

**“The Front Page of the Internet”: Safe Spaces and Hyperpersonal Communication among  
Females in an Online Community**

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### **Abstract**

The social content sharing site, Reddit.com, has seen an increase in both popularity and criticism recently. Within this larger website, smaller communities exist which cater to specific interests and groups. One of these communities is TwoXChromosomes (or 2X), a “subreddit” for women to share information and experiences with other like-minded women. Through a voluntary online survey and four-week-long online ethnography, this research found that, like other online communities, 2X fulfills a specific need for the members and contributors. Among other things, 2X fulfills the need for a safe place (when many places on the Internet are not considered to be as welcoming to girls and women), and it provides information and camaraderie that community members feel they cannot find in their offline lives for any variety of reasons. Public relations and communication professionals working for nonprofits and other women-centered organization can use this information to find out what women are talking about, what areas they are asking for advice in, and use this information to inform their strategic communication efforts.

Reddit.com is a social content sharing site that is entirely driven by user-generated content (in the form of a link or written text). People who frequent the site are called redditors, and most describe reddit first and foremost not as a website, but as a community (Steinbaur, 2011): “reddit is a single organism, a gigantic internet brain, composed of millions of cells, each of which vibrates at its own frequency” (Shaer, 2012, para. 14). The site contains more than 144,000 active smaller communities (Shaer, 2012) or groups – called subreddits – each of which is devoted to a different topic, some very specific (like /r/gaymers, which caters to gay and lesbian video game enthusiasts), and others large and more general (like the subreddit /r/Texas).

Reddit.com has seen an increase in both popularity and criticism recently. At the start of 2011, the site had about 30 million page views per day, but by December that number had shot up to 65 million per day (Steinbaur, 2011; Shaer, 2012). It has been listed as the largest Internet message board in the world (Shaer, 2012) and the “largest petri dish around” of images and stories that go viral (Townsend, 2012); but among the criticisms have been charges of the misogynistic tendencies and content on the site (Zuckerman, 2012; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2012; Chen, 2012). Yet within the broader context of “anti-women” (Zuckerman, 2012) content exists TwoXChromosomes (or 2X), a robust “subreddit for women to share information and experiences with other like-minded women” (reddit.com/r/twoxchromosomes). Members of 2X share news stories and current events that affect women, ask other women for advice, share experiences and personal stories unique to being a woman, discuss feminism in general, and share blogs and other media that deal with these topics, all in a trusting and supportive environment. As of January 2013, 2X moderators reported between 150,000 and 350,000 unique visitors per month (reddit.com/r/twoxchromosomes). Additionally, as of September 4, 2013, there are 148,441 people who subscribe to 2X, which means the most popular posts from the

subreddit appear on their customized Reddit front page (this requires a reader to create an account and change the default settings).

Through community observation and a voluntary questionnaire posted to 2X, this research seeks to understand the culture of this subreddit, 2X, within a broader culture of reddit.com that allows for anti-woman and misogynistic rhetoric. Understanding this culture of 2X and the motivations women have for participating yields insight into social interaction online and cohesion in the context of broader cultural tensions. Further, with much social interaction now occurring online, this research has implications for communication scholars and professionals working to understand how people interact in online communities (Steinmetz, 2012; Kozinets, 2002), and how gender influences how people interact online (Kapidzic & Herring, 2011). Previous research and literature in this area has included how members of online communities share knowledge with each other, the potential for online interactions to yield hyperpersonal connections, and how women tend to communicate online.

### **Literature Review**

Not only is a greater percentage of the female population online than that of the male population (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2012), but research also has demonstrated that the activities and motivations of women online tend to differ from those of men (Herring, 2003; Weiser, 2000). Online communities, particularly communities catering to a very specific niche, are important spaces for sharing information and forming bonds. These virtual communities have unique ways in which they share information, which may differ according to the characteristics of the community, such as gender makeup, and from the ways that offline groups share knowledge.

### *Knowledge Sharing in Online Communities*

Previous research has attempted to understand online communities (e.g., Hagel, 1999; Kozinets, 2002) , but there is little discussion about the motivations behind sharing knowledge in this way, especially when there is no immediate benefit to the person who is taking the time to share the information (Sun, 2009). ‘Knowledge sharing’ can be defined as a process through which people gain knowledge by learning from other people’s experiences and first-hand knowledge (Sun, 2009). Lin (2010) explored the concept of online community loyalty through the lens of social cognitive theory, or SCT, and found that affective commitment, which “refers to the strength of a member’s attachment and identification with a particular online community” (p. 347), has a positive relationship to how heavily the member participates in knowledge sharing. Social norms was the other primary influence motivating community loyalty behavior (Lin, 2010). In this case, loyalty behavior was shown by participating in discussion boards, responding to questions, and interacting with other members. These findings are supported by more recent research which used the term “citizenship behavior” to describe the same type of involvement. For example, Xu, Li and Shao (2012) found that motivations for citizenship behavior include enjoyment in helping other members of the community and commitment to the community, among other things. They also found that trusting relationships were instrumental in holding the members of an online community together and positively affecting the members’ feelings about that community to which they belong (Xu, Li, & Shao 2012). Members of these virtual communities are willing to contribute their knowledge and experience when there is no immediate benefit to themselves because they feel that it is the right thing to do, and it is part of being a member in the community (Xu et. al., 2012; Lin, 2010). Sun, et. al also found that trust is an important factor in the willingness of members in a virtual community to share knowledge

(Sun, Ju, Chung, & Wu 2009). When members trust that their efforts in contributing experience and knowledge will be reciprocated, they are more likely to participate in knowledge sharing (Sun et. al., 2009).

### *SIDE Model and Hyperpersonal connections through CMC*

In contrast to factors such as knowledge sharing, enjoyment and trust are also issues that may be disruptive or have negative outcomes. Online communities like Reddit are often criticized for suffering from “hive mind,” despite the fact that posters have the ability to be completely anonymous. Postmes, Spears, and Lea (1998) addressed this phenomenon with the SIDE model. They argue that computer mediated communication “does not necessarily lead to increased equality or democratization, and may even increase intergroup discrimination and hostility” (p. 694). Central to this model is depersonalization, which “refers to the tendency to perceive the self and other not as individuals with a range of idiosyncratic characteristics and ways of behaving, but as representatives of social groups or wider social categories that are made salient during interaction” (p. 698). This salience can lead to a participant feeling a deeper similarity and liking of those he or she is interacting with.

Computer mediated communication also carries the possibility of allowing interactions to become deeper and more personal than face-to-face (FtF) interactions. Walther (1996) describes this as hyperpersonal communication, which is “CMC that is more socially desirable than we tend to experience in parallel FtF interaction” (p. 17). Similarly, when online communities are formed around a common interest, they are likely to share common experiences despite the fact that this is a community of strangers, and this can lead to “more positive relation than the accidents of location-based FtF communities afford” (Sproull & Faraj 1995, p. 45). Walther (1996) also found that these CMC interactions can result in less stress, more expression of

feelings, “more positive evaluations of others and the self, and more frequent reference to interpersonal issues” (p. 31).

### *Feminist Online Communities and Gendered Behavior*

One of these characteristics or interests that bring people together online and allow that deep interpersonal connections is gender. Among feminists, early discussions regarding the Internet involved imagining an online space in which users would be disembodied, thus genderless, and the Internet would be a space devoid of discrimination so frequently experienced in the offline world (Brophy, 2010). As it became clear that this was not necessarily the case, there was a movement advocating for a new kind of “cyberfeminism” that rejected both leaving the gendered body behind and viewing the Internet as an extension of the body (Brophy, 2010). Women and girls on the internet found themselves wanting to both downplay their gender and openly flaunt it, but by and large, women did not choose to become genderless online. Teenage girls especially, portray themselves as gendered while participating in online discussion (Sarkio, 2009).

Websites and blogs centered on girls and young women serve as spaces for debate, discourse, and the exchange of “politically and socially engaged ideas by those who are marginalized within mainstream political debate” (Harris, 2008, p. 487). Political engagement and discussion is just the beginning. Gender-specific spaces continue to grow and expand into new and different spaces both online and offline.

Research shows that women also use online communities to reach out for support, report sexual assault, and to satisfy their needs for self-disclosure in general (Chen, 2012). Dare and Green’s (2011) research shows that women are utilizing the Internet more and more frequently when “distance, time constraints or emotional intensity” renders more traditional communication

(telephone or face-to-face) problematic (2011, p. 486). Many middle-aged women interviewed in that study mentioned turning to online communities for help when the problem they were dealing with was rare or specialized (they didn't know anyone personally who they felt could relate), or when they didn't feel they could speak to close friends or family because the subject matter was too difficult. The Internet also facilitates new networks of support for women when the depth of social stigma means that a woman is unlikely to reach out to someone in her social circle when in need of support or advice (Dare & Green, 2011). Networks of support like these have the potential to evolve into online communities whose members readily share information, feel a sense of belonging, and provide mutual support, which make these forums especially appealing to women seeking support for suffering abuse, coping with disease, and to members of minority social and political groups like those in the LGBT community, racial minorities, or feminists (Herring & Job-Sluder, 2002). These new opportunities for engagement and support have positive effects on these women's lives, as social support becomes increasingly important during times of trial or major transition in a woman's life (Chen, 2012; Dare & Green, 2011).

Herring's research explored how women spoke differently from men in online spaces, focusing on specific differences in tone and speech. In their online communications (in this case, discussion on message boards), women are more likely to be apologetic, justify and hedge, appreciate, and be upset by violations of politeness; men tended to violate politeness norms, post longer messages, assert opinion as facts, and use more assertive and active language (Kapidzic & Herring, 2011; Herring, 2003). Women tend to have less influence in mixed-gender online groups/discussions, and this may account for why online groups meant solely for women are so common (Herring, 2003). If women want to address their interests online, it appears necessary that they create their own groups, "suggesting that the default activities on the Internet address

the interests of men” (Herring 2003, p. 221). A review of message boards and sites like reddit suggests that this holds true. This was also reiterated by the women in the online community examined for the current study.

These feminine online spaces and feminist online communities also tend to be unique from mixed-gender or largely male communities in their structure; women participate more eagerly and enjoy greater influence in online communities that are controlled by moderators or individuals trusted with holding posters accountable to community rules and maintaining order and focus within the group (Herring, 2003; Herring & Job-Sluder, 2002). Studies have supported this in showing that women-centered groups whose moderators place restrictions on things like the number of messages that can be posted tend to thrive and enjoy active participation by a larger number of members (Bergstrom, 2011; Sarkio, 2009). This research attempts to build upon these findings of unique characteristics of women-centered communities and analyze the behavior of the gendered online community 2X.

### **Methodology**

Data was collected through netnography, or “ethnography adapted to the study of online communities” (Kozinets 2002, p. 61) and through qualitative data collected in response to open-ended questions included in a larger survey posted on [reddit.com/r/twoxchromosomes](https://www.reddit.com/r/twoxchromosomes). This research involves open-ended questions that were part of a larger survey of the 2X community (n =566). Netnographic data was collected over five weeks and included the top 20 posts, including comments; additionally, one of the researchers reviewed all posts for pertinent emergent themes, and kept a journal noting trends, language, social norms, nature of interactions, and communication themes. Collectively, this information yielded 43 pages of data. Themes from the netnographic observations were explored in more detail in open-ended questions included in the

survey, focusing particularly on why members visit the subreddit, how they describe it, and what feelings, uses and other responses they felt are most important for understanding their interactions on the site. The 1,104 responses to the open-ended questions (Q1: n=469, Q2: n=460, Q3: n=175) were analyzed inductively, as the researchers identified emergent themes within the data.

## **Findings**

Several important findings emerged from the data. Specifically, findings about use of in-group language, members' sense of community, and the feeling of safety and support in 2X compared to other places online and the rest of reddit.

### *Language, Meaning and Culture*

Findings present a unique language and vocabulary among 2X participants that paints a picture of this community's mindset. One term often used is "vent" or "rant." This is a disclaimer that the OP (original poster) often includes in the title of a post to indicate that he or she needs to talk out or complain about something that happened to him or her. Sometimes community members end a post or comment with "/rant" this is a play on computer coding languages in which the slash essentially denotes the end of something. This disclosure of a rant or vent is consistent with the female online language patterns that Herring (2003) found (apologizing, justifying and hedging).

Another term often used is "possible trigger" or "trigger warning." This is a tag that appears next to a post warning sensitive readers, victims of sexual assault, or those suffering from related PTSD that they may find the contents of the post upsetting. This tag is usually added by the OP, but is occasionally added by one of the moderators after the fact. In the survey,

several community members indicated that they look for these tags to avoid reading “heavier” posts when they don’t feel up for it.

The topic of “victim blaming” also comes up frequently in 2X discussions. Victim blaming is insinuating that a sexual assault or rape is the fault of the victim or insinuating that he/she should have done more to prevent the attack. Members of 2X often call out victim blaming wherever and whenever they see it (online or offline), and it is absolutely unwelcome in the subreddit.

“Hive mind” or “group think” were terms also mentioned frequently by 2Xers. This refers to the homogenous views or opinions shared by members of 2X (and other online communities), as people feed off of each other creating something of an echo chamber. This occurs on Reddit as a whole as well as in smaller subreddits like 2X.

Street harassment is an issue that received significant attention in the later portion of the netnography. Generally, street harassment is any unwelcomed comments or catcalls directed towards someone out in public, coming from a stranger. The women on 2X are beginning to speak out against it, talk about it, and share tips on how to deal with it.

Finally, image fest Friday (IFF), is a day that the community created where members are allowed to post pictures. Previously, pictures were not allowed to be posted in this subreddit because the moderators preferred posts that would facilitate more discussion. This year, however, IFF was created as the one day each week that pictures are permitted.

#### *Questionnaire responses and emerging themes*

When participants were asked to identify three words to describe 2X, “supportive” was by far the most commonly mentioned word. Other frequently used words included “friendly,” “feminist,” “community,” “interesting,” “safe,” “welcoming,” “helpful,” “open,” “accepting,”

“informative,” and “fun” (for a word cloud of the 30 most common words, see Appendix 1). These sentiments were echoed in the other open-ended questions.

When asked why they visited 2X, the major themes that emerged were the notion that 2X was first and foremost a community and the fact that it was female-centric (unlike the rest of reddit) was a major draw. This was the most frequently reported reason for visiting 2X. One respondent wrote, “These men and women understand me, and I them. We have grown and learned together as a community. There is no embarrassing question or subject matter. It’s like family.” Several respondents mentioned that while they like the format and content on reddit as whole, they found problems with redditors’ attitude towards women. One wrote:

*I like that it [2X] can often be a little microcosm of reddit, with news, interesting discussion and fun stuff, but it’s a much more supportive environment overall than most of reddit, especially because it isn’t full of misogynistic attitudes and comments like many of the larger subreddits are.*

Respondents also mentioned they visited because 2X was a supportive, friendly, welcoming, safe place, “It’s a space where it’s okay to be a woman on the internet,” said one respondent. Another added:

*It’s nice to have a large community of women like and unlike me, sharing their stories and interests. It’s a space I know I could count on, too, if I needed to. There’s an unexpected sense of closeness among the visitors of TwoX that isn’t found elsewhere in the otherwise male-dominated larger Reddit community.*

Other community members said they came to 2X to ask specific questions or to offer advice or answer questions. One respondent wrote:

*I use it to get advice on life, and to share my experiences with others. I like to offer advice to other women when I can. I also use TwoX as a way of learning about other women. It's such an accepting subreddit that I feel like it is helping me become a better woman, a better feminist.*

The notion that 2X offered a different perspective and points of view was also repeated. Others mentioned they visited to find news stories that pertained to women's health, women's issues, and feminism. One respondent in particular summed up all of these themes well by saying she visits, "mostly to compare myself to others; to see if they're dealing with the same thing, to feel good about myself, to be affirmed, to be listened to, to help others, to stay updated with opinions." Another respondent also encompassed many of these themes with her response:

*I just really like the community. Sometimes it feels like a big gathering of girlfriends. If you have a problem, you ask them for advice and they give it to you (with the added perk of being unbiased because they don't know you personally). If you have something to share, whether an accomplishment or an interesting read, they support you. What's different about subreddit culture and other forums made specifically for women is I feel that everyone has a valid say in what they post or comment.*

The answers to Question 3 ("Is there anything else you would like to add about r/twoxchromosomes...") added some nuance, especially in the aspect of the community being more open-minded and accepting than reddit as a whole.

Respondents said they find things in 2X that they can't find elsewhere on the internet or reddit. This included news stories, opinions, support from other members, acceptance, and the

safety to share personal information. One respondent explained that she has two reddit accounts, one using a gender-neutral username, and one with a more feminine-sounding username:

*I feel the need to obfuscate my gender on my primary account because (for example) if my comments on, say, r/gaming got a lot of attention from that community, and someone looked through my history and discovered I was subscribed to a lot of women's subreddits, I worry that I'd be "outed" as a woman and people would think of my comments/opinion differently.*

In addition to saying that they find things in 2X they can't find elsewhere on Reddit (or online in general), respondents said they find things in 2X that they feel they cannot find in their offline lives or interactions. Many mentioned that they don't have many "girl friends" or older female mentors in their lives:

*Sometimes I can have difficulty understanding/empathizing with people without making others uncomfortable with my efforts...TwoXChromosomes is the only way outside of speaking with my female relatives and small (but close) circle of friends that I can learn and understand issues that face people without feeling like a voyeur or creep. I'm very analytical and seeing posts (especially rants or debates) about experiences and issues really helps me comprehend what people face outside my immediate social circumstances.*

Another teenaged girl added:

*I like TwoX because, as a 15-year-old girl, I get a lot of conflicting messages on what it's like to be a woman in society and what I'm supposed to look and act like. I feel like TwoX is a good place to find positive ideals, and to find role models that I aspire to be like. I don't have close relationships with any women.*

*As I get older, I'm intrigued by what it means to be a woman in America. Some days I like it, some days I don't.*

Perhaps the most important findings in answering the research question were themes that came up across all three questions. In the responses to every question, the same themes of community, safety and support were repeated by many respondents.

### **Discussion**

Those themes of community, safety and support are among many parallels between the findings of this research and theories established in previous research in computer-mediated communication. Walther's (1996) hyperpersonal communication theory is supported by the theme of women finding things in 2X that they cannot find in their offline communications or relationships. While media richness theory states that the interactions happening on this subreddit would be less rich than those occurring face-to-face, many respondents made the point that they can discuss and learn things here that they have no opportunity to discuss with people face-to-face. Just as Walther's (1996) theory predicts, 2X allows interactions to become deeper and more personal than can be accomplished in face-to-face interactions. These findings also support Dare and Green's (2011) research which found that online networks offer support for women who wish to talk about issues around which there is too much of a social stigma to discuss the issue face-to-face. 2X shows many classic characteristics of online spaces dedicated specifically to females, for females, created to discuss female issues.

### **Application and Future Research**

The findings of this research shed light on the culture of 2X members and the community as a whole. The sense of community, safety, and support among members seem to motivate them to participate in the subreddit community, despite the perceived threats of misogyny and anti-

female behavior on Reddit as a whole. These findings show that 2X is something of an oasis within the larger space and culture of Reddit.

The makeup and communication strategies of these communities have implications across a range of communication fields, including advertising and public relations. The self-selection and segmentation typical of online communities make it easier for advertisers who have specific knowledge of these communities to target them with messages tailored to their needs. Additionally, these spaces provide an opportunity for researchers to identify the unique language, desires, tastes, and influences of specific groups (Kozinets, 2002), and to listen to and better understand the influence of gender on these conversations.

For example, women-centered activist organizations and nonprofits could benefit from knowing what women are talking about and how they share information. As Coombs and Holladay (2012) point out, “corporations cannot meet stakeholder expectations if they are not aware of them” (p. 54). An in-depth understanding how members of these women’s online communities interact with each other and why can lend insight into the organization and purposes of these social spaces, and can aid organizations in learning how to listen to and monitor discussions in appropriate ways. Listening to and monitoring online communities allows organizations to cater to stakeholder needs, see crises coming, and observe emerging trends and perhaps opportunities. Previous research has the tendency to focus on how PR practitioners can talk to these online communities, but there is little emphasis on understanding these niche communities for the purpose of simply ‘listening in’ rather than interacting.

This research could be useful for communicators looking to reach a young, female audience, particularly if the organization’s objective is to offer support or education to young females. There is an opportunity for nonprofits such as Planned Parenthood to become a part of

these online communities where women are asking for help, advice, and support. Of course, one would have to tread lightly and be careful not to take advantage of the trust found within these communities. Only if communicators are coming with the sole intention of humbly offering help (and not just selling a product), should the PR or communication professional even participate. Even in this case, however, there is the question of whether brands should participate at all in these communities (by interacting or simply listening in). There are ethical issues – especially when taking into consideration the possible exploitation of a safe, trusted space – that need to be addressed.

One obvious limitation of this research is that it only focused on one online community, thus these results should not be extrapolated to women's online communities as a whole. Additionally, the ethnography took place during a relatively short time frame. During the short time of this research, the researchers were able to see one trend begin to emerge (the discussion of street harassment), but a longer netnography has the potential to see trends emerge, play out, and fade away. Further research should look to replicate this study in other female-centric online spaces, as well as to observe the community for a longer amount of time.

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## Appendix 1

This word cloud includes the 30 most frequently cited words when respondents were asked what three words they would use to describe 2X. The size of the word indicates how often it was mentioned (the larger the word appears, the more times it was used).



[Graphic created by importing responses in .txt format to [www.wordle.com](http://www.wordle.com)]