

## Language And Gender in Online Communications

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### **Abstract**

*This research explores the intricate interplay between language, gender, and digital interactions within online communication. The study examines how linguistic patterns, communication styles, and the dynamics of digital platforms influence and shape gender representations. A qualitative approach was adopted for the study. Three research questions were raised to guide the study. Conceptual clarification on critical concepts was established. Literature studies are conducted through research and analysis of the literature related to language and gender in online communications. The review investigated how gendered language manifests in online spaces (social media, forums, etc.), examined linguistic patterns and communication styles and the impact of digital interactions on gender representations. This research underscores the importance of promoting inclusive language practices, advocating for equitable representations, and fostering digital spaces that empower individuals to express their gender identities authentically.*

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**Keywords:** *Language, Gender, Online Communication, Digital Space*

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### **Introduction**

Language and gender in online communications is a captivating and multifaceted field of study, emblematic of the intricate interplay between language, societal constructs, and digital platforms. Within this domain, the exploration delves into the nuanced ways in which gender influences and is influenced by the language used in digital communication channels such as social media, online forums, emails, and instant messaging.

The evolution of online communication platforms has introduced novel dimensions to the study of language and gender, unravelling a diverse tapestry of linguistic practices, expressions, and identities (Ohmynews, 2016). This area of research scrutinizes how gendered language manifests itself in online discourse, encompassing linguistic choices, speech patterns, conversational styles, and even the emergence of new forms of gendered language unique to digital spaces.

One prominent facet of this discourse involves analyzing the language disparities between genders in online interactions, exploring how men and women might use language differently by conforming to societal norms or subverting them. Examining these variations offers insights into power dynamics, social roles, and the perpetuation or challenging of gender stereotypes within the digital realm.

Teibowei (2022) and Charles-Owaba (2019) submitted that the intersectionality of gender with other factors such as age, culture, ethnicity, and sexual orientation in online communication underscores the complexity of this field. It necessitates a holistic approach, acknowledging the intricate interconnections between linguistic choices and the broader social contexts within communication. The digital landscape also witnesses the emergence of gender-neutral language and the facilitation of inclusive communication spaces. As technology evolves, so do the linguistic norms and etiquettes, presenting researchers with a compelling arena to study the adoption and diffusion of inclusive language practices and their impact on gender representation and equality in virtual environments. Moreover, the proliferation of artificial intelligence and natural language processing technologies introduces a new dimension to the study, as algorithms and automated systems often reflect biases embedded in the data they are trained on, raising critical questions about the reinforcement or disruption of gendered language patterns in online interactions.

Okunna (2020) disclosed that exploring language and gender in online communications encompasses a rich tapestry of themes, from linguistic structures and discursive practices to the socio-cultural implications of digital interactions. This interdisciplinary field continues to evolve, beckoning researchers to unravel its complexities and discern the intricate relationship between language, gender, and the ever-evolving digital landscape.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The study examined language and gender in Bayelsa State, Nigeria, online communication. Specifically, the study achieved the following:

1. Investigates how gendered language manifests in online spaces (social media, forums, etc.).
2. Examine linguistic patterns and communication styles.
3. Examine the impact of digital interactions on gender representations.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were raised to guide the study:

1. How does gendered language manifest online (social media, forums)?
2. What are the linguistic patterns and communication styles peculiar to online spaces?
3. What is the impact of digital interactions on gender representations?

### **Conceptual Clarification**

Gender is a socio-economic variable for analyzing roles, responsibilities, constraints, and needs of men and women in a given context. It refers to the social and cultural constructs each society assigns to behaviors, characteristics and values attributed to men and women. The basis of the construct lies behind the idea that they are natural or intrinsic and, therefore, unalterable. These gender constructs are shaped by ideological, historical, religious, ethnic, economic and cultural determinants. These are usually translated into social, economic and political inequalities, where men's activities and their gender attributes are perceived as essentially superior to women's. Buttressing this notion, Okunna (2020) opines that gender relations in Nigeria are characterized by much imbalance, to the disadvantage of women, by keeping women in subordinate positions to their male counterparts.

The larger society and the male subculture still see women and their aspirations as subordinate, resulting in a situation in which the marginalization, trivialization and stereotyping of women become glaring aspects of Nigerian life. According to the Civil

Resource Development and Documentation Centre (CIRDDOC, 2021), gender could be described as “a system of roles and relationships between men and women that are determined not biologically but by social, political and economic context” (p.1). Gender also involves the process by which individuals who are born into social categories of male and female become the social categories of men and women through the acquisition of locally defined attributes of masculinity and femininity, which is beyond biological differences; all other differences between men and women are socially constructed and have no logical relationships with their biological composition.

Burgos-Bebray(2010) asserts that though gender roles are distinctively different and vital in every existing human society, they are nevertheless not unequal and that during struggles, they are irrelevant. As if invoking Burgos-Bebray (2020), Boserup (2017) argues that colonization came with gender inequality as an instrument to strategize the perpetuation of women's subordination, subjugation, and exploitation. In developing nations like Nigeria, where people are raised in a culture highly dominated by role differentiations, women are often reminded of their natural roles as wives and mothers and that these are the only places where they can fit in and perform. Therefore, women, especially in Nigeria, tend to shy away from other roles they can comfortably fit into. This stereotype thereby strengthens the patriarchal worldview amongst most Africans that women are not expected to participate in the decision-making process. By implication, therefore, women should be seen, not heard.

The concept of gender is used to understand the social and political relations between men and women, as well as how femininity and masculinity are constructed. Gender attributions are, therefore, often justified based on sexual or biological differences. For instance, women are perceived as “naturally” nurturing, a characteristic linked to their reproductive capacity as child bearers. This gender attribution has permeated the field of science and technology globally. This is because it is often categorized as “hard” and therefore “masculine,” a field traditionally considered suited for men, not women. Language and gender in online communications represent a dynamic and multifaceted research domain that delves into the intricate interplay between language use, gender identity, and digital communication platforms.

### **Methodology**

The study adopted a qualitative study, which specifically used literature studies. Literature studies are conducted through research and analysis of the literature related to language and gender in online communications. Literature studies are conducted by gathering several previous similar studies, which include research reports, journal articles and books, and news in newspapers, both online and offline, for library studies. These literature studies are used as a basis for supporting and compiling research terms of reference for supporting the discussion of the initial problem of this study.

### **Discussion of Findings**

#### Research Question 1

How does gendered language manifest online (social media, forums)?

Gendered language manifests in online spaces such as social media, forums, messaging platforms, and other digital communication channels in various nuanced ways, reflecting societal norms, cultural influences, and individual identity performances. Para-Mallam (2017), Ohmynews (2016), Angya (2019) and Burgos-Bebray (2020) disclosed that the manifestations of gendered language in these online environments encompass linguistic choices,

conversational styles and interactional patterns that often exhibit gender-specific characteristics, which include:

**Vocabulary and Lexical Choices:** Gendered language can use specific vocabulary that aligns with stereotypical gender roles or societal expectations. For instance, words associated with traditional femininity or masculinity might be employed more frequently by individuals to express their gender identity or to conform to perceived gender norms.

**Speech Patterns and Communication Styles** – Speech patterns and communication styles are essential to how individuals express themselves and interact with others. In online interactions, men and women may exhibit distinct speech patterns and communication styles. These patterns vary widely among individuals and are influenced by culture, upbringing, education, and personal experiences. Understanding different speech patterns and styles is crucial for effective communication and building positive relationships. Research suggests that women tend to use more expressive and emotional language, while men may employ more assertive and directive language. Societal expectations and cultural norms may influence these differences regarding gendered communication. Understanding and respecting these variations in speech patterns and communication styles can enhance interpersonal relationships, minimize misunderstandings, and contribute to effective communication in various personal and professional settings.

**Politeness Strategies** – Politeness strategies are linguistic and social behaviours used to communicate respectfully and courteously. These strategies vary across cultures and contexts, but some general principles can be applied in various situations. Using Polite Words and Phrases that include adding "please" to a request is a common way to make it sound more polite. Also, expressing gratitude is a fundamental aspect of politeness. Apologizing, when necessary, shows humility and consideration for others. The phrase 'excuse me' is used to apologize for minor social transgressions or to ask for forgiveness. Additionally offering compliments can create a positive and friendly atmosphere. Gender can influence the use of politeness strategies in online communication.

Women might employ more mitigated language or politeness markers to maintain harmony and establish rapport, whereas men might use more direct and assertive language, emphasizing task-oriented communication. The effective use of politeness strategies depends on the specific context, relationships, and cultural norms. Adjusting your communication style to fit the situation and being mindful of others' feelings is essential to effective politeness.

**Emojis, Emoticons, and Visual Cues** – Emojis and emoticons are graphical representations of emotions, expressions, objects, or symbols used in digital communication to convey feelings or add context to messages. Visual cues play a crucial role in enhancing the tone and meaning of online conversations. Emojis, emoticons, and visual cues also reflect gendered communication. Studies have shown that certain emojis or emoticons may be associated more with a particular gender or can be used to convey emotions or expressions in line with societal gender norms. Emojis, emoticons, and visual cues play a vital role in modern digital communication by adding expressiveness, nuance, and context to text-based conversations. They contribute to a more dynamic and enjoyable online communication experience.

**Conversational Participation and Turn-Taking** - Gender differences can emerge in conversational participation and online discussions. Some studies suggest that men dominate conversations by taking more speaking turns or being more assertive in expressing their

opinions. At the same time, women may exhibit more collaborative or supportive communication styles.

**Identity Presentation and Self-Disclosure** - Individuals may present their gender identities through the language they use in online profiles, bios, or self-descriptions. This can include disclosing gender-specific information, language choices reflecting gender identity, or adopting linguistic styles associated with their perceived gender.

**Stereotyping and Language Bias:** Online spaces may perpetuate gender stereotypes through language use. Stereotypical portrayals of gender roles, biases in language algorithms, or biased language moderation practices can reinforce existing societal norms and inequalities.

**Adaptation to Digital Contexts** - The evolution of digital communication has led to new linguistic forms and adaptations. Some online communities may develop their unique gendered language practices, including memes, slang, or specialized vocabulary that reflects their identity within the digital space.

## Research Question 2

What are the linguistic patterns and communication styles peculiar to online spaces?

Examining linguistic patterns and communication styles for effective online communication involves exploring how language choices, speech patterns, and interactional styles impact messages' clarity, tone, and reception in digital spaces. Zoonen (2015), Boserup (2017), Okunna (2020) and Aghadiegwu (2018) identified the linguistic patterns peculiar to the online spaces as presented below:

**Clarity and Precision:** Effective online communication hinges on clear and precise language. Examining linguistic patterns involves assessing how individuals construct their messages—choosing words, phrases, and structures that convey their intended meaning accurately. This scrutiny extends to the avoidance of ambiguity and the use of language that resonates with the audience.

**Adaptation to Audience:** It is crucial to understand how communicators adjust their language to suit their audience. This involves examining tone, vocabulary, and complexity shifts based on the recipient's knowledge, familiarity with the topic, cultural background, or preferred communication style.

**Conciseness and Accessibility:** Online platforms often demand brevity and accessibility. Studying linguistic patterns involves analyzing how individuals condense information effectively without losing substance and ensuring that the language is accessible to a broad audience.

Zoonen (2015), Boserup (2017), Okunna (2020) and Aghadiegwu (2018) identified the communication styles peculiar to the online spaces as:

**Interactive and Engaging Styles:** Effective communication online often involves interactive styles that engage the audience. Research scrutinizes how individuals employ questions, prompts, and inclusive language to encourage participation, foster discussions, and maintain engagement.

**Adaptive Tone and Emotive Expression:** Examining communication styles encompasses understanding how communicators adapt their tone and express emotions through text-based mediums. This involves analyzing emoticons, emojis, punctuation, or formatting to convey feelings, tone, or emphasis.

**Respectful and Inclusive Discourse:** Effective online communicators prioritize respect and inclusivity. Research into communication styles delves into practices that foster a

respectful environment, such as using inclusive language, avoiding offensive or discriminatory language, and promoting open-minded discussions.

### **Research Question 3**

What is the impact of digital interactions on gender representations?

The impact of digital interactions on gender representations is a multifaceted and evolving subject that reflects the intersection between technology, society, and individual identity construction. Zoonen (2015), Boserup (2017), Okunna (2020) and Aghadiegwu (2018) summarised digital interactions on gender representations as:

**Self-Presentation and Identity Construction:** Digital interactions offer individuals a platform to craft and present their gender identities. Social media profiles, online avatars, and personal descriptions serve as avenues for self-expression, allowing individuals to shape how they are perceived in alignment with their gender identities.

**Performance of Gender Norms:** Online spaces often mirror and sometimes intensify societal gender norms. Individuals might conform to or deviate from traditional gender roles when engaging online, consciously or unconsciously reflecting societal expectations in their digital interactions.

**Reinforcement of Gender Stereotypes:** Digital interactions can perpetuate existing gender stereotypes through language use, visual representations, or algorithmic biases. Social media content, advertising, and online discussions sometimes reinforce gendered expectations, thus perpetuating societal norms.

**Challenging Gender Norms:** Digital platforms can also serve as catalysts for challenging gender stereotypes. Online activism, gender-inclusive language movements, and diverse representations in media shared through digital channels contribute to challenging traditional gender norms and fostering more inclusive representations.

**Algorithmic Biases and Representation:** Algorithms used in social media and online platforms may inadvertently reinforce gender biases. For instance, biased targeting in ads or recommendations may perpetuate gendered stereotypes in content consumption.

**Empowerment and Agency:** Digital interactions can empower individuals to assert their gender identities authentically. Online communities and support networks offer spaces where marginalized genders can find solidarity, share experiences, and advocate for their rights.

**Fluidity and Intersectionality:** Digital spaces have contributed to the visibility of gender diversity and understanding of gender as a spectrum. Interactions in online forums, discussions, and content creation have facilitated conversations around gender fluidity and intersectionality.

**Global Perspectives and Cultural Influences:** Digital interactions provide a platform for global discourse on gender, exposing diverse cultural perspectives and challenging ethnocentric views on gender roles and identities.

### **Conclusions**

The examination of language and gender in online communications and the impact of digital interactions on gender representations underscores the intricate relationship between technology, language, societal norms, and individual identity construction. This multifaceted exploration reveals that Online communication showcases distinct linguistic patterns and communication styles influenced by gender, reflecting societal norms and individual identity performances. In essence, the significance of understanding language and gender in online communications and the impact of digital interactions on gender representations lies in fostering inclusive, respectful, and empowering digital spaces for all individuals. Embracing

diversity, challenging biases, and promoting equitable representations are pivotal steps toward creating a more inclusive online world that celebrates the richness of gender identities and expressions.

#### **Recommendations:**

The following recommendations were proposed:

**Promoting Digital Literacy:** Encourage digital literacy programs that educate users on recognizing and addressing biases, foster inclusive language, and promote respectful online communication.

**Algorithmic Audits and Ethical Design:** Advocate for audits of algorithms used in digital platforms to mitigate biases and ensure more equitable representations of gender.

**Inclusive Language Policies:** Encourage the adoption of inclusive language policies by online platforms to promote gender diversity and inclusivity in digital communication.

**Continued Research and Education:** Invest in further research to deepen our understanding of the evolving dynamics between language, gender, and digital interactions. This research should inform educational initiatives and policy changes to create more inclusive online environments.

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