Flow Experiences and Image Making: An Online Chat-Room Ethnography

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ABSTRACT

Chat rooms are a relatively new phenomenon. They provide a unique experiential locale, much like a community. They have become a popular replacement for oft-diminishing communities of yore. Qualitatively building on three overarching themes, chat rooms are put at the nexus of three diverse theoretical themes: community, flow experiences, and image management—the latter two being explored in this article. Chat rooms provide flow-like experiences to participants and allow chatters to manage and enhance their images. Given that chatters are highly involved and frequent visitors to their online community (specific chat rooms), they provide a unique opportunity to study this relatively new phenomenon, which has far-reaching, multidisciplinary implications. © 2004 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Internet-based chat rooms have been growing rapidly. Some chatters come in infrequently but many visit daily and spend hours chatting. What needs do chat rooms fill? Is it a case of “if you build it, they will come,” or is it an answer to true consumer desires? What could be the reasons for the ever-increasing popularity of chat rooms? People enter the magical chat-room doors to bond socially, to look for solutions to personal problems, or to satisfy a need for affiliation with a community. All of these motives in combination suggest a community-based meta-motive for chatting.
This community-based meta-motive has not gone unnoticed. Scholars have turned to online communities in a quest for a deeper and thicker understanding of modern-day community members (Kozinets, 1998, 2002; McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). However, most inquiries have been limited to specific communities (e.g., Harley-Davidson and Jeep owners—McAlexander et al., 2002; Saab, Mac, and Bronco owners—Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001).

This ethnographical article extends previous research on Internet communities to chat rooms. A chat room is a non-geographically-bound community, which is based on relationships between chatters. It can be general (e.g., the “lobby” in many chat facilities) or specialized (e.g., by age group); open to the general public or of limited access; and moderated or nonmoderated. Although such communities have been studied as popular forums for brand-interested individuals, chat rooms have become centers for a new, non-brand-centered, Web-based marketplace (Donath, Karahalios, & Virgas, 1999). For example, Internet relay chats (IRC) have blossomed (one central MIRC, a client on the EFNET server, hosted 76,223 chatters in 651 rooms at 11:00 pm on 2/18/2002). In short, chat rooms have become a central feature in the online lives of many people.

Studying chat rooms is important to many disciplines. First, chat rooms are provided by Internet service providers (ISP) and portals in many countries, making them a global phenomenon. Thus, understanding chat behavior is managerially important. Second, chat rooms serve as new communities. They provide a suitable context for products and services, which are discussed by chatters with shared interests. This makes chat rooms conducive for word-of-mouth about issues that pique participants’ interests (Locke, Levine, Searls, & Weinberger, 2000). Because chat rooms form around shared interests, they can serve to launch new products and to market existing products. This enhances the interest of management and marketing scholars in chat rooms. For example, Cornerstone Promotion (2002), a marketing firm specializing in under-the-radar marketing, offers a service of digital street marketing, which can be used to “create online street buzz via fan sites, message boards, chats, discussion groups, etc.” This firm belongs to what PBS (2001) called “Merchants of Cool”: “The firm hires kids to log into chat rooms and pose as another fan of their clients.” Third, chatters meet face-to-face beyond the chat room they use, making them a nonvirtual community. Thus, their on- and off-line behavior is worthy of study by sociologists. In sum, chat rooms are lively communities that deserve research attention.

As this research progressed, it became clear that chat rooms could be studied from three perspectives: community, flow experiences, and image management. Although the community perspective has been addressed to some extent in previous research in a different context (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001), treating chatting as a manifestation of flow experiences and as an arena for image management and enhancement are unique to this study of online life.
RESEARCH PROGRAM

Ethnography and Fieldwork

This research followed a qualitative approach, which has a long tradition in the marketing literature. In fact, a special 1999 issue of *Psychology & Marketing* was devoted to such research. Qualitative research can take on many forms, such as focus groups (Nevid & Sta Maria, 1999), interviews, observations, and document analyses (Cohen, 1999a), the last three of which were used in this research.

A focus on age-based chat rooms (e.g., chat room for people in their 40s) served as the foundation for this pure autoethnographic research. The project began with participant silent observations. That is, the researcher was present in the chat room but did not interact with chatters. It is to be noted that although most similar research projects use multiple observers, the current study used a single observer. The approach used to handle the associated problems in this regard is detailed later in this section. The researcher became fully incorporated into the population of interest over an extended period (McAlexander et al., 2002; Stewart, 1998). Thus, it involved the researcher in a presence role. In other words, the researcher and chatters experience the phenomenon as if it is not computer mediated. This is similar to Paccagnella's view (1997) of virtual communities as exemplars of real and meaningful personal relationships (compared to real-life relationships) in the absence of physical matter.

Following established guidelines for this type of research (Hirschman, 1986; Kozinets, 2002), the analysis was multiperiod and multilevel. It followed the notions of integrity and system (Cohen, 1999b) by being prolonged, persistent, and triangulated, involving gain of chatters’ trust, and culminating in researcher retrospection (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). The first level of analysis was conducted after the end of the first phase (2 months), the second after the second phase (2 months), and the third involved a continuous reflection on emerging themes over the third phase of the study (18 months). Self-reflection was used to elaborate on and assess the themes and to direct future observations. The fourth stage involved a deep analysis of notes and printed records and writing of a first draft. Thus, three research tools advocated for a qualitative study (online interviews and observations and document analysis) were used (Hall & Rist, 1999).

The research began in April 2000 with the researcher silently observing exchanges in age-based Israeli chat rooms for people in their 40s and 50s. This stage corresponds to the first stage in the humanist method, namely, “a priori conceptualization” (Hirschman, 1986, p. 240). The phenomenon was seen as a mass of contents and processes the researcher wanted to study, guided by a strong desire to deeply understand the nature of chat rooms. The researcher was not identified as such in all
ethnography phases, except to the individuals who were asked to comment on the first draft (discussed below).

The second stage of a priori conceptualization served as an “exploratory investigation” (Hirschman, 1986, p. 241). It began in June 2000 and involved interactions in public-access rooms, in which the researcher was introduced as a newcomer to chatting and sought guidance and socialization from experienced chatters for 2 months. After these initial periods, the author’s online relationships developed and grew, resulting in familiarity that made it possible to witness processes and relational changes over time. Observations in two chat rooms allowed a triangulation of the themes and ensured that the findings were not chat-room specific. During this subphase, an effort was made to comprehend the phenomenon, identify facets of chat interactions, and assess how they are intertwined. The third phase, starting in August 2000 and lasting 18 months, was “personal immersion” (Hirschman, 1986, p. 241). A switch was made from the original chat rooms into another age-based chat room for people in their 40s to test the themes identified in the first two phases in the context of a different ISP. Such chat rooms included specific, age-based chatters, with high traffic and many individuals, which provided detailed and descriptive exchanges, involving multiple interactions (Kozinets, 2002). Close to 1000 h were spent in chat rooms over 2 years.

A continuous observations → theme formation → new observations → revised themes process was used, premature closure in the form of finalizing emerging structures was avoided, and an effort was made to account for the fact that the task was a full understanding of the phenomenon. These emphases made it possible to identify the community and image-management chatting themes first, followed by the flow theme. A continuous process of interpretation, a thick description of the phenomenon (Hirschman, 1986), observations, and one-to-one virtual talks with chatters were used to clarify and challenge emerging observations. Notes were taken and chat windows were printed for later decoding of themes, resulting in over 100 pages of notes and printouts.

A first draft of the article emerged at this stage and was sent to three experienced chatters as a credibility check (Hirschman, 1986). This phase, designed to authenticate and enrich the interpretations, led to some changes. Then, a second draft was sent to three scholars to assess the dependability and confirmability of the findings (Hirschman, 1986). Their comments were used to reformulate and resynthesize the themes, sub-themes, and their interrelatedness. Another draft was then sent to an editor of an academic computer-mediated communications journal. After accounting for his comments, the current version was written.

Description

Chatters during all phases numbered 500–1000 across portal rooms and 10–100 in specific rooms, peaking in late evening/early night and week-
ends. Notably, one cannot determine with any certainty if chatters disguised their identities and demographics. Yet, it was obvious that individuals varied from neophytes to experienced. The former can be identified by a reluctance to participate in public chats or when they identify themselves as such. The latter are known to old hands and are greeted as such upon arrival. Additionally, judging by their nicknames and use of the feminine or masculine Hebrew verb form, males and females were fairly even distributed.

**Ethical Considerations**

It became evident that ethics needed to be addressed. Should the ISP, portals, or chatters be informed about the researcher’s identity or purpose? Are general chat room discussions public discourses? The Sudweeks and Rafaeli approach was followed (1996, p. 121; Paccagnella, 1997): “We view public discourse on . . . computer mediated communication as just that: public. Analysis of such content, where individuals’, institutions’, and lists’ identities are shielded, is not subject to ‘Human Subject’ restraints. Such study is more akin to the study of tombstone epitaphs, graffiti, or letters to the editor. Personal?—yes. Private?—no.” Thus, only public exchanges were analyzed as public discourse because they were not solicited. However, portals and participants’ nicknames are disguised throughout this article.

**ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

Three themes dominated chat-room interactions: chat rooms as communities, chatting as flow experiences, and chatting as image management. Because previous research has dealt with the first theme, it is only noted that the findings (details are available from the author) are in general agreement with recent articles on online communities (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001), and the other two themes are discussed. A theoretical discussion of the relevant theme is followed by illustrative examples.

**CHAT ROOMS AS PROVIDERS OF FLOW EXPERIENCES**

**Flow—A Theoretical Overview**

A theme that became apparent in the ethnography was chatting as a flow experience (Han, 1988; Massimini, Csikszentmihalyi, & Delle Fave, 1988). This section begins with a short overview of flow experiences. Then, it shows how chatting provides for such a flow (with one exception, discussed below). Importantly, online chatting does not always involve flow
experiences. In some cases, chatters may seek pleasure, power, participation, or sexual on- or off-line encounters. The intent here is to suggest that for some chatters, online chatting is a flow experience some of the time, a point for which a reviewer is thanked.

Csikszentmihalyi (1988, p. 15) noted that psychological trends “all share a common epistemology. In an attempt to be scientific as possible, they have developed reductionistic accounts of human action, discounting or ignoring the most obvious aspect of the human phenomenon, namely, the existence of a conscious self.” He suggested that the self is built on pleasure, power, and participation, used in various combinations to shape consciousness. Since consciousness, emotions, and feeling have evolved, pleasure, power, and participation do not adequately account for some goals individuals pursue. Thus, it is necessary to develop a view of the self that is teleonomic (a goal-oriented process by a person unconscious of the goal) in nature. Csikszentmihalyi advanced the concept of flow, what one feels when an event is beyond the normal course of life. Such events produce “a sense of exhilaration, energy, and fulfillment that is more enjoyable than what people feel in the normal course of life.”

Flow is more likely when individuals are motivated by themes beyond pleasure, power, and participation (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). Needing to open their consciousness to live and experience new venues for being, flow, which, once experienced motivates replications, provides people with autotelic motivation (defined as something worth doing for its own sake). The goal is the experience, not its external rewards. When people engage in an activity with no premeditated practical goal they can make new and important discoveries and “the flow experience is the prototype of such intrinsically motivated states of consciousness” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988, p. 29).

Flow’s structure is based on seeing an activity as autotelic. Csikszentmihalyi (1975) documented flow experiences for artists, athletes, and dancers, who unanimously describe flow using similar terminology. Such unanimity indicates that these specific experiential states, produced by reordering consciousness, are desirable and motivate people to seek reexperience in any domain (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). Flow requires three characteristics, which account for the experience and future attempts to relive it (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Han, 1988; Massimini et al., 1988). First, a precondition for flow is that people perceive that there is an act they are capable of. Stated differently, a balance is required between the challenges posed and the skill brought to a flow activity. Second, the experience must be an opportunity for personal growth. The task must become increasingly challenging and the tools used to handle it must become more complex over time. If skills exceed the challenge or if the challenge exceeds the skills, flow will not occur. Whether skills and challenge co-balance depends on the individual’s autotelic nature. Third, flow materializes in structured activities (rituals, games, and sports),
which allow for variety and control of skills needed for and complexity of the experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988).

Flow experiences have seven dimensions. First, the activities must have clear goals to enable an individual to know what needs to be done (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). Second, flow requires rapid and clear feedback to allow individuals to know how well they perform. Third, the activity requires and results in focused concentration. Being enjoyable, such activities allow individuals to attend to them totally, producing an awareness/activity bond. Fourth, one needs to be able to perceive the experience as being sufficiently under one’s control. This explains the insistence of risky sport practitioners that the sport is not risky, because the outcome is under their control. Fifth, flow can potentially distort time and make it subjective. The passage of time is unnoticed because the experience is involving and enjoyable. Sixth, people should experience a transcendence of self. Skydivers describe their flow activity “as one of total absorption that provides them not only with thrill and excitement, but also a sense of involvement that transcends mundane experience” (Celsi, Rose, & Leigh, 1993, p. 11; Arnould & Price, 1993). This enables a strengthening of the self over specific and repeated flow experiences. Finally, self-consciousness, how we appear to others, tends to disappear.

**Ethnography of Chat as Flow**

This ethnography phase illustrates how the first six dimensions of flow apply to chat rooms. Notably, the author is aware of potential differences between himself and other chatters. Although chatting with a social goal in mind, the author was also trying to understand chatting, so he made every effort to not project his experiences into others. Furthermore, chatters were phoned and e-mailed to ensure that the observations were not an idiosyncrasy of the author’s projections. They suggested that the description applies to them as well.

**Clear Goals.** An obvious goal in chat rooms is meeting others. A less obvious but common one is searching for virtual cybersex or actual sexual encounters. The following two examples are typical. The first was recorded on 2/10/2002 and newcomers are noted as such.

Lawrence [newcomer]: Hi.

Ben [newcomer]: Hi everybody. I am looking for a married woman about 45 years old. Any takers?

Maggie: Hi, Lawrence.

Lawrence: Any horny ladies? I am looking to have some fun.

Kent [newcomer, self-designated by nick as married and orthodox Jew]: Any orthodox lady?
Lawrence: Looking for a lady that wants to reach new heights.
Ken: Kent, if I were you, I’ll look for ladies, who are not deeply religious.

**Quick Feedback.** The next exchange, from 2/9/2002, was an unsolicited private conversation. It happened when the author mistyped his nick, resulting in a nick that can be perceived as a bisexual person (shown as [Bi] below). While illustrating clear goals, it shows how rapid feedback can be provided in the virtual world. The exchange lasted only about 30 s. It shows clarity of purpose for Noel, who was searching for a bisexual partner for cybersex. He came, he saw, and he did not conquer, so he left for greener pastures.

Noel [Self designated as a 29-year-old male, married person]: Hi.
Bi: Hi to you too.
Noel: How old?
Bi: 49. Why? Is it important?
Noel: Are you bi?
Bi: Depends on how you define bi . . .
Noel: I mean bi-sexual.
Bi: LOL. No, not really. And you?
Noel: I am bi-sexual. How do you define bi?
Bi: Bi can mean many different things (including your interpretation). For example, someone, who enjoys talking to males and females. Talk!
Noel: I hear you.
Bi: I’ll allow you to keep on searching, then. Have a nice day and happy hunting.
Bi: Bye.

**Focused Concentration.** On many occasions, people focus on an exchange to the point of disregarding other on-screen exchanges. This is typical when chatters are involved in private conversations. In such situations, the probability of not noticing that someone else is talking directly to the person in a private exchange is high. For example, the following exchange between regulars took place on 1/21/2002:

Leo: Hey, Katie. How come you disregard me?
Katie: Leo, you should examine your eyes. I acknowledged your greetings and responded.
Leo: What did you say?
Katie: I said “Hi bro”.
Leo: Oh, sorry, you are right. I apologize. I was talking to someone privately.
Katie: Jerryyyyy. Jeryyyyy.
Jerry: Hi Katie. Sorry, Katie. I was not paying attention, diving, you know.

**Feeling of Control.** The next requirement is that individuals feel that the situation is under their control. The two exchanges below, from 12/20/2001 and 11/12/2001, respectively, are characteristic of individuals making an effort to maintain control over their chat destiny. The first provides two additional exemplars of control-seeking behavior. In all cases, the chat was among regulars. In the first encounter, Don works hard to maintain control of his chat-room environment, being worried about fitting in, age-wise. The second exchange provides two examples of Kay and Amy, two regulars, involved in control maintenance strategies.

Dina: Hi everyone and you, Donna and Nate.
Don [after a minute of no response]: D, since nobody is reacting—hi to you.
Dina: Hi to you, too, Don.
N: Good morning Dina.
Donna: Hey, I am still up.
Dina: Yea! They woke up (smiley face).
Don: Well done, Nate, you managed to come out of the dive [smiley face]?
Dina: Don, Donna has also awoken.
Don: Dina, yes, I can see. How can one not see?
Dina: Don, I thought you did not see. Some people don’t (smiley face).
Don: Dina, at my age . . . we have glasses.
Dina: Mmm (sad face . . . old?)
Don: I am at the age of this room [forty plus]. Still.
Dina: Still and here go the years and suddenly, you are fifty.
Don: Hey, I am still three months away from fifty. Will you still accept me here then?
Dina: Of course, Don. I am accepted and I am not yet forty. . . . At worst, you can always switch to the “fifty plus” chat room. Don’t tell them your age (smiley face).
Danny: Kay, How old are you?
Kay: Danny, what sign are you?
Danny: Kay, how can I answer you if you don’t answer me first? Kay, are you from the sign “bullshit”?
Kay: Why do you answer me like this [a series of sad graphical faces]?
Danny: [A smiley]. Kay, why don’t you just answer my question?

* 
Kay: Danny, I don’t answer such questions in the general chat area, only privately.
Danny: So, you are ashamed about your age!
Kay: Not ashameddddd.
Danny: Yes, you are. Otherwise, why are you avoiding my question?
Kay: Why do you mind?
Danny: I don’t; I was just wondering. I am 32, by the way.
Kay: Sorry, only privately.

* 
Amy: Aren’t you the hero, Danny?
Danny: A, concentrate on your private exchanges.
Amy: Concentrating, Danny.
Danny: So, why are you communicating in the general chat room?
A: I feel like it!
Enya: My, oh my. Aren’t you in a combative mood today, Danny?
Danny: Enya, are you sick today?
Amy: Who asked you, Danny, what to do here?
Enya: Danny, why do you think?
Danny: Enya, I am surprised. You have never approached me directly before today. That’s why I thought something was wrong with you . . .
Enya: Do you like it, though?
Amy: Good, Danny. You are off my case.

**A Distorted and Subjective Sense of Time.** This fifth characteristic of chatting as a flow experience is illustrated through three observations. One, from 12/21/2001, shows a chat-room exchange in which Elsa [regular] failed to see Dan [regular] because she has been “diving.” Note how time becomes distorted and subjective for Elsa when she chats online.
The second observation (1/15/2002), unlike others, involves a count of the people in one room over 3 hours. At 8:45 PM, there were 51 people in the room. At 9:45, 27 of these people were still present and active. Twenty of the original chatters were still online and talking at 10:45. Finally, at 11:45, 23 of the originals were still chatting. When three of them were asked privately, they noted that this was typical and that they were addicted to chatting. Thus, they failed to recognize how long they have been online and one actually asked, “Has it been three hours already”. Thus, one’s sense of time is indeed distorted and subjective when chatting, as prescribed by this facet of flow experiences.

Finally, another exchange documents the addictive nature of chatting. Three regulars were involved in this conversation on 2/20/2002. As will become obvious, people get addicted to chatting. When they cannot chat online, they make sure that someone with whom they are in face-to-face or phone contact will let their friends know that they want to but cannot chat. Moreover, it shows that even when missing, a regular chatter attempts to contribute to the discussion, if only to let people know that she cannot establish a connection.

Ben: Gloria, hi.

Gloria: Hi, Bennn.

Ben: Gloria How are you doing?

Gloria: I am OK. I am doing slightly better than I did last time.

Ben: Ana asked me to say hi to you.

Gloria: Thanks. Give her my regards.

Ben: Ana cannot establish a connection to the chat service.

Gloria: Why? What is wrong?

Ben: Her computer has a problem, but she asked me specifically to pass her regards to you. She wanted to make sure that you hear from her through me.

Transcendence of the Self: The sixth component of a flow experience is its provision of opportunities for transcendence of the self, which blur the distinction between the self and important others, as they become an on-
or off-line group. Specifically, loss of self-consciousness and a transcendence of ego boundaries are apparent when one gets a sense of growth and of being part of a greater entity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993). The complexity of interacting with many people in a chat room and off-line meetings is far greater than normal, one-to-one interactions. This enhances one’s involvement with the activity, which makes the chatter feel as one with the group (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). Chat rooms allow for personal growth, especially when members move from a virtual to a nonvirtual space (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). A third of the relationships started in Internet news groups develop into face-to-face meetings (Parks & Floyd, 1996). The following announcement, posted in the general room for all to see on entry, illustrates that many chatters want to know fellow community members beyond the virtual environment.

You have entered the ZZZ room. After the great party of 280 in CLUB1, prepare for the end of winter party. The Party will be held on 3/14, in the charming CLUB2. Only 40 minutes from Tel Aviv. Come visit the party’s site and you can have an impact on which music will be played. You can reserve your tickets through Lea, or Sharon.

The party described is not atypical. Parties and meetings allow for change (Celsi et al., 1993), development, and renewal of the self (Arnould & Price, 1993). Chat-room regulars provide a similar role as that provided by rafting guides (Arnould & Price, 1993). It is the tangible element of guidance that allows newcomers to acquire skills, thus enhancing the fun aspect of chatting, as documented in earlier passages. Additionally, chat rooms provide a context for personal change and for organizing a new identity (identity construction; Celsi et al., 1993). Chat rooms allow a person to mask personal characteristics in building a new identity (Witmer & Kartzman, 1998), be it a constant (but different from the identity used in other contexts) or a new identity every time a person chats.

Personal growth and identity construction sometimes require that a person mask his or her true self, in line with chatting as a genre of play or a costume ball (Danet, Ruedenberg, & Rosenbaum-Tamari, 1998). Purim, the Jewish equivalent of Halloween, when people wear costumes, was the context for the following exchange between regulars (2/25/2002). Mordecai is in “costume,” with a nickname from the biblical story of Purim, and Isaiah calls himself “a man in costume.” The dialogue exemplifies two issues. First, that chatters wear costumes. In this case, the context allows it and the chat room provides an opportunity to construct a new, “new” personal identity (Belk, 1988; Schouten, 1991). The second “new” means a self that differs from one’s everyday chat identity, which is also new for many people. Second, it shows the effort people make to recognize other regulars. This parallels the need for the chat room context to be well defined, as is the skydiving context (Celsi et al., 1993).

Isaiah: Gee, Mordecai, I do not like your style.

Mordecai: Isaiah, I told you . . . if you only knew who I am.
Isaiah: And you, Mordecai, know who I am?
Mordecai: I think I do.
Isaiah: I, for one, think I recognize you.
Mordecai: And I think I know you as well.
Kim [newcomer]: Hey, Isaiah, I also want to know who you are!
Isaiah: Mordecai, if you know, do tell everyone.
Mordecai: I know.

Another way in which chat rooms make it possible to manage the self is by providing a supporting, group-like environment. The following examples (11/19/2001 and 10/10/2001) illustrate how chat rooms can play an important role in supporting chatters’ identity.

Bob [regular]: Hi, Barbara [regular]. How are you doing?
Barbara: Great.
Bob: How come?
Barbara: Bob, I have you to thank. You encouraged me yesterday and I finished the project.
Ely [newcomer]: Congratulations, Barbara [graphical representations of birthday cakes].
Bonny [regular]: Barbara—great! [graphical representations of “thumbs up”].
Ely: I don’t know why I am congratulating you, Barbara, but congratulations anyway.
Barbara: Thanks, Ely.
Moira [regular]: [Graphical cakes]...Congratulations, Barbara [Graphical kisses].
Barbara: Thanks, all. Couldn’t have done it without you.
Sony: Hi, Sapphire. How are you?
Sapphire: OK.
Sony: How is Jerry [Sapphire’s partner]? Is he OK?
Sapphire: He is still sick.
Sapphire: Yes, they seem to have found what is wrong with him. It’s [a medical description].
Sony: Sapphire, make him healthy again! Does he need an operation?
Sapphire: They do not know yet. In a week, after additional tests, we’ll know more.
Sony: Sapphire, give him my best and let me know if I can help in any way.

Sapphire: Thanks. Will let you know.

The third example involves Ely [regular], who arrived in a bad mood after a difficult day at work. The regulars felt for him and provided support. Prior to departing on 9/9/2001:

Ely: OK, everyone, I have to go. Behave as if you are all sad to see me go. It will do wonders for my ego. Lie, if you must. [five seconds later].
Come onnnnn!

Lea [regular]: Ely, haven’t you left yet [smiley].

Betty [regular]: {{{{Ely}}}} don’t go! NO! Not yet! [graphical representation of a kiss].

Ely: Have a great day, all. Thanks!

Mira [regular]: Byeee, Elyyy!

In sum, chat rooms provide a flow-enhancing context. Six components of flow-like experiences are present. Loss of self-consciousness is missing and is discussed below.

CHATTING TO MANAGE AND ENHANCE AN IMAGE

Image Management and Enhancement—A Theoretical Overview

A brief overview of the literature is provided first. Impression management is defined as “the process by which individuals attempt to control the impressions others form of them” (Leary & Kowalski, 1990, p. 34) or as an “attempt to control images that are projected in real or imagined social interactions” (Schlenker, 1980, p. 6). The terms image and impression management are used interchangeably in the literature and the former will be used here.

Three overlapping approaches have been used to explain why people engage in image management. First, Goffman (1959) identified three motives: defining one’s place in the social hierarchy, setting a tone for social interactions, and facilitating the performance of behavior that is governed by one’s roles. Second, Leary and Kowalski (1990, p. 37) suggested three motives: “maximizing one’s reward–cost ratio in social relations, enhancing one’s self-esteem . . . and facilitating the development of desired identities.” The three interrelated motives underlie five concrete benefits. The first two, at the most general level, are based on “the motive to engage in impression management [that] springs from the same motivational source as all behavior, namely, to maximize expected rewards and minimize expected punishments.” Then, image manage-
ment may be used purely to affect the audience’s behaviors. It may also be important in joining and aligning one’s public and ideal selves. Finally, people may engage in image management as a means of creating and sustaining identities. The third and final approach (Tedeschi & Riess, 1981) discusses two motives for impression management, defined as a behavior designed to control or manipulate the impressions formed by others. First, it is important to the extent that it improves symbolic interactions when individuals take on identities that are related to their roles. Self-presentation techniques allow actors in symbolic interactions to define the situation and their social identities and affect acceptable behavioral boundaries. Second, people seek to attain credit and avoid blame. Image is managed to maximize credit and minimize blame by allowing actors to associate themselves with positive interaction outcomes and disassociate themselves from negative ones. Actors achieve these outcomes by building power, immediate and delayed, which is based on their perceived expertise, trustworthiness, legitimacy, consistency, and physical appearance.

Image Management and Enhancement—Ethnography Findings

Image management has not been recognized as a central feature of computer-mediated-communications (CMC) in a chat-room context yet. Walther (1996) noted that CMC provides senders with an opportunity to construct messages to optimize self-presentation. The image management ethnography examples follow Bromley’s analysis of such strategies (1993). This analysis is structured and allows for developing observations that, as a whole, tell a compelling story of chatting for image management and enhancement.

Bromley’s first observation (1993, p. 101) is that people who have the most to gain or lose in way of reputation (e.g., celebrities and entertainers) will be “the most sensitive to and active in managing their reputation.” In chat rooms, the people with most to gain and lose are “old regulars” or newcomers in search of a position in the chat hierarchy. The following examples document image-management behavior by the two types of chatters.

The first exchange (1/30/2002) involves Samantha [regular] and Clancy [newcomer]. Samantha is quick to defend her position and image as an accomplished individual, single, but not in search of a partner. Clancy is angling for a position in the hierarchy based on an image as an assertive individual, while signaling his search for a partner. While illustrating Bromley’s first theme, the exchange shares much in common with another theme. Following Deluga (1991), Bromley (1993) argued that people use numerous impression-management tactics, including assertiveness, power, and flattery. In this example, Clancy uses friendliness to approach Samantha, a high-powered, established chatter. Samantha, on the other hand, uses assertiveness and power to put him in place.
Clancy: Samantha???
Samantha: What is it, Clancy?
Clancy: What's your angle?
Samantha: Mine?
Clancy: I still cannot tell.
Samantha: What have I done, Clancy?
Clancy: What are you searching for?
Samantha: What do you want from me, Clancy?
Clancy: Nothing, really.
Samantha: So why do you think I am searching for anything?
Clancy: Are you not? How old are you?
Samantha: I am not searching for anything! I found everything I have been looking for!!!
Clancy: Married?
Samantha: Not married! Anything else, Clancy?

The second example documents an exchange in the same room, immediately following the previous discussion. In this case, Sammy tries (and succeeds) to ingratiate himself, since Sally is a powerful member of the room community. Sally uses the opportunity to build a coalition with Sammy, which will further strengthen her position (Bromley, 1993).

Sammy [regular]: LOL. WOW, Sally, you sure seem to be irritated.
Sally [regular]: Sure, Sammy. Wouldn't you be irritated? Such an attack!
Sammy: And, all you did was trying to be friendly to him.
Sally: I tried????? I was!!!
Sammy: Of course you were.
Sally: Sammy, you are OK.
Sammy: Thanks, Sally.
Sally: You are welcome, Sammy.

The third conversation (2/10/2002) involves Thomas [newcomer] and Tania [regular]. Thomas has much to gain/lose through his self-portrayal. He continuously tries to establish an image of good-looking, sexy individual, as befitting his presumed goal to find a lady for a private chat. Once his intentions became known, nobody reacts to his advances.

Thomas: Good morning. Any serious females here?
Tania [regular]: Good morning, Thomas.
Thomas: I am 43, good looking and sexy. Really!

* [Other chatters, experienced or not, continue the general discussion]

Thomas: If anybody wants to talk to me, let’s talk “privately”. It will be worth her while!

A third theme discussed by Bromley (1993, p. 101) is that individuals engage in image management to affect “how we are viewed generally by others, and how we are viewed by individual others” (DePaulo, Kenny, Hoover, Webb, & Oliver, 1987). This theme is illustrated through the choice of nicknames (nicks), following Bechar-Israeli’s analysis of nicks as identity markers (1995). According to her, individuals choose nicks with care because they can convey their identity and encourage other chatters to strike up a conversation with them (Curtis, 1997). In this section, her categorization of nicks is followed with examples from the current research for the six categories. Importantly, as noted by a reviewer, the analysis here is inferred or assumed from the nicks.

The first category is nicks related to literature, fairy tales, films, and television, such as “Tinkerbell,” “Lolita,” “Beavis,” and “Zoro.” In such cases, people choose nicks to mesh with their self-image. Alternatively, such nicks are designed to create a mental image of chatters to others with whom they interact. The second category includes fauna or flora nicks. For example, chatters used “elm,” “tree,” “scorpion,” and “butterfly.” Similar to the goal of image portrayal in the first category, the first two nicks are designed to portray an image of strength and stability, the third of danger, and the fourth of lightness and sociability. A third category involves choosing nicks of famous people. Such a choice is a form of identification or an effort to be perceived to be like the famous person (Bechar-Israeli, 1995). Examples include “Sharon” (Israel’s prime minister) and “Nimni” (a famous Israeli soccer player).

The fourth category is nicks related to objects. The intent is to associate oneself with some prestigious object. For example, “sapphire” and “diamond” are precious stones. Choosing them as nicks associates the chatter with the rarity and beauty of the precious stone. Two other popular categories are related to people’s self/age. Examples include marital status, such as “married39” (status/age), “happily married,” and “divorced-female” (status/gender); appearance, such as “fat,” “foxy,” “ugly-B,” and “sexy”; personality, such as “warm-Tel-Aviv” (with locale) and “redhead” (perhaps hinting at a redhead personality); and profession, such as “pilot,” “truck driver,” and “rich-contractor” (with income). These are designed to convey an image related to the facet of the self emphasized by the nickname. Paradoxically, some nicks are negative, such as the “ugly-B” example above. Negative nicks play a part in what Tedeschi and Riess (1981, pp. 4-5) call “symbolic interaction,” in which self-handicapping nicks “can serve to disarm information suggesting one’s incompetence.”
Bromley’s fourth theme suggests that individuals may differ depending on the nature of the extant community. People may behave differently depending on whom they interact with or on the context of the interaction. An illustration of such multinick and multibehavior chat is when somebody else uses one’s regular nick purposefully or inadvertently. It is purposeful when a chatter knowingly uses someone else’s nick—either playfully or to give the other a bad name. In a private conversation, a person explained the use of someone else’s nick because that person mistreated him in an earlier chat. An inadvertent situation can arise because once a nick is used, subsequent chatters cannot use it. Thus, a person, whose nick is already in use needs to select a different one. To maintain his or her image, the latter chatter tells the room that he is using a different name so as to be recognized. Some feel very strongly about the color of the font they use when chatting and will treat other’s use of the same color as almost equal to the use of one’s regular nick. The following exchange (9/1/2001) illustrates both situations. Note how forcefully Sandi defends her “color” and how indignant Connie is because another person uses her regular nick. People work hard at managing and enhancing their image and can become verbal and unhappy when they feel this image is infringed upon.

Sandi [regular]: There are thieves here today. They stole my color.
Connie [regular]: Sandi, who stole your color?
Sandi: You, Connie, first, and then Isaac [regular].
Isaac: I stole your color?
Connie: [smiley faces].
Sandi: Yes.
Connie: Someone stole my nick. This is much worse.
Sandi: But the other Connie is a male.
Connie: So. He is an 18 years old SOB.

Along the same line, a Purim holiday gave chatters an opportunity to use different nicks so that they can “wear” a different personality. However, even when masked, regulars tend to make an effort to give away their true chat identity. This attests to the powerful nature of the community and the importance of belonging to it, as in the following (2/25/2002).

Masked Man [regular]: Hi, Fiona [regular]. What exactly are you doing here?
Fiona: Masked Man, if you knew who I really am, you would talk to me differently.
Masked Man: And, do you, Fiona, know who I am usually?
Leona [F; regular]: Fiona, I think he knows.
Fiona: Yes, I think I know who you are.
Masked Man: I, for one, know who you are usually.
Fiona: And I know who you are, Masked Man.
Masked Man: Go ahead and tell us.
Fiona: I know. You are Joe most of the time.
Masked Man: LOL.
Fiona: LOL. Now, let’s see if you know my true identity.
Masked Man: LOL.

People are involved in image management to create or maintain a given self-image. Management processes are even more important when public images account for the norms, preferences, and expectations of the target audience, which are two additional themes emphasized by Bromley (1993). The first example is of Lana [regular], who worked hard to maintain her public image as a social and friendly chatter (1/17/2002). The second (11/25/2001) introduces Igor [regular], well known among regulars as a funny person.

Lana: I have many friends here, Mat [newcomer].
Mat: Lana, who exactly? Can you be specific?
Lana: Mat!
Mat: Yes?
Lana: Everybody here is a friend of mine. And I am mighty proud of it!
Mat: I hear you, but please tell me specifically.
Lana: Mat, whoever you are, you don’t understand me!
Mat: I am listening . . .
Lana: Each and every person in the room right now is my friend. Room, come on! Tell him!
Lisa [regular]: Mat, we are all her friends.
Ed [regular]: Indeed we are.
Igor: Hi everyone. Want to hear a good joke?
Hanna [regular]: Sure.
Igor: [Tells a joke]. LOL. A good one!
Hanna: LOL. LOL. Indeed.
Donna [regular]: LOL, a very good one.
Another image-management technique for newcomers is to associate themselves with high social-totem-pole regulars. In the following (3/2/2002), Simone is the newcomer.

Simone: Hi, everyone.

Ken: Room, meet Simone. Cynthia [F], please meet Simone. She is of our mind. She is a “10”.

Cynthia: Ken, really?

Cynthia: Welcome, Simone.

Ken: Yes, she is quite a gal.

Simone: Thanks, Ken.

One of the relevant image management behaviors in a chat context is defensive—when someone threatens a chatter’s identity or image or when a person purposefully creates a negative image to reduce expectations (Bromley, 1993), which is similar to a negative nick discussed earlier. The following example from 9/1/01 illustrates this situation.

Ben [newcomer]: You must be very smart, Adam [newcomer].

Adam: I am not smart, brother. Most people will consider me stupid.

Ben: Why do you think so?

Adam: I am slow, but I think fairly fast.

Ben: Good for you, Adam.

Sheila [M; regular]: One way or another, welcome, Adam.

Another useful tactic is to ask the people in the room for help when one’s image is threatened. Such a call is also designed to enhance one’s social standing in the room (Bromley, 1993). The following is a typical example (1/15/2002).

Kathy [regular]: I need a breather. Here is the way I usually do it [four graphical faces that can be perceived as bewildered, shouting, or relaxing].

Ivan [regular]: Why are you shouting, Kathy?

Kathy: Who is shouting?

Marty [regular]: Kathy! You are frightening us.


Ivan: Kathy, the faces you exhibited are of a person shouting.

Kathy: No, sweetheart, it’s me taking a deep breath. Someone, please come to my defense! Room, help!

Ivan: Kathy is great!

Sheila [regular]: Rom, Kathy is gentle!
Kathy: Thanks, I and Sheila.

Finally, the following exchange (3/4/2002) illustrates three attempts by Homer (regular) to manage his image through defensive, self-promotion, and general support tactics. It was recorded minutes after Moses [newcomer] cursed Tom [regular] and left the room.

Tom: How are you doing, Homer?
Homer: Fine. How did you resolve the situation with Moses?
Tom: No resolution. He kept on cursing me.
Homer: Don’t go down to his level. Ignore him and enjoy the chat.
Tom: Didn’t you see? I ignored him completely.
Homer: Great! That’s the way to treat such people.
Nancy [newcomer]: Good evening to you, Homer.

* 

Tom: Good evening Nancy.
Homer: Tom, Nancy belongs to my harem.
Nancy: A very good evening to you too, Tom.
Tom: How are you doing, Nancy? Homer, did you see? Nancy disappeared from the room.
Homer: LOL. Nancyyy!
Tom: Let go, she is out of the room.
Homer: She just left us.
Tom: We are not of her caliber.
Homer: Tom, you are mistaken. She is a great lady. She must have lost her connection to the room.
Tom: If you say so, Homer. Your word is good enough for me.

* 

Johanna [regular]: Hi!

* 

Homer: Hi, Johanna, sweetheart.
Johanna: Hi, Homer!

* 

Tom: How are you, Johanna?
Johanna: Homer, what’s wrong?
Homer: Johanna, I am looking for new volunteers for my harem.
Tom: Homer, don’t you have enough already?
Johanna: Why, Homer? Where have the old ones gone?
Homer: Y, people kept on interfering. They have all left without a warning.

In sum, many of the themes and motives of image management and enhancement as outlined by Bromley (1993) operate in the chat-room environment. People are aware of their public image and actively seek to sustain and improve it in the chat room of their choice.

It is recognized here that a thin line separates image management from deception, an issue for future research, especially in the context of detecting deception. For example, it is almost impossible for individuals to monitor all channels of communications, especially nonverbal ones (DePaulo, 1992; DePaulo, Stone, & Lassiter, 1985). Even oft-lying and practiced deceivers (personally or professionally), frequently reveal their deceptions through nonverbal cues (Baron & Byrne, 1997), such as microexpressions (fleeting facial expressions), discrepancies across nonverbal cues, pitch/pace speech changes, sentence repair, eye-contact avoidance, and exaggerated facial expressions (Ekman, 1985; Kleinke, 1986; Stiff et al., 1989; Zuckerman, De Paulo, & Rosenthal, 1981). Such cues do not exist in online communities, except for sentence repair. Future research is needed on online deception cues. Lately, dating Web sites have proliferated (e.g., www.udeate.com). People’s portrayals in the personal ads show that most rate themselves as 5 out of 5 on their looks. Although some obviously look the grade, most do not. Thus, an additional venue for future research in the context of image management and deception on the Internet will involve online dating services.

**IMPLICATIONS**

This ethnography documented chatting as a flow experience and a way to manage image. In this section, a number of examples are provided to illustrate the practical importance of chat rooms, not gone unnoticed by practitioners.

The first implication applies to managers of ISPs and to portal designers, who should recognize the popularity of chat rooms and act accordingly. Those that have no chat options should consider introducing them. Those that have chat rooms should improve them. For example, improved graphical icons can enhance the personalization of online dialogues. Additionally, stronger servers are needed to avoid system breakdowns due to heavy use.

Marketing uses of brand communities are obvious and important (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). Yet marketers can use chat rooms differently. The following are three real-world examples of opportunities. In all three cases, age-based chat rooms were used to
launch new products/services. The products were relevant for the target age group or to experienced Internet users. The first (1/12/2001) illustrates an introduction of a new service (city information) on a leading Israeli portal. The introduction was made with no prior warning and disturbed the normal exchange in the room.

Ian [regular]: My connection to the chat room was cut off.

Pam [newcomer]: Who cut you off?

Ian: And the server was impossible. I made every effort to re-establish my connection. Pam, it must be a bug in the software of the chat server.

Jerry: http://xxxx.yyyyy.co.il/zzzz/wwwwww.html

Pam: I [two graphical hearts].

Ian: My screen just went blank. Pam - [five hearts].

Isaac [newcomer]: Jerry, what is this address?

Jerry: It is a new city information service. Check it!

The second example from 1/30/2001 illustrates a new service—a party in one of Tel Aviv’s nightclubs. Norman is the newcomer in this conversation. Here, too, it takes the room a few seconds to recognize the interruption to the thread of the chat.

Norman: Thursday, there will be a couples’ party in Tel Aviv.

* 

Norman: Want to know where?

* 

Tami [F; regular]: Where, NA?

Norman: In “xxxxxxx”.

* 

Norman: In Tel Aviv, at 2:30. A.M., of course.

Tami: What do people do in such parties?

Norman: It will be a blast. Loads of sex. Resolutions of the craziest fantasies. What are your fantasies?

Ned: Norman, where will it be?

Norman: In “xxxxxxx”.

The third example (12/5/2000) is an introduction of a new Israeli portal. It shows the risks and benefits of introducing a product into a chat room. On one hand, at least one person tried the new portal. On the other, he provided others with a very negative word-of-mouth.
Hanna: [newcomer]: www.****.co.il.
Hanna: www.****.co.il.
Hanna: www.****.co.il [all in a span of 30 seconds].
Joe [regular]: Hanna, don’t you think you are a bit of a “nudnik”?
Joe: Everyone, this site is full of shit.
Joe: Room, I have checked it and it’s no good.

The next example (from 11/23/2000) met with a more positive reception.
Sam [newcomer]: Hi everyone.
Nathan [regular]: Hi to you too.
Sam: I came here to invite you all to a new line of parties being launched tonight. Anyone here, who likes electronic music?
Gerry [regular]: Speak up, Sam.
Sam: So, here goes. Alternative music such as breakbit, bigbit, techno, and chemical. Additionally, there will be video and multimedia artists.
Gerry: That’s not really alternative music.
Sam: Gerry, I will not challenge you on this J. Regardless, these types of music will be played. This was the “what”. Now, to the “where”. XXX club, in Y ZZZ St between Club W and Club V. A great location, somewhat similar to Club U. So, what do you say, G?
Gerry: I say thanks for the invitation.
Sam: Good luck. Enjoy. Gerry, are you saying thanks out of politeness or are you seriously interested as in “WHEN IS IT?” J.
Gerry: Half interested.
Sam: Tonight at midnight. Doors open at 11:30 P.M.
Gerry: You said today?
Sam: Indeed. We’ll start every Thursday and expand if there is sufficient interest. I hope you all come and you Gerry, specifically. Even if not, have a good one!

A final example, recorded on the evening of 3/24/2002, may well allow a glimpse into the future. Could it be that professionals, psychologists in this case, will practice in chat rooms, as this example suggests at least one maybe does (a reviewer noted that this may not be a professional as there is no way to gauge from the chat if she is)?

Psychologist: Hi. Do you have a problem?
George: Not really, just curious to chat.
Psychologist: I am just counsel here. How old are you?
George: 31.
Psychologist: What do you do in life?
George: I am a marketing manager. Are you part of the services provided by the ISP?
Psychologist: Not really. I have some free time and I am ready to counsel, that’s all.
George: So you counsel in chat rooms to provide a social benefit?
Psychologist: Right. Especially given the hard time in Israel now.
George: Are you qualified?
Psychologist: Of course. I am a clinical psychologist.

* 

Psychologist: I just want to help, that’s all. Many people find it easier on the net. They are less shy. I cannot help everyone, but I can help some. And I refer the others to professional treatment. And explain what it will involve.

George: Are you bugged a lot?
Psychologist: Sometimes. However, most of those who talk with me have real problems and I can tell imposters through experience.

SUMMARY

This ethnography identified three themes of chat rooms. The first is chat rooms as communities. As such, chat rooms are virtual communities, being manifestations of rooms, rings, and lists (Solomon, 2002). A community is the third level of the extended self (after the individual and family levels, and before the group level; Belk, 1988). This level is common to individuals, who describe themselves as members of a given community (chat room). Probably due to some level of rejection of the dominant culture, people can take four paths when they feel out of sync with their culture (Berkman, Lindquist, & Sirgy, 1996). The third, search for community, is the one relevant to the chat-room context. The second theme is chatting as a flow experience. Novak, Hoffman, and Yung (2000) noted that people have fun on the Web when in a state of flow due to their levels of skill, control, attention and arousal, and interactivity. Flow is likely to be experienced when happiness is high, such as when people are proactive and engaged, rather than passive (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This, indeed, is the case in chat-room environments. Finally, image is actively managed in chat rooms. Thus, chat rooms can be viewed as theatres, in which chatters are social performers (Goffman, 1959). In other words, chat rooms are reflections of a dramaturgical perspective.
In sum, the three themes provide for the need to reestablish communities in the twenty-first century in the face of immense changes and advances in human communications. Such born communities allow people to experience flow-like conversations while managing and enhancing their image in the eyes of fellow chatters. Thus, it is believed that chat rooms are real and significant, and contribute to the general well being of people in these troubled, postmodern times (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). They should prove to be an enduring phenomenon as representations of the persistence of communities in and across cultures.

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