Chapter 17
Change Talk at iVillage.com

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With the growing number of women going online, women-centered Internet sites have become more abundant. This case focuses on social support offered by relationship message board members at iVillage.com, a popular and pioneering site for women. Findings suggest that community members promote a form of individualism that reflects a dominant United States (US) cultural understanding of self. Read against research that suggests US females tend to have a more relational than individual sense of self, the promotion of an individual self may be an unhelpful aspect of the social support given on the relationship boards.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

Established in 1995, iVillage.com is currently the most successful Internet site designed for women. The majority (75%) of the over four million monthly U.S. American visitors are female (quantcase.com "US Demographics"). Site photographs and advertisements feature women and content focuses on what are traditionally thought of as women's concerns: pregnancy and parenting, beauty and style, home and garden, food and recipes, health and diet, and celebrity gossip and entertainment. Site

visitors can click through pages of articles, expert advice, and discussions that change daily, if not hourly. Community members—and iVillage.com emphasizes being a community for women—can upload pictures to the site, comment on blogs and engage in community message board discussions.

With the increasing numbers of women accessing the Internet, sites focused on serving the needs and interests of women, such as iVillage.com, should be evaluated for emergent and on-going women-centered communication practices. With the popularity and the success of iVillage.com message boards—a 2009 Alexa.com report states that its message board traffic is second only to its health

pages—iVillage.com provides an opportunity to observe a rich array of conversations. While iVillage.com hosts over 1,000 message boards, some with experts available to answer questions and others with members facilitating discussions, the focus here is on the 100 boards that pertain to relationships. These boards include discussions about issues relating to such topics as men, dating, love, marriage, and infidelity. As in other online communities (Ridings & Gefen, 2004; Rodgers & Chen, 2005), relationship message board members request and provide both social support (e.g., I am sorry that you are having to go through this.) and, less often, information (e.g., hypertext links to articles or books).

This case study evaluates the extent to which the social support given on iVillage.com relationship message boards can be considered helpful to women. While work in gender and computer-mediated communication focuses on explicating how gender is communicated, read, and altered in online communication, this case study takes a different approach. Focusing on messages surrounding relationship troubles, this case explicates a cultural discourse that structures computer-mediated communication on the boards. Findings suggest that norms surrounding troubles talk on these boards are premised on a notion of self that celebrates independence and sanctions dependence. This dominant cultural discourse under-privileges people, typically women, who see relationships with others as an integral part of their definition of self. In the context of social support given on an online community dedicated to the needs of women, this finding makes more complex the evaluation of computer-mediated social support.

SETTING THE STAGE

The Internet has held many exciting possibilities for gender and communication research. As a medium of communication, the Internet provides for gender ambiguity and anonymity by rendering invisible many of the social cues that mark gender—such as one's physical appearance and the tone of one's voice. Thus, computer-mediated communication presents users with an opportunity to adopt different gender identities and styles of communicating than they do offline. For this reason, computer-mediated communication has been studied for its potential to liberate women from off-line gender roles and identities, for the resources people utilize to establish online gender identities, as well as for the fluidity and the play of gender in computer-mediated communication.

Early work on gender in computer-mediated communication offered support for the Internet's liberatory potential. Graddol and Swan's (1989) study of a text-based university conferencing system suggested that qualities of computer-mediated communication inherent in the system facilitated more equal participation between men and women with varied social statuses. Specifically, they pointed to the general invisibility of status markers (including gender), the flattened hierarchical structure, and the public nature of communication as key equalizing characteristics. However, the optimism of their findings was tempered by research that indicated computer-mediated communication was not a panacea for gender-based oppression and marginalization. Kramarae and Taylor (1991) identified three issues that disadvantage women online: (a) men controlled topic selection and monopolized the talk (see also Herring, 1993), (b) sexism and sexual harassment silenced women's participation (see also Bruckman, 1993; Herring, 1999), and (c) the more masculine style of communicating on the Internet (e.g., assertiveness and flaming) hampered women's participation (see also Crowston and Kammerer, 1998). As the early optimism faded with the findings that gender inequalities found in face-to-face interaction were also present online, research began to analyze the resources people utilized to communicate and read gender in computer-mediated communication as well as the fluidity of gender online.

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