

Gender and Chat Forums

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INTRODUCTION

Within the last decade, the Internet has become one of the fastest growing technologies. According to research conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, nearly 60% of the United States (U.S.) population is now online, with variation based on race, age, education, region and income (Spooner, 2003). Despite the persistent discrepancies in access, Internet usage among the U.S. population is steadily increasing, up by 9% since 2000. Throughout the 1990s, well-educated white men primarily populated the Internet; however, this situation has changed in the last 5 years. As of 2000, women made up 50% of Internet users and “Hispanics [were] just as likely to be online as whites, and African Americans are coming online at accelerating rates” (Horrigan, 2000, p. 2). Overall, the Pew study found that activities such as e-mail (and other online communication forums); online shopping; Web surfing; connectivity with family and friends; hobbies; news; and information are popular online uses. Through the Pew Institute’s many studies, it is clear the Internet is a key aspect of social life in U.S. culture.

BACKGROUND

A particularly popular online activity is chatting. A variety of chat forums are in existence, including multi-user domains (MUDs), Internet relay chat (IRC) and Web chat. The very first form of chat was IRC; it was designed to allow a large number of people from different locations to chat among themselves. The initial protocol of IRC was designed in Finland by Jarkko Oikarinen in 1988, and since then, it has spread to more than 60 countries worldwide. Chat rooms such as IRC house a form of computer-mediated communication (CMC) or interaction that occurs in “real time: All participants in an interaction must be electronically present at the same time, and messages are immediately transmitted through the

intermediate servers to all participants, wherever they may be” (Paolillo, 1999, p. 3). Chat rooms are constant and channels (specific chat rooms) are occupied 24 hours a day. Web chat rooms are differentiated from other chat forums by their multimedia character. They incorporate typed messages, voice communications, emotional cues (emoticons) and, sometimes, video streams.

GENDER AND CHAT FORUMS

Many studies explore the role of gender in chat forums (Armentor, 2005; Sunden, 2002; Kendall, 2002; White, 2001; Ignacio, 2000; Parks, 1999; Yates, 1997; Roberts, 1999; Herring, 1999; Soukup, 1999; Danet, 1998; Rodino, 1997; Turkle, 1995). Table 1 offers a list of key findings on the issue. Most research on the relationship between gender and chat forums focuses on the issue of identity.

Rodino (1997) found in her study of IRC that gender is more of a performance than a binary category. Furthermore, she found gender construction is not divorced from *real* life, but is allowed to be multiple. Findings demonstrate that for some, gender “is made to be more ‘real’ than it really is” and for others “gender’s performativity is rendered more ‘virtual’ than it really is” (Rodino, 1997, p. 18).

For her research on MUDs, Kendall (2002) conducted an ethnographic study that addressed issues of gender identity. Based on her findings that demonstrated participants often reproduced hegemonic versions of masculinity, Kendall (2002) argues that “online relations do not occur in a cultural vacuum. However much people may desire to leave behind the constraints of their off-line cultural backgrounds and social identities, their social interactions online remain grounded in understandings and contexts that intersect with off-line real identities” (Kendall, 2002, p. 225). Armentor (2005) found in her research of a Web chat forum that there were many more performances of dominant gender identities than there

were acts of transgressive identities. However, she also demonstrates that for many participants, the Web chat forum is a space for them to experiment and play with sexual identity. She notes that for some female chatters, this may be especially appealing. During cybersex, one can perform versions of sexuality without the dangers of face-to-face relations.

On the topic of gender harassment in synchronous and asynchronous forums, Herring (1999) used a linguistic approach to analyze talk from each forum. She found that in both forums, the rhetorical gender dynamics were the same. That is, she observed that online gender harassment followed a certain sequence, which included: “(non)provocation, harassment, resistance, escalation, compliance” (Herring, 1999, p. 164). Herring, Johnson and DiBenedetto (1995) explored the claim that “men dominate computer-mediated interaction much as they dominate face-to-face interaction: by ‘talking’ more, by taking an authoritative stance in public discourse, and by verbally harassing and intimidating women into accommodation or silence” (Herring et al., 1995, p. 67). They found these forms of interaction were common in two mixed-sex discussion groups. However, they observed women participating in resistance strategies. Armentor (2005) found striking examples of discursive gender harassment and homophobia in the Web chat room she studied. However, she also noted that there were many instances of discursive resistance to gendered dynamics. Some participants who were the target of discursive oppression resisted through reframing issues and fighting back with words.

FUTURE TRENDS

The complexities of online social life are only beginning to be understood by researchers. As Internet research continues to grow and explore these com-

plexities, new findings are constantly surfacing. A variety of chat rooms are in existence, used for a variety of purposes. Within these virtual communities, regular participants establish their own set of norms. However, flaming (an attacking message) is often a problem for many virtual communities, especially chat communities. In addition, some chat rooms are clogged with bots (software robots that simulate human chatters) that attempt to lure chatters into Internet pay porn sites (Armentor, 2005). However, chat spaces may also offer participants a common meeting ground and the possibility of meeting new people without the fear of physical harm (Armentor, 2005).

CONCLUSION

Chat forums are simulated hangouts or places to go when people are looking to meet new people with similar interests. They are not separated from the off-line world. They are places and spaces very much connected to off-line social life and structures, especially when it comes to gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity. Chat forums also offer many new opportunities for resisting these structures and forming new types of communities. As the Internet continues to expand throughout society and as more research is conducted, new questions arise about how network spaces, such as chat forums, contribute to everyday social life.

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Table 1. Key issues on gender and chat forums

The reproduction of gendered identities
Breaking out of gender binaries
The reproduction of oppressive social interactions (i.e., sexist, homophobic or racist messages)
Resistance to gender harassment and other forms of harassment
Experimentation in sexuality and sexual identity among participants.

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