Special Session Summary   the Gendered Nature of the Evolving Technoscape: Evaluating Identity, Representation, and Locality
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 Broadly defined, technology is the “tools, devices or systems designed to help users carry out specific tasks (Koerber 2000).” This definition reflects the historically neutral way in which technology is conceived: as a culturally-void tool used to accomplish otherwise mundane tasks. While technology is often discussed in culturally-neutral terms, recent work in consumer research and other disciplines has begun to place technology squarely within the socially-contested landscapes of gender, race, class, and sexuality. This work has served to create a new definition of technology that emphasizes the continuous and everyday nature of the tool and its reflection of dominant social patterns such as sexism, racism and classism. In addition, if it is believed that technology is “inextricably linked to particular patterns of power and authority” and reflective of the human condition in which it developed and used, then we can assume that the cultural dynamics that shape our interpersonal lives exist in technology-based interactions as well. The utopian notion of a genderless, raceless, and classless world that many believed would emerge from the proliferation of information and communication technologies has not happened and now many researchers are questioning the true nature of this utopian vision.

This session served as an illumination of the core issues surrounding the role of technology in the formation and maintenance of gender. This session built upon a previous special session that introduced the ACR community to the core ideas surrounding the gender/technology intersection. Whereas that session described the intersection, this session served to critique it. Many within consumer research equate sex and gender and thereby ignore or miss the continuous nature of the gender construct. This session will shed light on the dynamic construct of gender by discussing the fluid nature of gender identities, gender representation in film, and gender locality in public access technology centers.

In the first paper, Zinkhan and Close examined the reshaping of gender identities in cyberspace. Their examination attempted to confront the utopian vision of androgyny in light of the proliferation of technology for use in interpersonal relationship formation and maintenance. While many commentators predicted that gender would be rendered unimportant in the technological landscape, most research has found the opposite to be true. In fact, internet access and usage reflects the exact same gender dynamics that occur in non-technological spaces. Through diaries, long interviews, and observation, the authors shed light on this apparent paradox and provide insight into our current understanding of gender identity.

While the Zinkhan and Close’s paper reflected on the current state of and provided insight into the future of gender identity, Neilson’s paper interpreted the gender representations present in science fiction films. Neilson posited that the gender/technology tension that exists in everyday life is either reflected in or contested in the portrayal of women in sci-fi films. The emergence of the female cyborg in particular demonstrates this tension and was analyzed by the author to provide insights into technology’s role in consumers’ everyday lives.

Finally, Dobscha’s paper served to interpret gender and race relations within a certain locality. While most work on the gender/technology intersection has focused on the way in which gender identity is formed/maintained/supported in cyberspace, Dobscha attempted to understand the role of gender and race in the use of spaces specifically designed to provide access to the internet. How participation in technology is locally situated in public spaces will provide insights into whether traditional terrains are being maintained or subverted with the introduction of technology as the new social arbiteur.