Chapter 12
Human Behavior in Chatrooms

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ABSTRACT

The development of new technologies has had an impact on human behavior and communication from time immemorial. With the growing rate of technological advancement during the past 100 years, the changes have occurred even more rapidly. In an effort to understand the effects of one medium on human behavior and communication, this article explores and synthesizes research that has been conducted over the past 30 years, in what has come to be known as the chatroom. The chatroom, in the form of Internet Relay Chat (IRC), was developed in the late 1980s, and has been growing in popularity ever since. Chatrooms are Web-based platforms that allow synchronous, written communication between two or more interested participants in a forum that is potentially open to other interested participants.

INTRODUCTION

In addition to written chat, video and audio chat have become available in the mid-1990s (Herring, 2002). The operational definition of chatrooms used in this paper excludes a) asynchronous communication such as email or discussion boards, b) oral synchronous communication such as Skype, that is limited to two individuals and c) potentially synchronous communication, such as texting, that is confined to only two individuals. Chatrooms may be entirely text-based, such as with Internet Relay Chat, (IRC), or they may be graphics-based, in which case they can also have oral and visual modalities in addition to written. Although some chatrooms may allow oral and visual communication, such chatrooms are different from other technologies that have similar components, such as online gaming, that also allow oral and visual communication. Perhaps in this case it is the purpose of the event that separates online gaming from chatrooms. Chatrooms are used for communication purposes and do not include a task completion component, thereby excluding

similar types of communication in which people are players who interact with other people for gaming purposes.

Having laid out some of the defining characteristics of chatrooms, we will know explore some of their characteristics in more detail. It should be noted that there is some variation in these characteristics; however, the current description will address the prototypical features of a chatroom that are common to almost all of them.

In terms of physical organization on a computer screen, a chatroom consists of three basic parts. One space, generally the larger space, is where messages are posted by the participants in the chatroom. These messages are organized in a linear fashion, one underneath the other, in the order in which they are posted by the participants. Usually, the poster's name or pseudonym accompanies each posting. This message area is seen by everyone who is present in the chatroom. In addition to the message area, chatrooms include an area in which participants type their entries. This area is seen only by the individual who is composing the message. In this way, individuals are able to compose and edit the message as they see fit before posting it. In other words, chatters can type, erase or alter their message up until the time that they hit the enter key and post their message to the message board. Another feature of a chatroom is a box which lists, by name or pseudonym, all of the people who are in the chatroom at a given time. Although it may seem obvious to list these chatroom features, it is important to do so because these features affect the types of behaviors and communication that are possible in a chatroom.

OVERVIEW

The use of chatrooms may be examined in several ways. One distinction can be made according to the general purpose of the interaction, with a two main categories being pedagogical and recreational. A considerable amount of research has investigated chatroom use in pedagogical and educational settings, perhaps because researchers themselves are generally familiar with this context. Consequently, numerous studies have described and evaluated how students and teachers use chatrooms. Less research has been conducted into recreational uses of chatrooms; nevertheless, research has investigated how and why people use chatrooms for social and leisure purposes.

Another distinction can be made between the linguistic and other behavioral aspects of chatroom use. Given that one of the main features of chatrooms is the language that occurs therein, a large body of research has investigated how language is used and how chatroom language may differ from face to face interaction (F2F). Behavioral aspects include issues of identity and social relationships. All of these facets of chatroom use will be examined in turn.

Pedagogical

Chatrooms have been used in numerous educational settings, including undergraduate and graduate courses, teacher training and development programs, and second language learning classes (Chapelle, 2009; Johnson, 2006; Kern, 2006; Kern, Ware and Warschauer, 2008; Warschauer, 1996). In some cases, chatrooms are used within an existing class as an alternative means to supplement communication in the class. Thus, chatrooms can be used in addition to face-to-face (F2F) interaction and asynchronous discussion boards, for example. In other cases, chatrooms may be the sole method of class interaction. Chatrooms in pedagogical contexts are usually open only to the members of the specific class or program within which the chatroom is being used. As a result, although the participants may not initially know their fellow chatroom participants, it is generally not possible for entirely anonymous participants to join the chatroom. In addition to the students, the teacher or instructor may be present as a moderator during interaction, or alternatively the students may be

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