Chapter 18
A Cross-Cultural Comparison of American and Overseas Chinese Prenatal and Postnatal Women’s Online Social Support Behavior in Two Online Message Boards

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ABSTRACT

Taking a culture-centered approach within the uses and gratifications theoretical framework, a quantitative content analysis was conducted to analyze the support messages of two online message boards: the Dear Baby message board created and moderated mainly by overseas Chinese prenatal and postnatal women, and the BabyCenter message board created and moderated mainly by USAmerican prenatal and postnatal women. Both similarities and differences of the two message boards were identified in message type (seek or give support), content, support type and support behavior. Constructed narratives were produced to qualitatively analyze the voices within the context of both USAmerican and overseas Chinese online communities. The results can help researchers and practitioners to better understand how cultural characteristics of Chinese and USAmerican groups influence the patterns of women’s online social support seeking/giving behaviors, enabling them to customize specific communication programs and services to meet the needs of members of those two cultural groups.

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INTRODUCTION

With the rapid growth of the Internet, an increasing number of people now seek health information, social support, and consult with health professionals (Cline & Haynes, 2001) through various online mediums, such as websites, listservs, message boards, chat rooms, and emails. Based on the data collected in 2008, 61% U.S. adults had the experience of seeking health information online, 41% of e-patients have read someone else’s commentary or experience about health or medical issues on an online news group, website, or blog (Fox, 2009).

In this era of new technology, the Internet becomes a primary venue for social support groups to address their health concerns and reduce stress. Social support groups provide mutual aid and self-help for people facing chronic disease, life-threatening illness, and dependency issues (Cline, 1999). A few studies investigate computer-mediated support groups of people with disabilities, breast cancer, AIDS, and smoking addiction (Boberg et al., 1995; Braithwaite, Waldron, & Finn, 1999; Schneider & Tooley, 1986; Shaw, McTavish, Hawkins, Gustafson, & Pingree, 2000). However, little research examines online social support groups of prenatal and postnatal women who actively seek health information from various sources (Bernhardt & Felter, 2004) when undergoing one of their major life changes.

Because the transition to parenthood is often stressful and “people tend to seek affiliation under conditions of actual or anticipated stress” (Wandersman, Wandersman, & Kahn, 1980, p. 333), numerous online support groups appear for prenatal and postnatal women from diverse cultural groups to connect, share experiences, and provide mutual aid. Researchers and practitioners reach a consensus that it is important to understand the health communication preferences of minority groups who have been traditionally marginalized from mainstream health communication discourse (Johnson et al., 2004). However, to our knowledge, no research explores the cultural differences in online social support of prenatal and postnatal women. This study fills the literature gap by comparing support messages of two online support groups of maternal women—a mainstream USAmerican group (http://community.BabyCenter.com/post) and an overseas Chinese group (Dear Baby bulletin board on www.wenxuecity.com: http://web.wenxuecity.com/BBSList.php?SubID=kids).

In the process of cultural adaptation, overseas Chinese women might have assimilated some Western health beliefs and practices about pregnancy and parenting, but still maintain some Chinese beliefs and practices, which results in their unique health concerns and support needs. Therefore, Chinese women turn to online communities for their own health needs, as do a disproportionate number of American women (Warner & Procaccino, 2007, p. 788). Physically separated from their social networks in their home country, Chinese women join online support groups to connect with other Chinese women with similar experiences. As cultural minorities in their host country, many Chinese women have weak ties with their counterparts of other countries because of language and cultural barriers. Thus, social alienation also prompts Chinese women to resort to online support groups of Chinese women in similar situations.

Taking a culture-centered approach within the uses and gratifications theoretical framework (U & G), the authors conducted a content analysis to analyze the support messages of two online message boards, one created and moderated mainly by overseas Chinese prenatal and postnatal women, and the other created and moderated mainly by USAmerican prenatal and postnatal women. The researchers identified the communication patterns in the online support communities of overseas Chinese women and USAmerican women through a quantitative content analysis and then presented composite voices within the context of their own online communities, as quantitative meth-