across time; (2) men will be shown using technology in film more frequently than women; and (3) the purpose of using technology will change from primarily business to personal use over time. In testing these hypotheses, we aim to add to the literature on social construction. Specifically, if men are depicted in film as greater users of technology then our social notion of what is appropriate as regards gender and technology is shaped in our minds eye.

## 1. Methodology

The sampling frame consists of the top grossing film in each even numbered year between 1972 and 2010. Thus, the period of observation spans approximately 38 years or almost four decades. The web site Box Office Mojo was used to identify the highest grossing film of the year. After a preliminary viewing of films, the decision was made to exclude films that were animated, fantasy, science fiction or a period piece. Such film does not depict how individuals use communication technology in modern daily life. In this

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