

‘On the Boards’: Performing Identity in an Online Women’s Magazine.

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Introduction.

This paper focuses on an analysis of the discussion board of a women's online magazine/portal and is constituted as part of the wider debate about the consumption of women's genres in popular culture and women's relationship with new media technologies. In addressing the relationship between women, technology and media consumption we have drawn substantially on two areas which are germane to the discussion; 'reception studies' of older media within cultural studies, and the social shaping of technology within research on new media. Both fields of research have questioned the 'means' of production, be it the technology or the text, and the extent to which the product can dictate use and reception. Research into new media has shown both continuities and discontinuities with the old in terms of research problematics.

Historically, both traditions have 'turned to' the receiver or user, and have passed through phases of under validating and subsequently over validating the consumer's role (technological determinist to constructivist theories in the technology debates and from 'inscribed' readers to 'oppositional reading' in the cultural studies debates). Both have increasingly turned their attention to the context of consumption. Factors, such as the consumer's social setting and personal sense of identity are now seen to interact with the technology and media messages to produce meanings particular to individuals and communities of consumers.¹

Gender has operated as a prism for exploring the dynamics of identity in both fields of research. Within cultural studies feminist scholars argued that media consumption was a gendered activity and writers such as Radway (1987) and Hermes (1995) writing on women's popular fiction and magazines respectively argued that women, rather than being passive dupes, interpreted mass-mediated messages in self-actualising ways. These studies formed a central role in the project of validating the reader and engaged with issues of power and pleasure in media use.

Similarly, gender has played a key role in exploring the social construction of technology. Researchers have investigated the differential 'frames' that inform the design and development of new technology and the gendered assumptions about the user that underpin the process (Akrich, 1992; Cockburn and Furst Dilic, 1994; Rommes et al, 2001). There is also a body of work that has examined the impact of designer expectations on women's access to and experiences of new media both as producers and consumers (for example, Green et al, 1993; Lie, 1998;). Women play an active role in defining their relationship with technology, but this does not take place in a vacuum. Technologies, like texts, come with preferred uses or readings within particular social contexts so that consumption becomes a process of 'co-construction' (Oudshoorn and Pinch, forthcoming). Gender and technology are perceived as 'mutually shaping', each impacting on the other (Berg, 1996; Frissen, 1997).

¹ In relation to mass media examples from cultural studies would include the work of researchers such as Ang (1985); Morley (1980); Lindlof (1988) and Kelly & O'Connor (1997). In relation to new media see, for example, MacKenzie and Wajcman, (1985), Oudshoorn and Pinch (forthcoming).

While both fields of study have grown closer through their shared interest in new media, each still contributes an analytic emphasis that can enrich the exploration of particular texts and technologies. Theorists within the social shaping of technology, have argued the need to remain vigilant as to the nature of the piece of technology itself and the preferred social and political arrangements that it can maintain (Winner, 2002). Cultural studies advocate a continued critical approach to cultural consumption, particularly in the light of the growth of liberal economics and globalisation. The former reminds us to question the role of technology, even as a 'soft form' of determinism (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2002:20), and the latter urges us to continue to question media products in terms of consumer ideologies and the interests that are served.

With the advent of new, interactive media there has been much comment on the development of online communities both critical and celebratory. Critics such as Robbins and Webster (1995) argue that much of the discussion is hype and that they are at best pseudo-communities in which bonds are tenuous, temporary and evade all of the commitment and complexity of face-to-face communities. At the opposite end of the spectrum scholars such as Turkle (1995) and Markham (1998) make much greater claims for such cyber relationships and portray them in a positive light, arguing that they perform many useful functions for those involved. These include, expressiveness, identity construction, bonding and sharing etc. In relation to personal expression, Turkle (1980, 1984) has likened the computer to a Rorschach in that it operates as a 'projective device' that allows users to control many aspects of their self-presentation and interaction. Much of the celebratory discussion of new media, interactivity has been equated with power – that if one can have one's voice heard, then this leads to a web/cyber democracy.

This paper takes a look at some of these issues. Oudshoorn (forthcoming 2002) reminds us that 'gender is not something that we are but something that we do'. She points to the fluid nature of this 'doing', continually constituted through the changing conventions of social praxis. She goes on to argue that 'technologies play an important role in stabilising or destabilizing these conventions, creating new or reinforcing or transforming existing performances of gender' (p.4). Based on data collected from an online women's magazine, we explore the 'performance of gender' played out through the construction of individual and community identity. We query the rhetoric of user empowerment, investigating both the enabling and constraining potential of this new media form.

One of the most distinctive capabilities of the online version of the magazine is its interactivity which is manifest in its strongest way in the discussion board, and it is to the discussion board that we now turn to investigate exactly what is going on 'on the boards'.

Context and Methodology

I Venus

The discussion board under investigation is part of an online magazine called iVenus, which operates in association with an offline magazine Irish Tatler. Contrary to the norm, the web site existed independently of the offline magazine for over a year before

they were merged, as part of a cost cutting exercise, in 2001. This initial web-only existence has meant that iVenus operates as a portal offering extensive on line services and links. It is the only women's portal originating in Ireland. While a number of online 'content' sites have begun to charge for access (e.g. Ireland.com), iVenus is still free. Although they have not yet found a way to advertise successfully on the site, they did make a profit for the first time in March of this year mainly through associated activities such as the sale of content to other ICTs such as WAP.

This paper is based on an analysis of the content of the discussion boards but it is part of a broader case study on the portal which has included interviews with producers (design, businesses etc.) and a group discussion with read-only users. The iVenus site is currently accessed by approximately 790 visitors per month. There are no numbers available to indicate how many of these users go to the discussion board, but a mailing list was recently established on the boards and 51 names were submitted. The numbers posting are extremely conservative and a small proportion of the total users of the site so findings can not be seen as representative of the users generally. However, they are instructive in that they are a rich source of information about the lives of the people who are members, their motivations for use, the topics which they discuss, and the style in which they discuss them.

Organisation of the Discussion Board

Like much new technology the discussion board is relatively easy to use for those that want to browse. There are two links to the boards on the iVenus home page. However, joining in on a discussion (posting) requires two sets of 'logging on' details and two sets of passwords. Once logged on, the discussion board is easy to navigate. A directory provides a list of categories and subcategories for discussion with information on the number of threads within each category and the date of the last entry. At the request of a user, the staff provided a link to 'active' discussions so that it is possible to go straight to the threads that have postings for that day. Due to the slight time lag between reading and responding to a message, posters sometimes communicate at cross-purposes. The board is not moderated though the technology does exist to activate such a system.

The Participants

The producers of iVenus hold or collect very little information on the background of their users. However, in a recent discussion on the board, entitled '*Let's share a bit about ourselves... again*' 31 contributors told each other about some aspects of their offline lives. A resume of this thread gives some notional idea of the profile of a typical poster. Twenty nine stated that they were in their 20s, one said that she was in her thirties and one said that she was 'older'. While it is interesting to note the aspects of their backgrounds that they discuss, the person who started the thread set the basic parameters by mentioning occupation, relationship status, likes and dislikes and favourite TV programmes. Others tended to copy this formula.

Twenty of the posters referred to their occupation and in most cases this included third level education (15 cases). Eight were involved in an ICT sector which is a much higher proportion than the general population and is clearly an artefact of the source of the data in that women in this sector are more likely to have access to the technology. It is clear from a number of references in other threads that a great many of the posters are logging on at work.

All but two of the posters discussed their current relationships with men. Two are married with children, two are married but have no children, and seven are single parents of which three appear to be with the father. While there has been a huge increase in single parenthood in Ireland, these proportions are very high. Two of the women wanted to be full-time 'moms'. Fourteen of the posters are in long term relationships while two have just split from long term boyfriends. Only one poster announced that she was single and enjoying it. Four of the posters were still living at home and while they were aware of the financial advantages, they all expressed the hope to be independent soon. Twenty-eight of the posters mentioned their place of residence. All of them were based in Ireland, the vast majority in Dublin (21).

Performing Identity

Much has been written of the role of performativity in contemporary everyday life generally (e.g. see Kershaw, 1996) where it is regarded as germane to the era of high or post-modernity. Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998:74) apply the term to mass media audiences and suggest that one of the reasons "...that modern societies are more performative is that the media of mass communications provide an important resource for everyday performance". Butler (1990) and Turkle (1995) have both dealt specifically with the performativity of gender in contemporary society, and the latter specifically in terms of virtual identity. Our research corroborates these writers to the extent that the discussion board is used extensively as a forum for performing identity and perhaps it is no coincidence that the title 'on the boards' is also the term for performing in a theatrical/stage setting.

Creating a Persona

The construction and performing of identity is manifest in the choice of handles and logos of the discussion board members. Though some members use names which could be their real names such as Mags or Ellie, generally they choose names which are pseudonyms such as Muffin, Triviadiva, Butterfly, Sexy Susie etc. These pseudonyms not only give an individual distinctiveness to each member but they also connote certain kinds of characters. We also suggest that these names help to construct the members as female and is part of the process of creating a feminine 'woman's world'. This sense of femininity is further established through the visual signatures which brand their postings. The latter range from angels to cute and cuddly pets such as cats and pandas. There are also explicit reference to the kind of persona the member wants to convey as in extracts such as "*Told you I was the independent sort, girls*". It is also clear that there is an

element of fantasy and make believe in some handles. One member 'Flower Fairy' talks of the how the handle is very different from the real - "*I'm about as far from a fairy as you can get!*"

The use of visual icons and logos and their ability to animate the discussion board, not only creates an identity which is gendered but also provides a means to perform their technical know-how. While one or two posters have expressed low technical skills, most perform a media savvy role by way of using, talking about and sharing knowledge about new media in general. They are very active consumers of new media often casually showing a knowledge of various web-based services.

Narratives and Narrative Structure

Another crucial way in which identity is performed is through the telling of stories. Writing stories based on personal experience and reading other member's stories is a great source of pleasure. The importance of personal narratives corroborates Giddens's (1991) claim about the importance of narratives of the self for the creation of personal identity in contemporary life. The topics can vary from accounts of one's love life to a story about trying to get a mortgage. It involves the pleasure of finding out 'what happened next' (the operation of the hermeneutic code) and it parallels the structure of the soap-opera to the extent that there are multiple plots (both multiple topics and multiple individual stories on each topic) and there is no beginning or ending but rather an 'infinitely expandable middle'. Writers such as Geraghty etc. have attested to the pleasures afforded to women by this open-ended structure and it is no surprise to see it operating in the new medium in comments such as: "*Well, ladies, I took the plunge at the weekend. Met my date on Friday afternoon...will let you know when the wedding is*". The promise of further sequels is strengthened by questions and requests for updating from other members e.g. "*was it in the Yahoo chat room you met him*"? or "*Glad to hear the date went well, what did you get up to for the day*"? or "*Good luck, Scorcha, Have a great weekend and fill us in on everything when you get back*" or "*I'm dying to find out how you all got on last night [when some of the members met in real life] so please share*". The enjoyment of the narrative is explicitly acknowledged and encouraged by the members. Following a posting by one member giving an account of her romantic engagement another member replies "*These stories are great girls...keep 'em coming!*"

These stories are also reflective of current television genre in terms of their 'real life' status. They concern the 'girl next door' whose highs and lows can be far more complex and intriguing than any a scriptwriter could possibly imagine. As commentators of post modernity have noted, the notion 'authenticity' has become central in a mediated, image conscious world.

In a number of ways these stories are also highly gendered content wise. They tend to be about 'men' – boyfriends, husbands or men in general. At times men are demonised (as when an offensive poster is accused of being 'male') but more generally they play a pervasive role as an absent presence – the nature of a 'women's discussion board' is premised on an awareness of gender differentiation. Talking 'about' men is part of the

performance of femininity. While some of the stories concern problems in relationships with men and experiences of lack of power within those relationships, the ability to talk about the 'man' on the boards appears to be a means of regaining some control.

Performativity on the boards can be seen as part of the increase in performativity in contemporary everyday life. With reference to media audiences Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) refer to this category as a 'diffused' media audience. By this they mean that audience members are performing in various contexts in everyday life including media and that there is an interplay between these contexts. This also seems to take place on the iVenus discussion board. There is an awareness of the 'society of the spectacle' and they are engaged with, and playing to it. For example, in congratulating a member who had just got engaged another poster writes, "*Have a ball and flash that diamond for everyone to see*".

Creating Online Community.

It was clear that the discussion board had developed into a vibrant online community in which individual members felt that this was a space in which they were free to discuss issues and feelings openly and in the process develop bonds with other members. This sense of community was created by a number of different means. In a positive sense it is created by the relationship between members themselves particularly through the number of shared motives for using the site. In an 'othering' sense, the establishment of an insider/outsider mentality was also key to the development of community. In the latter configuration there were a number of relationships between groups to be considered. Among these are their relationship with non-members such as the staff of iVenus, offline significant others and readers of the discussion board who do not post (lurkers). A final oppositional grouping consists of members who are seen to sabotage the discussion board by refusing to operate according to the tacit codes and conventions. These offenders are referred to as trolls.

In-group Bonding

Posters have expressed a wide range of motivations for using the discussion board from loneliness and isolation, being able to talk about embarrassing problems, being able to get good advice to relief from office boredom. But underlying these the most powerful attraction to the board appears to be the sense of safety, openness and solidarity, which the members experience inside the virtual space. While one needs to be careful about assigning stereotypical 'nerdish' motivations such as the fact that members don't have 'real life' friends, discussions do indicate that users are living in an increasingly mobile and anonymous world. Some members talk of real life as lacking in opportunities for transparent modes of communication:

After my break-up in November I felt very much alone (in many ways still do) and it was only here that I could get things off my chest and get some reassurance, something that unfortunately is sadly lacking in real life at the moment.

iVenus is very important to me in the days of open plan offices and anonymous estates, the chance to be open with people is so much appreciated.

But the changing world is not the only reason and this poster continues on to point out her personal reluctance to discuss certain feelings/issues with friends:

But I've never told any of my female friends about it. I suppose in some ways I don't want them to know all of my deepest darkest thoughts unless I tell them

So here, too, we are witnessing how performance and the perceived necessity for 'impression management' in real life are determining the use of the boards as a space for spontaneous and honest expression. The discussion board works in this way to create a kind of therapeutic community and contemporary confessional. Members talk of the openness and transparency of the boards in various ways. Yet the boards seem to operate in complex and seemingly contradictory ways, one is to be a place for display of the 'true' self and yet we have seen from the choice of handles etc. that there is a reflexive awareness of performance and the belief that there is no 'true' self.

Some members also speak of the non-judgemental attitude and re-assurance provided by other members:

I have to say I couldn't have got through my last break up (last year) without everyone here. I could say anything without fear of being judged or what I said getting back to [the] person I was talking about.

It is also useful to understand the context of everyday use of the boards as contributing to the sense of community. Most of the use is at work in an office environment and it is regarded as a break from actual work. It is frequently regarded as a temporary, but welcome, escape from the immediate world, a world which is fraught with tensions, possible surveillance by the boss, and indifferent co-workers. But the discussion board can also be used to counteract boredom or loneliness in the work environment and to structure the working day: "*I work in a really quiet office, so iVenus helps me through the day*".

Anonymity

The value of anonymity was cited as one of the pleasures of the boards and it is ironic to note that one of the primary motivations for going on the boards in the first place was to counteract some of the perceived anonymity of everyday 'real life'. While some of the members decided to meet offline for drinks, many did not avail of this opportunity because they thought that it might jeopardise their ability to speak freely on the boards and spoil their enjoyment. Some have claimed that offline meetings help to form cliques and most simply wanted to be filled in on the details. The freedom of expression which anonymity allows is encapsulated in comments such as:

The anonymity(sp.?) is the best bit of it though and that's why I can discuss things very freely with you all.

the beauty of posting here is that you can say things you mightn't feel comfortable saying to people you actually know

I wouldn't tell anyone (about being on the discussion board) I think it's nice to be able to come here and talk, safe in the knowledge that no one actually knows who you are. Ignorance can be bliss!!

By preserving anonymity the members were creating a secret world to which they could escape regularly or occasionally for solace, and reassurance which is highly valued:

I got to pour out my heart her when I split up with my ex last month, which is something that I only do with my closest friends. It's nice to be able to come on and be totally honest about how you're feeling and if I want to let my friends know, I'll tell them face to face. I have found the boards great, especially in recent times and just don't want to ruin it by telling people they can read all about me under this handle.

The boards are explicitly celebrated through numerous threads that explore how and why various members joined. Members regularly reflect on the role the board plays for them, on how it should be organised and on relationships with groups defined as 'outside' of the community. These threads document the development of the community, establishing hierarchies based on length of time and duration of time spent on the boards, and members' levels of contribution. All of three years old, the board already has a 'hall of fame' created through threads that reminisce over past member.

Forming the boundaries of the community

This sense of belonging is also reproduced through creating clear boundaries between those inside and those outside the community. Those who are not in the in-group include, iVenus administrators, lurkers/researchers and significant others such as partners and friends.

iVenus Administrator

The relationship with iVenus appears to be an ambivalent one. At one level the producers are seen as a possible threat since they hold personal details on members, have ultimate power of censorship and of barring a member or of deleting content from the boards:

The truth comes out....Tatler and/or iVenus was involved and our details are held by iVenus. Se we were right to be worried.

But they are also regarded by members as potential benefactors in that both the discussion board and email addresses are free of charge, and competitions and 'freebies'

are made available on the portal. Members respond very positively to promotions that are aimed at them, and entries to competitions are extremely high relative to those in the offline magazine. The women are not averse to being addressed by iVenus as consumers but are wary of expert knowledge relying instead on each other's experiential knowledge as a form of consumer advice.

Members also regard themselves as being a valuable asset to the producers and on occasion seek rewards for being 'faithful' posters:

At our meeting last night we thought it would have been very nice if iVenus could have sent us a bottle or 2 of champagne to celebrate the success of the discussion board. Failing that, how about throwing us a party somewhere iVenus?? It would be a chance for a major meet up and would show just how wonderful you guys are.

On occasion, iVenus have placed a link on the home page to the discussion board which posters have commented on. They are aware that they produce 'content' which is avidly read by many that log on and do not contribute themselves.²

Lurkers / Researchers

Lurkers are those that read the boards without contributing. Similarly, there have been a number of cases where researchers have attempted to use the boards as a short cut to gather information. Posters object and feel 'used' in both cases although in the case of the researchers they are at least aware of their motives. Lurkers are cast as 'peeping toms' who secretly observe, and read the 'private' thoughts of the posters, without contributing themselves. This shows the sense in which they feel that they have taken a leap into a virtual world and if you're not with them you're against them:

I guess I felt un-nerved at the thought of people who aren't part of the community knowing some of my innermost thoughts and secrets...I guess it was innocence on my part.

Why am I feeling a little like a guinea pig in a lab at the mo?

² *iVenus staff also express some reservations about their relationship with posters. In some discussions they side with the posters and claim that management (referred to as the parents) are the problem, while in other instances they take a more controlling position albeit to remind posters that they are not exercising that power. Staff are aware that posters are sensitive to being 'used' but are aware at the same time, that the commercial nature of the magazine will dictate the future of the discussion board. They did, for example, discuss the initial association with Irish Tatler and despite objections from posters the merger went ahead. They are wary therefore of the sense of ownership of the discussion board that posters express, and the potential for future conflict. The symbiotic nature of their relationship is held in tension by the potential demands of market forces.*

Offline Relationships

In a recent thread entitled ‘who knows about your iVenus identity?’ posters talked about how open or secretive they were in revealing their virtual activities on the boards. This revealed a number of interesting aspects of how they perceived others regarded their online affiliation. Twenty users contributed to the discussion and all related to the notion of stigma whether they were expressing concerns about friends finding out or stating that the stigma did not worry them. Expressions such as ‘weird cult’ and being ‘totally nuts’, ‘odd’ a ‘freak’ ‘bonkers’ were used. Only three stated that they told no one at all about their contribution to the discussion board – most told some of their friends though often without mentioning which discussion board or that they contributed themselves. A number of posters expressed the view that using the discussion board was a stigmatised activity. Some felt that they could tell no one at all about their ‘other life’.

I agree with Lois about the stigma though. I met up with some fans of Kristin Hersh through her website when I was going to her concert a few years ago, and when I told people, they thought it was a bit weird. When we actually met up before the concert, we all went to great lengths to convince each other we weren't lonely Internet nerds’.

A surprisingly high number (14) told their boyfriends or husbands though usually on the assumption that they would not be bothered, or would not have the time to log on themselves. Many reported that their male partners would have no interest in such ‘girlie’ activity.

I was talking to my fella last night after the meet up. He's the only one that knows which site I'm hooked on. I thought it was out of respect for my privacy that he wouldn't come nosing around but he told me it was mostly cos he couldn't be interested in what we were talking about (shows how much he knows!).

My hubby checked out the discussion boards and had a good laugh at all your comments and I couldn't reply without giving away my secret identity.

Well 2 friends and my hubby know about it (being on the discussion board) ...My hubby thinks we are a mad crowd of men hating psychos who spend all day bitching about how useless our menfolk are how best to get the better of them....hold on HE HAS BEEN READING!!!!). Similarly I know he's a regular contributor to lefty political boards & ditto I'm not bothered.

In this sense the activity was not only stigmatised but also hugely devalued. In one case it was made clear that the man simply wouldn't use the internet, and one or two reported a respect for privacy, but in all other cases there was a sense that the particular discussion board was seen as trivial. And at least some members took on board this denigration of their activity by referring to their ‘addiction ‘ to the boards much like the ways in which women have referred to their relationship to other ‘female genres’ like television soap

opera. However, the dismissiveness of their male partners did not appear to upset most of the posters, if anything they were pleased that it aided their privacy.

A lot of the posters expressed reservations about telling female friends, some reporting that the friends would be jealous of the intimacy on the boards. In other words, their discussions on the boards threatened chats with female friends more than it threatened intimacy with male friends. Some have tried to explain how they enjoy going online but feel that friends cannot understand:

I was trying to explain to a friend of mine recently how nice it is to have this unknown circle of friends that you can sort of connect with but I don't think that she understood.

Most posters express this sentiment that the problem is with their offline friends who have preconceived notions and cannot grasp the value of the online experience. The notion of stigma in relation to their role as contributors to the discussion board does underpin their sense of 'presentation of self'. As Goffman has noted such activities force the user to redefine their role so as to distance themselves from the stigma (1961). This is achieved by emphasising those aspects of their offline life, discussed above, that contradict the stigmatised notion i.e. their heterosexual relations, their circle of female friends, level of education, occupational status and generally full lives. But this thread, openly discussing the stigma they perceive, is also a testament to the level of honesty and trust that is attained on the boards and works to reinforce the bonds that have been formed.

Controlling the Trolls - Self-Regulation on the board

Discussion board members are aware that their valued virtual space is not reproduced automatically and that they must self-regulate in order to maintain their distinctive form of community. This reflexivity is manifest through discussions of netiquette. All appear to agree that the boards should remain open and friendly though there are debates as to how such sentiments might be defined. Posters who transgress the norms of politeness are cast as 'trolls':

I do think that there is a lot of pussy-footing around and if your opinion doesn't fit in with the norm then you are ostracised in some way or denounced as a 'troll'.

This used to be a friendly forgiving discussion forum discussing people and their lives only when asked for our input. This thread is unacceptable and not in the spirit of the boards. You have crossed the line many times H in the last few weeks. But this is the lowest you've stooped to yet. It should be removed as it is nothing more than bullying. Simply unacceptable.

We get accused of being too nicey nice, but I think that they (Handbag) are the other extreme.

Herring has argued that there are particular characteristics of posters depending on their gender and that women ‘...displayed features of attenuation – hedging, apologising, asking questions rather than making assertions – and a personal orientation, revealing thoughts and feelings and interacting with and supporting others’ (Herring 1994). She goes on to argue that ‘[w]hile these styles represent in some sense the extremes of gendered behavior, there is evidence that they have symbolic significance above and beyond their frequency of use’ (p. 4). There has been evidence of this on iVenus where aggressive posters have been accused of being male. Such accusations have been supported by posters on the site who are known to be male³. Clearly gender in this context is not necessarily related to sex, rather it is a construct based on cultural assumptions.

Standardising the ‘language’ of discussions, both visual and verbal, is carried out implicitly. There is extensive evidence of the features mentioned by Herring. All topics are discussed in highly facilitative language, and opinions are generally premised as personal, of dubious worth and well intentioned. Users also regularly discuss explicitly how they use the discussion board. This has taken the shape of discussions about topics such as ‘lurking’, signatures, and the use of visuals. As well as discrete topics relating to the use of the discussion board, members regularly advise each other on preferred codes of practice in discussion on a range of topics. This could entail advice about the size or shape of a posting, the way to use visuals or problems relating to particular language use. When the current researchers entered the discussion board to query users on access to technology, they were advised on brevity and layout. The advice is given in a very friendly and support way but nonetheless underscores the pivotal role played by codes and conventions on the discussion board. Similarly, posters will explicitly point out when they are joking in case there are any misunderstandings.

Introductions to the board also necessitate a certain ‘netiquette’. New posters are expected to acknowledge their entry and are encouraged to say a little about themselves. They are then welcomed on board by a host of core users posting on the day. Posters’ handles are by and large pet names with friendly or fun connotations. ‘Smiles’ are used extensively as are other faces to avoid misunderstandings.

Persistent offenders against these conventions are openly challenged. Again this arises within the context of any topic – a recent discussion on boyfriends ended up in a debate over the intentions of some members to merely provoke rather than discuss the topic in hand. On occasion a special thread is devoted to the topic. One poster recently advocated a dedicated ‘bitching thread’. In the course of the discussion one poster argued that:

It is never acceptable to bitch about or bully someone. The fact that we are now devoting an entire thread is a poor reflection on us. There’s a big difference between replying to what a person said and replying about the person. It’s easy to degrade a person without actually addressing their point and this has become the order of the day here. If a friend said something to your face that was

³ In our perusal of the board, two members have self-identified as male

insulting and then asked for your help. What would you do? You'd ignore them, tell them to leave you alone and probably explain why. Why can't we just do that here? Free speech is fantastic but lets not abuse that power by abusing each other.

The solution of ignoring the trolls is often advocated particularly by those that get fed-up discussing the topic of free speech. Posters are clearly very aware of their self regulation but they see it as necessary in order to retain the friendliness and warmth that is commented on by new users who are familiar with other discussion boards and chat rooms. 'Handbag' is often held up as an example of the kind of discussion board that users dread. Some even see those that use Handbag as a potential threat. Using the boards is strictly rule-bound and calls for observing a range of conventions, but it function simultaneously to generate and maintain the sense of community spirit which is highly valued by members.

Consuming (and producing) Content

In the last section we have argued that members of the discussion board have created a distinctively gendered online community through the modes of address adopted. This gendering is also reflected in the choice of discussion topics. One method of assessing the user's choice of areas of discussion is easily achieved simply by quantifying the number of postings in each of the board categories. Summing up some of these we find that the three most popular are 'fashion, beauty and body' (3,227 hits), 'relationships' (1,886 hits) and 'entertainment' (1,375 hits). The low-hitters would include 'technology' (636 hits) and sport (247 hits).

It has been pointed out, however, that the categories for discussion are predetermined by the producers so that the selection of gendered topics is partially predefined⁴. The women are not, for example, offered a category of Current Affairs or Consumer Complaints. However, posters have exercised some self-assertion by means of using a catchall category and requesting a link on the discussion board to 'active' discussions. In this way, the first category, Introduction and Board Basics (3,845 hits), contains a myriad of messages some of whom would be almost impossible to categorise but which can be easily accessed by other posters simply by using the link that shows the days active topics. A quantitative analysis of the threads contained in this category would be extremely problematic due to the difficulty in defining the content. It is, of course, used for its intended purpose – introductions by new members. Certainly a further key thread would be the discussion board itself. This is the forum where members ask about each other and discuss netiquette. However, it appears to be used primarily for 'chat' so that any topic under the sun could spontaneously emerge. Currently, the following threads appear – Weekend; A cry from exile! New Member who feels welcome; BIRTHDAY MADNESS; Out of Dublin meet?; Am I very sad? These threads are defined less by the subject matter than a mode of address. They are an expression of highly personal issues

⁴ Staff have responded to users' requests for new subcategories. A recent example would be a subtopic devoted to Big Brother.

and events and are underpinned by a desire to make contact. In this way it is an important forum for the development of the community. It could be argued that these motives, if not the topics themselves, are feminine in a traditional gender sense.

The discussion topics indicate that the discourse of consumption is central. Indeed, they are addressed by the producers of the portal primarily as consumers through provision of information on shopping, soaps etc. and by way of promotions for products through competitions and 'freebies'. Postings regularly contain references to named products – at the moment a show in Dublin and a new game technology are mentioned in the category 'Introduction and board Basics'. Members comment on products and their own experiences with them, and they also seek advice and information on a range of products from cosmetics to mortgages. The discourse of consumption also runs through the discussions of romantic/sexual relationships (see Illouz, 1997). Though not among the most popular there is some discussion of national and international events and politics, and members who post on these topics seem both interested and very well informed. They express a range of political opinions from left to right but mostly liberal and conservative.

A few postings have an explicitly feminist slant. For instance the discussion on the low level of voting in a recent referendum sparked the following post:

I'm sure so many of us have studied history in school – we learned about the suffragettes fight so that women could vote. But look at us now – we forget the struggle it took to get us this far and take the right to vote for granted.

Conclusions

We set out to explore what women were doing on the iVenus discussion board and through this to ascertain what kind of virtual space they were creating and, relatedly, if, and in what ways, new communication technologies were empowering women. Our findings indicate that women are using the new technology in ways which are both enabling and self-actualising but which are also constraining.

We have seen how iVenus operates as a women's space, reinforced by the resources available on the iVenus home page (articles on fashion, beauty, soaps, relationships) but ultimately dependent on the construction online of feminine sociality and identity. This 'social space' operates as a specifically female virtual world – a 'girlie world' both like and unlike the 'woman's world' created by women's magazines. (see Winship, 1987) This may be unsurprising, since it is after all a 'woman's portal' named after a Roman love goddess and purporting to offer everything a woman could want. However, we feel that the discussion board is *the* most interactive space on the site and there is a significant amount of freedom of expression. The fact that the members choose to construct the online community on the boards in a particular way is significant. We have argued that the gendered nature of the virtual space is created through particular forms and practices which we have outlined: the individual handles and signatures chosen, the topics which

generate most discussion, the creation of an insider/outsider relationship, modes of address and, styles of discourse such as advise giving, reassurance, appreciation, and 'bitching'. The online portal, unlike the print magazine, enables a self-actualising interactivity in which women can communicate directly with each other and which provides them with an opportunity to share ideas, information and feelings in an environment which is perceived to be open and non-judgemental. This is particularly valued in an increasingly globalised and mobile society.

We have also seen evidence of a strong sense of ownership and involvement in this female virtual world. The members make no apologies for the 'girliness' – soaps, beauty, fashion, shopping are activities they enjoy doing and discussing. They discuss them in what might be considered a 'gossipy' narrative fashion but again they celebrate this. They maintain a netiquette which some posters consider over self regulated but this is stoutly defended – they do not want a discussion board that prizes 'male' aggressiveness over female civility even if this does mean abiding by codes and conventions. If this is restrictive it is a small price to pay.

In terms of online practices, and corroborating O'Brien (1999), we have seen how the gender dynamic has tended to reproduce conventional gender forms. Some of these may be empowering and others disempowering but further questions need to be answered before any definitive conclusions could be arrived at. One of these questions might be about the meaning of online community and the strength and duration of the bonds created. Another question might be to what extent the fact that members are hailed and respond predominantly as consumers has consequences for empowerment.

The technology involved in the discussion board is also both enabling and constraining. For example, the need for a proscribed list of topics emanates from the particular management system. Similarly, the need for double codes and logging-on procedures is necessitated by the technology in order to insure anonymity. These procedures to enter the discussion board may not be as much of an impediment if the site were used by males who are more likely to engage with technology at a level of tinkering, playing, experimenting⁵. Posters' ability to use the discussion board for chatting is impacted on by the time delay, and perhaps most importantly, the accessibility of the technology has led to the need for self-regulation of the boards. Similarly, the issue of accessibility is particularly gendered in that the trolls are seen as 'male' and the space to be protected is 'female'. This aspect of the technology, which has been noted on numerous sites (Regan Shade, 1993) could be altered by putting a moderator in place, but this would then impact on the women's space in other ways. The extreme self-regulation of the boards, by means of highly gendered forms of interaction (hedging, apologising etc), derives in part, therefore, from the accessible nature of the technology.

While there are material constraints operating, which it could be argued are gendered, the greatest impact of the technology is by way of discourses that are formed culturally and

⁵ Kleif and Faulkner (forthcoming) have argued that this may in part be due to the way that children's play is gendered '...such that boys are more likely to acquire and so enjoy skills in hands-on tinkering and problem solving geared to the creation or mending of technological artefacts'

brought to the boards by the users themselves. These are often conflicting. For example, discussion board users on the one hand perform the role of being media savvy, but on the other, they engage in discourses around stigmatisation. Indeed, there is evidence that the discussion board is doubly stigmatised in that not only do the women feel that there is a stigma attached to the notion of having online friends, but that they are seen to use it inappropriately as a 'girlie site'. This might be seen as the antithesis of discourses around technology relating to '...objectivity, progress, rationality, productivity and competition, 'values most societies consider to be the preserve of men' (Van Zoonen, 1992:16).

The social organisation of the discussion board is also double-edged. It is a commercial product and is currently operating as a free service to users. Its future is uncertain, and, while it continues to exist despite the down turn because they are web presence for the publishing company, both producers and users are aware that a decision to axe it could be taken any day in the boardroom.

Ultimately, then, we can consider the iVenus discussion board as a contradictory space. On the one hand it creates a valued interactive social space for women. On the other hand, it is a conditioned world. It is a space in which women have 'freedom' of expression' and simultaneously a space which is constrained by the producers, the technology and by conventional forms and practices of the members themselves. These findings would seem to temper the utopian claims to cyberdemocracy and cyberfeminism for new media technologies and would indicate the need to take the contexts of consumption into account when addressing the relationship between new media, technology and gender.

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