Chapter 60
Gender Characteristics:
Implication for Cross-Cultural Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

Demographics in higher education populations have been changing. Females have become the major-ity population in online learning. Genders are physiologically and psychologically similar yet still different. This chapter provides an overview of cross-cultural gender characteristics of adult learners and discusses the associated challenges that interfere with their online learning effectiveness. Gender differences in behavior and learning are discussed from biological, environmental, and technological perspectives. Strategies to address their challenges and needs in online learning are provided. The chapter then concludes with suggestions for future research on cross-cultural gender issues in the online learning environment.

INTRODUCTION

Online learning is an artifact of advanced technology which has enriched the learning environment with diverse social, cultural, educational, working, and religious backgrounds from all over the world. In higher education, online learning has become an interactive and collaborative virtual learning environment (Schuster et al., 2015). However, online higher education literature has presented evidence of gender barriers and differences in learning behavior and communication (Chan, Huang, Hui, Li, & Yu, 2013; Crymble, 2016; Little-Wiles, Fernandez, & Fox, 2014). Adult learners' behavior can vary by gender. For example, females tend to be more self-directed in learning compared to males (Reio & Davis, 2005; Xu & Jaggars, 2014). Gender appears to be a critical factor in instructional design. Yet, studies that address gender characteristics in cross-cultural online learning are limited.

It is vital to the online educators to have a clear understanding on the foundational issues that have created gender differences in learning, to examine gender characteristics of adult learners, and to identify the associated issues or challenges genders may encounter in online learning. To better understand the influence of gender characteristics on online learning, an overview of cross-cultural gender characteristics of adult learners and the associated challenges that interfere with their online learning effectiveness were discussed in this chapter. Strategies to address gender needs in online learning and suggestions for future research on cross-cultural gender issues in the online learning environment were then deliberated.

BACKGROUND

Internet used to be a male-dominated technology; yet, the gender gap in Internet usage has narrowed (Price, 2006). The advanced educational technology allows women to balance multiple roles and demands on their life with family responsibilities and financial stresses (Yukselturk & Bulut, 2009). Interestingly, women have become the majority population in online learning (Carr-Chellman, 2014). The student demographics in online higher education populations have reformed, and demands for online programs may require adjustments based on different gender characteristics and needs.

Genders are defined by socio-cultural norms, and their roles may be reinforced by education systems (Ifegbesan, 2010). According to the World Health Organization (2018),

Gender refers to the socially constructed characteristics of women and men – such as norms, roles and relationships of and between groups of women and men... they are taught appropriate norms and behaviours – including how they should interact with others of the same or opposite sex within households, communities and work places. (1ˢᵗ paragraph).

An ordinary critique or judgment can affect an individual's behavior or belief when the environment is shaped by the same group pattern or thought. Cultural views of gender-appropriate behaviors have stereotyped both men and women in many ways. Traditionally, women are expected to take over family caregiving responsibilities and behave based on the socially defined gender role and feminine characteristics (e.g., sweetness, gentleness, sensitivity). To challenge stereotypical views of women, Price (2006) examined gender differences and similarities in online contexts and indicated that genders tend to have different interaction and tutoring styles in online learning. Specifically, women seem to be confident and engaged independent learners who may outperform men in aspects of online learning (Price, 2006). While many studies indicated that genders tend to have different performances, motivations, and communication behaviors in learning, some studies argued that gender has no effect on motivation and (self-regulated) learning achievement (Astleitner & Steinberg, 2005; Chyung, 2007; Price, 2006; Yukselturk & Bulut, 2009). Evidently, there has been a debate in the literature on gender differences in online learning. Are genders really different? If they do differ in learning, how and why are they different?

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