NEKAMA: LIVING WITH ANOTHER GENDER ON THE NET

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Abstract

Nowadays, Japan has had a huge number of people who enroll and join in online games or SNS. With increasing the number of its users, online communication with invisibility and anonymity has generated a new form of participants, those are referred to as *"Nekama"*, in online communities. The form of *"Nekama"* behavior allows only male participants to adopt and implement on the Net. That is to say, *"Nekama"* means male participants who represent themselves as females on the Net. However, they naturally go about their own daily life as person who have a male gender identity and most of them are heterosexual.

The existence of *"Nekama"* can bring up gender issues not only on the Net but also in the real world. In other words, development and deployment of ICT have effects on men as well as on women. For men acting as *"Nekama"*, doing it is an effective measure to fix gender problems on the Net which are originally derived from gender system in the real world. Thus, *"Nekama"* makes us fully aware that our online communication comes under the influence of gender/sex and gender images as well as communication in the real world. This paper explores how ICT influence gender identity on the Net in Japan, and also considers how gender identity is pluralistic and/or multilayered.

1 Introduction

In recent decades, numerous studies have examined the effects of information and communication technology (ICT) on gender and gender roles. Some studies have focused on the relation between women and ICT, revealing the existence of gender disparities or inequalities in information societies. Researchers have also proposed that ICT use contributes greatly to the empowerment of women, especially those in developing countries. The role of ICT in female empowerment is widely accepted by governments and organizations, including international organizations such as the United Nations. However, while many studies on gender and ICT have focused on women, it is likely that men have also been affected by the development and deployment of ICT.

This study examines the effects of ICT on men in Japan from the viewpoint of gender. Specifically, this paper illustrates the importance of ICT to Japanese men who present themselves as women in cyberspace, where that gender role may be supported more than in the real world. The next section describes the general characteristics of online communication in Japan. The third section looks at characteristics of nekama by categorizing them into two types. The fourth section focuses on aspects of gender identity on the Net and investigates how behavior constructed by gender images affects the communication pattern. These issues are considered based on interviews with nekama. The final section examines how ICT influences the diversity of gender identity in Japan.

2 Evolving Online Communications in Japan

In contemporary Japan, a large number of people join in online games or social networking services (SNSs). In 2005, the total population of Internet users was approximately 85.29 million, and 66.8% of Japan's households were estimated to have at least one Internet user. As of the end of March, 2006, 7.16 million people were registered as social network service (SNS) members, and 8.68 million were registered as bloggers [Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2006]. In addition, enrollment in online gaming has recently increased to 28 million, with 1.75 million of these gamers estimated to be members of fee-based game sites [ECR Report, 2006; Online Game Forum, 2006].

As mentioned above, the Internet offers various kinds of communication, which can be classified broadly into two types: "transient communication" and "continuing communication" "Transient communication" is defined as communication that occurs only once or a few times, such as on bulletin board systems (BBSs). "Continuing communicatio" creates a relatively long-term relationship among certain people, such as through communication about online games or as part of SNSs. In online games or SNSs, users repeatedly communicate with others using characters and emoticons in discretionary roles or as preselected characters.

The two communication types differ in their spatial and temporal contexts. These differences are generated from the invisibility and anonymity on which online communication depends to a great extent. Invisibility and anonymity can bring about two broad types of behavior in online communication. In the first type, the communicator disrespects others by misusing a trait of online communications, whereby communicators would probably have difficulty facing each other directly in the real world. This type largely matches with the "transient communication" mentioned earlier, and the communicator tends to perceive the online communication space as open and expanding, with relatively unfettered access to the sites used. The other type corresponds to "continuing communication" in which participants assume comparatively long-term communication in particular online communities. In communicating with others and exchanging information, these persons might consider the possibility of meeting face-to-face in off-line situations. Therefore, the community members are often required to present a user ID or an access code at the time they enter the site, and access to online communities is relatively limited. In this case, invisibility and anonymity are reduced, and participants have the sense of belonging to their online communities in which they find value similar to that of belonging to communities in the real world [USC Annenberg School Center for the Digital Future, 2006].

Recent developments in online communication may be modifying communication behavior in Japan. Yamagishi [1999] noted that Japanese society conventionally attaches importance to effective social and economic management through establishing mutual cooperative ties; these ties grant comfort within close relationships of high cohesiveness. However, at present, relationships that are more open to the outside world have increasing benefits, versus retaining and reinforcing closed relationships [Yamagishi, 1999].

Many online communities may help foster a sense of belonging at a time when declining opportunities for such belonging are becoming a social issue in the real world. In particular,

participants in online games and SNSs can easily gain a sense of commonality or belongingness because they share interests or concerns with other participants. Along with the increased participation in online games and SNSs, an interesting phenomenon in cyberspace communication has emerged: nekama.

3 General Characteristics of "Nekama"

On one of the major online game sites in Japan, over 91.0% of the players are male and 9.0% are female [BB Serve, 2005]. Online game software creators generally configure approximately the same number of male and female characters. However, more than half of the players pose as female characters on online game sites, in contrast to the male-dominated gaming population. That is, many male users are more likely to appear and play as females on online gaming sites. In addition, many men not only pose as female characters but also present themselves as women when they communicate with other players. In other words, they use feminine forms of expression, choose conversation subjects that women are more likely to talk about, and dress their characters or "avatars" in women's clothing.

The Japanese term nekama is thought to have been introduced in the pre-World Wide Web period in the early 1990s; the term has sometimes been associated with otaku, meaning an obsessive fan. Nekama originally derived from the term okama, which refers to a gay man or male cross -dresser and is an abbreviation of "okama on the Net." However, nekama does not necessarily correspond to a man's sexuality.

Instead, nekama refers to a certain type of male behavior in online communication. Specifically, nekama go about their normal daily life as person of male gender, and almost all are heterosexual in the real world. However, online they represent themselves as female. Thus, this term commonly refers to a man pretending to be a woman on the Net, regardless of his sexuality.

Two main reasons are given as to why men become nekama. One is to elicit positive responses from other males and openly rally for their credulity on the Net. This behavior pattern greatly depends on the invisibility and anonymity of online communication. The second reason is the enjoyment or sense of release obtained from acting as a female. This type of nekama assumes "continuing communication" with other players or participants and extremely dislikes exposure of their real figure or the fact that they are nekama.

Although many nekama are known to exist, little is known about them. The nekama phenomenon connects with gender issues in communication. If a nekama is exposed as such to others, his communication causes a malfunction not only in cyberspace but also in the real world. In cyberspace, he may be labeled as a liar and be excluded from the community. In the real world, people around him may develop unfounded notions that he might be gay or have unusual sexual predilections.

4 Pluralistic Gender Identity: Doing /Playing "*Nekama*"

4.1 Doing "*Nekama*": Case of a *Nekama* Participating in Online Game

As many linguistic sociology studies have noted, gender is considered an important element of communication in the real world. Thus, gender has a great influence on the underlying conditions for communication [Nakamura, 2001]. Given the importance of gender, what effect does doing nekama have in continuous communication on the Net? Few indexes are available for online users to discern other users' sex and gender when communicating in cyberspace.

In an interview, a nekama who acts as a female character in the one of the biggest online game sites reported that acting as a female on the Net allows him to disengage from the masculinity enforced socially in the real world. Historically, as well as presently, Japan has preserved a relatively stronger system of gender roles and norms than is common in the West. Thus, in the real world, this informant always conformed to his assigned gender role ("I am a man, so that means I strive for 100% in my job, never crying or whimpering"). On the Net, however, he can relieve the weight of gender, revealing a feminine side or a different disposition to an online game buddy. For him, being nekama is a way to break loose from the restrictions of the male gender role and express his pluralistic/ multilayered identity.

4.2 Playing "*Nekama*": Case of a Nekama Participating in SNS

Another nekama who acts as female in a SNS community (a kabuki theater fan community) told me that being nekama allows him to build, nurture, and preserve good relationships with other participants. Because female participants are cautious of male participants, differences in gender/sex prevent him from having heart-to-heart communications with others.

The effectiveness of his playing nekama is deeply connected with the characteristics of the kabuki fan community. Most site administrators of kabuki fan Web sites appear to be women, and many women comprise online kabuki fan communities. That is, women make up the majority of kabuki fan communities. For this reason, many men feel that the community is exclusive, and even if they joined, they might have difficulty opening up to other members.

In this case, a gender issue in online communication is raised. Women may believe that men negatively judge their chatting with other women on the Internet; men also have gender-based images of communication. After exploring the possibilities of communication beyond gender/sex, the informant in this case decided to pose as a woman. He told me that he has never told a lie or cheated anyone. Being nekama serves to facilitate his communication on the Net.

Both cases illustrate that being nekama was an effective measure for ameliorating gender problems in cyberspace. The first case indicates that the development of ICT and cyberspace communication has extended possibilities for expressing pluralistic/multilayered gender identity. The second case shows that gender functions as an important factor in building human relationships and communicating in cyberspace.

5 Conclusion

In Japan, the existence of nekama connects with gender troubles not only in cyberspace but also in the real world. That is, the nekama phenomenon illustrates that our communication on the Net is influenced by gender/sex and gender images as well as communication in the real world. As the cases have shown, some nekama attempt to resolve their own gender difficulties by using the invisibility and anonymity of the Internet, as well as conventional gender images. These findings suggest that ICT provides people with effective alternatives to the gender roles required in the real world.

In other words, ICT allows people to extricate themselves from enforced gender identity through a process of expressing another gender identity in cyberspace. This can be seen as a means for resetting one's own gender role in the real world through the anonymity and invisibility of cyberspace. At the same time, in the real world, the gender system is gradually transforming, with the past demands of gender roles slowly decreasing. Changes in the real world will likely influence the gender situation in cyberspace. This creates the possibility of forging new identities based on discourse in which expression rather than noneffective gender identity is given importance.

The situation and meaning of nekama are changing in cyberspace as a function of the gender situation in the real world. Further research on nekama will clarify how gender impacts human relations in Japan and the pluralistic and multilayered nature of gender identity.

Acknowledgement

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