As one of the primary axes used to articulate human identity, gender remains a core aspect of self-mediation and choice of communicative style used by participants in computer-mediated communication. Gender stands at the heart of a nexus of interrelated terms, which include the designation of individuals within and beyond existing categories such as “male” and “female,” the social construction and value of gendered attributes (such as “feminine,” “masculine,” “butch,” “sissy,” and so on), and an individual’s sexual orientation. The analysis of gender and new media covers a range of topics, including identity and representation, the gendered interpretation of genre and textuality, and, more generally, the sexism that continues to shape the processes of production and reception (for example, in relation to the development of software and computer programming). Analysis of gender in computer-mediated contexts has intersected with the concerns of cyberfeminism but has also drawn on work from sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and critical discourse analysis in order to explore questions of representation and communicative style.

Research in gender studies in relation to digital textuality has been shaped by changes in feminist thinking, particularly the key changes that took place in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Although the central goal of exposing and contesting inequalities based on gender-related differences remains, approaches to the study of gender and discourse (including digitally mediated discourse) have altered significantly in line with the shift from
second-wave to third-wave or postmodern feminist thinking. The politics of second-wave feminism rightly contested the academic and social relegation of women’s status (including their social role and the value ascribed to their textual production), drawing a binary, apparently universal, opposition between men and women, patriarchy and feminism.

Some early theorists of hypertextuality mapped this binary opposition of patriarchal oppression and feminist resistance onto textual qualities, so that open-ended, multilinear discourse was ascribed with feminist potential, as exemplified in the polemical writings of feminine écriture (Landow 1997; Love 2002). In turn, the parallels between feminine écriture and hypertextuality were used to interpret examples of digital fiction. Indeed, the artistic output of creators such as Shelley Jackson (Patchwork Girl) and Caitlin Fisher (These Waves of Girls) exemplifies some of the ways in which the affordances of hypertextual linking can support the feminist, hypertext fiction inspired by the work of landmark authors such as Mary Shelley and Virginia Woolf. But not all hypertext fiction, and certainly not all hypertextuality per se, need be put to feminist ends or be considered a female or feminine form. An abstract and simplistic pairing of gender and textuality is untenable. From a somewhat different perspective, the cyborg theory of Donna Haraway (1991) also used technology as the inspiration to contest gender boundaries. Cyborg theory inspired examples of print and online examples of cyberpunk fiction and also can be used to interpret the creative use of avatars in virtual worlds that resist simplistic human categorization (e.g., blends of animal and human features).

Later research rejected the binary polarization of gendered categories and reconceptualized gender as a dynamic, fluid aspect of participant identity that could be performed and reworked over time and across different contexts. Drawing on the seminal work of Butler (1990) and postmodern approaches to identity as discursively constructed, the text-based forms of computer-mediated discourse typical of early genres (such as Listserv discussions, MOOS and MUDS) were interpreted as ideal environments for identity play. The possibility of anonymous or pseudonymous discourse enabled participants to choose whether or not to explicitly state a category for their gender identity, an identity that need not map onto the attributes they performed in offline contexts. However, the extent to which online performances destabilized gender boundaries and eradicated difference is questionable. Some studies suggested that gender switching in online contexts was far less extensive than had been assumed initially (Roberts and Parks 1999), while others documented the ongoing conventions of authenticity which prevail in life history genres such as blogs, even for queer communities (Rak 2005).

While participants may not always choose explicitly to state a gendered category in their profile information, they may still “give off” clues via their use of discourse styles which index gendered identities that are consonant with the participants’ offline identities and are shaped by the prevailing social norms that govern gendered behavior. Analysis of gendered styles in computer-mediated discourse has extended research from sociolinguistics and the social sciences to explore the extent to which differences in language use according to the participants’ gender might occur (or not) in online contexts. This research has included scrutiny of microlinguistic features (such as word choice), discourse style (including turn-taking strategies, speech acts, politeness phenomenon, use of pronouns, typography, tone), and multimodal resources (particularly emoticons, visual self-representation, gaze and gestures). A wide range of computer-mediated genres have been examined, including Listserv discussions, Internet relay chat, blogs, social network sites, and SMS messages.
Results of these studies suggest that even while the boundaries between gendered categories may be destabilized in some contexts, and while online communication might afford pseudonymous self-representation, in many cases participants still use language that indexes gendered identities in ways that reflect stereotypes documented in the study of offline communication. Differences according to gender are not necessarily reflected in microlinguistic features: word choice is often found to be similar in studies of both blogs and Internet relay chat produced by women and men. Nor are the differences universal. Herring and Paolillo (2006) noted that when the topic and genre of online talk are controlled, differences in pronoun use disappear, such that attempts to identify the language of a text’s author by automated means (as did the algorithm constructed by Argamon et al. [2003] in the system called “Gender Genie”) are found to be inconsistent. Differences in discourse style also vary according to the age of the participants (contrasting teen and adult patterns of self-representation), and discourse styles can change over time (for example, Wolf [2000] notes that men adopted the rate of emoticon use set by women, and Page [2012] notes that the expressive punctuation used by young women on Facebook was later adopted by older women too).

Where differences in discourse style occur, these often relate to pragmatic choices, especially relating to managing interpersonal communication and performing sociality. Hence, even as early as the 1990s, Herring (2003) observed the posts of an academic Listserv, documenting the supportive behavior of women and the aggressive discourse style of men. In later work, Herring and her colleagues have argued that gendered differences are rooted in the complementary and co-constructive patterns of self-representation shaped by heterosexual markets, where the imperative to appear attractive to others influences textual style and self-representation. A recurring trend is the increased pressure on women to appear attractive and playful (Stefanone, Lackaff, and Rosen 2011), although more recent studies suggest that this pressure is also beginning to influence young men’s choice of profile photograph on mainstream social network sites (Manago et al. 2008).

The study of discourse styles used online often identified women as the trendsetters of innovative forms and genres (such as the use of expressive punctuation in SMS messages [Herring and Zelenkauksait 2009] or writing on personal blogs [Page 2008]). However, the contribution of women as producers of digital texts has sometimes been neglected in academic studies of new media (see Herring et al. [2004] for a critique of this). A gap continues to persist in the number of women who pursue careers in information technology (Herring and Marken 2008), and sexist attitudes toward women entrepreneurs in the “tech scene” of Silicon Valley (Marwick 2010) are at odds with the increase in women’s participation in online activities, which in some genres (such as social network sites) exceeds that of men (Vollman, Abraham, and Mörn 2010). Discrimination against behavior that falls outside heteronormative ideals also constrains the extent to which sexuality can be expressed online. The first decade of the twenty-first century saw the rise of women “sex-bloggers” who controversially published accounts of their sexual activities and desires. Notable examples include “Girl with a One Track Mind” (Zoe Margolis) and “Belle de Jour” (Dr. Brooke Magnanti), both of which gained popularity in the mainstream media as books and a television series, respectively. However, the need for sex-bloggers to write pseudonymously, as well as the media response to outing their identity, suggests that the freedom of expression promised by the early days of the Internet has not been realized fully. Indeed, while much has changed in terms of widening access to self-publication in online contexts, much has also stayed the same in terms of
gendered inequalities. Gender will thus remain a central issue of new media and its participants, for while discursive constructions of gendered identity might appear more open-ended and flexible than ever before, gendered politics continue to constrain and shape online patterns of participation.

See also blogs, cyberfeminism, identity, life history

References and Further Reading


