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Abstract:

At present, a huge number of people join in online games or SNS. With increasing the number of its users, online communication with invisibility and anonymity has generated a new type of communicators in Japan; those are referred to as "*Nekama*" and have communication based on the Japanese gendered linguistic system, in online communities. "*Nekama*" means a male participant who represents himself as a female in the cyber space. Whereas, he naturally spends his daily life as a male and most of them are heterosexual in the real space. Doing "*Nekama*" enables a male participant to free from traditional gender role. However, the existence of "*Nekama*" can bring up gender issues in the cyber space. Because they fill the lack of information about who they are with gender images and the Japanese women's language. Therefore, "*Nekama*" release himself from fixed gender order in the real space, and at the same time he reproduces and strengthens gender order in the cyber space.

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- Asai, R., Classic yet Contemporary Gender Norm: is ICT an amplifier of gender bias?, Proceedings of CEPE2009 Eighth International Conference of Computer Ethics: Philosophical Enquiry, pp.18-26.

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 based on gender images affects the communication pattern. These issues are considered referring to interviews with nekama. The final section examines how ICT influences the diversity of gender identity in Japan.

Evolving Online Communications in Japan

Increasing the number of online communication participants

The internet makes interactive and many-to-many communication possible for users. And the deployment of ICT allows people to increase their opportunities to make use of ICT as a means of communication on a daily basis. The development of ICT provide simplified information transmission capacity such as blog and SNS, and improve the utility value of information by finding and sorting huge date in a manner that is appropriate and effective. Many ICT companies provide various communication contents on the Net, where users can not only communicate with other users but also make their own avatars as they want to make it, such as putting nice virtual clothes on them and make them in the image of users themselves. And also users can have their own virtual pets or play sports on their computers. Moreover, some users look for their partner through online communities, and after their finding their partners on the Internet they meet each other offline and some couples get married in real[1] (Yoshihara 2008).

In other words, users would perceive the cyberspace as a part of their daily lives, not dividing from their lives in the real space. These phenomenon evoke questions about identity and norm in the cyber space; is it possible to establish identity within the cyber space?; if users behave based on their identities on the Net, what kind of features does their identities have?; how is different in their identities and norms between the cyber space and the real space? This study explores the possibility of forming identity on the cyber space, with referring to interviews with users those join online communities and keep long-term relationships with other users.

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 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 increasing the number of game playing users, many online game companies have provided various kinds of gaming contents, for instance massively multiplayer online role-playing games such as Ultima Online[2], or play-

[1] These phenomena are observed not only in Japan but also in the US. According to Yoshihara (2008), "online-dating" has become popular among many internet users in the US. They register online-dating sites, look for their prospective boyfriends in the Net and if they have interests with others there they meet each other off-line. And when they don't establish good relationship, they break up, go back to online-dating sites and find other potential dates there.

[2] Ultima Online is one of the bigger graphical massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG) released on 24th of

ing sports games with using avatars such as PangYa (playing golf game on the Net), to users across borders. And Japan has some SNS companies; for example, mixi which is one of the biggest SNS companies in Japan has about 20 million users (mixi 2010). Its user can access their SNS sites not only through personal computers but also through their own mobile phones. Thus its SNS system makes users possible to access favorite online communities even when they go outside.

Two types of online communication

As mentioned above, the Internet offers various kinds of communication and many users communicate with others vigorously for a variety of purposes. Communication can be classified broadly into two types in terms of the length of communication: "transient communication" and "continuing communication". The former, "transient communication", is defined as communication that users communicate with others only once or a few times, such as on bulletin board systems (BBSs). The latter "Continuing communication" means a relatively long-term relationship among certain people through online communication for instance online games or SNS where users repeatedly communicate with others by using characters and emoticons. Many online contents provide preselected characters those play discretionary roles in games and online communities to users. Those characters act in the cyber space in place of users themselves.

Both communication types greatly depend on invisibility and anonymity on the Net, and those two factors can bring about differences between online communication and communication in the real world. Users in both communication types can enjoy communication with others. However, in transient communication, some communicators can disrespect and humiliate others because of invisibility and anonymity on the Net. In this case, communicators wrongfully use the difficulty of users meeting with each other directly in the real world. Thus it is difficult for a victim to find and accuse a slanderer on the Net. And communicators in this type tend to perceive that the cyber space can be open to all users and enable users to unfettered access to others.

On the other hand, some users expect to establish comparatively long-term relationship with others in online communities. And those users sometimes assume that they will meet each other face-to-face in the off-line situation, in communicating with others and exchanging information. Therefore, such communicators want to have continuing communication and keep a good relationship with others. As a way of achieving continuing communication, 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). According to postmodernism thoughts, the Internet could enable people to release from the modern space where people have been tied themselves to traditional roles and norms, and also to establish another identity freely which they want to make (Yoshida 2000). However, anonymity makes users possible to behave what they want (Suzuki 2007). Two communication types as mentioned above reflect on drawback and advantage of the Internet.

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.

Many online communities may help foster a sense of belonging at a time of declining opportunities for establishing a sense of belonging in the real world. And the lack of belongingness is recognized as a social issue relating to social capital in the real world, at the present. In particular, participants in online games and SNSs can easily gain a sense of commonality and belongingness because they share interests or concerns with other participants on the Net. In some online games, participants need to find companion and play together with other participants to play or complete the game and mark good score. Therefore, online communication is inevitable for those users to enjoy their activities on the Net. As many people have communication through the Internet, we can see that online communication make the meaning of the body change. In order to

September in 1997 in US, after one month released in Japan. Japanese players constitutes about the hlaf of its population of this game. http://www.uoherald.com/uoml/

explore how the meaning of the body change by online communication, this study focus on male users those engage in online communities as female users. In other words, those pretend and conceal their sex from other users on the Net. They are referred to as Nekama in Japan.

Pluralistic Gender Identity: Doing /Playing "Nekama"

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[3]. 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[4]. 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, they represent themselves as female on the Net. 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, feel as if they were women and enjoy themselves as women through online communication. However, some of those nekama persuade other male users to believe that they communicate with real women and after that rally them on their credulity openly on the Net. This behavior pattern greatly depends on the invisibility and anonymity of online communication as mentioned above. In this case, nekama men can enjoy becoming women and drawing men's attention. And also they can play a silly trick on others, sometimes play an evil joke.

The second reason of actiong nekama is to get the enjoyment or sense of release by acting as a female. In this reason, nekama tend to pretend himself as a woman completely as long as possible and extremely dislikes exposure of their real figure or the fact that they are nekama. They intend to establish a relationship with others as female users do on the Net. Those nekama users assume continuing communication with other players or participants and try to do their best to become female players. Needless to say, it is very difficult for nekama of this type to meet others in the off-line situation. However, they assume that they have a good relationship with others and keep it for long time in the cyber space somehow.

In Japan, 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 a fake woman to others, his communication causes a malfunction not only in the cyber space but also in the real world. In the cyber space, 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. But, in the second type of nekama, a nekama user has communication with others to release himself from fixed gender roles and social norm and enjoy himself more in the cyber space. In this sense, he can establish communication without biological sex difference, and communicate with each other by complementing invisible sex difference with text and gender image. Through verbalized existence, he can be free from biological difference and able to feel that he is more himself than anything.

[3] We could observe such users those pretend their biological sex and gender in the real space not only in Japan but also in the US. In the US, this phenomenon is called 'gender switching' (Turkle 1995).

[4] Corresponding to nekama, some Japanese female users pretend their sex and gender in the real space and act as male users and male characters on the Net. Those female users are called 'Nenabe' in Japanese. Nenabe is an abbreviation of "onabe on the Net."Onabe means that lesbians or female cross –dresser.

Doing "Nekama": Case of a Nekama Participating in an 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 acting nekama have in continuous communication on the Net? Few indexes are available for online users to discern other users' sex and gender in communicating on the Net. This question relates to another question about a relationship between language and body in communication. In other words, communication is generally established not only by language and text but also by invisible factors, such as sex, facial expression or voice inflection (Ikeda 2000). In online communication, there are more invisible factors than in the real world and online communication sometimes stems from these missing parts. Because missing parts excite others' interest in a communicator on the Net.

In Japan, gender as an invisible factor functions greatly as an important role to lubricate communication because of gendered Japanese language system, what is called as "women's language". According to Inoue (2006), Japanese language is necessarily a social relation containing both a semiotic system and social action. Language itself is composed of images, ideas, identities, and gender. Thus individual speakers are engendered in the process of linguistic activities. Based on this notion, nekama not only pretends to be a woman on the Internet, but also engender a gendered environment in the cyber space, through having communication as a woman. Nekama want to be free from a male gender role in the real world. At the same time he makes a gendered space on the Internet and enjoys gendered communication there. Nekama takes seemingly contradictory behavior between in the real world and in the cyber space. This study focuses on two nekama men in order to explore nekama's contradictory behavior. Those two nekama's narratives clearly explain the reason why they act as nekama in communicating online and how acting nekama affects them .

The first nekama is in his late twenties and acts as a female character in the one of the biggest online game sites for five years more. He operates very famous female character in the game site and other players recognize that he is a "real" woman in the real world. When he appears in the site, other players come close to his character and want to talk with him, where others believe that he is a female player. And also he behaves as a female and talk with them by using Japanese women's language. He said that acting as a female on the Net allows him to disengage from the masculinity enforced socially in the real world. And he can find his feminine side of him and feel his own identity more strongly than 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 Internet, however, he can relieve the weight of gender, revealing a feminine side or a different disposition to an online game buddy. At a time he plays nekama, he uses women's language without his noticing and he thinks that women's language make him more comfortable and natural on the Net. For him, being nekama is a way to break loose from the restrictions of the male gender role and express his pluralistic identity.

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

Another nekama acts as female in a SNS community which is a kabuki theater fan community. Kabuki Theater is traditional Japanese theatrical performance and all of actors are male, and the theater has huge female fan groups. The informant is in his early thirties and belong three SNS communities where he act as a female. All of three communities are composed of the almost same members those like a kabuki theater. However, they talk not only about kabuki and also not-kabuki topics for example love, fashion and so on. Based on a topic, they use separate communities. He started his communication as a male user at first. However, female participants are very cautious of male participants; differences in gender/sex prevent him from having heart-to-heart communications with others. Thus he chose acting as a female on the Net and after that he could make a good relationship with other kabuki fans through online communication. He told me that he does not pretend anything but his sex and that he talk and behave what he wants. He recognizes that being nekama allows him to establish, nurture, and preserve good relationships with other participants, especially with female participants.

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 because of the gendered image of male users which female users have. This comment reveals that both men and women communicate with others based on their gendered image of other users.

This case shows a gender issue in online communication in Japan. Women may believe that men negatively understand their chatting with other women on the Internet; men also have gender-based images of communication and feel that gender difference make their communication difficult. After exploring the possibilities of communication beyond gender/sex, the informant decided to pose himself as a woman on the community. He emphasized that he has never told a lie or cheated anyone except his sex and he just uses Japanese women's language to lead female users to believe that he is a female in the real world and he is harmless. Being nekama serves to facilitate his communication on the Internet and it seems to be nothing more than means for establish a good friendship with other participants.

Both two nekama cases illustrate that being nekama is an effective measure for ameliorating gender problems in the cyber space. The first case indicates that the development of ICT and online communication has extended possibilities for expressing pluralistic identity as mentioned above that he recognized he has both a masculine side and feminine side on him. The second case shows that gender functions as an important factor in building human relationships and communicating in the cyber space. That is, the existing gender images shared by people reproduce new gendered images in the cyber space. And also communication in the both cases establishes based on the relationship of mutual trust among community members. Most important thing is that nekama need others to believe that they are female biologically in the real world. Thus, nekama use Japanese women's language because gender is made by language and productive of language (Inoue 2006). In other words, Japanese gendered linguistic system based on typical gender norms and gender images are very understandable signs of showing sex/gender in communication.

Amplifying Social Risk Related to Gender by online communication

When a physical bodily sign is deficient in the online communication, nekama complements it with stereo-typed gender images to make their communication go smoothly. Letting the other imagine the lack of information about who he is in real makes him more feminine and a more plausible female user. Therefore he does not need to lie to the other necessarily, just telling only a part of information about him and rousing the other curiosity and imagination through text-based communication using the women's language. In this process, nekama utilizes the symbolic difference which information contains, and brings about gender reproduction in the cyber space. By strengthening persuasive power of the message using by stereo-typed gender image of women, the message tend to easily stick out in people's mind, and exert an influence on transforming people's social norm to a greater or lesser extent.

Therefore, online communication using gender image and gender norm can maintain and strengthen existing gender order both in the cyber space and in the real space. This aspect also point out from ICT's dual characters. One is that utilization of ICT brings about a major change in existing frameworks of communication form, society and so on. Another is that use of ICT maintains and, even, strengthens existing frameworks. As is well known, this trend in the cyber space goes against the global trend away from gender discriminations and gender inequalities.

Needless to say, communication fettered by conventional gender role and particular gender image could convey the wrong meaning of messages to people at times. Up to now, many gender studies have developed this kind of argument. In these studies, researchers have point out inconsistencies in not only gender discrimination between men and women but also gender inequalities among same sexes. In other words, online communication by using ICT and the gendered linguistic system has originally had some gender problems. For example, most sophisticated computer users and many of whom work with computers as programmers or system administrators are men (NRI 1999). They have developed ICT based on value, social norms and gender roles they have fostered in their lives.

Additionally, online communication includes not only gender issues but also racial, economic and age

problems constitutionally. In a gendered Japanese society, ICT would make the gendered division of labour and it is assigned gendered symbolic values through communication (Lohan 2001). And given the ICT's dual characters, the gendered division and gendered symbolic values would socially maintain and strengthen through the use of ICT. Of course online communication using ICT inevitably faces to gender problem in the developing process and also in the uses of it.

Conclusions

In Japan, the existence of nekama connects with gender issues not only in the cyber space but also in the real space. That is, the nekama phenomenon illustrates that our communication on the Net is influenced by existing gender, gender norms and gender images as well as communication in the real space. As the cases have shown above, 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, those nakama phenomena are reflected by gender roles and gender norms in the real world. Many male users participate on online communities as nekama and they share and exchange information, feeling or thought on some topics between others users regardless of biological sex differences. However, the process of sharing their feeling and thought with the others means that users share their own cultural values and social norms. Moreover, online communication can reproduce gender order in the cyber space through using the gendered Japanese women's language.

Every information receivers not always comprehend and interpret sending information in the same way. According to Ikeda (2000), sending message itself has no meaning, and the meaning of the message are provided by information receivers. And information contains nonlinguistic factors as well as linguistic ones, and communicators send and receive information including both factors consciously or subconsciously. In order to perceive and construe the message, receivers extract "information as Vorstellung" from their own existing knowledge, experiences and reasoning capability (Nakamura 2001). And receivers finally find meaning of the message through the extraction process. As compared with communication in the real space, online communication is established with many people including anonymous person and users who is just browsing. Therefore, meanings of messages through the Internet become diversified depending on the number of users those have experience, normative consciousness and social value in their own way. Under these circumstances, users could find person who has possibility to share value with them, on the Net. Nekama phenomena show that ICT allows people to extricate themselves from enforced gender identity through a process of expressing another gender identity in the cyber space. And also it shows that many users foster a relationship of mutual trust one another by doing nekama and sharing their own value with others. The more gendered system of language in Japan can make nekama's communication go smoothly and easily.

Some nekama men behave as if they are real women when they communicate with other community members. This can be seen as a means for resetting one's own gender role in the real space through the anonymity and invisibility of the cyber space. However they do not notice that their acting of nekama reproduces gendered order and strengthen gender norms on the Net. In the real space, the gender system is gradually transforming, with the past demand of decreasing gender roles. In the faceless communication on the Net, the lack of information and the blank of communication are filled with gender which people have in the real space. Therefore changes in the real space will likely influence the gender situation in the cyber space. And these changes create the possibility of establishing another identity based on discourse. The situation and meaning of nekama are changing in the cyber space as a function of the gender changes in the real space. As increasing the number of nekama, we could observe more clearly how gender impacts human relationships in Japan and the pluralistic nature of gender identity. And also we could clarify how gender in the real space reflects on people's behavior in the cyber space more expressly. Whereas, we need to recognize that online communication would be saddled with social risk of amplifying typical gender norms and gender roles against the stream of eliminating those in the real space.

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