



FEMININE TOUCH

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FACEBOOK, TWITTER AND OTHER SOCIAL MEDIA HAVE REVOLUTIONISED THE WAY WE COMMUNICATE AND DO BUSINESS. THERE IS EVERY SIGN THAT IT'S A REVOLUTION THAT HAS SWEEPED WOMEN ALONG WITH IT – IN A GOOD WAY. BUT HOW MUCH HAS IT REALLY CHANGED GENDER PERCEPTIONS FOR THE BETTER?

Tell any woman in the 1950s that, decades on, the number of women in employment within the United Kingdom would be over 7.5m, and she would probably shoot you a cynical look. Mention the technological revolution and the rise of social media, and the idea would be ridiculously outlandish.

The Baby Boom years brought with it expectations for women that included being a loving mother, a meticulous homemaker and an obedient wife. Marrying after finishing high school was the norm, and the few women who ventured on into further education were taught economics and cooking – skills that suited their role within society.

Even the media at that time reflected these values. The American sitcom *I Love Lucy* was a prime example of a stereotypical woman in distress who needed her husband to bail her out. Although a sitcom, it was also a universal symbol of the inept woman.

Fast-forward to today, and not only are women free to study whatever they please in higher education, but they also make up a substantial percentage in employment terms. In recent years, social media has evolved so much that there are now jobs based around the phenomenon; jobs that women are comfortably slipping into. Even though men are still the larger percentage in employment and the gender most likely to be affiliated with technology, it seems that the new wave of social media users is predominantly female.

Brian Solis, a frequent speaker about the convergence between traditional media and social media, has produced figures showing that females outnumber male users on various social networking websites. Popular platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, MySpace and Flickr are all categorised as 'matriarchies', as they attract more female visitors than male.

Though sites such as LinkedIn and YouTube have roughly equal numbers of male and female users, the only male-dominated site appears to be Digg, the social news rating and content-sharing site. The results are clear to see, and support the notion that female users are the future of social media. In order to understand how the scales have tipped, placing females as the dominant gender probably for the first time, it's important to see why social media and women go hand in hand.

THE IDEA OF CONNECTING PLAYS A ROLE, AS COMMUNICATIONS CONSULTANT Shonali Burke explains. 'In very simplistic terms, social media is about connecting. It's about sharing, and talking once those connections are made, and those are things women have always been more comfortable doing than men.'

Chris Matyszczyk, the creator of the CNET News blog **Technically Incorrect**, seems to have alternative reasons for women using social media. 'Some studies have shown that one of the reasons why females are on Facebook is that they need more validation. Or, indeed, that they use it to compete for men. Which seems just a little sad.'

The idea that women use social media for validation may not be completely obvious. But updating profile pictures, posting a status in the hopes of a handful of people 'liking' it or even commenting, does give way to this notion. Matyszczyk touches on the point that

even though social media is incredibly popular, that doesn't mean a change is not inevitable.

'Anything social has generally been more female in society. But there is no guarantee that social networking is how it will always be. It may well be that people will get very tired of living in public, and there will be a new movement that returns life to the private side of the spectrum,' Matyszczyk says.

For the time being, though, communication and interaction is involving hordes of people being online. This hasn't gone unnoticed by businesses, who are also jumping on the social media bandwagon, with links to Twitter and Facebook, in order to reach millions of users. But considering that businesses employ more men, could social media be an opening for females to get a foot into the workplace?

'NUMBERS VERSUS EXPERIENCE ARE VERY DIFFERENT, AND TO ASSUME THAT ANY gender is more qualified in terms of sheer representation is likely to produce inconsistencies. However, I believe that women carry the potential to contribute to more valuable experiences for the social community overall because of their sweeping presence,' explains Brian Solis.

Though they may have that sweeping presence, Burke touches on the idea that it's not so much about gender, but more along the lines of who can produce results and the type of job being offered in the first place.

'What is happening is that as businesses realise they have to get on the social media bandwagon, they'll look for the people who can help them achieve their objectives the best. Just because someone is female or male doesn't mean they're going to be in a better or worse position. Several other factors come into consideration, such as their experience, their reputation, and so on. In addition, the kind of position being hired for also makes a difference: is it entry-level, mid-

level or is the business hiring an executive?' Burke explains.

C. V. Harquail, a scholar and blogger at AuthenticOrganizations.com also thinks there might be a place for women within such businesses. 'Given that women are taught (not born) to be more relational, more empathic, more connecting and generally more social, women are more likely than men to have the interpersonal skills it takes to conceive of, create, manage and grow these kinds of business products.'

Web companies know that they have a big target market in females, as they spend more time online connecting, building relationships and sharing pictures. *Bloomberg Businessweek* reported that married women were joining social networks in huge numbers compared to married men. Knowing this leads to new sites catering specifically for women.

'Just take a look at RockYou and Slide, providers of two dominant photo widgets. These sites are clearly targeting young women, down to the fact that they're designed with traditional feminine colours (purple and pink), littered with glitter and almost exclusively adorned with pictures of women,' the article says.

While this may be true, it is worth looking at Brian Solis's

SHERYL SANDBERG, THE CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER AT FACEBOOK, PREVIOUSLY STATED THAT WOMEN DRIVE AN INCREDIBLE 62% OF ACTIVITY ON THE SITE ... FEMALES HAVE ESSENTIALLY SHAPED THE WAY FACEBOOK IS VIEWED AND USED



'REMEMBER, WOMEN "DOMINATE" IN A LOT OF SOCIAL AND PROFESSIONAL ARENAS. FOR EXAMPLE, WOMEN DOMINATE THE "CHAMBERMAID" PROFESSION IN THE HOTEL INDUSTRY. BUT ARE WOMEN POWERFUL IN THAT INDUSTRY SEGMENT? NO'

analysis again. His results prove that a website doesn't have to be filled with feminine colours to attract a large number of females. Facebook, MySpace and Twitter, all with blue themes, have a larger percentage of female users than men. In fact, practicality is more important to users than the design element behind the actual website. Matyszczyk shares this view, saying: 'I'm not sure women care too much about whether these sites have a masculine feel. They have found uses for these sites that makes them worthwhile, so they use them.' He continues, 'While the blue colour does, indeed, dominate in Facebook, and Twitter too, in the case of Facebook women probably saw more immediate and versatile uses for the site than did men. It was the ability to share pictures and connect with friends that, I feel, women took advantage of more than men, regardless of the brand colours.'

Solis's analysis proves that masculine colours do not deter females from using websites, but it also shows that there has been something of a shift in how one should perceive females.

Zynga, a popular social gaming site, would normally be associated with men as gaming is seen as a male pastime. Surprisingly enough, 60% of players on Zynga are female. In fact, the average gamer is likely to be a 43-year-old woman. Even Twitter, as Aileen Lee explains in her article, being a 'techie insider's [ie male] product' has more females interacting by following others and tweeting their own messages. It seems that women have carved out another space online that goes far beyond shopping.

'If you hadn't noticed, our media climate generally provides a very distorted mirror,' Johanna Blakley said in her speech at TED 2010 about social media and the end of gender. 'I think that social media is actually going to help us dismantle some of the silly and demeaning stereotypes that we see in the media and advertising about gender.'

The fact that Zynga reports a high percentage of female users is proof that stereotypes and assumptions made about the interests of people are changing.

HOWEVER, EVEN THOUGH WE MAY THINK WOMEN ARE DOMINATING THE SOCIAL media landscape, Harquail sees it very differently, more along the lines of women merely being influencers, which isn't power. 'When you factor out the consumerist argument, that purchasing power is "real" power and influence, you're left with the premise that women are powerful because they are the dominant group on the social media networks – like Facebook, which is a largely social network used for socialising.'

The key thing to remember with Harquail's argument is that *dominating* doesn't exactly hold as much strength as we think.

'Remember, women "dominate" in a lot of social and professional arenas. For example, women dominate the "chambermaid" profession in the hotel industry. But are women powerful in that industry segment? No.'

Matyszczyk echoes a similar perspective, saying that it is 'like asking whether you feel women have more influence in, for example, politics than they used to. The fact that there might be more women in positions of power doesn't necessarily mean that those women act in a manner that is suddenly "female" – however you would like to define that.'

In a way, Harquail's argument allows us to look at the role of

females within social media very differently. It could be seen as a sort of cycle that is playing out. As females use more social networking sites, their tastes and preferences are always reflected in the side ads that are linked to businesses that match their interests. Rather than look at females as dominant elements within social media, they could be seen more as catalysts that drive sales and make websites like Facebook more money.

'Facebook's design was driven by male preferences, was presented as being androgynous and was later retrofitted to encourage women's participation. This is true not only of the visible features and functionality, but also of the database preferences such as privacy issues. It was not designed to meet women's socialising needs; but the design has evolved somewhat because Facebook can make more money from women's consumer data than from men's,' explains Harquail.

BLAKLEY'S ASSUMPTIONS THAT WOMEN WILL BE 'RESPONSIBLE FOR DRIVING a stake through the heart of cheesy genre categories such as the chick flick and all these other genre categories that presume certain demographic groups like certain things' may not be completely valid. If the interest is there, then in fact they'll be responsible for keeping those assumed stereotypes in circulation.

'Maybe this will happen in the long term,' explains Burke. 'Right now, though, I don't see any dismantling of gender stereotypes. If anything, the media is starting to open up slightly more to older people, but that is regardless of gender.'

Burke is right. There is no dismantling of gender stereotypes because advertisers and social media developers have found a lucrative market in females. This notion can even go so far as to dispel Blakley's original argument about 'social media and the end of gender'. How can social media bring about an end to gender, if gender is what is driving social media forward?

To an extent, females do hold a certain power over consumerism. Stereotypically, the fairer sex is most associated with shopping and spending an insane amount of money and without them, it would be interesting to see how different the consumer landscape would look.

In terms of real power, and when exactly women will rule the internet, Harquail touches on a very important number. 'When 45% of internet products are run by women, when 45% of designers are women, and when 45% of the companies are owned, started and funded by women, then women will rule. As long as women are buyers and not creators, they only have the power to choose what's offered. Real power is deciding what to offer, whether that's a product or a social interaction platform.'

For now, though, it seems that the surge of women interacting with social media is merely influencing rather than shaping. It is worth knowing that despite this, Sheryl Sandberg, the Chief Operating Officer at Facebook, previously stated that women drive an incredible 62% of activity on the site. Proving that the site is an easy and efficient way to keep in touch with family and friends, females have essentially shaped the way Facebook is viewed and used.

'I find it hard to imagine that women would not have immersed themselves in Facebook, largely because Facebook has had no real competitors,' says Matyszczyk. 'If women had, for some reason, decided to boycott Facebook, then Facebook might have looked a little like Digg. And look how that's going.' ■

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