Standing on an internet soapbox: an exploration of language and gender on Facebook

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A Thesis

entitled

Standing on an Internet Soapbox: An Exploration of Language and Gender on Facebook

by

Kelly Wherley

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the Master of Arts Degree in English with a concentration in
English as a Second Language

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May 2010
An Abstract of
Standing on an Internet Soapbox: An Exploration of Language and Gender on Facebook
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This thesis explores language and gender on Facebook. A discussion board on a popular Facebook group is the focus of the study. 19 topic threads from the discussion board were examined. The first theme that I identified in the data is that males made disruptive statements in discussions. Next, males were more likely than females to attack other participants through the use of sarcasm and name calling, often using harsh and aggressive name calling. Although some females utilized personal attacks in discussions, they were more likely to criticize another participant’s grammar. Females also used grammar corrections to facilitate relationships. Additionally, female participation was low in discussion threads that contained many arguments and attacks. Females seem to be more engaged in topics where arguments did not take place such as topics devoted to game board discussions where conflict was low. Limitations of the research are discussed and suggestions for future research are offered.
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Table of Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................................... iii
Acknowledgments .......................................................................................................................... iv
Table of Contents ............................................................................................................................. v
List of Figures ................................................................................................................................ vi

I. Literature Review ........................................................................................................................1
   Introduction ..................................................................................................................................1
   Participation among men and women in online discourse .........................................................3
   Discourse styles in CMC ..............................................................................................................6
   Framework of study .....................................................................................................................9
   Facebook ....................................................................................................................................11
   Limitations .................................................................................................................................14
   This research ..............................................................................................................................14

II. Methodology .............................................................................................................................16
   Overview of research questions .................................................................................................16
   Rational for methodology ..........................................................................................................17
   Setting .........................................................................................................................................18
   Methodology ..............................................................................................................................26
   Description of the Guinness Group ............................................................................................27
   Procedures for data collection ....................................................................................................28
   Participants .................................................................................................................................28
   Data Analysis .............................................................................................................................29

III. Analysis of Data .......................................................................................................................31
   Overview of data ........................................................................................................................32
   Disruptive statements .................................................................................................................32
   Personal attacks and flaming .......................................................................................................38
   Grammar corrections ..................................................................................................................43
   Female participation ....................................................................................................................49
   Discussion ..................................................................................................................................52
   Limitations .................................................................................................................................56
List of Figures

Figure 1. Image of a Facebook profile .................................................................26
Figure 2. Image of a Facebook user’s information under the Info tab ......................27
Figure 3. An image of a Facebook user’s pictures ..................................................28
Figure 4. An image of assorted applications under the box tab ...............................29
Figure 5. Image of a Facebook user’s group membership ......................................30
Figure 6. An example of a group page on Facebook ..............................................31
Chapter 1

Introduction and Literature Review

Introduction

This thesis proposes to explore language, gender, and computer-mediated communication (CMC). Specifically, this thesis will focus on male power displays in language on a discussion board on a social networking website named Facebook. Previous research in computer-mediated communication (CMC) and gender has focused on discussion boards, instant messages, and chatrooms (Baron, 2004; Fox, Bukatko, Hallahan, & Crawford, 2007; Colley & Todd, 2002; Herring, 1992; Soukup, 1999). As of yet, there has not been an interest in researching a medium that reveals personal information such as names and profile pictures which Facebook does. Additionally, because users willingly divulge personal information, there is less ambiguity surrounding the gender of the user, an issue that has plagued prior research.

Research on language and gender has grown substantially since the work of Robin Lakoff, *Language and Woman’s Place* (1975). Lakoff argued that gender inequality is created and reinforced by language used about women and the language used by women. Over the years the subject of language and gender has entertained audiences even outside the academic world in books by linguists such as, “You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation”, by Deborah Tannen (1991). And with the advent of
technology, researchers have studied language and gender in cyberspace (Herring, 1994; Sutton, 1994; Wofe, 1999).

In the beginning, researchers argued that cyberspace was a place where gender could transcend the medium (Danet, 1998; Graddol & Swann, 1989). Danet (1998) proposed that typed text becomes a mask in which gender becomes obscured. She explains because only text is visible in computer-mediated communication, men and women could become freer to experiment with different gender identities through communication and women could take advantage of this medium to “avoid being harassed sexually or to feel free to be more assertive” (p.130). Graddol and Swann (1989) found equal participation rates among men and women in an online conferencing system. They argued that unlike face to face communication, no status revealing symbols were present such as names, clothing, or voice. Graddol and Swann concluded online conferencing “shows promise” (p.178) for egalitarian discourse.

However, in spite of such hopes, other studies have shown that in chatrooms, discussion boards, instant messaging (IM), and emails, that equality in cyberspace is not present (Baron, 2004; Ebben, 1994; Fox, Bukatko, Hallahan, & Crawford, 2007; Herring, 1992; Soukup, 1999; Sutton, 1994). Typed text is not a mask for gender and online participation is not equal between genders. Men post more, their messages are longer in some cases double the length of women’s average message, men’s posts receive more replies, more likely to begin and end discussions….in general they are more likely to hold the floor. So, online discourse is not equal. Furthermore, user’s identities are becoming less anonymous with the growth of social networking sites where personal information such as names and profile pictures are easily viewed by everyone.
Participation among men and women in online discourse

Several researchers have found men tend to post more messages than women in online settings and that their messages often contain more words than messages posted by women. Kramarae and Taylor (1993) in their synthesis of various gender and communication studies explain that in any public or open situation, even in online discussions, men are more likely to dominate the talk. Numerous researchers have found that men are more active participants than women, as indicated by the number of messages posted (Barrett & Lally, 1998; Herring, 1992; Sefte & Meyer, 1991; Sierpe, 2000). In addition researchers have documented that men also post longer messages than women (Barrett & Lally, 1998; Sefte & Meyer, 1991). These behaviors are characteristic displays of power that men use to monopolize talk. Furthermore, they should not be interpreted as signs of engagement in conversation. Herring (1993) argues that such power displays ignore and censor women’s contributions and because of intimidation women are less likely to participate in online communication. This section will explore these strategies.

Selfe and Meyer (1991) investigate gender and power in an educational electronic forum that focuses on technology and composition. They found that men and high profile members (determined in part by publications) dominate the discussions. They theorize conversational dominance is characterized by contributing more messages, introducing more topics, and disagreeing more. Specifically, males contributed 70% of all messages even though they constituted 50% of the population. Furthermore, three high profile males sent 47% of all messages. Selfe and Meyer state, “The dominance of the conference conversations by men and higher-profile members of the community suggests
that the conference is not as egalitarian as we might wish” (p. 186). Although these results reach statistical significance, the researchers acknowledge that the number of subjects involved (33) is low and consider that other electronic discussion might yield more egalitarian results.

Similarly, both Herring (1992) and Herring, Johnson, and Dibendetto (1992) explore the participation and response rates among men and women in online academic discussion boards. Through an ethnographic observation and discourse analysis of a discussion board called LINGUIST. LINGUIST is an online academic discussion board for academic professionals in the linguistics field. Herring found women were 37% of the members on LINGUIST but their participation rates were only 21% and in contrast, men made up 63% of the linguist community but participated at a 79% rate. Also, women’s messages contained fewer words on average than messages posted by the men. Herring explains that other factors present in the discussion boards contribute to the lack of contribution by women. These factors include low response rates to women’s postings and adversarial language use by men. Herring, Johnson, and Dibendetto (1992) investigated participation among academics on a discussion board devoted to topics in composition and rhetoric. The researchers examined a discussion over a one month period and found men contributed to 70% of the discussion and wrote slightly longer messages than women. As in Herring (1992) the researchers looked at the response rate among the sexes and found 89% of male postings received responses whereas female postings received a 70% response rate. However, there was one exception: during an argument on men’s literature, women’s participation rose to 64% during a two day period.
and exceeded the men’s participation. The men responded angrily and threatened to leave the group.

In comparison, Barrett and Lally (1999) explore behaviors and messages within a distance learning context involving students rather than professional academics. They looked at asynchronous communication in two online seminars based on readings from class with graduate students and their tutors as participants. Barrett and Lally found males sent more messages than females and the length of the messages was on average double of a female’s message. Males also exhibited more social behaviors, engaging more in gossip and social interactions, while women stayed on task and more often than men referred to others’ ideas and contributions presented in previous messages. Interestingly, Barrett and Lally administered a survey and found that both sexes found the discussions to be beneficial, however, the students were unaware of gendered behavior such as the length of messages between males and females and the high degree of social interaction by men that the researchers found in the discussions.

In his 2000 article, Sierpe confronts the issue of methodological weakness found in previous studies in CMC and gender. He argues that prior research has used relatively small samples collected during a brief period of time, which he contends reduces the degree of confidence. In order to reach greater validity Sierpe collected over 800 messages during a two year period from the Library/Information Science Education Forum (JESSE). JESSE is a moderated email list serve that is highly used by academics in the library and information science field. Based on analysis of the data, Sierpe concludes that previous research findings in CMC and gender were supported. Males, who constituted 40% of users, accounted for over 45% of all messages. In addition, four
(1.4%) of the most active contributors to the discussions were men who wrote 16% of all the messages. Sierpe concludes that a larger question remains unanswered about the high participation rate of males in online communication and the low participation rates among women in online communication.

In her 1999 article, Wolfe confronts the issue of women feeling ignored in computer-mediated communication through a study of cross-gendered interactions. She reasons, “Men retain power by ignoring the contributions of women” (154). She attempted to describe this process by analyzing the effects of individual interactions. Similar to prior research, she found that men averaged more words than women. Furthermore, Wolfe finds that women agreed with other students at a high rate but received less support (agreement) than males. In addition, women were less likely to reply to oppositions than men.

These articles point to the fact that men in these studies participated more not only through the number of messages but also the length of messages posted. The research also points to factors contributing to this phenomenon such as response rates and men’s language style, including adversarial discourse, which the following section will explore.

**Discourse Styles in CMC**

Several sources address men’s and women’s discourse styles found in CMC: Herring (1992) examines men’s language and discusses tactics used to silence others in discussion; Guiller and Durndell (2006) explore gender, language use, and interaction style; and Soukup (1999) discusses masculine and feminine forms of discourse found in chatrooms.
Herring (1992) looked at data from her investigation on the LINGUIST discussion board in an attempt to characterize men’s language. She found that men employ three tactics to silence other users: Self-aggrandizement, adversarial attacks, and coercion. Herring (1992) defines self-aggrandizement as “…citing oneself excessively or inappropriately...lavishly praising an organization or school of linguistics that one was instrumental in founding, commenting explicitly on how important and/or well-connected one is, quoting portions of one’s own previous postings, etc (349). She describes adversarial attacks as “one participant belittles or ridicules another for something he or she contributed to the discussion” (349). She further explains that these attacks are through “direct put downs”, “saying something flattering” before the attack, and sarcasm (349). Herring explains that coercion takes place by “embedding potentially contentious claims in presuppositions” (349). She gives an example of this by the use of the phrase, “of course”, “it’s clear”, and “it’s obvious” (349). Furthermore, she categorizes men’s language as strong assertions, self-promotion, presuppositions, rhetorical questions, authoritative tone, challenges to others, and humor or irony. Herring acknowledged although men and women used stereotypical gendered language from both genders, she found that men were two and a half more times likely to use only men’s language. Of course the study from Herring (1992) takes place on an academic discussion board and others will argue that male academic linguists are not representative of all males. However, further research in this literature review addresses male communication in a non- academic setting and finds similar results.

Guiller and Durndell (2006) examined, gender, language, and communication in the academic setting using qualitative and quantitative methods. They studied the
messages left on an undergraduate introductory psychology online module. In terms of the content posted, females used more attenuated language and the posts were more likely to be positive. Guiller and Durndell defined attenuated language as personal opinions, qualifiers, and suggestions phrased as questions. They defined positive as agreement with others and requesting other’s opinions. In contrast, the males’ posts tended to be more negative. In group interactions females responded to females and males positively, and were twice as likely to agree; but males were more likely to respond negatively to females and males, and most likely to disagree. Also, the way in which females and males disagreed was different. Female disagreement was attenuated and they often used the pronoun „I” to soften the tone of the disagreement and also used more positive statements in arguments. For example in a disagreement, a positive statement in an argument would be, “I understand what you are saying but…” (p. 373). Males, on the other hand, were more likely to make controversial statements or use challenging language. To further the research, students gave feedback about their experience in the online discussions groups through questionnaires with open ended questions at the end of the semester. In the questionnaires students reported that they valued the freedom of expression; however, females brought up the issue of insults and controversial statements by males in the discussions. A female participant explained that she did not like “People insulting the previous contributor in a personal fashion” and “Some individuals only participated for the sake of disagreeing with others and making irrelevant contributions” (p. 377).

Similarly, Soukup (1999) performed an ethnographic study in which he explored chatrooms. He found stereotypical gender roles in the communication of the participants.
He conducted an ethnographic study posing as a participant observer in a sport related chatroom and female based chatroom. Over the course of several months he observed, took notes, and interacted with members of the chatroom. Soukup also asked questions to the members. He reports that he found masculine dominating features such as aggressive, argumentative, power oriented communication in both chatrooms. In the sport related chat he reports the features present were shock talk, sexual humor, profane words, and attacks on others. On the other hand, in the female based chat users established rapport through greetings and built dyadic relationships through the use of instant messaging. Soukup notes that male users still interfered by soliciting females for romantic encounters and interrupted conversations with disruptive statements in the female based chatroom. He asserts that males dominated the discourse in both types of rooms through their language use and style. Ultimately he concluded that masculine norms prevail.

Although in this study, Soukup actively participates and interacts with the members he does not find out why men are in the women’s chatroom. It’s strange that men would be participating in a women’s chat and further dominating the conversations but he never pursues this question in his research. Furthermore, Soukup only assumes the participants gender based on the nickname of the participant. This method of assigning gender, I feel is mediocre at best. Some nicknames in chatrooms are gender neutral and guessing the gender will not give an accurate count of participants.

Framework of study

This section addresses the framework that my research will use. The framework for this research is a study conducted by Sussman and Tyson (2000). The researchers
explored power displays in anonymous computer-mediated communication between men and women. Sussman and Tyson (2000) hypothesized that men would compose longer postings than women; men would communicate more often; and men would write more opinionated statements. The researchers distributed questionnaires to 50 undergraduate students and asked them to rate a list of 30 topics according to the interest of males, females or both. Fishing and baseball were found to be most masculine, ballet and figure skating were found to be most feminine, and news media and theatre were found to be most gender neutral. I then found Facebook groups representative of the aforementioned topics. Through an analysis of six newsgroup discussions (masculine, feminine, and gender neutral) they analyzed displays of power through the length of communication, frequency of communication, and discourse content. In order to code the content of messages, the authors developed a scale that contained the following categories: factual, opinion supported by fact, opinion without factual support, and miscellaneous.

Sussman and Tyson (2000) found that the length of communication was unequal between the sexes. On average, men’s communication contained 105.1 words and women’s messages contained 81.2 words. Men wrote longer posts overall in all newsgroup discussions, even in the feminine based discussions. Next, the research found that women tended to communicate more frequently than men in the feminine discussions. However, men’s and women’s frequency of communication was similar to each other statistically in masculine and gender neutral discussions. Finally, males’ postings were generally more opinionated without facts, especially in masculine and gender neutral topics. However, it should be noted that in this research that males were overrepresented in the data. There were a total number of 464 posts by males and 237
posts by females. The researchers did not take into account the number of participants but only the number of posts by each gender.

The design of my research will closely mirror the research done by Sussman and Tyson (2000) but will differ in the setting of the study, the amount of groups, and the discussion topics used, and will incorporate a more qualitative analysis of the speech acts. First, the setting of this research is a discussion board called, “Let’s Break a Guinness Record! 2010! The Largest Group on Facebook!”; however, it is embedded in a social networking website. The use of a social networking site is significant because it is easier to correctly identify the gender of participants. Next, the amount of groups and number of discussion topics was substantially reduced because of time constraint. Instead of using groups representative of masculine, feminine, and gender neutral, I will be using only one group that is gender neutral. Also, since this research is primarily qualitative, the amount of data in comparison to that of Sussman and Tyson will be significantly lower. In addition to quantitative methods such as the number of postings, this research will explore the qualitative aspects of the communication through an ethnographic approach.

My research will attempt to answer the following questions: What constitutes powerful language in an online social networking discussion? Does men’s language create power, and if it does, how? Does men’s language silence women and what kinds of strategies do men use to silence women?

Facebook

Recent research on Facebook has focused on the history of the website (Beer, 2008; boyd & Ellison, 2007); issues of privacy and surveillance (boyd, 2008); identity
and self (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008); and possibilities for educators and students (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfeld, 2006; Mitchell & Watstein, 2007; Chu & Meulemans, 2008). Relevant to the thesis, this section will explore a user’s motivation for joining the website.

boyd and Ellison (2008) describe a social networking site as a place “to make visible your social networks” (p. 211). Furthermore, they argue that it is not a place to meet strangers but a place to connect with people already in a user’s extended social network. Thus, a social networking site is an online extension of a user’s everyday social circle.

Similar to boyd and Ellison (2008), Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfeld (2006), in their survey of entering college freshman, found that the majority of students used Facebook to maintain existing relationships. In a follow up study conducted in 2008, they found that this trend had not changed. This study reveals that the trend of connecting with friends is continuing and people do not typically use the medium to seek new friendships.

In addition, Lenhart and Madden (2007), part of the Pew Internet and American Life Project, found through surveys and focus groups that 91% of teenagers use social networks to connect with people they see frequently. Additionally, 82% of teenagers who use social networking sites are also using social networking sites to maintain friendships that they have infrequent live contact with.

Likewise, adults have similar motivation for joining social networks. Lenhart (2009), part of the Pew Internet and American Life Project, explored adults’ motivations for using social network sites and maintenance of their privacy. It was revealed that 97%
of adults who social networking sites, use the technology to maintain existing friendships, and 56% use it to organize for social events.

This literature indicates that a user’s primary motivation for using Facebook is to maintain offline relationships and not to make new ones. Therefore, information users give about themselves should be authentic unlike other forms of communication, where there is not an extension of reality, such as online message boards and chatrooms. Furthermore, although I am not able to distinguish between adult and teenager memberships participating on the Facebook message boards, Pew research has indicated the populations have similar motivations for joining social networking websites.

A problem with past research in CMC and gender is that researchers have often guessed gender from nicknames and signatures. For example, Soukup (1999) studied gender and communication in two online chatrooms, one a sports related, masculine based chatroom and the other a female related chat. A study by Herring (1994) described different communicative ethics between men and women in message boards. However, neither researcher was effective in determining the gender of the participants because they made guesses from signatures or nicknames. In contrast, since it has been demonstrated that people join Facebook to connect with established friends, the information that people share about themselves should be more likely to be truthful. Moreover, nicknames are not used on Facebook because people usually choose to use their real names. If a problem arises where one cannot distinguish between the genders by name, a user may click on the name to reveal limited information about the user such as the location and sex of the user. Therefore, a researcher is more likely to be able to gather accurate information about the users in a social network setting.
Limitations

Although this research uses a new medium which reduces anonymity of gender, other factors related to the nature of online communication still limit the research. The data collected is not an entire representation of communication on Facebook. Other mediums of communication besides discussion boards exist on the website, including messaging, chat, and messages left on profile walls. Another limitation is that personal information from the communicators provides only limited information such as gender and location including city, state, and country. Therefore, due to the nature of the data, no control was made for ethnicity, age, or socioeconomic status.

This research

This research addresses the lack of scholarship in gender and language on social networking websites and more importantly the research is conducted on a site that allows for a more accurate identification of gender which has been an issue in previous research on gender and CMC. Articles have been written on language and gender in discussion boards in the realm of general internet discussion boards, classroom and academic discussion boards but there exists no literature on language and gender on a social network website. Research in this area could help educators and students in distance learning courses and courses where assignments and discussions take place in a virtual setting. As educators, we need to be aware of such communication that can happen in CMC. We need to monitor who is participating and who is not participating and what factors contribute to these behaviors.
In the next chapter, the methodology of the research is discussed and a thorough explanation of Facebook will be given. The chapter also addresses methodological problems that occurred.
Chapter Two

Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodology used in this study. First, I outline my research questions and justify the methodology used. This is followed by a discussion of the setting and description of the group studied; a description of the data selection and problems that occurred; and a description of the participants in the research. This section also includes a brief history of Facebook and detailed information about Facebook profiles and groups.

Overview of Research Questions

As this thesis examines language, gender, and power, the following research questions are asked:

Does men’s language create power, and if it does, how?

What constitutes powerful language in an online social networking discussion?

Does men’s language silence women, and if it does, what kinds of strategies do men use to silence women?
Rational for methodology

The methodology for this research was chosen based on research already done in the area of language, gender, and computer-mediated communication. Research in this area has employed a mix of purely qualitative methods, a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches and purely quantitative designs. The method that I have chosen is similar to prior research in that it is mostly qualitative in nature but also contains some quantitative characteristics. It will also be ethnographic in nature.

Some researchers focusing on online communication have used an ethnographic approach where they participate and interact with the subjects they are studying. Barret and Lally (1999) utilized an ethnographic approach by analyzing online communication qualitatively, while using a quantitative approach to analyze the message length and participation of online subjects. Soukup (1999) also used an ethnographic approach in which he participated, observed, and interacted within a chatroom for an eight month period. Herring (1992) preferred an ethnographic approach in which she lurked in an academic discussion board examining language and participation using quantitative and qualitative methods.

In contrast, other researchers have preferred not to interact with the subjects while gathering data. Herring, Johnson, and Dibenedetto (1995) looked at a six week period of communication from an online discussion board using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Self and Meyer (1991) studied communication in an online discussion board using descriptive statistical data and qualitative examinations of the communication. Likewise, Wolfe (1999) analyzed 494 messages in a synchronous conferencing system analyzing quantitatively the number of words and turns and using
qualitative means to analyze the actual communication. Guiller and Durndell (2006) examined a large amount of online discourse qualitatively and quantitatively. They used a computer program Atlas.it 42 to develop codes for the qualitative analysis and SPSS 10 for a quantitative description of the communication.

After examining others’ research methods, I decided that an ethnographic approach would be the most appropriate to answer my research questions. Creswell (2007) explains, “Ethnographers study the meaning of the behavior, the language, and the interaction among members of the culture-sharing group” (pp.68-69). This approach is needed because it allows me to explore the relationship between language, gender and power. Further, I plan to utilize a critical ethnographic approach. As Creswell (2007) states, “A critical ethnographer will study issues of power, empowerment, inequality, dominance, repression, hegemony, and victimization” (p. 70). Additionally, I will report brief quantitative reports of the communication and participants.

**Setting**

The data for this study was collected during the spring of 2009 on a social networking website, Facebook. Facebook is website designed for communication purposes between friends, family, and colleagues (Factsheet, 2009). This website was first developed in 2004 by two Harvard students (Factsheet, 2009). When the website initially launched, it was open to only Harvard students, but a short time later was available to students at other Ivy League schools (Factsheet, 2009). After growing in popularity, the website allowed users from other American universities to join (Factsheet, 2009). With continued rapid development, it allowed high school students to join, granted
access to foreign universities, partnered with Microsoft, and opened its doors to the
general public (Factsheet, 2009). According to Facebook’s statistics, the site currently has
175 million users (Factsheet, 2009).

On Facebook all members have a profile. The first display page of a profile
contains the user’s name and profile picture. Additionally, there is room for personal
information such as the user’s network, relationship status, and birth date. There is also a
box that contains all the user’s friends’ names and profile pictures. The wall, depending
on how the user has set the privacy settings, shows their activity on Facebook and also is
a place for other users to post messages to one another. As seen in Figure 1, a user and
his or her friends may post comments on their page.
Figure 1. Image of Facebook profile
When a user clicks the Info tab, the user’s information is displayed. There is space for basic, personal, contact, business, and education information.

*Figure 2. Image of a user’s information under the Info tab.*
A user may also wish to display photos of him or herself on their profile as seen in Figure 3. All pictures are displayed under the photo tab.

*Figure 3.* An image of a user’s pictures.
Next, there a tab called boxes, as seen in Figure 4, for extra applications that users add to their profile. For example some members add pictures, random quotes, or joke generators.

*Figure 4.* An image of assorted applications under the box tab.
Located at the bottom of the info tab is a listing of all the user’s groups as seen in Figure 5. A group is a collection of people who join together to show support for a particular topic or cause.

*Figure 5. Image of a user’s group membership*
According to the Facebook Project Wiki page, the types of groups include: common interests; inside jokes; communication; dedications to friends; cultural jokes; dedications to causes; and dedications to people. Group membership ranges from one member per group to over one million per group. As an example, Jeff Ginger, creator of the Facebook Project website, estimates that a group dedicated to the idea that every human is separated by six contacts, “Six Degrees of Seperation-The Experiment” has a membership of over 5 million users (Quick Facts, 2008).

Each group page is composed of a profile that includes information about the group, photos, discussions, and contact information for the group; for example, websites, and email addresses of the group administrators as seen in Figure 6. The members are also displayed by thumbnail photographs. Members may communicate via a wall displayed on the profile page of the group and also can start discussions on a discussion board. A group profile is similar to a member profile.

![An example of a group page on Facebook.](image)

*Figure 6. An example of a group page on Facebook.*
Methodology

In order to gather data, I first identified a suitable Facebook group. Creswell (2007) explains in ethnographic research, “The researcher needs to identify a group…to study, preferably one to which the inquirer is a “stranger” and can gain access” (p.122). Therefore, I identified a discussion board on the social networking Facebook, where I am a member. This allowed me access to browse through discussion boards easily. Furthermore, I did not have to actively join the Facebook group and could remain anonymous by only browsing through the communication taking place.

I initially planned to mirror Sussman and Tyson’s (2000) study, which used gender specific group topics such as feminine, masculine, and gender neutral. The researchers distributed questionnaires to 50 undergraduate students and asked them to rate a list of 30 topics according to the interest of males, females or both. Fishing and baseball were found to be most masculine, ballet and figure skating were found to be most feminine, and news media and theatre were found to be most gender neutral. I then found Facebook groups representative of the aforementioned topics.

However, the problem that occurred during the data collection period was that there was an overwhelming amount of data. Unlike Sussman and Tyson (2000) I did not analyze the discussion by means of a computer program. Although my research explores quantitative aspects of the data, the majority of the discussion will focus on qualitative characteristics of the communication.

Therefore, because of time constraints and general focus of my thesis, I decided to select a group that would be of interest to both males and females. In order to select such a group, I browsed through groups in which members of fishing, baseball, ballet, figure
skating, news, and theatre, also had membership. I finally found the group called, “Let’s break a Guinness Record! 2010! The Largest Group on Facebook!” which was popular with members of the previously selected groups.

Description of the Guinness Group

The participants in this research came from a Facebook group called, “Let’s Break a Guinness Record! 2010! The Largest Group on Facebook!” This group was dedicated to breaking the record of the largest Facebook group ever and people joined this group in order to form a large group without any other specific shared topic of interest. Therefore, the discussion boards include anything of interest to the members. The discussion board for this group contained 14,864 discussion threads in the spring of 2009. Due to time constraint, I selected the first page of discussions that include 30 individual topics. Eleven topics were deleted from the data set because they were spam or advertisements. The remaining 19 topics were used in the research:

- “We need another religion Chrislamish”
- “Last Word Fun Game!!!!!!”
- “I AM NOT A RACIST BUT”
- “The prostitute contributes more to society than the most honorable soldier or diplomat”
- “Are you a real person and will you please prove it; 1 million post (protestation for capitalism)”
- “Can anyone give me one logical reason why Israel is a country?”
“WRITE ON WORD USING THE LAST LETTER OF THE PREVIOUS
COMMENT!!!!!!!!!!!”

“IM GAY AND GOD LOVES M E”

“LAST POST WINS!!!!”

“never ending story”

“George Washington sucked and heres why…”;

“what is your favourite place in the world?”

“DRUGS: The Reason Cops Don’t Bust Everybody”

“Stereotype the person about you”

“Truth or False Game; and Capitalism or Communism?”

These 19 groups provided a total of 860 posts to analyze.

Procedures for Data Collection

In order to gather the data, I visited the group “Let’s Break a Guinness Record! 2010! The Largest Group on Facebook!” and the discussion boards. I accessed the discussion boards and observed the communication taking place for about two weeks. In addition, I also downloaded the most recent communication from the discussion board to use in this research.

Participants

The participants in this thesis, members of the Facebook group, “Let’s Break a Guinness Record! 2010! The Largest Group on Facebook!” range from high school age to young adult. The nationalities of the participants include citizenship from the United States, Canada, Germany, London, Turkey, Madagascar, and various Middle East
countries. This information was accessed through limited information revealed by Facebook.

**Data Analysis**

In this study, I first organized the data in a binder. I then began to analyze the data by reading posts from the discussion boards. I read the data recursively until I identified specific themes. I then identified coding categories. Creswell (2007) explains, “Codes represent information that researchers expect to find before the study; represent surprising information that researchers did not expect to find; and represents information that is conceptually interesting or unusual to researchers (and potentially participants and audiences)” (p. 153). In order to develop codes, I wrote notes in the margins next to key ideas and phrases that Creswell (2007) advised to look for. In addition, I also counted relevant codes.

The codes that I identified were:

- **Disruptive statements:** statements made in order to cause arguments or conflict
- **Attacks:** when a participant criticizes something another participant has posted in a hostile way. An example of an attack is using name calling or the use of sarcasm
- **Grammar corrections:** one participant correcting another’s grammar
- **Calls for peace:** a plea to mediate the conflict in a discussion.
- **Personal greeting/personal communication:** directly greeting another participant or engaging in personal conversations in a public discussion
- **Stating opinion as fact:** a participant expressing his or her opinion as fact in a discussion.
• No response: a participant stating that he or she has not received a response or asking for a response

Furthermore, after coding 100% of the data, I created a more complete description of the data codes and trends that I identified and then recruited a second coder. The second coder, Amanda Wolfel, has previous experience with qualitative data. She has attended a qualitative data coding workshop and is working on a similar project concerning language and the internet. Amanda and I met and we discussed the data and the descriptions of the codes and trends that I identified in the data.

First, I showed her my research questions and explained the focus of my project. Then I gave her a list of the codes and explanations. At this time, we went through the codes together and I pointed out examples of each code in the data. For example the comment, “Because you said stupid things. I can’t believe you’re an adult” would be coded as an attack and the comment, “You need to learn how to spell Koala Bears” would be coded as a grammar correction. At the conclusion of our meeting, I gave her a copy of the complete data and a description of the codes and trends that I identified and she agreed to code 10-15% of the data. After Amanda coded the data, she returned the data and I compared our codes. We had about 80% agreement in application of the codes. She pointed out exchanges that indeed did fit a coding category but I had not identified the exchange as fitting anything. Also, there were also some exchanges that I didn’t agree with Amanda. Thus, we met again and discussed our disagreements and new findings.
Chapter Three
Analysis of Data

In Chapter One, I reviewed the literature related to gender, language, and the Internet. I identified a gap in the literature and explained that in investigating language and gender online, it was hard to determine the gender of the online participant and that using nicknames was not a reliable method in establishing the gender of a participant. I showed that perhaps using a social networking website such as Facebook would be a more reliable method of obtaining data because usually people join in order to connect with friends and family, thus revealing their true identity, including gender identity.

Next, in Chapter Two I discussed the methodology of the research. I stated my research questions and explained the rationale of my methodology for the research. I also described the participants and the setting. The chapter also described the coding methodology and the role of the second coder in the process.

Finally, Chapter Three will discuss the themes identified in the data. The themes I discuss are disruptive statements, personal attacks and flaming, grammar corrections, and female participation. In the section about female participation, I will explore the lower participation rate of females in topics with disruptive statements and personal attacks and the higher female participation rate in topics dedicated to playing games with other participants. Afterwards, the chapter will continue with a discussion of the results,
Overview of Data

The data revealed males not only posted more messages than females but also started more discussion topics. In total, the data includes 17 discussions containing 860 posts. Males accounted for 588 of the total posts (68%), whereas females accounted for 272 posts (32%). In addition, males started 15 discussions (88%) and in contrast, females started only 2 discussions (12%). A theme that I identified in the data is that males made disruptive statements in discussions, which seemed to trigger arguments or conflicts among participants. Next, males were more likely than females to attack other participants through the use of sarcasm and name calling, often using harsh aggressive name calling. Although some females utilized personal attacks in discussions, they were more likely to criticize another participant’s grammar. Also, female participation was low in discussion threads that contained many arguments and attacks. Females seem to be more engaged in topics where arguments did not take place such as topics devoted to game board discussions where conflict was low. Below, I will discuss the themes I identified in the data.

Disruptive Statements

This section focuses on the theme of disruptive statements. Disruptive statements are defined as statements or comments made in order to cause arguments, disagreement, or conflict. Males posted 11 disruptive statements in the data, while females made no
disruptive statements. These results are similar to those of Guiller and Durndell (2006) who identified the usage of controversial statements in their study of an educational discussion board. In the study by Guiller and Durndell (2006), males were more likely than females to use disruptive statements in discussions which the authors claim “provoked anger and disagreement” (Guiller & Durndell, 2006, p. 375). Soukup (1999) found similar instances of this kind of communication in his research exploring chatrooms. He explains, “Generally, a member of the group would make an absolute, controversial statement that other members of the group would certainly disagree with” (172). Likewise, my research identifies disruptive statements in the title of the discussion or the beginning post of the communication thread that set the stage for arguments between the participants. A total of five discussions out of 17 were started in this manner. Males were authors of all threads beginning this way.

A defining feature of disruptive statements in the titles and first posts of communication is that the intent of the author seems to be provoking an argument. The authors pose questions or write comments about a topic that will more than likely spark an argument between participants. One example of a disruptive statement can be seen in a thread posted by Michael titled, “I am not a racist but…..” and then posts his first comment: “Studies show that Africans/African Americans put 87% more heart into their music than most white people. And no i’m not talking about commercial music or music you hear on the radio all day long.” This example is relevant because it is highly unlikely there is any instrument that can determine how much “soul” one puts into their music. Also by comparing ethnicities, it seems as though the author of the discussion topic is looking for an argument. The following example shows the beginning of the discussion
where participants attempt to figure out exactly what Michael means by his comment and how his claim was determined:

*Gill:* Hmmm, interesting…But what does “more heart” mean? Serious question, because if you enjoy music, regardless of the origins and regardless of how it’s made, then different styles can tug on your hear in different ways.

*Michael:* more heart=more soul

*Howard:* That really didn’t answer the question at all…

*Bander:* Tell me exactly how you determined that. Fucking jackass. Imagine that! A black guy claiming that black people exhibit more “soul” that whites! LMAO

*Dan:* Don’t hate

*Jack:* I think it’s because there are more black people living on music…I know there’s a lot of people singing, but what I mean is that Africans is having it hard to find a job, get a job permission in Europe etc…the music is all some of them have, and they have to do their best out of it.

*Bander:* Don’t support bullshit. “Studies show” LMAO, when did they develop a study for measureing the “heart” put into music, in terms of race? Anyone who believed that is a fucking moron. This thread is typical moronic bullshit.

In this exchange, Gill attempts to reason how it was figured out how one puts more “heart” into music. Michael responds to Gill’s post but Howard states it really didn’t answer the question. While Bander hostilely interjects saying, “Tell me exactly how you determined that.” Then he uses an expletive against Michael and then uses a racially charged sarcastic comment. From the participant’s comments, it can be seen that they want to know more about where the information came from and how it was determined that African Americans put more soul into music than whites; however, Michael avoids stating directly how he got this information which leads to more arguments between the participants. When the author of the thread fails to explain his statement, it incites outrage from, Bander, who calls the author a “fucking jackass” and then also attacks others who support his point of view. This pattern of attacks between the author and the other participants was a typical pattern throughout the discussion of this topic.
Another pattern that was evident in discussions started by disruptive statements is that the author seemed not willing to see anyone else’s opinion. The following example shows the authors refusal to accept anyone else’s ideas:

*Michael:* I didn’t want to say this because it makes me look racist but MOST BLACK PEOPLE can sing better than white people. And most white people know this already.
*Liz:* fact and opinion mix very well don’t they?
*Michael:* no they don’t. I have fact and you have opinion. Why you think slave masters didn’t want the slaves to sing? Because they could sing better than their “white” wives.

As the quotation demonstrates, the author clearly never considered contrasting views. He started the discussion with a disruptive statement that fueled heated exchanges with participants. He also furthered the disruptive behavior by challenging every participant that disagreed with him.

In addition, disruptive statements include positioning the author as an authority on a topic. In another thread started by Michael, the author of the thread about African American music, we also see a discussion started by a controversial statement where he acts as an authority on the subject. Michael titles this discussion, “DRUGS: The Reason Why Cops Don’t Bust Everybody.” His beginning post explains the title of the discussion:

It never did make sense to me why the cops throw people in jail for selling dope when cops, the IRS, and the government are the biggest dope dealers in the county. The government collects taxes on ALL illegal drugs that come in and out of this country. They collect somewhere between 55 million to 227 million a week. And every once in a while the FBI will do a raid or bust a major shipment to make it seem like they are doing their jobs. But guess what, they already know every shipment that comes in and goes out. And even the drugs that they raid are still put back on the streets. Ask a mafia member if you don’t believe me. So what I don’t understand is why do they lock people in jail for selling dope when they
are the main pushers? And why are the two deadliest drugs (alcohol & cigarettes) still legal? This county is like a baby’s diaper, full of shit.

Like the discussion that he started about African American music, he also phrases this beginning post in the same way. He begins with a controversial statement about the United States government being the largest drug dealer and then supports this argument through undocumented numbers concerning their alleged profit and the way in which they organize their business. Again, he represents his opinion as fact using undocumented numbers and positions himself as an authority on the topic. However, unlike his earlier discussion thread, he poses two questions to the readers. But he ultimately ends his post with a disruptive statement by equating the United States to a baby’s diaper. This example is relevant because it leads to arguments like the topic about race and music. The following example illustrates the argument that ensues:

*Henry:* easy there mr. conspiracy, let me guess, they didn’t land on the moon either? IT WAS STAGED MAN! Yeah, you sound like a huge druggie anyway so I see why you would think that.

*Michael:* Hey kid how is this conspiracy theory? And better yet have you ever heard of dirty cops? How naïve are you?

*Ross:* Conspiracy theory’s are pointless…especially when your evidence is “go ask a mafia member”. And dirty cops are just that…Dirty Cops. Bad people will be bad people…it doesn’t mean every governmet official is corrupt…and certainly doesn’t mean they abide by some secret code of selling illegal drugs after spending time and effort to confiscate them.

*Michael:* Damn, you are so naïve. You got a lot to learn.

In the above conversation we see the type of conversation that follows a disruptive statement. It is started by an attack on the author who is a called a “druggie” and suggesting because of this his opinion or ideas should not count. The author just counters back with another attack calling him “naïve.” Another participant comments on his lack of evidence for his position and again the participant receives the same reply from the author: “you are so naïve.” This discussions shows that when an author
positions himself as an all knowing authority of the topic disruptions and arguments are likely to follow. First, the author writes a lengthy disruptive post, using undocumented numbers to support his argument. Then the author expresses his intelligence by calling everyone naïve who disagrees with him. This behavior ultimately leads to personal attacks which the next section will explore.

Disruptive statements not only include positioning the author as the authority but also include topic threads focusing on controversial moral and political issues presented in a sarcastic or hostile way. In another discussion concerning religion, Abdullah begins a thread with a title stating, “Can anyone give me one logical reason why Israel is a country?” Then he follows this question up by his first post stating, “They stole my land and killed my people and now they should get the fuck out of it!” This example is significant because the title of the discussion implies that currently there is no reason why Israel exists as an independent state and then in the first message of the discussion blames Jewish people for stealing Muslim land and killing them. To add to the intensity of the statement, he also uses a curse word. This example is relevant because this topic was written to incite sarcastic, hostile comments and name calling from participants. In the first response, Peter, responds by using a racial slur, “Born in Syria, Egyptian passport and live in Turkey…They stole my land and killed my people and now they should get the fuck out of it! This is why no one takes you seriously sand monkey!” It seems that the author sets the tone of the conversation and discussions to follow.

The above samples of disruptive statements show that they are formed in a variety of ways in discussion board topics. These statements are used to cause arguments with other users. Another feature characteristic of the users posting disruptive statements is
that they also interact in a disruptive way: acting as a know it all or as an authority on a particular topic. They rarely see anyone else’s point of few and they often avoid other participants’ inquiries into their statements.

In the following section we will see how these discussion topics lead to arguments where participants use personal attacks towards one another and this aggressive speech is used against one another.

**Personal Attacks and Flaming**

Personal attacks occur when a participant criticizes something another participant has posted in a hostile way using name calling or sarcasm. The following example illustrates a personal attack using both name calling and sarcasm: “Just like rock music and heavy metal tells people to worship the devil. Wake up dumbass the alarm just rang.”

There were a total of 48 personal attacks in the data I analyzed. Males wrote a total of 42 personal attacks and females wrote six personal attacks. Notably, one female was responsible for five out of the six personal attacks.

Herring (1992) in her exploration of academic discussion lists found that men used “dominance strategies” to control communication and silence others (p.349). One strategy that Herring (1992) describes is the adversarial attack whereby “one participant belittles or ridicules another for something he or she contributed to the discussion” (p.349). She acknowledges that these attacks come in many forms but the most prominent in the discussion were: “the direct put down, saying something flattering or conciliatory before launching a critical attack, and ridicule through sarcasm” (p.349). Although Herring (1992) did not find name calling in her research, Soukup (1999) reports name
calling in his ethnographic study. He reports that “virtually every profane word in the English language [was used]” and further he describes the chatroom as a “locker room” or “bar room” atmosphere (Soukup, 1999, p. 172). The participants attacked one another with insults related to their sexuality and used name calling against each other (Soukup, 1999). Likewise, personal attacks can also be a part of online behavior called “flaming.” McCormick and McCormick (1992) describe flaming as, “excessive informality, insensitivity, and the expression of extreme or opinionated views, and vulgar behavior (381). The discussions that I explored also contained many varieties of personal attacks such as name calling, and profane words as found in Soukup (1999) and extreme views associated with flaming as described by McCormick and McCormick (1992).

Males were found to use more personal attacks than females in the data. They wrote a total of 42 attacks while females wrote six attacks. A reason for this could be that males are over represented in the data compared to females. However, the types of attacks that they choose to use are quite different: males used attacks against other participant’s religions and ethnicities. Females did not make these kinds of attacks, even when provoked.

Male participants attacked other participants’ religions and ethnicities when the discussion thread centered on those topics. The topic thread that generated most of these attacks was the thread titled, “Can anyone give me one logical reason why Israel is a country?” Although many personal attacks were directed towards a specific participant, many of the attacks were directed towards the religion or ethnic group as a whole. This example illustrates a personal attack against the author: “You are the biggest tool I have ever met.” In this comment he is attacking the author and not directing his comment to
the wider community of people. However, other participants used this discussion board as a place to attack religious and ethnic groups as a whole. Although, the conversation is on topic, they don’t address the author’s question and prefer to focus on their prejudiced opinions. The following example illustrates this type of attack:

Cole: Hahahaha jews. Those lucky little marsupials. I hope they kill some dirty fucking abbo’s [derogatory terms for the native, indigenous people of Australia] while they’re at it.

Huey: look at inner western sydney, its like fucking arab country! Go home you camel fuckers! stop rebirthing our wrx’s [Subaru car model] and selling drugs! Lmao [laughing my ass off]…fucking lebs should go back home where they can get blown up and shot at


Cole: This is rather lol. All people from the middle east are the same, I say we leave them to their own devices, They’ll kill each other in a matter of days.

These posts are not only extremely hostile but also hateful. They do not focus on the topic why Israel is a country but instead criticize and degrade Jews, Indigenous people of Australia, Arabs, and Muslims. The participants use derogatory terms, for example, “abbo’s”, “camel fuckers,” and “lebs.”

While there was a female participant who used a personal attack against another participant in the discussion concerning Israel, her attack did not focus on race or religion. The following example illustrates this point:

Vinny: Your all ex cons on a dumpy prison island. You speak English but no-one can understand a word your saying. Your obnoxious. You all fuck kangaroos and kuala bears. Your god is a faggot who got killed by a sting ray. You contribute nothing to the world.
Vinny: And what the fuck is aussie rules all about? Worst sport ever, official!
Nina: Mmmm..I was never an ex con and neither was any of my family so *all* Australian’s can’t be ex cons. It’s called Australian English and the reason you can’t understand it is because you can’t speak it. You’re the one that’s obnoxious. You need to learn how to spell Koala Bears. He’s not a god he’s a human but yes
it is pretty stupid that he got killed by a stingray but then again so does a lot of people. We contribute nothing, we have over 11,000 people in Iraq and there’s more to come and what exactly is your country doing? Sitting on your arses waiting for someone else to fix the problem.

In this exchange, which is also later discussed in the later section on grammar corrections, Nina calls another user obnoxious and tells him he can’t speak Australian English but this is after he calls Austrians ex cons and stating Australians contribute nothing to the world. In comparison, her personal attack is softer than the male participants’ personal attacks in this exchange and also different from other male participants’ exchanges in the entire discussion concerning Israel. Many males just made personal attacks against other participants or against the author with no prior conversation. Often, the attacks were more hostile using derogatory racial terms.

Another example of a female using a personal attack is in the discussion concerning the USA and drugs. The female participant uses attacks unlike the previous example, as her attacks include profanities. In this example, Bart responds to the authors post and is visibly upset by the use of caps lock and calls the author insane. Diane comments on Bart’s comment and tries to make an argument justifying the author’s position. The following is their conversation:

*Bart:* [this statement is directed towards the author of the post]
“when cops, the IRS, and the government are the biggest dope dealers in the country.” That’s probably the most ignorant statement I’ve seen in a while. Next to the ignorant disrespectful moronic idiot that made the topic disrespecting soldiers.
FIRST of all, cops and the IRS ARE THE GOVERNMENT.
SECOND, since when does the IRS push dope? ooo, they don’t… the collect your taxes and audit people.
THIRDLY, WTF!!!!???? Your insane. The government doesn’t sell dope. Dope dealers sell dope. Yeah there are corrupt cops and government officials. But not an entire agency. Lmao, your so crazy its dangerous. Have you been watching the news about Mexico? Why would we be trying to shut down the cartels that make/send us our drugs? There are
so many flaws in your unstable, unfounded, ignorant statement that I could go on all day. All year. Jesus….ignorance is bliss.

Diane: Dang you are naïve. Go watch the true story of Frank Lucas (American Gangster) the drug lord climbed the top of the drug world by smuggling heroin in the US via military service planes.. & paying off crooked cops.

Bart: Ok buddy, do you realize that the Army had nothing to do with that? YOU said yourself, he SMUGGLED the drugs in. If the Army had any part in it do you really think he’d need to hide it from the army? He merely paid soldiers off so he could get it in to the country without the army finding out. Not to mention that American Gangster is a MOVIE.

Diane: Yeahs, that’s what I said…he “smuggled” them (like CIA guys, cops, soldiers and other politicians do) it’s a TRUE STORY that was made into a movie, f/cktard [fucktard].


This example illustrates that females are also capable of making aggressive attacks just as males make. It seems as though Diane responds with personal attacks when she has little defense. Bart runs through a list of flaws he finds with the authors statement; however, the only defense that Diane has is to go watch a movie. Bart replies again questioning the validity of an argument based on a movie. She claims it’s a true story and then finishes her statement calling Bart a “fucktard.” She then continues the conversation by calling Bart “dumb” and “sensitive like a lil bitch.” She then mentions his affiliation with the army and seems to be provoking Bart to continue the conversation.

The participants’ use of personal attacks is used by both males and females alike. However, males were found to make extreme attacks against other’s race and religion. Out of the two females, the first example shows a female showing a “softer” attack while the second example illustrates a female who uses harsher attacks with profane words.
Although females do use personal attacks, it does not seem to be as common among females as males.

**Grammar Corrections**

Another trend identified in the data is that in arguments, females made more grammar corrections as a form of an attack against other participants and conversely, used grammar comments to participate in the discussions and facilitate relationships. Labov (1972) demonstrated that females were more likely to use the standard or prestige form of the language in his study of dialect change in New York City. Trudgill (1972) also found that women in conversations changed their speech to the more prestigious form. Furthermore, Gordon (1997) found that the speech of the lower class was found to be associated with low intelligence and low income. Perhaps, this data indicates that females want to be seen as more powerful or intelligent by using correct grammar. They exhibit their linguistic knowledge through the use of language and grammar corrections. Instead of engaging in attacks and using disruptive statements as often as men, females utilize grammar correction more often as a tool to one up their opponent in an argument and demonstrate their superiority. In addition, females may also use their linguistic knowledge to make contributions to a discussion and further relationships with participants. I found five instances of females commenting on male participants’ grammar, one instance of a male commenting on another male’s grammar, and one instance of a female commenting on another female’s grammar.

The following illustrates an example of a female using a grammar correction as an attack on another participant. In this exchange they discuss Australia:
Vinny: Your all ex cons on a dumpy prison island. You speak English but no-one can understand a word your saying. Your obnoxious. You all fuck kangaroos and kuala bears. Your god is a faggot who got killed by a sting ray. You contribute nothing to the world.

Vinny: And what the fuck is aussie rules all about? Worst sport ever, official!

Nina: Mmmm..I was never an ex con and neither was any of my family so *all* Australia’s can’t be ex cons. It’ s called Australian English and the reason you can’t understand it is because you can’t speak it. You’re the one that’s obnoxious. You need to learn how to spell Koala Bears. He’s not a god he’s a human but yes it is pretty stupid that he got killed by a stingray but then again so does a lot of people. We contribute nothing, we have over 11, 000 people in Iraq and there’s more to come and what exactly is your country doing? Sitting on your arses waiting for someone else to fix the problem.

Vinny approaches the conversation in a hostile tone using generalizations and stereotypes of Australian people. He attacks Nina using a putdown calling her obnoxious. Also, he uses an expletive when referring to koala bears. Nina responds and refutes his claims one by one; however, she does use a putdown by calling him obnoxious. Furthermore, she also points out his mistake of misspelling koala bear and insults Vinny over his proficiency in English by telling him, “you can’t understand it [Australian English] because you can’t speak it.” This example is relevant because it shows that grammar corrections are a tool to use against an opponent in a disagreement.

However, what is interesting in this exchange is that she actually agrees with him in one aspect, stating, “...but yes it is pretty stupid that he got killed by a stingray.”

According to Blum (1999), in his study about gender differences in learning styles and communication styles in asynchronous communication, he found that “significantly more female than male students expressed understanding or partial agreement before ultimately disagreeing” (as quoted in Guiller & Durndell, 2006, 378). Unlike Vinny, who does not attempt to agree or reach any kind of equality in the discussion with Nina, Nina attempts to reason and accept his point of view in the disagreement by agreeing with him. This
example shows that although females might disagree and resort to name calling and criticizing grammar, they use a lesser degree of adversarial discourse by accepting other’s view points in the discussion.

Similarly, females also use grammar corrections to point out errors in other participants’ writing with no comments on the substance of the post. Instead of commenting on the contribution, females analyze the grammar and then give only the correction. This type of comment is intended, it seems, to attack the other participant directly. Participants know that the discussion board is a public forum that everyone can see, yet they still correct another’s grammar. Obviously, in these situations females are not looking to contribute to the group in a meaningful way or build relationships with others, as they were the only comments they made to the post and received no further feedback from their corrections nor did they make any follow up posts on the topic. There were a total of two grammar corrections like this in the data. The following is an example that illustrates my claim:

Bander: Michael never had a point, he’s just a dumbass trolling for attention.
He’s fucking moron.
Michelle: *He’s a

Bander does not respond to Michelle’s comment about his grammar. In addition, this is the only contribution that Michelle makes to this discussion. Here another female participant in the same discussion, Diana, corrects Bander’s grammar again:

Bander: Virtually NO rock or “heavy metal” tells people to worship the devil. Where the fuck do you get your facts? Youre 85 year old preacher? What you’re thinking of is death metal and only about 1% of it is Satanic, if that. And nice beat you posed in the other thread. I could make that with acid loops in about 15 second. ANYONE could. You’re pathetic.
Diane: what’s with the grammatical errors today, Bander?
Like the conversation between Bander and Michelle, Bander does not respond to Diane’s comment about his grammar either nor does Diane make any further comments about the ideas or substance of his post.

Notice that in both examples, the females pick on the same participant who uses hostile and aggressive speech against the author of the comment thread. Bander resorts to name calling and states the author is a “fucking moron” and “pathetic.” Perhaps, females think if they have a concrete example of the aggressor’s “poor education”, as one participant states in the discussion, they can comment on that part instead of his ideas. Maybe they know that if they try to disagree with him on his position or ideas, they will receive the same treatment as the other participant, whom the posts were directed toward, and fall victim to the name calling and personal attacks.

Likewise, grammar corrections are not only used by females to males but also used in female to female comments. One instance also occurred where one female corrected another female participant’s grammar:

*Penny:* kid your expecting to make a point when honestly you have no idea what your talking about. get your facts right then come talk.
*Diane:* *you’re.* neither do you from the looks of it.

Like Bander, Penny does not respond to the grammar correction. However, unlike Bander who continues to post in the discussions, this is Penny’s first and final contribution to the discussion thread. This example shows that a grammar correction can be used to silence another participant through humiliation or shame in front of the group. Diane did not attempt to pursue conversation with Penny: she simply commented on Penny’s grammar and then made a sarcastic comment.
Although I have noticed that grammar corrections can be used to insult one another, comments about grammar can also be used to form meaningful contributions to the group discussion. This example includes a male and female involved in a dispute over the word, stupider:

Ken: Wow. The more you try to make people believe you. The stupider you sound. You can’t form an opinion about something and then try to push it upon people and label it a “fact” when you very well know that you can’t make your own fact. Whether one person is a better singer than another people is up to the person who is being asked. And it still remains an opinion. End of conversation.

Michael: “stupider” is not a word kid. Read a book before you try to check someone.

Brittany: [link to dictionary]

Joe: since when does vocab have to deal with a person’s common sense

Michael: with that comment you just admitted that you have poor education.

Brittany: I looked it up, Stupider actually is a word.

[link to dictionary]

Ken: Thank you.

Unlike the previous exchanges involving grammar corrections, this dispute over grammar starts with two males. However, it is a female that provides evidence with a website link to an online dictionary to further prove the point. What is interesting is that she posts the link to the website twice and emphasizes in the second post, “I looked it up.” At this point there is a response to her findings and the participant, Ken, thanks her. This example shows that females want to contribute to the group and that sometimes they are even ignored. Brittany’s participation is not even acknowledged until she reposts the link and highlights that she looked it up.

As grammar comments can be used in making contributions to a discussion, they may also be used in building relationships with other participants. For example, in another conversation concerning religion there is a comment about the spelling of a word.
Heath admits in the post that he might have misspelled the word. Later, Nara enters the conversation and her first post is to him concerning the word in question:

*Heath:* No. Lol. He is said to be of Arabic ethnicity, blind in one eye, a slight facial distortion (a floating eye [uneven eye position]), black-bearded, and the word “Khafir” (I might have butchered the spelling) is his name and it is written on hi fore-head. He is said to gain a following of 70,000 or more people until the Prophet Jesus returns and defeats him and passes judgment on his followers.

*Nara:* it’s “Kafir” = infidel impressive…10/10

Nara not only corrects his spelling of “Kafir” but she also further compliments the participant calling his knowledge and spelling of the word, “impressive” and giving him a grade. This exchange between Nara and Heath develops into 25 more posts of personal communication between the two, unrelated to the discussion board topic of religion. Their communication ends by Heath asking to solidify their new relationship status by becoming “friends” on Facebook. He states, “Also u seem like one of the few decent human beings on these boards. do you feel like being friends? If yes add me in no let me know.” Nara replies, “dude, u r soooo kool! Tank u 100x…the thing is I don’t add ppl I don’t know in real life…but hey! i know where to find you!! cheers…Mr.awesome!” This example illustrates that grammar corrections can also function as a springboard to jumpstart conversations between discussion board participants and build solidarity through communication. Although, ultimately, Nara decided not to friend Heath on Facebook, they built solidarity and friendship discussing personal issues and interests started by a single grammar correction.

As can be seen in the above analysis of the data, grammar corrections and comments can be used in a variety of ways in online discussions. I found females were more likely to make grammar corrections of a male’s language and used these instances
to correct participant’s grammar, contribute to ongoing discussions, and to build relationships.

Female Participation

As I analyzed the data I found that women’s participation rates in discussion boards with more arguments and attacks seem to elicit less female participation than other discussion board topics such as where participants play discussion board games. In order to reach an accurate representation, I categorized the argumentative discussions and discussions concerning gaming. From there, I counted the number of participants, number of posts, and calculated the number of turns.

I found that the females’ participation rate was lower than the males’ participation rate in discussion boards containing arguments and personal attacks. In this category, there are three discussions, “Drugs: The Reason Why Cops Don’t Bust Everybody; Can anyone give me one logical reason why Israel is a country?; and “I am not a racist but…” There were a total of 12 female participants with 38 total posts with an average of 3.2 turns per each participant. In contrast, there were 38 males with 180 total posts with an average turn of 4.7 per participant. Immediately it became clear that there are three times as many males participating and writing five times as many posts as females. However, there is still unequal representation in the data because females make up 24% of participants yet they only account for 17% of the total posts, while males’ posts account for 83% and they make up 76% of the participants.
In the breakdown of the topics males even have more turns per participant in each discussion. In the discussion, as can be seen in Table 1, “Drugs: The Reason Why Cops Don’t Bust Everybody” females’ turn rate was equal with one turn per participant while men had almost three turns per participant. In the discussion, “Can anyone give me one logical reason why Israel is a country?” females had an average turn of four while men had an average of almost seven turns. Then in the topic, “I am not a racist but…” females averaged almost four turns with males accounting for almost five turns.

Table 1. Table of female participation in groups with high amounts of arguments and attacks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discussion Thread Title</th>
<th>Females Number of Participants/Posts/Turns</th>
<th>Males Number of Participants/Posts/Turns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am not a racist but…</td>
<td>6 /23 / 3.8</td>
<td>16 / 76 / 4.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can anyone give me one logical reason why Israel is a country?</td>
<td>3 /12 / 4</td>
<td>12 / 78 / 6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drugs: The Reason Why Cops Don’t Bust Everybody</td>
<td>3 /3 / 1</td>
<td>10 / 26 / 2.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the other hand, I found that females’ participation was higher in discussion boards that focused on games and where no arguments or attacks occurred. For clarity, a discussion board game is defined as a competitive activity that participants play according to a set of rules, usually for their own amusement. For example, in the discussion, Last Word Fun Game!!!, participants write a word that begins with the last letter of the previous comment. Another example of a discussion board game is Stereotype the person above you. In this game, a participant writes a stereotype about the
person who has posted before him or her. For example, Mary writes about the last post author, Shelly:

^generally a happy persona. You are happy with yourself and you don’t need a person to look up to. You don’t let others guide your life. Very analytical, you like to look at every small detail. You enjoy life and nature, you don’t like anything fake :).

Then Dan replies to Mary:

hmm, seems like a nice person with a strong/smart head on shoulder, sometimes can be mean to people but only when threatened. Enjoys to drink occasionally perhaps her favorite drink is whisky or coke with rum and a lil dash of Lemon or lime. Will say what she feels about people if they treat her badly, basically does to people as people do to her. Has a pretty voice, Likes to sing but doesn’t because she’s self conscious. Loves Dancing and partying. That’s basically what IM think just from looking at the picture.

This data contained seven discussion threads devoted to this topic. There were a total of 73 females, 177 posts, with an average of 2.4 turn per participant. In contrast, there were 144 males, with 295 total posts, with an average turn of 2.1. Females make up 34% of all participants but account for 38% of all posts and men make up 66% of the participants yet account for 62% of the posts. Females are slightly over represented in their posting, while males are marginally under represented.

In each of the seven discussion topics women had more turns except for one discussion topic as can be seen in Table 2. In the discussion, “Last Word Fun Game!!!!” males had an average of 2.7 turns while females averaged 2.4 turns per participant. The greatest difference in the amount of turns is in the discussion, “never ending story,” where women averaged 9.3 turns per participant and males participation rate is roughly 2.1 turns per participant. Males and females also have close turn rates in the discussion, “WRITE ON WORD USING THE LAST LETTER OF THE PREVIOUS COMMENT!!!!” and “Stereotype the person above you” with a difference of .1 and .2 turns, respectively.
Table 2. Table of male and female participation in discussion board game

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discussion Thread Title</th>
<th>Females Number of Participants/Posts/Turns</th>
<th>Males Number of Participants/Posts/Turns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Last Word Fun Game!!!!!!</td>
<td>11/26/2.4</td>
<td>25/68/2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WRITE ON WORD USING THE LAST LETTER OF THE PREVIOUS COMMENT!!!</td>
<td>18/34/1.9</td>
<td>30/56/1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAST POST WINS!!!</td>
<td>9/34/3.8</td>
<td>20/56/2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>never ending story</td>
<td>3/28/9.3</td>
<td>19/40/2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stereotype the person above you</td>
<td>22/40/1.8</td>
<td>28/50/1.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truth or False game</td>
<td>10/15/1.5</td>
<td>22/25/1.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

In this study, I examined how males create power in online discussions boards. Past research has shown that males tend to participate more in online discourse, write longer messages, and hold the floor of conversations more often than women (Barrett & Lally, 1992; Herring, 1992; Self & Meyer, 1991; Sierpe, 2000). Research has also indicated that males are more likely to be argumentative and attack others in online communication (Herring, 1992; Soukup, 1999). In this research study I found similar traits of previously documented behavior in answering my research questions. Perhaps,
males’ language creates power by silencing and belittling other’s views, forcing the participants into silence.

Specifically, men’s language such as attacks and disruptive statements could possibly contribute to less participation by women. The tone of the conversation in some discussions threads created an environment where participants with conflicting views were belittled relentlessly. As one participant said about another’s discourse behavior, “haha trying to win an argument with this dude is pointless…you can make all the great points you want…he’ll come right back and call you naïve or ignorant…maybe some intelligent conversation would get started if you would stop bashing people who disagree with you.” Furthermore, some discussions consisted of mostly absolutist opinions and racist remarks. I found that discussion threads with the most arguments and attacks had the lowest rates of female participation, whereas other discussion threads with the highest female participation did not have an adversarial environment.

Past research could explain the phenomenon of women participating less. Herring (1992) found that 62% of female respondents said that they didn’t participate in the discussion because they felt intimidated. She further described that men also were intimidated but less than women reported. Furthermore, men interpreted the adversarial discourse differently as male respondents called the heated exchanges “fun” and “entertaining.” While women provided a less tolerant prospective:

“I was terribly turned off by this exchange, which went on and on forever. I nearly dropped myself from the list of subscribers. (…) Most of the participants – many of them people who should know better- sounded pompous aggressive, and arrogant, intered in self-aggrandizment and not the development or discussion of ideas (p. 10).”
“I was not a genuine exploration that was open to other than primary players (...). People were playing hardball with no gloves. Boxing with no teeth-guards. That is inimical to encouraging thoughtful, exploratory discussion. (...) The intensity of the debate made it real clear to me that the various propounders were focused on WINNING whatever round they were in. That is precisely the kind of human interaction that I committedly avoid (...) I am dismayed that human beings treat each other this way. It makes the world a dangerous place to be. I dislike such people and I want to give the WIDE berth (p. 10).”

Likewise, Guiller and Durndell (2006) report that females conveyed dissatisfaction with the negativity in the discussion. For example, in a feedback questionnaire, one female student stated she didn’t like the discussion because of people insulting each other. Another female student explained, “Some individuals only participated for the sake of disagreeing with others and making irrelevant contributions” (p. 377). Also in the study of a non academic newsgroup, Sutton (1994) found similar sentiments. One female participant explained, “And as I had figured, this whole discussion has been a tar baby and since at least one low blow has been struck, I’m bowing out as gracefully as I can” (pg. 514). These comments clearly explain that aggressive discussions are not preferred among females and they would rather not participate.

Although this research did not include participant interviews, the interviews conducted by previous researchers indicate that women may not be participating in the Facebook discussion boards as much as men because they are put off by the adversarial discourse and attacks by male participants. Sutton (1994) explains the root of women’s silence in CMC, “This silence could be interpreted as the silence of disapproval, the silence of being fed up… (p. 517)” The female’s silence or lack of participation could be interpreted as many things but it’s most striking in my research that this occurred more often in discussions with the most arguments and attacks.
Secondly, the trend of males posting more comments and starting more discussions can be found in previous studies. Self and Meyer (1991) found that males contributed 70% of messages posted in a period of 40 days in an academic discussion board. Herring (1992) monitored a discussion board for academic linguists for a period of two months. She found that men contributed 53 posts (75%) and in contrast, women posted 18 messages (25%). Herring, Johnson, and Dibendetto (1992) looked at the same discussion board as Herring (1992) for a six month period and found that males contributed 64% of messages, whereas, women contributed 36% of messages. In a non-academic setting, Sutton (1994) found that in a USENET discussion group, males disproportionately contributed more to the online communication than women. In this research males accounted for 68% and women authored 32% of all posts. The participation rate of females is slightly higher than previous studies, however, is still significantly lower than what males contribute to the online discussion boards.

Also worth noting is an unexpected finding that significantly more females than males corrected other’s use of grammar in the online discussion boards and in contrast used grammar corrections to facilitate relationships. Although this specific phenomenon has not been studied, it is documented in literature that in spoken speech women are more likely to use the standard form of language and over report using it (Trudgill, 1974). It is interesting that although they did not exhibit adversarial behavior as much as men but preferred to use grammar corrections instead as a means to increase their status within the discussion. Females also used their knowledge of grammar and language to form relationships in online discussion boards by commenting and praising other participants writing which led to more intimate and personal communication.
Limitations of the research

A significant limitation to the research is that because I do not have any knowledge of prior contact between participants and their relationships so it is hard to interpret their exchanges in an online discussion. Take for instance, the example where Diane corrects Bander’s writing: “what’s with the grammatical errors today, Bander?” I interpreted this as a sarcastic comment; however, it could have an alternate meaning. Since Diane uses the word “today” in her comment towards Bander, perhaps this means that she has interacted with him before and he had no grammatical errors before. Due to the volume of conversations on the discussion board, maybe there was evidence of a prior relationship but all the discussion threads cannot be analyzed and thus I was left with data that does not accurately reflect the real relationships between participants.

Another limitation of the research is that there was significantly less women participating on the discussion boards. This leads to less female data analyzed and contributed to males having more instances of the variables that I found. If there had been more women participating, there might have been more equal results. Through this analysis of discussion boards, it is clear that male participants average more turns in discussions where there are more arguments and attacks and females average more turns in discussion boards focusing on games where there exist no arguments or attacks. But it should be clear that women represent a lesser number in the sample of participants and this could skew the results.

Also, the questions remain: “How do you know how many women looked at the board and decided not to post? Perhaps women don’t look at these discussions?” These
are questions that will remain unanswered because this behavior cannot readily be determined. The behavior of only looking and not posting is known as “lurking.” According to Broadhurst (1993), women users on a New York City news system were more likely to identify themselves as “lurkers.” Furthermore, in this news system female lurkers even had a discussion dedicated to the lurking topic where they discussed their frustrations about flamers or disruptive participants on the news system discussion (Broadhurst, 1993). I also argue that female participants were lurking in these discussion boards as well. For example in the previous section, Grammar Corrections, women sometimes only made a grammar correction and that was their only contribution to the entire discussion. This shows that female users are reading these discussion boards but are remaining silent and only choosing to post in a trivial way. They simply comment, and then disappear from the discussion. But for one reason or another, women have decided not to participate as much as men and may simply lurk behind the scenes of the discussion.

Suggestions for future research

In future research of language and gender on the internet, I would suggest that researchers include interviews with participants in their research design. It was interesting to see that females made far less attacks than male participants in the study and one female participant was responsible for almost all attacks. But I did not have the chance to ask her or other participants about their feelings or motivations for these actions in the discussions. The participants’ thoughts and feelings about their motives and others’ actions on the discussion boards would have provided another layer of data to explore and incorporate with the qualitative findings. As a starting point, I would suggest that
researchers should question participants about their reasons for using discussion boards. I would also suggest that researchers question participants’ use of personal attacks and flaming. For example, I would explore their use of personal attacks by asking, “If you had the same argument with the person in real life would use name calling too?” and “Do you believe there is any kind of communication etiquette on the internet that users should follow such as the kind of etiquette used in classroom communication or in the business world?”

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this research has found the same characteristics of online discussion forums that have previously been documented by past research. It is clear that the trend continues but unclear why women are not as active in the discussions where adversarial discourse is taking place. Future research should continue to explore this avenue. One application for the results of this study is in the education field and extends to the increasing growth of online classrooms and virtual assignments where students communicate in online forums. Since women have been found to participate less in these settings, instructors need to be aware of such inequalities found in CMC communication. One recommendation from this research is that communication ethics or rules of communication should be established beforehand so that everyone may participate freely without the threat of aggressive discourse.
References


61
