

Women's Empowerment on the Internet?

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Abstract

This study employs interpretive research via Netnographic fieldwork to explore a famous website for women in Taiwan called *SheSay* (<http://www.shesay.com>) which has promoted an online dating game called "Raising Men for Fun." This online game, offered a utopian vision for women to empower themselves, attempts to reverse traditional Taiwanese gender roles by enrolling women as 'masters' and men as 'pets'. We examine whether women are empowered on the Internet and whether the power can be further transferred from online to offline. Principally, this study describes the experiences of seventeen Taiwanese women and thirteen Taiwanese men and how they embody their cultural expectations and values through playing this online dating game. The findings of our data are heterogeneous and context-oriented. To some degree, our findings challenge the results of Lennie et al. (1999) and Clark's (1998) studies that women are empowered on the Internet. During a long-term investigation, our study finds that few women felt they were empowered on the Internet, but most of the women did not. Only one woman could transfer the power from online to offline. Meanwhile, most of the men still used this online game as their tool, their power and their weapon to recreate limitations in order to rule over women. We argue that women's empowerment via the Internet might temporarily exist online, established power still rules society. We suggest that culture is inescapable and that the Internet affords only very limited liberating to extend alternative gender relations and power before there is a 'catastrophic reversion' to traditional gender roles.

Keywords: women's empowerment, masculine culture, technology, online games

1. Introduction

The Internet is the most effective form of communication available to promote the Western-world value of autonomy: It is driven by the ideas of consumerism, the culture of freedom, individual innovation, free expression, equal opportunity and equal gender right (Castells 2000). Basically, Taiwanese culture is prone to a patriarchal relationship between man and man as well as men and women, which is something that could be jeopardized by Internet innovation and freedom. According to a yam.com survey in 2003, Taiwanese female online users (53%) outnumbered for the first time male online users, and female users were even more enthusiastic than their male counterparts in expressing their views on the Internet. Through globalization and mediaization, where society becomes global simultaneously fragmented and hyperreal, people in Taiwan are threatened not only by social changes, but also by a number of ‘dilemmas of the self’: fragmentation, powerlessness and uncertainty (Castells 2000; Giddens 1991). As one Taiwanese author Po (1996, cited in Castells 1997, p. 110) wrote, “Just like pubs for the making of British working class, gay bars play important roles for the formation of urban gay/lesbian communities in Taipei.” In the new technology age in which Taiwan is fully immersed, not only are gays and lesbians not limited to bars in their networking activities, but also all of the people in Taiwan are allowed to extensively use the Internet to experience the opposite gender role or (re)construct alternative selves (Castells 1997). In this sense, gender roles are now different from the views of tradition. According to the *Taiwanese Women Forum* (2004), although the traditional model ‘active men and passive women’ of an intimate relationship has been reproduced, some young Taiwanese women are becoming more open and daring in actively going after the men they like. Meanwhile, some studies showed that women and girls in Taiwan are developing confidence in

cyberspace (Chen et al. 2002; Chen & Chen 2005). The Internet provides the opportunity for multiplicity of women to be 'heard' (Malina and Nutt 2000). Harcourt (1999) argued that the Internet has the potential to empower women and provide an environment for women to challenge the masculine power base. The idea of a *SheSay* (<http://www.shesay.com>) online dating game, one of the most famous websites in Taiwan, – “Raising Men for Fun” – is similar to Harcourt’s suggestion. This online dating game, a utopian vision for women to be empowered, appears to reverse the traditional Taiwanese relationship between men and women that men are active to go after women. In this game, women are called “masters” while men are called “pets.” It is a crucial breakthrough and a challenge to the Taiwanese masculine power base because in the game women are human beings with higher status than the animal-like men. This game allows women (masters) to pick an online “kept” (raised) man (pet). Both men and women can play, although their gender roles are different. Especially, only men present themselves for women to be chosen in this game. The woman is empowered to choose a suitable man. The man, on the other hand, waits to be hunted, makes every attempt to please his female “master” and needs permission from the woman to talk to her. It could be argued that women in a masculine culture can use the power given by online game(s) to challenge the constraints of time and space, allowing them to explore potential relations among men and authority (Stone 1995). If this situation can really be applied or is translated into real life [offline], then women in Taiwanese society may transform traditional patriarchal culture. In fact, empirical work investigating women’s empowerment on the Internet remains limited. Thus, this study is undertaken in the *SheSay* online game with two primary objectives: (1) to explore whether women are empowered on the Internet, and (2) to further examine whether this power can be transferred from online to offline.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Technology as Masculine Culture

In a contemporary age, the Internet has been considered as a new technological power (O'Brien 1999), and women can be empowered through this new technology (Lennie et al. 1999). However, Wajcman (1994) argued that technology is 'socially and culturally' constructed as a male practice carried out in male institutions. It can be used as an important ideological or cultural instrument in the power relations of gender (Kramarae 1988). Traditionally, women's social space has been restricted mainly to the private domain, or to relatively powerless positions in the public domain that do not require 'complicated' or 'abstract' masculine skills (Leung 2003). Gradually, since women are excluded from technology, they are excluded from a very important power domain as well. Once masculine culture has been built, "man can do nothing on his own: carefully concealed, woman nevertheless continues to function as the ground and possibility of his quests for identity, agency and self-control" (Plant 1995, p. 58). For women, technology is used as men's tools, men's power, men's media, and men's weapons all developed by the interests of men. Hence, men can use this power to create constraints/limitations in order to rule over women.

Danet (1998) argued that although there are social and cultural constraints on individuals' behavior, women's behavior in particular, a new technology such as the Internet is seen as a potential liberation from these constraints/limitations. On the contrary, a growing number of literature claimed that the subordinate status of women is

being reproduced in cyberspace (Clark 1998; Kramarae 1995). Even on some forums consisting of mainly females (Baym 1995), participants understand that their forum exists in a male-dominated context and therefore feel the need to use various strategies to limit participation or to protect their regulars from hostile interlopers. Generally, males who still enjoy high status dominate the online interactions, both under normal conditions and under conditions of anonymity, although some individual women report feeling freer to participate when the messages are anonymous (Selfe and Meyer 1991). Wiley (1995, cited in Wakeford 1997, p. 52) suggested that “we should not be surprised if electronic networks are experienced by many women as ‘male territory’.”

2.2 Women’s Empowerment

Traditionally, women’s social position is that of powerlessness and dependence on their husband(s), father(s) (Moore 1994), and even their son(s) in Taiwanese culture when their husband(s) die (Leung 2003). Danet (1998) argued that women on the Internet have an increased opportunity to mask their gender identity and experience the power they have never held in the past. According to a yam.com survey in 2003, more recently in Taiwan some women are somewhat more aggressive than men in establishing online relationships. In this sense, the Internet has the potential to empower women and provide an environment for women to challenge the masculine power base. Lennie et al. (1999) and Clark’s (1998) studies confirmed the empowerment of women on the Internet. There are three important themes of women’s empowerment online which have been identified through their studies:

First, women on the Internet are gaining increased confidence in using new technology, including the confidence to express themselves with freedom, and to use computers and e-mail with less fear. They also try to assist others in getting online and talk about this form of communication with others (Lennie et al. 1999).

Second, females on the Internet are increasing their knowledge and awareness to provide new insights and broaden their views and ideas to be able to communicate with other women. In Lennie's et al. (1999) study of Australian rural and urban women, it was found that women are conscious about broadening their existing knowledge. One rural woman said, "it breaks you out of the cocoon" (Lennie et al. 1999, p. 189). Another woman described empowerment as "having the information and knowing where to get it, then using it" (p. 189).

Finally, while women on the Internet understand that their voices can be heard, they are not dependent on men, and they can make their own decisions. In other words, they feel their views are valued and that they are valued. One of the rural women of Lennie's et al. (1999) study said that it was about being "respected for my opinion and it not being seen as my husband's point of view" (p. 190). Additionally, women's empowerment in decision-making has been found in Clark's (1998) study of teens dating on the Internet, and the power has also been extended to real life. In Clark's (1998) study, Elizabeth "deliberately kept her phone line busy during the appointed time so that he [her male net friend] would not be able to get through" (p.168). She also noted that although she had never 'met' anyone online from her own school, she had decided to terminate one relationship owing to the fact that the boy attended a neighboring school. Clearly, Elizabeth is empowered not only to decide her relationships online, but also to reject relationships with boys [offline] in real life. It is argued that she "does her own thing", and challenges a society where male power and privilege are hegemonic (Weir and Wilson 1984, p. 84).

We come to ask whether or not women are empowered on the Internet. In fact, research in this area is limited. Some studies (Clark 1998; Lennie et al. 1999; Malina and Nutt 2000) supported women's empowerment online, but other studies argued that

electronic networks are still considered as ‘male territory’ (Correll 1995; Wakeford 1997). The answer to be drawn from the literature is still ambiguous. To overcome this, more relevant empirical work is needed. The following sections explain how we have done and what we have got in our study of this area.

3. Research Methodology

Netnography (Kozinets and Handelman 1998; Kozinets 2001, 2002) has emerged as a methodology for the Internet within the past decade. “Netnography” combines traditional ethnographic methods [e.g., traveling, paper-and-pencil notes and face-to-face interviews] with new online methods [e.g., participant-observations on the screen, email exchanges and on-line interviews]. To achieve our research objectives, we examined whether women are empowered on the Internet and whether the power can be further transferred from online to offline. This study used ‘Netnography’ to gather data, including online participant-observation (e.g., observing informants’ diary and joining postings and discussions in the *SheSay* games), online interviews (e.g., email exchanges and online immediate interviews), offline participant-observation (e.g., visiting home, dormitory and office, joining private parties/meeting and tour trip) and offline (face-to-face in-depth) interviews.

According to Charolotte Sue, the producer of *SheSay*, the demographic data indicate that most of its members are between 16 and 30 years old and likely to be university or college-level students as well as working men and women. For the privacy and commercial secret concerns, the company could not disclose personal information. Therefore, we adopted a strategy of “posting” to recruit volunteer informants on the

SheSay Online Community Bulletin Board and looked for friends of friends who were playing on this online game. In total 30 informants were involved in this study. Fifteen informants [8 females and 7 males] were working-people and fifteen informants [9 females and 6 males] were enrolled as full-time students at the University. The thirty informants had all been involved in the *SheSay* website game -- "Raising Men for Fun" for at least one year. Although a pool of thirty key informants may seem small to some readers, it exceeds the number suggested by McCracken (1988, p. 17) as sufficient for generating themes or cultural categories in this type of qualitative research. Additionally, supplemental informants who knew the key informants as friends, colleagues, boy/girlfriends, flatmates, classmates, tutors, supervisors and parents also provided additional perspectives and insights into the aspects of the key informants' offline lives and identity/identities references. Hence, they often helped to corroborate, challenge, clarify or expand the key informants' accounts when we checked the text given by key informants online and offline.

The data reported in this study were collected from 1 July 2001 to 30 September 2003. Data collection consisted mostly of formal and informal face-to-face interviews, online and offline participant-observations, online diaries and email exchanges and online interviews. In certain formal face-to-face in-depth interviews, we audio-taped and transcribed not only the exact words from the informants, but also some other non-verbal and emotional cues like laughter and signs of embarrassment. In order to minimize the 'distortion of the fieldwork texts', we read all textualized data directly from the original language (i.e. Chinese or Taiwanese). The interpretations we accomplished for this study were the outcomes emerging from the dialectical process between the juxtaposed perspectives of the "experience-near" and the "experience-far" (Geertz 1973). Catterall and Maclaran (2001) argued that online researchers need to accept that the characteristics of informants are

‘unknown’ beyond their probable gender, age and so on. In this regard, informant online realities are moulded by a multiplicity of ever-changing socio-cultural forces, and it is questionable whether one can establish dependability or a pattern of behavior. Holt (1991) argued that no matter how many suggested research techniques are used, there is still no guarantee that we can unquestionably establish these evaluative criteria. We deem the recommended research techniques such as prolonged engagement in fieldwork, triangulation across methods and critiques from colleagues (debriefings by peers) as useful in this online research. Furthermore, two professional scholars check-gauged the credibility of our interpretive claims against the view of those sharing their stories. In the next section, we show the stories of informants from the interview data. We focus on the way informants discuss, describe and socially interact with each other when they log onto the *SheSay* “Raising Men for Fun” dating game. Our attention is especially given to whether women’s empowerment on the Internet and whether this power can be transferred from online to offline.

4. Findings

4.1 A Utopia

Under a long-term investigation, the conclusion to be drawn from our data is heterogeneous and context-oriented. On one hand, most female informants did not feel that they have got any power though this online game. It echoes Dietrich’s (1997, p. 180) argument that “the Internet is a powerfully conservative venue, mirroring gender-based ideologies that circulate in the larger culture. Challenging women to identify the issues of their gendered realities means confronting behavior that has developed in response to

patriarchal pressures.” That is, women in Taiwanese culture are projecting embodied identities into cyberspace in an imagined social space defined by their experiences – less chance to use the power – in a patriarchal culture (Stockman 2000). For example,

[Tina](25 yrs, female, a staff of a civil engineering company): I didn't hold any special power in this game. I didn't treat or see my male net friends as my pets.... My online personality was the same as my real life personality.

[Ivan](23 yrs, female, an undergraduate student): I don't think that women are actually empowered in this game. There are at most three limitations in all. Nothing special. "Raising men for fun" is overstated.

Some female informants felt that they were empowered at the beginning of playing this game. Gradually, they unconsciously gave the power back to the men during their intercommunication or playing, a point reinforced by some female informants.

[Sunya](27 yrs, female, a teaching assistant at a university): At the beginning, I felt that I had a lot of power to control him. In fact, it became more equal for both of us after playing for a while. Gradually, I don't care who posts messages or sends virtual gifts to the other after playing for a long time.

[Ma](22 yrs, female, an undergraduate student): At the beginning, I felt that women were empowered but it has disappeared now. It became normal chatting...

On the other hand, a few female informants stated that women are empowered through playing this online game. More importantly, they were empowered to escape from their husbands' or boyfriends' views and to gain the confidence to handle their own feelings and emotions. As they said,

[Jane](38 yrs, female, an assistant at an architect's agency): Sometimes my husband feels that I am a boring woman because I always like to talk about issues in which he isn't interested. Now I can talk about these things with my pets in this game... I didn't have to worry about anything and didn't care whether a pet (he) wanted to

chat with me or not. I could kill him and re-raise a new one if he didn't want to talk with me.

[Juan](25 yrs, female, a saleswoman): My ex-boyfriend couldn't even understand the jokes I made. Sometimes he thought I was an indecent girl when I told him something. In contrast, the man I met in the SheSay game was funny and talkative. The most important thing was that I had no responsibilities with him. I made jokes and chatted about what I was interested in...

Furthermore, very few female informants felt empowered not only to make their own decisions that were not on the basis of the traditional masculine values, but also to offer their own thoughts to dominate the issues in the online game. As they explained,

[Nora](30 yrs, female, a mortgage specialist at a bank): I felt that women in this game were empowered... For example, I felt tired of playing with him (a male net friend) so I killed him. He sent a message to me, "My master!! Why did you kill me...?" But I was fed up with him so I killed him. His manners were really really annoying me....

[Ma](22 yrs, female, an undergraduate student): He (a male net friend) asked for my mobile number but I didn't give it to him. I always changed the subject when he asked for my mobile number. I must admit that I ignored it deliberately.

Together, the results might disappoint women in Taiwanese culture. After a long-term investigation, our data found that few female informants felt their empowered and only one of female informants, *Christine* (22 yrs, female, an undergraduate student) who she was empowered to choose her 'real' boyfriend (*Charles*) through the *SheSay* game. It entirely reverses the traditional situation in which men hold upper hand and get to evaluate the women's appearance first during the matchmaking process. She also had the power to evaluate her male net friend first on the Internet and to hold upper hand onto real life. In fact, it could not be ignored that her online empowerment was really transferred to offline and truly challenged Taiwanese masculine culture.

4.2 Male Territory

Traditionally in real life, men in Taiwanese culture are afraid to be called ‘eating soft rice’ guys who are ‘raised’ (financially supported) by women and lose all ‘masculine’ power. Therefore, it can prove difficult for male informants to discuss whether women are empowered in this online game or not. On one hand, male informants were keen to enjoy playing or pretending to be powerless as ‘pets’ on the basis of the *SheSay* game rules. On the other hand, they were afraid to lose their ‘masculine’ power and be called as ‘raised’ (kept) men. As some male informants claimed, they did not feel that women using power in this game caused them any problems. For instance,

[Chiming](42 yrs, male, an architect): At the beginning, my master limited me to writing a maximum of 20 words in each message. To my surprise, I didn't need to ask her to allow me more words but later she actively set me free anyway.

[Hank](31 yrs, male, a 3 D freelancer): Both of my masters gave me no limitations when we started playing this game. They didn't cause me any difficulty. I have never said, 'Please, raise me!!'

Some male informants are used to being empowered in their daily lives and to gaining ‘masculine’ face in public. It is difficult for them to accept that they are doing something without showing their ‘masculine’ power. They felt uncomfortable to interact with ‘the powerless’ in this way, so they emphasized that ‘it is only a game’ or even said that ‘men ought to be respected’ in this game. As they stated,

[Mark](25 yrs, male, just graduated from postgraduate school): I think it's only a game. It doesn't mean anything to me that women are empowered in this game....

[Dave](39 yrs, male, an assistant manager of a bank): It's only a game. It's only for killing time. It makes me uncomfortable to call people masters and pets when playing this game. People are human beings, not animals. It hurt my feelings when I

heard this kind of stuff because I felt that I had lost my rights. It (the SheSay game) should respect us (men).

To some degree, our findings supported Wakeford's (1997, p. 52) argument that many women regard electronic networks as 'male territory', in which men are familiar with the existing masculine power and know how to dominate women in online interactions. For instance, some male informants know how to use 'tactics' to dominate women on the Internet in the same way that they do in real life, even though the rules of the SheSay game give power to women. A number of male informants confidently described how they held the power in this game.

[George](27 yrs, male, a salesman): Being a man in this game I was waiting to be raised.... I waited...waited for my master to reveal any limitations to me... Finally, I actively gave her my email address. So there is no restriction on me when we communicate through e-mails...

[Lucas](29 yrs, male, a staff at a university): I did think women in this game were empowered but in fact men had powers as well. For example, you could re-play this game, even though your master had killed you. Other women would choose you again.

Some male informants even showed that once they are empowered through the Internet, they know how to use this masculine domination over women in real life. This echoes Plant's views (1995, p. 58) that once masculine culture has been built up, "man can do nothing on his own: carefully concealed, woman nevertheless continues to function as the ground."

[Chan-Wa](29 yrs, male, an interior designer): In my opinion, a man is always lower than a pet when he is courting a woman in this society. But it becomes totally different after a man has won the heart of a woman. Who knows whether she or he will become a pet?

[Charles](23 yrs, male, an undergraduate student): I know that some of my male classmates were very bad because they invited their female net friends to meet them in real life. They would call her on her mobile near to the agreed place but out of sight and then watched whether she was good looking or not. They would leave her there if they thought that she was a 'dinosaur' (that means she isn't good looking). I know that several of my male friends did this.

From our male informants' point of views, the Internet is still used as a man's tool; it is his territory, his power, his media and his weapon. Hence, men can use this power to (re)create limitations over women to control them, even though the Internet offers a freer atmosphere and environment for women to experience power than other technologies do.

5. Conclusion

The questions in this study are whether women's empowerment exists on the Internet and whether it can be further transferred from online to offline. The answers of our data are heterogeneous and context-oriented. While the Internet is shown to be in someway women's empowerment, by allowing some of our female informants to gain the confidence to express their opinions, make their own decisions and dominate the issues in a non-traditional way, our findings also show that this empowerment is only momentarily enjoyed to most of our female informants. In contrast, our study finds that most male informants use this online game as their tool, their power and their weapon to recreate limitations in order to rule over women. To some degree, our findings challenge the results of Lennie et al. (1999) and Clark's (1998) studies that women are empowered on the Internet. Although the Internet is seen as a potential liberation from traditional power constraints, Castells (1997) argued that "we know what it is, yet we cannot size it because power is a function of an endless battle around the cultural codes of society" (p.360). He

further explained that “whoever or whatever, wins the battle of people’s minds will rule” this ‘real’ power in real life (p. 360). We argue that both men and women in Taiwan have been cultivated by a masculine culture and are accustomed to behaving and thinking of new technology as men’s power. The new technology such as the Internet might create ephemeral or artificial victories, “since the turbulence of information flows will keep codes in a constant swirl” (Castells, 1997, p. 360). That is, women’s empowerment via new technology, the Internet in particular, might temporarily exist online, but established power still rules society. In other words, the established power, which men have traditionally held, still shapes and dominates us in our daily lives. We suggest that culture is inescapable and that the Internet affords only very limited liberating to explore alternative gender relations and power before there is a ‘catastrophic reversion’ to traditional gender roles, that is, there is a complete and sharp reversal to an original position with no evidence of mutation or change. Our study supports others who have questioned whether “technological transformations may be grasped, not as flights from reality, but as the means for creating new bodily and social realities, unimpeded by modern categories and constraints” (Lyon 1999, p. 82). Our evidence shows “cyberspace as a repository for a collective memory – it is popular culture, it is narrative created by its inhabitants that remind us who we are, it is life as it is lived and reproduced in pixels and virtual texts” (Fernback 1997, p. 37).

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