

**ONLINE SOCIAL SUPPORT FOR SINGLE MOTHERS IN
JAPAN**

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A THESIS SUBMITTED

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF JAPANESE STUDIES

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

2005

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to take this opportunity to thank the organizations as well as the people who have contributed to the writing of this thesis. Firstly, I would like to extend my utmost appreciation to the National University of Singapore and Japan Foundation for their financial support through the provision of research scholarships. Thanks must not be forgotten for my supervisor Dr. Thang Leng Leng, for without her guidance, this thesis would be impossible. Dr. Thang's willingness to share her broad experience and extensive knowledge in the field of anthropology made my research process a lot more focused while her unassuming personality lightened the tensions induced by the constant struggle with time. I would also like to acknowledge my online support network of honours classmates which allowed me to ventilate my emotions when the going got tough. Last but certainly not least, I would like to extend my gratitude to my parents and Adrian Mak for their unwavering support and love.

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SUMMARY

Utopians claim that the Internet is providing new and better ways of engaging in community and finding information. Conversely, dystopians argue that the Internet lures people away from their in-person communities and informed discussions. These debates are usually characterized by opinion and anecdotal accounts rather than scientific analysis, and little is known about the actual structures and dynamics of online groups. This paper attempts to investigate the supportive aspect of computer-mediated communication and the types of social support found in a bulletin board system (BBS) intended for single mothers in Japan.

This paper begins with an introduction to the social aspects of computer-mediated communication as it becomes increasingly embedded in everyday life. The communicative capabilities of the Internet has been harnessed for diverse social purposes as witnessed by the proliferation of web-based diaries, bulletin boards, chat channels, just to name a few. Using a social support framework, the efficacy of computer-mediated communication as an instrument for the exchange of social support online will be studied through a content analysis of messages posted on the BBS. Chapter 2 reviews the phenomenon of single-parent families as an emerging alternative to the conventional two-parent family unit and looks at the changing family patterns and gender relations in contemporary Japanese society, locating the accelerating rates of divorce to a combination of economic, cultural, and social factors. This chapter also analyzes the socio-economic conditions of single mothers in Japan, highlighting the ineptness of

official measures to alleviate their problems and the difficulties these women encounter being situated in a traditionally patriarchal society.

Content analysis was employed as a technique to systematically review the entire data mass and identify the material relevant to the scope of the research topic. A section on virtual ethnography provides some background on how the concept of ethnography can essentially be applied to a virtual environment, such as an online community. In the following chapter, quantitative results of the content analysis will be presented and dimensions of support employed in this paper, namely, informational, emotional, esteem, network, and instrumental, will similarly be explicated upon. Messages posted by participants Results showed that participants of the BBS actively engaged in exchange of social support by sharing practical information and advice, offering comfort and encouragement, creating shared social realities, and reinforcing a sense of empathy. Interviews with three single mothers reinforced the findings from this study, and demonstrated the applications of online social support in their daily lives.

Besides the high level of social support being exchanged among the participants, patterns of self-disclosure, sharing of personal experiences, emotional ventilation, and flaming emerged in the BBS. These characteristics of computer-mediated communication will be addressed in this chapter. Chapter 6 summarizes the findings from this study and also addresses the limitations of this study. In conclusion, this study illustrates the supplementary nature of computer-mediated communication to other communicative

mediums and proposes the use of online forums by policymakers as a platform towards understanding grassroots concerns.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Uses of computer-mediated communication

The Internet has evolved from a national security project founded by American defense researchers in early 1970s to a fundamental tool of communication used by millions throughout the world daily. Contrary to social commentary that the Internet is likely to cause either a massive social revolution or a massive social problem, what is occurring is a much more complex and subtle interaction between individuals and technology as computer-mediated communication is increasingly embedded in daily life (Nettleton *et al.* 2002). The advent of the Internet ameliorated traditional systems of human interaction, spawned off whole new channels of global communication, and amplified connectivity between otherwise isolated individuals. Over the last two decades, various online communities organized by individuals and small groups have been mushrooming in virtual space.

The Internet is essentially a social phenomenon as evident from users' predominant activities, and its communicative capabilities are being harnessed for diverse social purposes by physically distant individuals who share common interests and/or concerns. Online space is dominated by asynchronous exchange of opinions and information on particular issues through electronic mailing lists, emails, newsgroups, and bulletin boards, and synchronous interaction in virtual chat rooms (Inter Relay Chat, or

IRC), instant messaging systems, and online gaming in multi-user dungeons (MUDs), just to name a few. Users have also found innovative ways to utilize the Internet's communicative capacity. In recent years, weblogs, (more commonly known as blogs) have gained immense popularity on the Internet. Blogs are personal journals published on the Internet and are likened to diaries, albeit accessible to the general public. Personal blogs serve as an avenue for its owners or 'bloggers', to express their feelings, opinions, and reflections, while for others it is an avenue for creating new, pseudo identities and living out online fantasies.

Today, most online groups are more than just virtual acquaintances with shared interests; established and supportive relationships exist within many groups online. Communities established on the Internet could also develop offline relationships through social gatherings and activities. The widening of social circles through online interaction helps users to feel that he/she is a part of a larger community through the provision of companionship. Barnes (2001) posits that the Internet tends to foster support groups because people can come into contact with others who share similar conditions. Moreover, cues are filtered out in online communication, making it easier for some people to discuss their problems and the elimination of immediate face-to-face reactions enables individuals to discuss personal problems in a less emotional context. Even when online groups are not designed to be supportive, they tend to be. As social beings, those who use the Net seek not only information but also companionship, social support, and a sense of belonging. The proliferation of online social support groups worldwide suggests alternatives for traditional social support exchange exist and can be exploited upon.

1.2 Studying computer-mediated communication

Extensive research has been conducted on the social uses of the Internet, and much of existing research on computer-mediated communication and online behavior has focused on differences between computer-mediated and face-to-face communication. Key features of face-to-face communication include the ongoing provision of feedback and the clarity of participants' relative social status. In comparison, online communication is characterized by the absence of regulating feedback and reduced status and position cues, therefore an impoverished and anarchic communication tool. Comparison between the two media forms has largely colored the research agenda on the Internet.

Internet enthusiasts laud the capacity of the Internet to provide new means of connectivity and to promote social interaction and exchange, bringing together otherwise socially isolated individuals with shared experiences and shared interests. Patton (1986:20) asserts that

“Computer-mediated communication ... will do by way of electronic pathways what cement roads were unable to do, namely connect us rather than atomize us, put us at the controls of a “vehicle” and yet not detach us from the rest of the world.”

Online communities are composed of a large heterogeneous number of people, each armed with knowledge of a certain topic to engage in information sharing and

exchange. In turn, the ease of access to online information and online groups lead people to new organizations and increased involvement with existing organizations. The surge in online usage has stimulated the growth of online communities and altered everyday activities such as shopping, work, and companionship. The Internet is unlimited by space and time and its asynchronous nature allows users to access and retrieve information at their own time. A high degree of privacy and anonymity reduces inhibition for those ill at ease in the presence of others, and for some, allows for the enactment of multiplicities of identities and role playing (Wood, 2001).

However, opinions from the other camp beg to differ on the positive effects of Internet use. In his reflections on the Internet, Stoll (1995) expresses his apprehension about the virtues of online communication and asserts that face-to-face meetings are far more meaningful and valuable than disembodied network interactions. In turn, Slouka (1995) questions the need to inhabit these alternative virtual spaces and sees it as an escape for the problems and issues of the real world. Dystopians see Internet use as undermining “real” social interaction, alienating people from their “real life” relationships with family and friends. The Internet also disconnects people from collective, civic enterprises while engaged in solitary connectivity (Putnam, 2000). As people remain physically distant, computer-mediated communication is unable to offer the full range of support available from social contacts in ‘real life’ such as practical assistance or other tangible support classified as instrumental support.

Moreover, computer-mediated communication often takes place in unregulated environments, in which various risks are attendant. The ease of access and anonymity also expose online individuals to flaming and unregulated messages. Pleace et. al. (2002) found that the online environment can be detrimental for vulnerable individuals, such as a lengthy post placed on a self-help newsgroup for people with depression which detailed various methods for committing suicide. The extent to which danger exists on the Internet is uncertain, but the perception of risk among some users is evident through the non-disclosure of personal details and the use of remailers (computers that disguise an original email address) to avoid their real email addresses becoming known. Although the Internet facilitates sharing of information, such informational exchange among non-professionals could pose a risk of being incorrect, compromising the quality of the information. The availability of Internet access presents another important consideration as many of those with health and social care needs are in a situation of socio-economic disadvantage.

While important findings have been achieved from this perspective, this approach has ignored the multitude of possibilities resulting from human-computer interaction and perpetuated a dichotomized view of human behavior. Unlike a separate reality, Internet users bring to their online interactions influencing factors such as their gender, stage in the life cycle, cultural milieu, socioeconomic status, and offline connections with others. However, much of the existing analysis tend to be parochial, treating the Internet as an isolated social phenomenon without taking into account how interactions on the Internet fit together with other aspects of people's lives. Observing online phenomena in isolation

discounts social processes offline which contribute to an understanding of use of the Internet as a meaningful thing to do. The interactions between the various social spaces both online and offline remain to be explored, although this is a task that cannot be easily accomplished from within the online setting.

Previous studies often used artificially constructed approaches such as controlled experiments to examine computer-mediated communication. Early research is also largely focused on the impact of computer-mediated communication in the workplace (Markus, 1994). These studies tend to be computer deterministic, assuming that the computer itself is the sole influence on communicative outcomes. In this perspective, the computer is assumed to have low social presence, and therefore, deprive users of salient contextualization cues conveyed by appearance, nonverbal signals, and features of the physical context. Though these early studies reveal important data for current reference, more in-depth, ethnographic research is necessary to explore the online environment.

The naïve assumption that media characteristics would have determining effects on interaction has been dispelled by the numerous researchers adopting a fieldwork approach towards studying online phenomenon. This work in natural contexts revealed the wealth of alternative scenarios for online communication (E.g. use of emoticons, supportive social groups). Users have overcome the limitations deemed to reduce the quality of communication online to create new forms of online social interaction. This different methodological approach turned up evidence that socioemotional communication not only existed in computer-mediated groups, but was more likely to be

prosocial than antisocial (Hiltz and Turoff, 1978; Rice and Love, 1987; Lea et. al., 1992). Baym (1995:140) posits that “CMC not only lends itself to social uses, but is, in fact, a site for an unusual amount of social creativity.” For example, Baym’s discussion of a Usenet newsgroup showed that participants developed forms of expression which enable them to communicate social information and to create and codify group-specific meanings, and norms were also developed to organize interaction and maintain desirable social climates.

There is a need for more integrative views on computer-mediated communication and its supplementary nature to offline social interaction, complementing other aspects of the individual’s everyday life. Although early accounts focused on the formation of online communities, it has become clear that most relationships formed in cyberspace continue in physical space, leading to new forms of community characterized by a mixture of online and offline interactions (Rheingold, 2000). Moreover, online interactions can fill communication breaks between face-to-face meetings and facilitate online arrangements for physical gatherings.

1.3 Objectives of Study

The Internet has become an indelible communicative apparatus in most of the developed world and is rapidly expanding among users in developing countries, reflecting the changing nature of human relations and human interaction. As Reid (1995:139) has aptly described; “...Rather than being constrained by the computer, the

members of these groups creatively exploit the systems' features so as to play with new forms of expressive communication, to explore possible public identities, to create otherwise unlikely relationships, and to create behavioral norms. In doing so, they invent new communities.”

This thesis explores the processes of computer-mediated communication in an electronic bulletin board system (BBS) intended for single mothers in Japan. A social support framework will be used to study the efficacy of computer-mediated communication as an instrument for the exchange of social support online. In this study, two main issues will be discussed. Firstly, previous research has shown that the online environment is conducive for the exchange of social support. In a forum designed as a communicative platform for single mothers, what dimensions of support are being exchanged? Secondly, while online social interaction is shaped by the nature of the Internet, the medium itself is a site for social creativity as users appropriate the communication channel and develop new forms of expression. What are the emergent characteristics of online interaction between the participants of the single mothers' BBS? To answer these questions, a content analysis of the messages posted on the BBS of a single mothers' website will be conducted. The written text also reveals significant information about the issues single mothers grapple with in their daily lives and their strategies for coping.

1.4 Defining social support

Human beings live in a social world in which we are unable to exist or keep things under control without the support of others. Verbal and nonverbal communication between recipients and providers of social support reduces uncertainty about the situation, the self, the other, or the relationship, and functions to enhance a perception of personal control in one's life experience (Albrecht and Adelman, 1987). Although theorists differ on specifics, there is wide agreement that social support is a multidimensional phenomenon (Caplan, 1974; Cobb, 1976, 1979; Weiss, 1974). A broad range of interpersonal behaviors by members in a person's social network may help him or her successfully cope with adverse life events and circumstances. Direct assistance, advice, encouragement, companionship, and expressions of affection all have been associated with positive outcomes for persons facing various life strains and dilemmas.

The proliferation of definitions of social support and the need for conceptual clarification prompted Stewart (1993) to present eleven different definitions of social support put forward by key theorists between 1974 and 1990. Ideas about the different forms and components of social support appear to converge on a common set of dimensions. Cutrona and Russell (1990) looked at five representative theoretical models of social support and attempted to draw parallels among forms of support that appeared to be highly similar across models. The dimensions of support derived were emotional support, social integration or network support, esteem support, instrumental support, and

informational support. The abovementioned five dimensions would be utilized for the codification process in this paper.

The philosophical origins of social support theory can be traced to John Bowlby's theory of attachment as a fundamental requirement for healthy development (Veiel and Baumann, 1992b). The effects of social support were subsequently differentiated between main effects of social support on health, and buffering effects on the relationship between stress and health. While main effects include the provision of practical help and/or assurance and care during illness, buffering effects of social support impact on health only under situations of high stress in which demands exceed personal ability to respond.

Much of early research was based on the notion of support as a moderator of stress (Sarason *et al.* 1996). Social support has been extensively studied in stress research in the context of the stress-illness model (Lin *et. al.* 1985). The idea that social support plays a role in the negative impact of stress on health is attractive because it opens possibilities for outside intervention. While it has been hypothesized that social support might affect the stress process at several points (Friedman *et al.* 1991), most studies have examined the stress-buffering effects of support on illness (Kessler and McLeod, 1985). Little attention has been paid to the possibility that support can act at an earlier point in the stress-illness sequence, by preventing or limiting stress. This approach has been advocated by Pearlin (1989) who suggested that social support is most fruitfully evaluated in terms of limiting the number, severity, and diffusion of stressor constellations. In this capacity, support may form a shield which insulates the individual

from stress exposure, so that the supported individual experiences less stress than the unsupported individual. Supportive relationships also enable people to cope better with environmental stresses, enhance one's sense of control, and reduce feelings of vulnerability and helplessness.

1.5 Computer-mediated social support

Traditionally, the exchange of social support takes place in 'real', face-to-face environments led by professional facilitators such as nurses, social workers, and/or psychologists, or function as self-help groups offering peer support. Well-known examples of successful support groups include Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), an international society offering mutual help for those seeking to recover from alcoholism, and Depression Alliance, a leading U.K.-based charity which extends a range of services for people affected by depression. These support groups have, at its core, the principle of members sharing experiences, strengths, and hopes in order that members may solve their common problem. It is this self-referenced, rather than authoritarian, instruction and guidance that has been exported in the development of a huge variety of self-help groups. The advent of the Internet's communicative capabilities sparked off a burgeoning growth in the number of new online support groups and traditionally offline support groups have started to include communicative platforms for online interaction in their websites. In a computer-mediated environment, the effects of social support are multiplied as individuals have expanded access to like-minded others and form large, heterogeneous online communities, pooling resources of collective knowledge and expertise. Individuals

are also able to form support groups for people with similar life experiences or undergoing challenging life stages, reaffirming and encouraging each other effortlessly via online interactive means.

The use of online communicative platforms such as newsgroups, mailing lists, bulletin boards, and other forums for virtual self-help and social support is a potentially significant development in computer-mediated communication. The potential of computer networks to function as mutual support networks was recognized early on by North American medical researchers, and early experiments were conducted with people afflicted with HIV (Boberg *et. al.* 1996) and cancer (Weinberg *et. al.* 1996). The combination of a positive attitude towards technology and an orientation towards 'self-help' in the U.S. soon led individuals to begin setting up their own online self-help groups. As Denzin (1998:110) has observed: "We cannot imagine America without its self-help groups. And, we cannot imagine an America that is not in love with technology. Cyberspace and the recovery movement were meant for each other." Studies have been conducted in the U.S. examining self-help groups for people recovering from child abuse (Mousand 1997), disabled people (Finn 1999), and recovering alcoholics (King 1994).

The development of online self-help groups in the United Kingdom soon followed (Burrows and Nettleton, 2000). This self-help is part of the widespread health-related activity on the Internet. By some estimates, the second most common use of the Internet, after sex-related activity, is in seeking health and health related information (Eysenbach *et al.* 1999). Preece *et al.* (2002:80) argue that "computer-mediated social support arrived

in a context in which its capacity to allow for increased self-reliance is in tune with a general movement towards increased self-reliance in society.” Family and other social networks are less robust than before, and governments have reduced the size and scope of welfare states, and science is losing credibility in dealing with disease and other problems. Computer-mediated social support can potentially offer individuals access to a supportive peer group with shared needs and experiences on an almost constant basis. The types of exchanges that take place in fora providing computer-mediated social support can be generally categorized into two broad types—*informational* and *emotional*. Informational exchange is concerned with the sharing of personal experiences and other information, whereas emotional exchange is designed to provide encouragement or reinforce relationships between individuals.

In tandem with the proliferation of supportive online communities, researchers have engaged in various ethnographic studies on the social reality in various online communities. Qualitative data from Dunham et al (1998) illustrate that close personal relationships and a sense of community developed among a group of young single mothers who participated in a computer-mediated social support network concerned with parenting issues. An analysis of pretest-posttest changes in the level of parenting stress also revealed that mothers who participated regularly in this online community were more likely to report a decrease in parenting stress. Campbell (2002) studied online solicitation and expression of social support in five online eating disorder support groups and found positive affect, or the provision of encouragement and constructive feedback to

be a recurring theme in the discussion boards. Findings also reveal that sharing experiences is the most frequent strategy for soliciting support.

1.6 Computer-mediated social support in Japan

Despite the availability of technology for electronic character retrieval since the early 1980s, Internet use in Japan has lagged behind most developed countries due to several structural factors. The high cost of land-line phone calls is a major impediment to the penetration of the Internet in Japanese homes. Diffusion rates of personal computers were slow to take off: by 1997 only 20 per cent of Japanese owned personal computers, compared to 40 per cent in the United States. However, the introduction of NTT DoCoMo's *i-mode* service marked a breakthrough in Internet usage in Japan. The *i-mode* service allows users to access the Internet through a variety of text-based information sites accessible only by mobile phones. Besides *i-mode* which was launched in 1999, other providers have since also offered this service and Japan currently leads the world in mobile Internet use. According to the White Paper on the Internet in Japan 2004, the number of Internet users in Japan passed the 60-million mark in December 2003, reaching 62,844,000 in February 2004, an 11.3 per cent increase from last year.¹ The number of users connected to broadband services and the average usage time has also increased in recent years.

¹ <http://www.impressholdings.com/release/2004/023/>

The Internet is often discussed in terms of its ‘global’ reach and its ‘borderless’ frontiers. However, it is crucial to bear in mind that individuals log on as real people in actual locations for specific purposes; the meaning of the Internet is thus partly the product of social context. Hine points out that

“In thinking of the Internet we should not necessarily expect it to mean the same thing to everyone. It could be said that ideas about what the Internet is are socially shaped, in that they arise in contexts of use in which different ways of viewing the technology are meaningful and acceptable” (2000:30).

Japanese researchers have taken an interest in studying the social aspects of Internet communication in Japan and Japanese publications have been growing steadily. However a dearth of English literature existed before the 2003 publication of *Japanese Cybercultures*, a compilation of articles focusing on the juxtaposition of the Internet in Japanese society, with issues ranging from pop culture, gender, and politics. Researchers found that the Internet can serve as a tool of emancipation and an outlet of expression and awareness for marginalized groups and individuals in Japanese society. Controversial themes such as alternative lifestyles, homosexuality and AIDS rarely appear in mainstream media as it is still a taboo and remains largely concealed from the average Japanese.

The advent of the Internet in Japan has created an online ‘space’ whereby these individuals can interact, form groups, and establish an online presence. Cullinane (2003) explores online HIV communities in Japan and how HIV-positive individuals use the

Internet to share information, seek support, and socialize with other members of a highly stigmatized group. McLelland (2003) explores the online sexual activities and discourses of the gay community in Japan, positing that “the Internet has added to the richness and complexity of gay men’s interaction in Japan, as it had done throughout the world.” Besides the Internet’s impact on interactions and relationship formation for gay men, McLelland also found a development of a communal discourse regarding online etiquette which relies on concepts of harmony and negotiation that are integral to social interaction in Japan.

Onosaka (2003) found that Japanese women’s activism on the Internet has been on the rise and they are increasingly making their presence felt through individual and collective means. “Communication on the Internet, however, enables women to take part in public discussions while preserving their privacy and anonymity; that is, they have no need to engage in face-to-face debate or to use language appropriate for hierarchically-ordered direct discourse.”

Internet capabilities have extended beyond that of mere group formation of online users with common interests. Japanese women have found innovative ways to use the communicative aspects of the Internet. Miyata (2002) examined the socially supportive aspects of online communication by studying a group of Japanese mothers who subscribe to a mailing list for mothers. Miyata monitored the impact of online participation for the participants and found that the receipt of social support from weak ties via an online community promotes psychological wellbeing. Active participants experienced increased

self-esteem and decreased depression, and were more likely to provide social support to others due to a sense of generalized reciprocity.

Japan's accelerating aged population has also gone online, dispelling the myth of resistance by the elderly to new technology. Kanayama's (2003) study on an online community of elderly users reveals that the elderly enjoyed social interaction and constructed supportive relationships via online communication. The elderly participants developed innovative ways to overcome the limitations of text-based communication by engaging in a variety of language forms ranging from haiku to emoticons. Through the sharing of old stories and memories, a sense of social connectedness and mutual support was established.

1.7 Summary of Chapters

Chapter 1 begins with a review of single-parent families as an emerging alternative to the conventional two-parent family unit. In this thesis, a single-mother household is defined as one where the father is absent and the divorced, separated, widowed or unmarried mother lives with a child, or children. Chapter 2 looks at the changing family patterns and gender relations in contemporary Japanese society, locating the accelerating rates of divorce to a combination of economic, cultural, and social factors. This chapter also analyzes the socio-economic conditions of single mothers in Japan, highlighting the ineptness of official measures to alleviate their problems and the difficulties these women encounter being situated in a traditionally patriarchal society.

Chapter 3 describes, in greater detail, the methods used to obtain and analyze the research data. Content analysis was employed as a technique to systematically review the entire data mass and identify the material relevant to the scope of the research topic. A section on virtual ethnography provides some background on how the concept of ethnography can essentially be applied to a virtual environment, such as an online community. A summary of the research method and design is presented at the end of this chapter.

Chapter 4 presents the quantitative results of the content analysis and explicates the dimensions of support employed in this thesis, namely, informational, emotional, esteem, network, and instrumental. Messages posted by participants will be used to illustrate the coding process.

Chapter 5 discusses the characteristics of online communication which emerged during the research process. Besides the high level of social support being exchanged among the participants, patterns of self-disclosure, sharing of personal experiences, emotional ventilation, and flaming will also be highlighted in this chapter. Examples of messages exhibiting the above features further will be expounded upon to make the distinctions and texture in the messages more evident. Findings from interviews with three single mothers will be summarized at the end of the chapter.

Chapter 6 summarizes the findings from this study and also addresses the limitations of this study. In conclusion, this study illustrates the supplementary nature of computer-mediated communication to other communicative mediums and proposes the

use of online forums by policymakers as a platform towards understanding grassroots concerns.

Chapter 2

Single Mothers in Japan

This chapter begins with a review of the existing literature on single mothers in an international context, focusing on the issues that single mothers face in present-day societies. This is followed by a discussion of the issues that single mothers in Japan encounter, namely; lack of social welfare, gender-biased labor participation, weak implementation of child maintenance system, lack of childcare facilities, and social stigmatization.

2.1 Change in traditional familial patterns

Single-parent families have become a permanent feature in many societies today. Single motherhood has grown globally by 60 per cent over the last decade. According to the United Nation's statistics in 2000, informal unions are common and births to unmarried women have increased dramatically in developed regions.² In many urbanized societies, divorce rates have accelerated in tandem with the growth of affluence. Long term changes are taking place in family patterns and gender relations as the traditional familial structure of husband, wife, and children gives way to alternative forms of family life. Observers identify changes in the economic, cultural, and social context which provides individuals with choices about how to lead their lives. In both developed and developing countries, marriage is no longer a financial prerequisite to motherhood as

²United Nations, Statistics Division. Available from <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/Demographic/products/indwm/wm2000.htm>

women are receiving more education and are better equipped to achieve financial independence.

With increased social acceptance of divorce as an alternative to a bad marriage, single motherhood has lost some of its social stigma and even glamorized in Western media such as in the widely popular 90s drama series, *Murphy Brown*. Silbergleid (2002) identifies 2001 as “the year of the single mom”, where “actors including Camryn Manheim, Calista Flockhart, and Jodie Foster, by adoption or by birth, placed single motherhood in the national spotlight.” The ‘new’ single mother is no longer the stereotypical unwed teen living on welfare; rather, a personification of a strong-willed, determined woman capable of raising a child by her own means.

2.2 Social reality for single mothers today

However, social reality for most single mothers remains stark. International research has shown that low wages, non-payment of child maintenance by absent fathers, and inadequate social services are the three primary causes of single-mother poverty in developed countries. Though socio-cultural and economic conditions vary among countries, single mothers worldwide have to balance the dual roles of breadwinner and caregiver. As the sole provider of the family, single mothers are generally engaged in paid labor, with wages forming the bulk of their incomes. Financial support from the state and child maintenance remains supplementary to paid labor for most single-mother families.

In the U.S., a largely unchanged minimum wage standard, inadequate alimony, and inadequate public assistance are three compelling reasons for single mothers to seek employment. However, many are positioned in the secondary labor market where jobs are low paid, and have little stability or continuity. Single mothers' rate of participation in the labor market is constrained by several factors. Firstly, the availability and costs of childcare facilities is a major factor for mothers who are seeking employment. For example, Ireland continues to have the lowest employment and economic activity rates for mothers in two-parent and single-parent families in the European Union due to an absence of publicly funded childcare services (McLaughlin and Rodgers, 1999).

Secondly, the availability of jobs in the labor market influences women's labor participation. Since the 1990s, many industrialized economies began to reveal recessionary trends, rising unemployment, and dramatic changes in the social welfare regimes. The scarcity of jobs drove women into part time, lowly paid employment, while men received priority for fulltime employment due to the entrenched societal norm of men as breadwinners and sole providers for the family. McHugh and Millar (1989) found that official measures to increase single mothers' labor participation rates were constrained by soaring unemployment rates in Australia. Despite a positive policy stressing employment through job training schemes and financial incentives, single mothers in Australia continue to live in poverty due to unfavorable labor market conditions.

Research has shown that poverty continues to be the central quandary for single mothers in an international context. Globally, single mothers receive income in varying forms (paid wages, public assistance, and/or alimony) and quantities which are dependent on the socio-cultural, economic, and political positions of each country. However, the collective parallel is that a large majority of single mothers remain poor. Financial duress coupled with child rearing stress leaves single mothers in a precarious situation in many societies today.

2.3 Single mothers in Japan

Despite living in the world's second largest economy, single mothers in Japan face similar concerns as those in other countries. While the number of single mothers is increasing, social welfare is inadequate in a society where women face more entry barriers in job markets. A labor force survey conducted by The Public Management, Home Affairs, Posts and Telecommunications Ministry revealed that the jobless rate for single-mother households stood at 8.9 per cent, compared with 5.3 per cent for two-parent households.³

Moreover, Japanese legislators are introducing laws to make it more difficult for women to raise children on their own. Most lone mothers and their children now live in poverty, with many experiencing real hardship. In 2000, the average household income was about 6.17 million yen, and for an elderly household the figure was 3.19 million yen.

³ The Japan Times 26 May 2004. Available from <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/print/news/nn05-2004/nn20040526b2.htm>

The average household income for single-mother families is about 40 per cent that of households with two parents, and 8 out of 10 single mothers reported having trouble making ends meet, according to a survey conducted by The Health, Labor, and Welfare Ministry in 2003.⁴ Single mothers also face social isolation as their status as divorcees and unmarried mothers remains a stigma.

In Japan, discrimination against illegitimate offspring is institutionalized, and single mothers with kids often get little in the way of official financial aid. As in many societies, single mothers in Japan have to deal with immense financial and social pressures, often without sufficient financial and emotional support. In recent years, cases of death from starvation of single parent families have emerged. A 27 year-old single mother and her 3year-old son were found dead in their apartment in Saitama Prefecture in early February 2005. The cause of death was identified as starvation and police found neither food nor money in the apartment (Curtin, 2005). Poverty in single mother families are due to several factors; low wages for women, a non-functional child support payment system, an inadequate social welfare policy, and a weakening of traditional family support networks.

2.4 Rise of single-mother families in Japan

Despite the social and economic repercussions of single parenthood in Japan, the number of single-parent households has been rising steadily, and divorce is the major contributing factor to the increase (Table 1).

⁴ <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/print/news/nn05-2004/nn20040526b2.htm>

Table 1. Divorce rates in Japan

Year	Divorces	Divorce rates (per 1,000 population)
1999	250,529	2.00
2000	264,246	2.10
2001	285,917	2.27
2002	289,838	2.30
2003	283,854	2.25

Source: Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2005

According to the National Survey on Lone Mother Households (NSLMH) held in 1998, the number of single-parent families is estimated at 1,118,300 and 85 per cent of single-parent families are female headed (Table 2). Statistics released under a new Japanese government survey estimates that the number of households headed by single mothers has skyrocketed, hitting 1.22 million in fiscal 2003 in the nation of 128 million (Table 2). This is the highest number ever recorded and represents a massive 28.3 per cent increase from the previous survey conducted five years ago.

Table 2. Number of single-parent families

Year	Single mother households	Single father households
1993	789,900	157,300
1998	954,900	163,400
2003	1,225,400	173,800

Source: Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2005

The NSLMH survey reflects a downward trend in the ages of both mothers and children in mother-headed families. The average age of single mothers is 40.9 years old, and that of the youngest child is 10.9, according to the NSLMH in 1998. At the point of

divorce, the average age of mothers is 34.9, and the youngest child is 5.4 years old. In particular, 34.6 per cent of the youngest child is under 3 years old, when their parents divorced. In 1956, widows made up 77.9 per cent of single mothers. In 1998 widowed single mothers made up 18.7 per cent, while divorced single mothers increased to 68.4 per cent.

2.4.1 Domestic violence

The rise in numbers can be attributed to several factors. In the case of single motherhood as a result of divorce, domestic violence and economic hardship are the most frequently cited reasons. In Japan, the concept of domestic violence as a social problem did not exist until the enactment of the Law for the Prevention of Spousal Violence and the Protection of Victims in April 2001. Prior to official recognition of domestic violence, there has been little social comprehension of violence against women and the problem has remained invisible, and at times trivialized as a problem of the individual. Battered women lacked an understanding of what constitutes as violence and were deprived of any social institution where they could seek assistance from. Moreover, domestic violence is seen as a private issue best kept within the family due to its associated sense of shame victims feel about being battered by their husbands and the notion of marital privacy prevents formal intervention by government agencies.

According to the Cabinet Office's Survey on Domestic Violence (2002), 15.5 per cent of women have suffered physical assault from their spouse or boyfriend, 5.6 per cent

have suffered frightening threats from their spouse or boyfriend, and 9 per cent have suffered sexual coercion from their spouse or boyfriend in their lifetime. In total, almost one out of five (19.1 per cent) women has experienced one or more of these types of violence (Gender Equality Bureau, Cabinet Office, Government of Japan).⁵

2.4.2 Poverty

In the world's second largest economy only after the U.S., it is almost implausible to suggest that poverty constitutes a major cause of divorce. Yet economic hardship remains one of the major reasons women cite when filing for divorce. In the wake of the collapse of Japan's 'bubble economy' in the early 1990s, administrative reforms undertaken by major companies led to massive retrenchments and a drastic change in employment practices such as a move away from lifetime employment and the seniority wage system. Victims of these reforms faced urban poverty, unemployment, high living costs, loan burdens, and an inability to provide for their families. In other cases, women were reportedly unaware of their husbands' financial status prior to marriage, only to discover a massive sum of loans pending repayment after their marriage. Against the generalized observation of Japan as a middle-class society, poverty persists as a key source of rising divorce rates.

⁵ Gender Equality Bureau, Cabinet Office, Government of Japan. Available from <http://www.unifem-eseasia.org/resources/others/domesticviolence/PDF/Japan.pdf>

2.4.3 Rejection of traditional attitudes

The growing presence of single-parent households suggests women's rejection of traditional attitudes that insist children be raised by a mother and a father. Japanese women have wider access to information regarding the range of opportunities and choices open to them. In media-saturated Japan, women are extensively exposed to Western modern notions of conjugal marriage based on love and partnership, envisioning marriage to be a union based on equality and mutuality. However, social reality remains that the strict segregation and adherence to gender roles within the family persist in contemporary Japanese society. With increased education and opportunities, women tend to possess greater independence and choice whether to remain married or not. Despite the financial and social challenges of single parenthood, women are more empowered to make their own decisions than their predecessors did. Although the social stigma associated with divorce still exist, amplified public coverage of the rising numbers has increased public acceptance of divorce as an alternative to a bad marriage.

2.4.4 Child custody laws

Changes in the legal attitude to child custody in divorce had considerable impact on the impetus for a marital dissolution as more mothers were given custody of their children, as compared to the practice in the 1970s. Prior to the mid-1960s, fathers were expected to be given the exclusive custody of their children in accordance with the tradition of the Japanese patrilineal household structure, which is premised upon the

primogeniture system and the household economic structure in which the head of the household is solely responsible for the continuity of the family name. In most cases, the caregivers were usually the female members of the father's family, such as grandmothers and aunts. Since the end of WWII, there was a gradual shift towards giving mothers the custody of their children and by 1990, about three-quarters of child custody cases gave custody to the mothers.

2.5 Problems faced by single-mother families

International research has shown that in developed countries the three primary causes of single-mother poverty are low wages, non-payment of child support payments by absent fathers, and inadequate social services, such as welfare programs, tax credits for poor families, free child care for impoverished mothers or other systems in which the state assist the needy by transferring resources to them. Japan shares the same trends cited above, accompanied by a weakening of traditional family support networks, creating an environment in which poverty levels are almost certain to increase. The Japanese poverty map has been redrawn, with mother-headed families constituting the bulk of the poor as compared to those of previous years, where elderly households made up a larger percentage of the destitute. In 2001, the average annual income of a mother-headed family was about 2.52 million yen while the average household income was about 6.17 million yen, and for an elderly household the figure was 3.19 million yen in 2000 (The Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2005).

2.5.1 Lack of social welfare

The postwar Japanese social welfare system, or more commonly referred to as the ‘Japanese-style welfare society’ (*Nihongata fukushi shakai*) is a rhetoric that argues for the establishment of a uniquely Japanese-style welfare society founded on the principles of ‘mutual and self-help’ and ‘independence’, unlike the welfare states of industrialized Western countries. (Baba, 1979; Garon, 1997). As its name suggests, the Japanese-style welfare society discourse argued that Japan was by nature not conducive to becoming a ‘welfare state’, but rather, could only become a ‘welfare society’, where welfare obligations were to be shared by all members of society, and not left to the state. This reasoning is based on the premise that Japanese culture is so implicitly embedded in the idea of the Japanese family, viewed as being built on strong ties, stable relations and mutual help, such that any attempt to artificially install state welfare would not only violate Japanese cultural sensibility but would also damage crucial social institutions. The Japanese-style welfare society discourse also emphasized on individual paid work over state handouts as the appropriate option for the needy in Japan, grounded on the basic principles of mutual and self-reliance and family economic independence. Social welfare policies for single-mother families were based on the same principles as above, emphasizing the importance of employment to achieve economic independence and mutual reliance in family relationships as solutions to welfare.

Social policies for single mothers can be traced back to early postwar years, where public loan programs were introduced to support war widows who formed the

largest group of single-parent families in the 1950s. Postwar policy were developed based on a mix of residual and non-intervention aspects - low benefit provisions, public loans, and non-enforcement of child maintenance - and single mothers were expected to work rather than stay at home as mothers. The expansion of the social security system in the 1960s generated new programs such as non-contributory pension system for widows, and child rearing allowances for divorced single mothers (Ito, 1999).

Rapid economic growth throughout the 1960s gave the Japanese state an impetus to expand social welfare, introducing the national pension and health care insurance schemes which were considered crucial elements of a modern society. In 1964, the Lone Mother Welfare Law was implemented, providing legal grounds for many social programs for single-parent families, including financial support, providing shelter for mothers and children, and setting higher priorities in allocation of public housing. However, these measures were built around highly stigmatizing and discretionary provisions. The shame associated with receiving basic public assistance (*seikatsu hogô*) discourages single-mother families theoretically entitled to such welfare.

Social policy framework remained largely unchanged since the 1960s but in recent years, the state has been adopting an ultra-conservative approach of trying to discourage divorce by restricting the eligibility to various single-mother welfare entitlements. In response to the alarming rise in divorce rates and tightening of fiscal policies, welfare supports for single-mother families were cut and eligibility criteria were made stricter. Cuts in welfare support for divorced and unmarried mothers continued as

the state continued its policy emphasis on single mothers' economic self-reliance and mutual family support.

State policies reveal an official non-recognition of the increasing poverty of single-mother families and strengthened support for the traditional two-parent and multi-generational family mode. In 1985, the Child Rearing Allowance Law was passed, significantly tightening the eligibility criteria for the allowance and extended ex-husbands' obligations to make maintenance payments. In August 2002, the income threshold for receiving a special childcare benefit for single-mother families (Dependent-Child Allowance) was lowered from 2 million yen to below 1.3 million yen. A tax deduction for widows has also been eliminated. As part of its reform package, the government is including a new bill that would stop providing full child-rearing allowance after a child from a single-mother family reaches 5 years old. The current law provides financial aid to single mothers until the child reaches 18 years of age.

2.5.2 Weak implementation of child maintenance system

Unlike most European countries, Japan has no official system for the collection of child support payments from non-compliant fathers. The procedure for obtaining a divorce is relatively simple and this ease of accessibility has crucial implications on child maintenance arrangements. In the case of mutual agreement to divorce, formal procedures can be completed by endorsement of an official document and submission to a registration office. More than 90 per cent of divorce cases in Japan are based on mutual

agreement, and engaging in litigation in the case of non-mutual consent is still uncommon. The issue of child maintenance is a part of the negotiating process towards mutual agreement as concerns such as right to and amount of child maintenance, child custody, and even consent for divorce comes into play. In many cases of divorce by mutual agreement, mothers tend to accept a lump sum payment at the point of divorce over the uncertainty of receiving monthly payments.

Secondly, the weak implementation of laws to enforce a maintenance payment or to secure the continuation of payment makes maintenance from fathers highly unreliable. The maintenance payment can be enforced by a civil law suit, but bringing a former partner to court for maintenance is not always the best option as the legal costs would surpass expected maintenance payments in a cumbersome, time-consuming legal battle. Even if the ruling is in the mother's favor, the courts can only legally compel a father to pay a quarter of the originally stipulated amount. According to the latest NSLMH survey, only 35.1 per cent of divorced mothers had made arrangement over child maintenance with their previous spouses and only 20.8 per cent are functioning support payment agreements⁶. In response to criticisms, the law was revised in April 2003 with the intended aim of making more divorced fathers pay child support, but the feeble attempt had no visible impact so far. Surveys have shown that the average monthly maintenance payment has decreased 16 per cent over the last 5 years, indicating deterioration in the situation for single mothers. Moreover, past attempts to effectively amend the law have

⁶ NSLMH (National Survey on Lone Mother Households 1998). Available from <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/houdou/2003/03/h0312-4b.html>

been derailed by a vocal group of conservative male lawmakers who claim that making men liable to pay for divorced children goes against long held 'Japanese familial traditions'.

2.5.3 Gender-biased labor participation

Japan's social welfare policy advocates the notion of single mothers' economic independence and self-reliance through paid work. Public financial loan systems include interest-free loans for job skills training and starting small businesses based on the principle of self-help. Despite having one of the highest labor participation rates among the developed world (83%)⁷, average wages of single mothers remain extremely low. In 2001, the average annual income of a single mother family was about 2.52 million yen. Latest data estimates a fall of average annual income to just 2.12 million yen in 2002, almost three times lesser than the median figure.

Japan's existing labor market structure is highly discriminatory against women, and Ito (1999) identifies three distinctive features which impedes single mothers' from achieving full economic independency, namely, (i) a family wage system based on a male-breadwinner model; (ii) patriarchal corporate-style employment arrangements; and (iii) a growing polarization of working hours between men and women as a result of recent labor market restructuring. Japan's postwar economic and labor market systems can be described as one based on the male breadwinner family wage model, assuming

⁷ The Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, 2005. Available from <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/houdou/2005/01/dl/h0119-1b07.pdf>

that men would earn sufficient wages to support their families, while women devote themselves to child rearing and managing households within the domestic sphere. This model rationalizes women's subordinate role and marginal status within the labor market and their wages are seen as supplementary to the family income. Women are often assigned low-skill and low-status jobs with low wages in smaller subsidiary industries and service sectors.

The male breadwinner model also reinforces the philosophy of 'good wife, wise mother' (*ryōsai kenbo*), a traditional Meiji-period ideology that still persists in Japanese society today. Contemporary media portrayals of Japanese women emphasizes on their domestic roles as mothers, wives, and caregivers of the elderly. Images generated such as "the subservient wife", "the perfect homemaker", "education mama" revolve around the role of women as nurturers in society. Studies of the family in postwar Japan emphasized that the primary role of adult women was to care for their families. The idealized household consisted of a husband as a *salaryman*, putting in long hours at the office to fulfill his role as a breadwinner, and the wife is relegated to the domestic sphere and her life revolves around managing the household, raising children, and supporting her children's academic and her husband's business careers. Although state-supported daycare exists for working mothers, the presumption remains that childcare is the full-time responsibility of mothers because the customary mode of interaction between Japanese young children and their caretakers demands a high degree of focused attention on the part of the caretaker. In addition, both preschools and elementary schools make high demands on mothers (involvement in PTA, attendance at school meetings), and

mothers also provide a high level of support to older children, who are expected to devote their full energies to studying.

Although a substantial number of married women are participating in the labor force, they are mostly engaged in part-time jobs with low wages and their first priority is to the family (Table 3). These enduring social structures subject single mother families to more hardship as mothers have to fulfill both the caregiver and breadwinner roles and burdened with income and time constraints.

Table 3. Employment rates for single mothers

Year	Employment rate (%)	Full-time (%)	Part-time (%)
1998	84.9	50.7	38.3
2003	83	39.2	49

Source: Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2005

Since the postwar era, Japan's distinct corporate employment system has been premised on two pillars; namely, lifelong employment and seniority-based wages. This patriarchal corporate structure favors male concentration in managerial echelons, which not only dominates economically but also provides higher wages and job status accorded with steady employment. Males are socially obliged to participate in the labor force upon graduation from educational institutions and do not face disruptions in the course of their careers. On the other hand, female labor participation pattern reflects a deepening 'M-shape', with mass exit of women from the labor market upon marriage and/or childbirth

and re-entry after child bearing. Since women are unable to subscribe to lifelong employment due to their exit and entry in the labor market and thus do not progress onto managerial positions, they are excluded from the benefits of the seniority-based wage system. Women rarely enter into career positions and are largely given lower status, lower paid jobs, regardless of the company size or academic qualifications.

Another feature of the patriarchal corporate employment system is the system of subcontracting arrangements between large firms and small-medium enterprises. This system is highly engendered, as men are concentrated in the corporate sector with higher income and job security, while women are confined to small-medium enterprises where wages are low and jobs are less secure. Despite the recent restructuring of the economy, corporate norms remains entrenched in predetermined gender roles and female labor participation is largely reduced to the periphery sphere of the labor market. The recent economic restructuring has also led to a growing polarization of working hours between men and women as companies are under mounting pressure to abandon the traditional practice of lifetime employment and seniority systems and adopt free-market labor practices. In a bid to reduce operating costs, companies are making their fulltime staff work longer hours and employing more part-time workers. Male workers are therefore expected to work longer hours, while women are increasingly channeled to part-time work. The polarization of work hours by gender implies a further entrenchment of the male breadwinner model arrangement by restricting women's fulltime employment.

Strictly defined gender roles and patriarchal corporate employment are two mutually reinforcing elements in the Japanese labor market structure which function as formidable barriers preventing women from achieving economic self-sufficiency. The marginalization of women in the labor market relegates women to low-paying jobs with minimal job security in the manufacturing, retail, and service sector industries. For single mothers, the barriers are amplified as they are further discriminated against because of their marital and social status. Employers are also less willing to employ single mothers who tend to be more prone to disruptions at work; e.g. when a child is sick, events at schools, and unable to work overtime due to their childrearing activities. Consequently, most single mothers are engaged in low-wage, temporary and casual part-time employment on a contract basis, devoid of medical and financial benefits that comes with full-time employment.

2.5.4 Lack of childcare facilities

Japan's childcare and educational institutions for preschoolers include both daycare centers and kindergartens, with the former catering to full-day care for children aged 0-6 years of age, while the latter are considered as educational facilities for children aged 3-6 years old. Daycare centers are further divided into licensed and non-licensed centers, where differences lie in standards and availability of government subsidy. The Child Welfare Law stipulates that municipal governments are required to provide daycare services for children whose parents are not capable of providing childcare for reasons such as work, illness, and care of other members of the family. Licensed daycare centers

are required to fulfill minimum standards established by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, which encompasses child-staff ratio and the physical space available for each child. In exchange for these regulations, a large portion of the operating costs for licensed daycare centers are subsidized by central and local governments. Admission criteria and fees are based on needs for childcare, such as household income, family structure, and mother's working status, to name a few.

According to the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research 2003 report, there are 22,313 licensed daycare centers in Japan catering to more than 2 million or 29 per cent of pre-school children.⁸ As licensed daycare centers are financially supported by the state, fees tend to be much lower than unlicensed daycare centers, thus more favored by families with lower household incomes. Many Japanese working parents rely on mothers staying at home or grandparents taking care of young children. With the rise in the number of working mothers, there has been a severe shortage of daycare centers especially for children aged 0-2 years old. The shortage is magnified in the metropolitan areas with a high concentration of working mothers. Single mothers often find themselves on the waiting list for their child's entry into licensed daycare centers, impeding their ability to locate a better-paying regular job with more stable income. Moreover, unemployed mothers are not eligible to apply for their children's admission to licensed daycare centers, further engulfing them in a vicious cycle of poverty. Most daycare centers provide up to 8 hours of care, thus lowering single mothers' job eligibility as they are unable to work overtime.

⁸ National Institute of Population and Social Security Research. Available from <http://www.ipss.go.jp/s-info/e/childPJ2003/childPJ2003.pdf>

2.5.5 Social stigmatization

In the last decade, Japan's low birthrates and rapidly ageing population have been subjects of intense debate amongst policymakers and academia alike. Media coverage highlighted 'social ills' such as accelerating divorce rates and juvenile delinquency, attributing the rise to a breakdown in 'traditional' family relationships threatening the social fabric of Japanese society. Attention was also drawn to the rise in single mother families and single mothers were singled out as irresponsible individuals who are overly reliant on social welfare.

Despite increased awareness and public acceptance of single mothers in Japan, social discrimination against single mothers and their children persists. Single mothers are viewed as Japanese women who deviate from their assigned gender roles as mothers and wives in a society which values marriage, stability and the family unit. Japan's patriarchal societal structure meant that women's social positions are tied to men's, and when ties are broken, women's status will be weakened. Many single mothers find their status a liability for them in finding employment, housing, and also in developing social relationships. Some single mothers also face estrangement from their own families as the latter sever familial relationships due to the shame associated with divorce. In a case study of the effects of neighborhood on single mother families in a Tokyo ward, Ito (1999) found that many of the single mothers she interviewed claimed that they were discriminated against by landlords and neighbors because of their status as single mothers.

Some of the women also reported that they had to move out of their homes after they became single mothers because of landlord harassment.

Children of single mother families are equally not spared from the repercussions of social discrimination. The blemish of divorce impedes chances for children from single parent families to find suitable marriage partners or desirable employment opportunities because their backgrounds reflect a flawed family unit. The social stigma and sense of shame associated with single mother families significantly impedes the establishment of supportive social networks, perpetuating a sense of isolation and helplessness.

The Japanese family registration system appears to perpetuate the discrimination against children born out of wedlock. When children are newly registered within a family registration, the first child of a legally-married couple is registered as “the first son”, or “the first daughter”, but the first child of an unmarried couple is registered as just “boy” or “girl”. The Japanese inheritance law dictates that the amount of inheritance to children born out of wedlock should be half of that of children born within marriage.

2.6 Absence of supportive networks

When mothers establish single-parent families, they face a multitude of difficulties. Non-payment of child maintenance by ex-husbands and low wages place serious financial constraints on single mothers. The patriarchal labor market structure

impedes their entry into full-time, well-paid jobs which would provide financial stability. Unlike conventional two-parent households, families with absent fathers are seen as a blemished environment for raising children since the family is incomplete. Social stereotypes tend to portray single mothers as irresponsible and selfish individuals who inflict psychological trauma on their children in the course of divorce or separation. Children from single-parent families are believed to be prone to juvenile delinquency and hostile behavior which is attributable to the unfavorable family environment.

The maintenance of social harmony is an imperative concept in Japanese society, where individuals subjugate their needs over those of the group. Single-mother families represent a violation of the ideal family model, where the mother fails to place the family's needs before her own. As a socially marginalized group, single mothers find a challenge in bringing up their children in the absence of extended family and community ties. Divorce or separation from one's spouse induces a breakdown in familial ties in a society already facing weakening traditional family networks. Single mothers have to take on both the breadwinner and caregiver roles in the family, leaving them with little time to initiate relationships within members of the neighborhood or parent-teacher associations (PTA), communities which most Japanese mothers subscribe to. Moreover, their tarnished status as single mothers impedes their entry into such groups which place a high value on family cohesion and stability.

In accordance with the Child Welfare Law, each of Japan's 47 prefectures operates several child guidance centers (*jidô sôdanjo*) and support centers for households

with children (*jidô katei shien senta*). Despite the existence of these state-funded social welfare centers catering to the needs of single mothers, these centers functions mainly to assist single mothers in fulfilling their physiological needs and economic independence through the provision of information and limited financial aid. Social workers are not obliged to dispense psychological counseling. Moreover, the concept of shame limits the resolution of problems within the confines of the family, group, or community. This acts as a barrier for single mothers from seeking assistance from professional counselors or mediators as a sense of shame is likely to arise.

The paucity of social supportive networks within the family and weak community ties makes it difficult for single mothers to seek outlets for alleviating stress and obtain support from others. This, in turn, increases the propensity for them to fall into depressive states of helplessness and despair. Recognizing the need to provide support for single mothers in Japan, several non-profit organizations and informal groups have introduced avenues for single mothers to seek various forms of physical and intangible assistance. Besides the organization of informative seminars and social activities, the formation of social networks among participants is also encouraged through the setup of virtual interactive platforms such as chatrooms and electronic bulletin boards. Through these interactive channels, users can benefit from the collective information source while beginning new social networks. This thesis examines the online exchange between participants of single mothers' BBS, accessing the efficacy of online social support and its complementary nature to face-to-face communication. In the following chapter, the methods employed in the research process will be explicated.

Chapter 3

METHODS

This chapter discusses the research design and presents the method that was adopted in the data collection process. Specifically, there will be an elaboration of both the sampling method employed in the compilation of messages posted on the bulletin board for single mothers and the criteria used for the codification process.

3.1 Content Analysis

The increasing popularity of the Internet has attracted the attention of a vast body of researchers. In general, Internet research has progressed in two directions. The first focuses on the people who use the Internet and the second on the text exchanged by the users. Both the user-based and the content-based approaches to the analysis of the Internet acknowledged that the text exchanged between the different users is the formative source of the Internet (Mitra 1996, 1997). As users simultaneously produce and consume these texts, a systematic analysis could shed some light not only on the content and implications of the text but also on the users who have produced the text.

In this thesis, content analysis will be employed as a method to examine the data collected in the research process. Broadly defined, *Webster's Dictionary of the English Language* (2003) identified content analysis as “an analysis of the manifest and latent content of a body of communicated material (as a book or film) through classification,

tabulation, and evaluation of its key symbols and themes in order to ascertain its meaning and probable effect.” Krippendorff (2004:34) asserts that content analysis is potentially one of the most important research techniques in the social sciences as “it makes sense of what is mediated between people—textual matter, symbols, messages, information, mass-media content, and technology-supported social interactions—without perturbing or affecting those who handle that textual matter.”

In content analysis, a researcher first constructs a world in which the texts make sense and can answer the specified research questions. A context renders perceptual data into readable texts and serves as the conceptual justification for reasonable interpretations. This initial process helps the researcher to identify a body of material to analyze and creates a system for recoding specific aspects of the material collected. Analytical constructs operationalize what the researcher knows about the context, specifically the network of correlations that are assumed to explain how available texts are connected to the possible answers to the research questions. The system of analysis may include counting the frequency which certain words or themes occur.

3.2 Virtual Ethnography

Methodological approaches to the study of computer-mediated communication contexts have varied widely and ethnography holds particular appeal as it treats online space as an ethnographic reality. Early approaches to the study of computer-mediated communication were technology-based and considered its use in organizational contexts.

The 'reduced social cues' model is perhaps the most influential of the technology-based approaches. This position was established through experimental studies on group decision-making (e.g. Kiesler *et. al.* 1984; Sproull and Kiesler, 1986, 1991). Ethnographers, on the other hand, preferred to avoid technology-determinist approaches and seek to explore the social contexts of online communication in its naturalistic settings through observation-based studies. Hine (2000:26) stresses that "once we think of cyberspace as a place where people do things, we can start to study just exactly what it is they do and why, in their terms, they do it." However, Hine also points out that moving ethnography to online settings involves a re-examination of what the methodology entails. The ethnographical approach involves the study of a small group of subjects in their own environment and this requires the ethnographer to spend a prolonged period on the field site observing and interacting with the subjects. In cyberspace, there is no physical 'space' in which the ethnographer can inhabit, and the asynchronous nature of online communication meant that ethnographers and their subjects need not share the same time frame. Moreover, the validity of the ethnographer's observations has traditionally relied on the breadth of observations and his/her sustained and involved presence in the field, which is compromised in electronically mediated contact prone to fabrication of identities.

The accessibility to the field site in the online environment enables ease of data collections as online material are often archived for future retrieval. However, a more active form of ethnographic engagement in the field also requires the ethnographer to go beyond lurking and downloading archives, to interact with the subjects. Markham (1998) suggests that reflexive engagement with the medium brings the interpretative problems of

being a user of the medium to the fore, and in this way provides new angles on the experience of being a user for exploration. Making this shift from an analysis of passive discourse to being an active participant in its creation allows for a deeper sense of understanding. A challenge which arises from an ethnographer's active involvement in the field is the negotiation of access and the requirement for self-presentation in ways acceptable to potential informants (Lindlof and Shatzer, 1998). The ethnographer is required to reveal his/her role as a researcher as non-compliance may result in participants to feel that their privacy has been infringed upon by researchers. Another consideration would be the negotiation of consent from participants during the duration of study. Negotiation of consent can be seen as an ongoing process throughout the ethnography, rather than an isolated initial event. In online settings however, the difficulties of negotiating consent with informants whose identities are unstable and whose presence may be ephemeral pose some problems for conventional notions of informed consent. Thus, the researcher needs to apply an ethnographic sensitivity to the recognition of potential ethical problems and the development of solutions that are appropriate in context, and these issues are heightened in the online environment.

Despite the establishment of research ethics and guidelines in recent years, the sphere and its boundaries are still fluid and ambiguously drawn. In most ethical guidelines, the core principles tend to be loosely worded and open to subjective interpretation. The ethical dimensions of research in online settings have been much debated. As online settings are heterogeneous, and so are the disciplines that study them, there is no single ethical code which can be applied wholesale. Tolich and Davidson

(1999) propose that most ethical codes can be reduced to a core of five principles, namely, (i) do no harm; (ii) voluntary participation; (iii) informed consent; (iv) avoid deceit; and (v) confidentiality or anonymity. Tolich and Davidson also suggest that these principles be used in concert rather than as individual proscriptions to ensure that research remains ethically accountable, while recognizing that in different research settings, different principles will predominate.

Recent research has begun to draw on discourse in online communication to help answer social-scientific questions (Preece 1999; Kahn 2002). In 2003, Kanayama conducted an ethnographic research on the experiences of an online community of elderly Japanese users. In this study, a content analysis was conducted on the messages exchanged between members of a mailing list of an online senior citizens' group. During the period of study from September 1999 to July 2000, there were approximately 120 subscribers to the mailing list and the average number of daily posted messages ranged from 20 to 40 messages. The messages were then categorized into three main themes; (1) styles and forms of the messages, (2) pattern of self disclosure, (3) patterns of interaction and construction of relationships. Kanayama also conducted in-depth telephone interviews with six female and seven male members, each interview lasting 30 to 60 minutes. In Kanayama's study, the content analysis revealed the issues which members were concerned with and identified the themes of discussion in the mailing list. The firsthand accounts of members' experiences obtained through the in-depth interviews provide supportive evidence for the researcher's conclusions. The methods employed in the abovementioned study would be utilized for this paper.

3.3 Research Design

This paper seeks to understand the social dynamics of computer-mediated communication and dimensions of online social support through a content analysis of messages posted in a single mothers' electronic bulletin board system (BBS). A general Internet search conducted via the Internet search engine, Google Japan generated 854,000 Japanese web pages related to single mother families and over 145,000 related to single mothers. Most of these were personal web pages belonging to individuals or small groups of single mothers. Most personal web pages consisted of a profile of the owner, a diary recounting their daily activities and a BBS for text exchange. Some personal web pages contained photo images and are linked to web pages of other single mothers. There were also some informative governmental sites which listed social services available for single mothers in various prefectures and wards. Two largest non-profit organizations (NPO) for single mothers, Single Mother's Forum (しんぐるまざあずふおーらむ) and Republic of Boshikatei⁹ (母子家庭共和国) had their own websites as well, and both were regularly updated and contained comprehensive information for visitors. NPO websites reaches out to a wider audience and contains communicative platforms for interaction between users; hence data obtained from these websites tend to represent a wider group of single mothers in Japan. In this paper, the Republic of Boshikatei's website was selected to form the data source as it is a prominent information source where single mothers can obtain advice on issues ranging from legal matters to personal dilemmas. The website also has a list of activities organized for single mother families and several

⁹ Boshikatei translates to 'mother-child family'

communicative platforms such as email magazines, electronic bulletin boards, online counseling, and an email exchange service for single parents looking for new partners. Thus the Republic of Boshikatei's website is popular among single mothers and others alike, and receives high user traffic. The Single Mothers Forum's website was not used in this paper as member registration was required to access the BBS.

The BBS on the Republic of Boshikatei's website is known as 'Communication BBS' (コミュニケーション掲示板) and it receives an average of 3 to 5 messages daily (Appendix A). Visitors to the BBS are advised to read and observe the regulations before participation. The BBS functions solely for communication between participants and all forms of solicitation is prohibited. Participants are proscribed from posting online surveys and questionnaires and recruitment of participants for research purposes. All new messages are assessed by the moderator of the BBS before being posted publicly.

The principle of 'informed consent' may not be possible when the research involves an irregular field such as cyberspace. In my research, I was unable to obtain informed consent from participants of the BBS I was studying as I was not permitted to solicit for informants through the BBS nor conduct online surveys. Although I managed to obtain consent from the moderator of the forum for data collection, it was not possible to seek the individual consent of the subjects under study. Similarly, I was unable to fulfill the principle of 'voluntary participation' as the participants were unaware that their contributions to the forum were being studied. However, I adhered to the other principles

and ensured privacy is maintained for the participants of the BBS throughout the research process.

Messages posted on the BBS were systematically collected over a four-month duration from 25 November 2003 to 25 March 2004. During the period of study, 145 participants participated in the BBS and 269 messages were collected. There were 76 original postings and 193 responses. Of these messages, 134 (52%) contained one or more dimensions of social support. These messages were systematically coded in accordance with the dimensions of social support established by Cutrona and Russell (1990) as mentioned above. In the coding process, terms and expressions found in these messages were classified into five categories: informational support, emotional support, network support, esteem support, and instrumental support. Table 4 presents an elaboration of the dimensions that were identified in the messages posted on the BBS.

Table 4. Dimensions of social support

Dimensions	Measurement
Informational support	Providing the individual with advice or guidance concerning possible solutions to a problem
Emotional support	The ability to turn to others for comfort and security during times of stress, leading the person to feel that he or she is cared for by others

Network support	Feeling part of a group whose members have common interests and concerns
Esteem support	Bolstering of a person's sense of competence or self-esteem by other people
Instrumental support	Concrete tangible assistance, in which a person in a stressful situation is given the necessary resources (e.g. financial assistance, physical help with tasks)

In addition to textual analysis of messages posted on the BBS, a face-to-face interview with several participants of the BBS was made possible during my field study in Japan. After contacting several single mothers' groups, an administrator of a non-profit organization for single mothers in Osaka introduced me to several single mothers who happened to be users of the BBS as well and they agreed to share their thoughts on their understanding of online social support. Their views on online social support are discussed in Chapter 5. The interview was instrumental in authenticating the real-life experiences of online participation. Accounts of their experiences and encounters added a textured description of "real" people who participated in online fora, thus providing credibility and a real-life dimension in a virtual environment.

The next chapter will look at the results of the statistical analyses carried out on the data gathered through the codification criteria that have been presented thus far.

Chapter 4

RESULTS

This chapter discusses the results of the content analysis in order to ascertain the supportive nature of the Republic of Boshikatei's BBS. In addition to a quantitative analysis of online text in posted messages, in-depth interviews with single mothers would reveal the social dynamics of their online experiences.

4.1 Results of Content Analysis

Table 5 presents a summary of the coding categories, and the percentage of messages containing each of the dimensions of social support in the postings on the BBS. Of the 134 messages which contained one or more dimensions of social support, results showed that many participants engaged in informational support (44%), emotional support (7%), network support (8%), and esteem support (9%). By contrast, there were no messages of relevance to instrumental support.

Table 5. Results of Content Analysis of Messages

Dimensions	No. of messages
Informational support	119 (44%)
Emotional support	19 (7%)
Network support	22 (8%)
Esteem support	25 (9%)
Instrumental support	0 (0%)

Given the centrality of qualitative results in this study, I would like to explicate the coding categories. By doing so, I aim to bring the reader closer to the data to feel the distinctions and texture in the messages posted by participants. The quotations that follow are translated to the best of my ability.

4.1.1 Multiple Coding

It is necessary to emphasize that single segments of a message could elicit multiple codes. The following example illustrates how one message is multiple-coded.

Example 1

“Hello! It must be a really difficult time for you now. I can totally understand that! From Kansai I came to Tokyo, a place I did not understand, right before my eldest son would have his senior high school entrance examinations. In addition, in October, it was the time when we had to make a decision about the choice of schools to go. Firstly, I chose a school which has a good and comfortable environment because it is a place where one spends the longest time each day. And I also wanted a place that is not too far from elementary and high schools for my third son who was of kindergarten age then. Although such places exist, the rent was exceedingly high. However, I took a loan under my brother’s name on the condition that I am living together with him, so now I am living in a relatively inexpensive 3DK condominium in this region. Although I work

part-time in the early morning at the convenience store, I have a full-time lifestyle. However, it is ok as my workplace is within 5 minutes from my home. I constantly tell my children that I want them to cooperate while living as a community. Although there are various problems, school is enjoyable, which has made them feel comfortable, and the children have been attending school everyday without absence. If you believe in your children's infinite potential, and try to have a deep physical contact (skinship) with them, a little endurance will help them grow up well. As your son is an only child, my family situation may be different from yours. However, why don't you start with a part time job with flexible hours near your residence first? In order to stabilize your life, I would recommend a full time job whereby you can get your salary every month. These days, there aren't many... But do not give up! Think of various ways, and please take it up as a challenge. Be firm, and think about bringing up your daughter! Let us work hard together for the sake of independence and freedom!"

こんにちは！今、とても気持ち的に苦しい時ですよ。とてもよく分かります！「何を一番に考えるか」私は、関西から知らない東京という土地に、長男が高校受験の、しかも10月という志望校決定の次期に来ました。まず、一日のうち一番長く生活する、学校だけは、良い環境で落ち着いている所を選択しました。そして、保育園児だった三男が小学校に上がる時に、通う学校が遠くなく、中学校も遠くなく・・・それがあったんですが、地域的に家賃が非常に高

く悩みました。でも、弟が同居し弟名義で借りる事を条件に、この地域ではお安く3DKのマンションに今も住んでいます。その分、私は早朝のコンビニでもパートをしながら、フルタイムという生活ですが、仕事場がすべて家から5分以内という高条件で、クリアしています。子どもには、何回も話し皆で共同生活に協力して欲しいと伝えました。色々ありますが、学校が楽しいことですっかり落ち着き休むことなく、通っています。子どもの無限の力を信じて、中身の濃いスキンシップを心がけると少しの我慢は、成長になると思います。お子さんがお一人なので、我が家のようにはいかないのかもしれませんが、まずは、ご実家に近い所で、仕事も時間を選べるパートなどを探されたらいかがでしょう？安定には、少なくとも月給で頂けるフルタイムがおすすめです。今、なかなかないんですよね……。でも、諦めないで！！色々な方法を考えて、チャレンジして下さい。しっかりした、娘さんに育つと思いますよ！お互い自立と自由のために頑張りましょうね！”

This message was coded under two categories of social support, namely informational support and esteem support as it contained both advice on housing and employment arrangements, and encouraging expressions providing positive affirmation. This message epitomizes the fundamental issues single mothers encounter, i.e. housing and employment. While they grapple with financial difficulties, single mothers appear to possess a resilient and enduring attitude as their priority is to bring up their children in a

conducive environment. Participants tend to include their personal accounts in the provision of advice. This feature helps newcomers to the BBS feel less intimidated as they are aware that others are sharing similar experiences.

4.1.2 Informational Support

Informational support refers to the provision of advice or guidance concerning possible solutions to a problem. Among the messages posted, most messages (44%) are classified as relating to an exchange of information and advice. The BBS functions as a source of practical information for issues such as physical wellbeing, management of finances, employment opportunities, parenting, divorce, abortion, and other child-rearing related topics. Although the BBS is established for single mothers to interact online, participants who were not single mothers were equally active in the BBS. During the period of study, participants of the BBS included a single father, 2 children from single-mother households, twelve women contemplating divorce or abortion, and even a man who needed advice on dissuading his girlfriend from getting an abortion. Unplanned pregnancies, childrearing, and divorce were the most common issues discussed.

Unplanned pregnancies

The high frequency of messages seeking advice on unplanned pregnancies seems to illustrate that participants who are single mothers will be able to dispense appropriate advice based on their wealth of experience. Although the number of single-mother

families is rising, it is largely due to divorce and unmarried single mothers are uncommon as children from these families are highly discriminated as a result of their illegitimate status. Thus requests for advice on unplanned pregnancies tend to be from unmarried women who find themselves pregnant but are unsure of their prospects for marriage. Responses from single mothers providing advice on unplanned pregnancies also illustrate their stance against abortion. All single mothers who responded indicated the difficulties of maintaining single-mother households, while relating their happiness with their children. Although they are economically restrained, these mothers found their lives better off apart from their ex-husbands and are contented with their decision to become single mothers.

In this message, the participant was seeking advice on her unplanned pregnancy with a divorced partner. Although her partner has two children from a previous marriage, he is not contributing to the child maintenance payments as he claimed that his ex-wife rejected his offer. The participant is torn between having the child and terminating the pregnancy and hopes to seek some resolution through her participation in the BBS.

Example 2

“I am a 23 year-old ‘freeter’¹⁰. Today at the hospital I was told that I am pregnant. I was worried when my period was late so I went for a check.

My partner is, of course, a guy I am dating. He is a divorcee with two

¹⁰ “Freeter” is a Japanese word recently coined by combining the English word ‘free’ and the German word ‘Arbeiter’ (laborer). Typically freeters are young people who do not have a permanent full-time job, but have one or more part-time jobs or move from one short-term job to another.

children ... I love children and I really want to bear this child. But I cannot be selfish about this, and I am troubled.”

私は23歳のフリーターです。今日病院で妊娠していると言われました。生理が遅れていて、心配になり検査をしました。相手はもちろん付き合っている彼です。彼はバツイチで子供が2人います。…私は子供が大好きで本当は産みたいんです。でもワガママも言えず、悩んでいます。

The following message was posted by a participant who is currently a single mother pregnant with her boyfriend’s child. The latter’s parents objected to their marriage as she has children from a previous marriage, illustrating the social stigma which impedes single mothers from remarriage.

Example 3

“I am a 26-year-old, and I have two daughters with my ex-husband. Now I am pregnant with child with my current boyfriend. Abortion is absolutely undesirable, and I do want to marry my boyfriend. However, his parents are very much opposed and they say “It is ridiculous for our son to have to look after your ex-husband’s children”. I am weary from thinking of ways to convince his parents otherwise. I am considering remaining single as it is and giving birth to my child.”

あたしは26歳、前の旦那との間に2人娘がいます。そして今の彼の子を妊娠しています。中絶は絶対嫌だし彼とも結婚したいと思っ

ているのですが彼の親がすごい反対していて「前の旦那の子をうちの息子が面倒みるのはおかしい」と言われます。どうしたら彼の親を説得できるのか考えるのも疲れました。このままシングルで生もうかと考えています

The following message was posted by a man who was seeking advice on his girlfriend's unplanned pregnancy. Although he wanted to get married and have a child, his girlfriend is considering abortion as she desires to enjoy her life while she is still young and she claims to be unprepared for motherhood.

Example 4

“In such times, what kind of words is best when I talk to my girlfriend, what is best for us to do, please give us your advice.”

こんなとき、彼女にどんな言葉 をかけてやればいいのか、僕たちはどうするのがベストなのか、みなさま何かアドバイスがあればお願いします。

In response, one participant provided some advice.

Example 5

“You can try talking a little more to her? Firstly, tell her that there is ‘life’ in her womb, not a ‘thing’. Next, there is no one who is confident of being

a ‘parent’ from the beginning (maybe there is), although she may feel the anxiety, you are ready to surmount the difficulties together with her. And the both of you, together with your child, will be able to enjoy life.”

もう少し、お相手にお話してみても如何でしょう。まずはお腹の中に“もの”ではなく“いのち”があるのだという事。次に最初から“親”になる自信がある人はいない(居るかも知れないが)、不安はあるかも知れないが一緒に乗り越えて行こうというあなたの気持ち。そしてお二人と子供との人生も楽しめるだろうという事。

Childrearing

The BBS also functions as an informative source where participants can seek and provide useful data on matters related to childrearing. The large, heterogeneous mix of participants enabled single mothers with children from different age groups to obtain relevant information required. Single mothers with older children can share their expertise in childrearing issues with mothers with young infants. Participants are also able to benefit from professional health advice given by single mothers who are in the nursing profession as illustrated below. In the following example, a participant is replying to a request for information on influenza immunization shots. This participant, who is a nurse, often administered professional advice to health-related queries from others.

Example 6

“Hi Nagisa-san, I am Masami, a mother of 3 children who have graduated from nursery school. In answer to your question [should children in communal environments receive influenza immunization] it’s definitely better for them to do so. All members of my family receive it every year. If it is received every year, the immunization accumulates little by little, and it becomes more difficult to get infected. By the way, we have been receiving immunization since 4 years ago, and we have not gotten ill once. Before we started immunizing ourselves, every year the whole family will be affected by influenza. We are grateful for the vaccination. Since the vaccine easily gets out of stock, we make a reservation in early November, and get vaccinated by the end of November. (those under 13 years of age must be immunized twice). By December, even if you have a reservation it might be too late to have a vaccination, so do pay attention.”

はじめまして、なぎささん。保育園児を3人卒業させた母の Masami です。インフルエンザの予防接種をしたほうがいいのか？どうかの答えなら、集団生活をしておられる子供さんは、絶対したほうがいいです。私の家族は全員、毎年受けます。毎年受けていると、少しずつ「免疫」が蓄積して、ますますかかりにくくなるそうです。ちなみに、我が家は、予防接種を受け初めて4年目になりますが、4年間家族全員かかってません。予防接種を受ける前は、家庭行事のように毎年家族全滅でした。ほんとに予防接種さまざまですよ。

ワクチンが無くなるので、11月に入ってすぐ予約をして、11月末には接種します（13歳未満は2回接種です。）12月に入ると、予約は取れても接種時期が遅くなるので、気をつけてね。

Single mothers are equally concerned about their children's developmental stages and some are unsure about the phases of growth a child goes through. The following message was posted by a mother who is concerned that her child is too introverted and withdrawn. She is contemplating to send her daughter for a learning activity that will boost her confidence and make her less shy.

Example 7

“From before, I have thought that I will let my child do something when she turns four, but on weekdays I am at work, and my daughter is at nursery school. Yes, it is restricted to Saturdays and Sundays if she takes up learning activities. Although I think I want to spend as much time as possible playing together with my daughter during the weekends. Conversely, it sounds like a good idea to enjoy learning activities. What are the learning activities which can only be done on weekends? If it helps her to have self-confidence anything is fine. If there is anyone who has his/her children engaged in learning activities, please share your information.”

私も前々から4歳になったら何かやらせたいと思っていたのですが、平日は私は仕事、娘は保育園。習い事をやるとすると土・日しか

ないんです。土日は出来るだけ一緒に居て遊んであげたいと思うのですが、逆に、楽しんで習い事をするのもいいかなと思っています。ただ、土日しかやってない習い事って何があるんだろう？自身を持ってくれるなら何でもいいんです。お子さんに習い事させてる方いらっしゃったら情報下さい。

The heterogeneous mix of participants in the BBS facilitates the formation of a collective information source as illustrated above.

Divorce

Divorce is the largest contributing factor to the rise in number of single-parent families in Japan. In the BBS, economic hardship and unfaithfulness are most frequently cited as reasons for divorce. Participants are more concerned about the impact of divorce on their children and many are holding on to irreconcilable marriages so as to maintain a functional two-parent family unit. Moreover, divorce results in various uncertainties in life as most single mothers have to establish economic independence almost immediately after years of relegation to the domestic sphere. The following message is from a woman who is contemplating divorce due to the economic hardships in her marriage. She disclosed that her husband is a bankrupt, a frequent job-hopper and lacks a sense of responsibility to the family.

Example 8

“Hello. As I am not a single mother I was not sure if it was ok for me to write an entry here but please listen to my problem. This spring I got pregnant with my boyfriend of five years and we took this chance to get married and I gave birth to my child this summer. My husband has many debts and is in a state of bankruptcy. ... I was brought up in a single-mother family myself. Although living with my uncle, his wife, and my grandmother in the same household was not uncomfortable, I always wished I had my father with me. In the past, just because I was from a single-parent family, I encountered discrimination from some parents of my friends. It was my dream to have my child go camping with her father, and engage in various activities together with her father. However, looking at my husband lately, I do not see him working hard for the sake of our child. I am looking in the direction of divorce, but please give me your most forthright advice.”

はじめまして。シングルマザーではまだありませんのでこちらに書き込みをしてよいのか迷いましたが、悩みを聞いて下さい。今年春に5年つき合った彼と妊娠を機に入籍し夏に出産しました。旦那は借金がたくさんあり、破産もしています。… 私自身も母子家庭で育ちましたが、母の兄夫婦や祖母も同居で不自由なく育ちましたが、やはりお父さんがいてほしかったです。昔は母子家庭だというだけで差別する友達の親達もいました。私には出来なかったお父さんと

一緒にキャンプに行ったりと色々な事をさせてあげるのが夢でした。でも、最近の旦那を見ていると子供の為に頑張っているようにはとても見えないです。離婚する方向だと思いますが、みなさんの厳しい意見をお聞かせください。お願いします。

The following message relates a woman's struggles with her marriage and the subsequent birth of her child, leading to her decision to seek a divorce. Like most women contemplating divorce, this participant is making a decision based on what she feels is best for her child over her own needs. Her concerns also reveal a strong belief in the traditional two-parent family environment as ideal for a child's growth.

Example 9

“This is my first entry. Actually, I am currently discussing with my husband whether we should seek a divorce and what I should do. We have been married for about two years. Since our marriage we never stop quarrelling, and I am too nervous, my husband has come to dislike it. ... after giving birth, my husband's behavior became worse and I discovered his unfaithfulness. ... My husband seems to dislike himself for his misbehaviors and thinks that it is not a good idea if we stay together. My parents live separately without having a divorce and keep a good relationship, and my husband wants to do the same. Although I understand my parents' intention (as I am an only child) I'm still having a tough time. If he lives separate from us, I am thinking it may be a better idea for

my child. But I am unsure if we are really doing it for the child, I'm at a loss I think there are some odd expressions in my writing, but I would like to hear your opinions please. I do not have any married friends around me, so I cannot discuss this matter.

初めてレスします。実は、今旦那と離婚しようかどうかどうしたらいいのか話し合っています。結婚して二年が過ぎようとしています。結婚してからけんかがたえず、私が神経質すぎて、旦那がそれを嫌がる日々。。。。 出産してから、旦那の行動がおかしくなり、浮気発覚。。。。旦那もそんな自分が嫌らしく、一緒に居たらよくないんじゃないかと悩んでいるそうです。 私の両親は、離婚せず別居していてちょうどいい関係になっているのですが、旦那もそうしたいと言い出して。。。私は、自分の両親のそういう姿をみてきて、納得はしているけど、一人っ子だったしやはりつらい気持ちでいるのに、旦那とそんなになるくらいなら、子供のために別れたほうがと考えています。でも本当に子供のためになるのかで、私は迷っているのです。ちょっと文章的におかしいところがあると思いますが、皆さんのいろいろなご意見をお聞かせください。私の周囲には、まだ結婚している人がいず、相談できません。

4.1.3 Emotional Support

Emotional support refers to the ability to turn to others for comfort and security during times of stress, leading the individual to feel loved, cared for, and understood by others (Cutrona and Russell, 1990). Participants are comforted to receive acknowledgement from others of their online presence, lessening their sense of social isolation. 19 messages (7%) were found to contain emotionally supportive content. In the following message, a single mother related her experience participating in the BBS. Despite the problems her children have encountered, she is contented with her life and receives affirmation from other participants in the BBS.

Example 10

“My eldest son left school at seventeen (now he’s working part-time while attending night school), and under police guidance, my 15 year-old second son is taking his senior high entrance examinations...My 7 year-old son having difficulty in studying, there are various issues but right now, we are happy. When I first read everyone’s messages, I felt encouraged.”

長男 17 歳の高校中退（今はバイトをしながら、夜間に通っています）警察に補導や、次男 15 歳の高校受験・・・7 歳の三男の学習問題と、色々ありますが、今、幸せです。皆さんの投稿を始めて見たときは、勇気づけられました。

Children from single-mother families also participate in the BBS, as evident from one message by a man who wanted to show his support for single mothers. Public perceptions of children from single-mother families have been largely negative, as it is believed that a dysfunctional family environment cultivates delinquency and deviant behavior. In his message, he listed his achievements to illustrate that children from single-mother families can excel in life like others. Despite his background, he now has his own house in a prime area in Tokyo, and has lived overseas in Europe and America. Besides being engaged in several managerial positions, he also teaches at the University of Tokyo and is the author of several books.

Example 11

“After viewing this BBS, I wanted to support it so I posted this message.

... I’m embarrassed that my message of support seems to have become a message promoting myself, but my intention is to let everyone know there is a man who was brought up in such a single-mother family.”

この掲示板を拝見して応援したく投稿しました。…なにか応援のつもりが自分の宣伝になったみたいで恥ずかしいのですが、こういう母子家庭で育った男がいることを知っていただきたく書き込みました。

The following message was posted by a participant who wanted to show her admiration for single mothers and the struggles they go through to bring up their children.

Example 12

“Three years ago I chose abortion after a lot of hair-pulling. I absolutely should not have done that. I live in regret everyday. Like all of you here, I should have the courage to choose to be a single mother. So I am cheering for single mothers. There may be difficult times, but you are holding on to something that money cannot buy...”

私は悩んだ末3年前に中絶を選択してしまったものです。絶対にいけませんでした。毎日後悔しています。皆さんのように、シングルマザーを勇気を持って選択するべきでした。ですから、応援しています。大変な事もあるかもしれませんが、それ以上にお金で買えない物を手にしているのですから…。

4.1.4 Network Support

Network support refers to feeling part of a group whose members have common interests and concerns. 22 messages (8%) were coded under the category of ‘network support’. In the BBS, participants are able to empathize with each other as they have gone through similar life experiences. Locating others who share similar realities also contributes to a sense of solidarity. In the following message, a single mother relates her sentiments upon joining the BBS, echoing many other participants’ responses as well.

Example 13

“I do not have friends who are single mothers in my social circle; since the feeling is different, when I speak to friends who have a husband and children, our conversations are not on the same wavelengths....I really felt reassured from everyone’s replies. Listening to everyone’s stories, I found out that everyone is doing their best under various circumstances, and I feel overwhelmed with courage. ‘I must do my best too!’”

周りに 母子家庭の友達もいないし 旦那子供のいる友達に話してもやっぱり 感覚が全然違うので 話がかみ合わなくて・・・。
みなさん いろいろレス下さって ほんとに心強いです。みなさんのいろいろな話を聞いて いろいろな状況の中 がんばっておられるので私も がんばろう！って 勇気が湧いてきました。

In another message, 2 single mothers found that their ex-husbands displayed identical behaviors.

Example 14

“How do you do, without much thought I posted this message because your ex-husband greatly resembles mine. In my case too, my ex-husband made a complete change from his usual self. He said, “If you are not around...” and kept crying. After having a child, he said, “now I cannot escape” which is also the same. ‘The same people do exist’, I thought to

myself... You are not alone because you have a friend who thinks just like you!”

初めまして、元旦那さんスッゴク似ていて思わずレスしちゃいます。普段とは一変して私の場合も、元旦那「お前が居ないと…」って泣いてました。子供が出来て、もう逃げられないって言うのも同じく。同じ人居るもんだなと・・・ここで同じに思う仲間がいるから一人じゃないですよ！！

4.1.5 Esteem support

Esteem support refers to the provision of encouragement and positive feedback, bolstering one’s sense of self-worth. 25 messages (9%) contained encouraging and reassuring expressions exchanged between participants. In the following example, a participant was responding to a message seeking advice on an unplanned pregnancy. Besides sharing her personal experience, the latter left words of encouragement.

Example 15

“Whatever it is, pick yourself up from the current hardship and please do your best.”

どうか、今の苦しみをバネにしっかり自分を見つめ直して、頑張ってください。

In the following message, a single mother encourages a single father who is facing child custody issues with his ex-wife.

Example 16

“For this matter, I think as human beings it is wrong. I wrote this message as I felt excessively angry too. Children cannot understand and they simply believe what their mother says, I guess. Daenkyu-san, the time will certainly come for them to understand. Do not lose sight of yourself, whatever you can do now, please do your best.”

それって、人間として間違ってると思います。あまりにも腹が立ったのでメールしています。子供は何にも解らず母親の言いなりになっているのしょうね、きっと。でも、楢岡球さん、将来ぜったいにわかる時が来ますよ。自分を見失わず、今出来ることを一生懸命がんばってくださいね。

In the following message, a single mother related her difficulties in bringing up four children single-handedly and ended her message with an encouragement to all single mothers to persevere for themselves and their children.

Example 17

“When you cannot understand, just say “I do not understand, please teach me!” You will be able to find the answers. When times are difficult, it is ok to say “it is tough!” and it is also ok to cry. By all means look forward!

For your future, and also for your children's future, be thankful to be alive without many desires, and try your best! While looking for happiness, look forward without hesitation!"

分からない事は、「わからない！教えて！」と言いましょう。何らかの答えが、見つかります。辛いときは「辛い！」と泣いてもいいんです！でも、とにかく前向きに！自分人生も、子どもの人生も、多くを望まず生きていることに、感謝して頑張りましよう！楽しいをさがしながら、堂々と前を向いて！

4.1.6 Instrumental support

Instrumental support refers to tangible assistance rendered to individuals in need, including physical items such as money, material goods, and services. During the period of study, no messages were found to contain references to instrumental support. This phenomenon was anticipated as instrumental support requires a physical medium and face-to-face contact. In an online environment, groups tend to be made up of wide social networks of loosely tied relationships limited to the virtual realm, thus incompatible for the exchange of physical aid. Although exchange of online instrumental support exists, it is usually found among groups which are well-established and have members who meet offline on a regular basis.

Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the impact of the communicative medium in shaping interpersonal behavior and the emergent characteristics of online communication, namely, self-disclosure, sharing of personal experiences, emotional ventilation, and flaming. An account of a face-to-face interview with three single mothers is also included in this chapter.

5.1 Characteristics of messages

The content of messages posted on the BBS is a clear reflection of issues single mothers in Japan face today. Most participants of the BBS encounter financial difficulties and constraints in their lifestyle choices. The most common issues discussed involved choice of housing, (subsidized housing, cost and location), and employment (job prospects, appropriate remuneration, skills acquirement). Some messages were concerned with childrearing topics (flu vaccines, extracurricular activities). Participants also share their personal strategies for dealing with stress and depression, and recommend constructive books and television programs that they find inspirational.

Although most messages were posted by single mothers, there were occasional messages posted by single fathers and children from single-parent families. The BBS also serves as an advice column for individuals who encounter relationship woes. There were

several messages seeking advice on unplanned pregnancies, from both males and females. The number of messages posted by participants contemplating divorce was substantially large. All the participants in this category were women who cite domestic violence and spousal infidelity as reasons for seeking a divorce. These women have doubts about their ability to attain self-sufficiency and stable employment, and are concerned about the stigmatization their children may face in single-mother households.

It is evident that the exchange of information and advice is the most prevalent feature on the BBS. The knowledge-sharing leverage of a large, diverse group of people generates separate, non-overlapping personal networks of expertise. Single mothers are able to share their wealth of experience and knowledge in aspects ranging from mothering and struggles with financial independency, to crucial decisions such as abortion and divorce. Having gone through similar life stages, they are able to offer consolation and empathy to families who are just starting out as single-parent units.

The coding process revealed several distinct characteristics of the messages. They are namely self-disclosure, sharing of personal experiences, emotional ventilation, and flaming. In the BBS, participants tend to reveal private aspects of their lives and share their personal life experiences while participating in the discussions. The BBS serves as a convenient venue to ease the tensions of daily life as participants can post messages at their convenience and the amount of privacy desired can be controlled by the amount of information participants choose to provide. Another feature of the BBS was the significant number of messages which were neither eliciting nor providing any form of

support from other participants; rather, these messages appear to resemble personal diary entries. Despite the intention of the BBS to facilitate communication between single mothers, it can be appropriated by individuals for disconcerting purposes. In the four-month duration, one participant posted a disparaging comment on single mothers which stimulated a flurry of activity on the BBS. These characteristics will be discussed below.

5.1.1 Self-disclosure

It was noted that more than 80% of the messages contained self-disclosure content. Self-disclosure include revealing information on one's family structure (number of children, age of children, living with parents), marital status (divorced, separated, widowed, years of divorce/separation), reasons for divorce/separation (victims of domestic violence, financial difficulty, unfaithfulness, incompatibility). Some participants also provide links to their personal homepages in their messages. Participants display a certain degree of intimacy and willingness to share very personal information, and this is most evident among those who participate on a regular basis.

Example 18

“This is my first contribution (to this BBS). In my 10th year of marriage...due to discrepancy with my husband's character etc...(that is the most important point) in August I moved out and now we are at a stage of separation. Although I have two children in elementary school...now I

am working part-time and definitely living a much happier life compared to the past.”

初めて投稿します。私は結婚10年目で. . . 主人との性格の不一致など (など. . . という所が重要) から8月に家を出て別居状態です。小学生の子供が2人いますが. . . パート勤務しながら以前より. . . 断然楽しく暮らしています。

Example 19

This is my first time to this web page and my first posting. When I was 16 I married the man my parents decided on, and almost immediately, I got a divorce. Soon after I ran away to a university overseas, and I gave birth to my child. It has been already 12 years since I became a single mother. Although I have encountered much prejudice and hardships, now I think it is really good to have a child!

初めてこのページに来て初投函させていただきます。
16で親の決めた人と結婚し、すぐ離婚。
その後海外の大学へ逃げるように逃亡し、出産。
シングルマザーとなり早12年になりました。
沢山の偏見や、苦労もあったのですが
子供がいてよかった！と今は本当にそう思います。

Participants' revelation of their personal information re-affirms their identity as single mothers and legitimizes their participation in a BBS meant for single mothers. This is particularly evident among new participants posting a message for the first time, where the need to establish legitimacy was felt most strongly. Disclosure of their household structure and conditions leading up to single motherhood reinforces the collective reality these participants share. The process of establishing legitimacy in online groups leads to strengthening of the community and group identity among its members.

Both experimental and anecdotal evidence suggests that computer-mediated communication can be characterized as containing high levels of self-disclosure. Rheingold (2000:102) claims that "the medium will, by its nature ... be a place where people often end up revealing themselves far more intimately than they would be inclined to do without the intermediation of screens and pseudonyms." In their study of relationships formed by Internet users, Parks and Floyd (1996) found that people reported disclosing significantly more in their Internet relationships compared to their real-life relationships. McKenna *et al.* (2002) found evidence that people are more able to express their 'true' selves on the Internet, which may involve disclosing information about the self that would normally be socially unacceptable. A plausible reason for the high level of self-disclosure in online communication is the anonymity provided by the Internet. Users are able to regulate the amount of information they choose to reveal about themselves while their awareness of other users is lowered due to the anonymous nature of online participation.

5.1.2 Sharing personal experiences

Sharing of personal experiences was a common feature found in the messages posted by the participants. Replies contained short narratives and were anchored in personal experiences. When responding to a posting seeking advice and/or information for a particular issue, participants would start off by relating similar incidents they have experienced before offering advice and information. The process of verbalizing one's emotional problems produces a normalizing effect and mitigates feelings of depression. Moreover, the knowledge that one's advice can be helpful for another increases participants' self-esteem and self-worth. In the following reply to a request for advice on unplanned pregnancy, a participant narrates her experience of having to make a decision between continuing or terminating the pregnancy, and the decision to re-marry.

Example 20

“I am currently five months pregnant. I have a history of divorce, and the child I am carrying now belongs to my boyfriend I am seeing now. After the divorce I met my current boyfriend and our relationship progressed naturally and we started living together. After seeing him for six months, I noticed changes in my body. My period stopped, and I went to buy a pregnancy kit to check if I was pregnant. The result was positive. I was very troubled over the decision to keep the child or to abort it. I have a history of divorce, and I have bad memories from my previous marriage so I did not want to get married. ... Now I am living each day with the

feeling of my child moving within me. I will soon marry my boyfriend and enter his family register. My point is that we need to give serious consideration with regards to life. You should think about the fact that you are conceiving a new life within your body.”

現在私は、妊娠5ヶ月です。離婚歴がありお腹の子は、離婚後に付き合った彼との子です。離婚後すぐ彼と出会い自然の流れで同棲をはじめました。付き合ってから半年ぐらいに、体の異変に気がつきました。生理がこなくなり、なんとなくだるくてすぐ検査薬で検査してみました。結果は陽性でした。生むか生まないかすごく一悩みました。私は離婚歴があるし、前の結婚で大変な思いをしてるので結婚はしたくないと思いました。…今はこの子の胎動を感じながら生活をしています。彼とはもう入籍する手前です。私が言えることは、命について死ぬ気で考えることが大事だと思います。自分の体に新しい命を宿しているということを考えるべきだと思います。

It was also noted that some messages providing information included caveats in their replies, used mainly when one’s answer is based on their own personal experience.

Example 21

“This is my personal opinion based on my experience …”

私の経験からの勝手な意見ですが…

Example 22

“This is only my personal opinion ...”

ただ、自分の意見のみ・・・

5.1.3 Emotional Ventilation

Emotional ventilation refers to messages that contain emotional expressions and are not particularly seeking advice, information or support of any kind. These messages are usually complaints and grouses about personal problems or issues one is currently facing. These messages do not elicit response but posting them seems to provide the user with some form of emotional relief. These messages could also arise from participants who are appealing for sympathy and wants recognition for putting up with stressful life events. The BBS thus functions as a forum for airing grievances. These messages can be seen as a form of emotional expression by participants who seem to lack social companions in their offline community. The following messages resemble diary entries relating one’s reflections and thoughts as compared to messages which solicited replies from other members. In Example 23, a single mother complained about her difficulties with her new job. Example 24 and 25 resembled diary entries as two single mothers relate about events in their life.

Example 23

“This is Renmei, who occasionally comes to this BBS. I live with my two young daughters and since I have no one to talk to about my problems, please let me grumble a little here.”

時々こちらにお邪魔させていただいている Renmei です。
幼い娘と 2 人暮らしで悩みなどをお話する相手がないものだから、
チョッと此方で愚痴らせてください。

Example 24

“When Christmas approaches, I will recall my ex-husband, who has never spent Christmas together with the child.... “I have a party with my friends” he would say. He has never given any presents too. (Since he did not give us living expenses, that was expected). I wonder what children meant to him? When we were getting a divorce, “if you and the child are not around, I do not know the meaning for living anymore!” he cried as he said this. That is plainly sleep talking! I thought to myself. When the child was born, “now I cannot run away anymore” he said. Surely he thought the child was nothing more than an instrument that was tying him down. Seven years of time and money wasted. The only good that came out of this was the chance to encounter my children. Although I just wanted ordinary happiness, unexpectedly, being ‘ordinary’ is the most difficult to achieve, lately I have been thinking. Although I am unable to create the happiness consisting of “father, mother, and child”, I want to be happy with my child. This has been a warm yet a little painful Christmas for the two of us.”

クリスマスになると、子供と一緒に過ごしてくれなかった元夫のことを思い出す・・・。「友達とパーティがあるから。」って言われて。プレゼントも一度もくれなかったなあ。（生活費もくれないんだから、当然だけども。）あの人にとって子供って、なんだったんだろう？離婚する時、「おまえと子供がいなかったら、なんのために生きてるかわからない！」って泣きながら言ってた。寝言は寝て言え！！って思った。子供が生まれた時、「もう逃げられなよ。」って言われた。きっと私を縛り付ける道具としか思ってなかったんだろうなあ。時間とお金を無駄にした七年間。かわいい息子に出会えただけで、今は良しとしてます。ふつうの幸せが欲しかったはずなんだけど、「ふつう」が案外一番難しいんじゃないかって、最近思う。「父と母と子供」っていう幸せは作れなかったけど、子供と二人で幸せになりたいなあ。子供と二人、あったかくてちょっとせつないクリスマスでした。

Example 25

“In the recent three and a half years of confusion, I finally got a divorce. But even now when I think about my husband, when somebody talks about him, and when the phone rings I almost have a fit and hyperventilate. If he is near, I will be thrown into a panic shaking from the fright and tears. Lately I finally manage to have a good night’s rest. It worries me to think about his non-payment of child-rearing expenses, but even the divorce

itself, to me, is worthwhile. However as I am a single mother, I want to shine beautifully, I do not want to become haggard...maybe I should go on diet? I want money..."

最近3年半悩んで、とうとう離婚できました。でも未だに旦那の事考えたり、言われたり、電話がかかると過呼吸の発作が起きそうになります。旦那が近づくと涙と恐怖で震えがとまらなくてパニックになってしまいます。最近やっと夜眠ることが出来るようになりました。養育費も全く貰ってない状態でこの先どうしよう！なんて考えながら、別れられただけでも私にとって価値あるんですよ。でも、シングルママだから綺麗に輝きたいかな～って、やつれたく無いし～ダイエットでもしようかな？お金欲しい～

5.1.4 Flaming

Another feature noted was a surge in postings responding to a flaming message posted by a disgruntled individual. Flaming messages contain insulting criticisms or aggressive remarks meant to incite anger within an online communicative network. The social psychological approach suggests that the lack of social context cues in computer-mediated communication results in a disinhibiting effect on participants. Online aggression can be explained as a disinhibition in the light of the lack of social context cues, leading participants to focus more on themselves than on other participants (Joinson, 1998). Castella *et al.*(2000) compared levels of flaming between groups discussing a

dilemma in three environments, email, videoconferencing, and face-to-face. Results showed that the occurrence of flaming was significantly higher in the text-based discussions than face-to-face or videoconferencing. In their study of organizational communication, Sproull and Kiesler (1986) similarly found that flaming occurred more often in email than in face-to-face interaction. In the message below, a participant related his/her parent's negative experience with single mothers at the workplace and concluded that single mothers were a selfish and inconsiderate group.

Example 26

“Excuse me but, I have come to dislike people who are brought up in single-mother families arising from divorce. The reason is because my parent has received unpleasant behavior at the workplace from two people brought up in single-mother families. Although they are adults, their behavior is as detestable as that of a high school student. My parent played a crucial part in their marriage ceremony and now feels betrayed. Although previously I have nothing against single-mother families, I am very angry with these people who are ungrateful and do hurtful acts to others calmly. By the way, in my high school days problem kids were all from single-parent families or remarried ones. I think that people from single-parent families arising from divorce have nasty attitudes. They are kind with themselves but unforgiving with others. Their viewpoints are biased. Why are they so unforgiving with others? To those around them, it is unpleasant. The number of people who casually engage in sexual

intercourse and produce children, only to get divorce within a few years is increasing. The children are very pitiful. I wish that the number of single-parent families do not rise.”

すみませんが、私は離婚による母子家庭で育った人の事が嫌いになりました。理由は私の親が職場で母子家庭で育った人間2人に嫌な態度を受けているからです。大人なのにそこまでするかというほど中学生のようなあきれられる態度です。私の親はその人の結婚式の発起人まで務めたのに裏切られた気持ちです。以前は別に片親家庭を何とも思っていませんでしたが、この人たちが今までの恩を忘れ平気で他の人たちへ傷つける行動をとっていることに腹が立ちます。ちなみに私が中学生のときの問題児もほぼ全員が離婚でできた片親家庭の人およびその再婚者です。親が離婚してできた片親家庭の人は態度がきついと思います。でも自分に優しく他人に厳しいと思います。見方が片寄っています。なぜそんなに他人に厳しいのでしょうか。周りの人にとっては不愉快です。簡単に性行為をして子供を作り、数年で離婚する人が増えていますが、その子供達がかawaiiそうです。片親 家庭が増えないことを願います。

The aggressive message reveals that the public stereotype of single mothers held by some individuals remains highly negative. The author of the message assumed that single-mother households are formed due to the irresponsibility of women who “casually engage in sexual intercourse and produce children, only to get divorce within a few

years.” The author also implied that single-parent households are breeding grounds for delinquents: “By the way, in my high school days problem kids were all from single-parent families or remarried ones.” Such negative viewpoints reflect the social discrimination against single mothers and discredit their ability to bring up their children well.

However, flaming need not be seen as destructive and conflict can have social functions. Through identification of insiders and outsiders and through the assertion of community values, episodes of conflict can be seen as strengthening the community rather than posing a threat. This is evident from the defensive content found in most responses to the flaming message. The controversial posting generated 44 responses over five days and many responses were from new participants previously unseen on the BBS. This finding reveals a significant number of passive participants or ‘lurkers’, defined as individuals who posts occasionally or not at all but are known to read the group's postings regularly. These participants could have been upset with the flaming message and felt the need to clarify the misconceptions held by the perpetrator of the flaming message. Responses to the flaming message ranged from polite refutation, defensive negation, to sarcastic retorts.

Polite

Example 27

“Now, you are still obsessed with the idea that ‘there are still many unpleasant fellows from single-mother families’, if you have time to spare,

please try to associate with various kinds of people. In this world, there are really many kinds of people.

今はまだ、「母子家庭の子どもは嫌なヤツが多い」という思いが大きいかも知れませんが、もし余裕ができたら、色々な人と付き合ってみてください。世の中には本当に色々な人がいます。

Defensive

Example 28

“But do you know all the people who were raised in single-mother households in this country? I know more than I can count with my fingers. There are both wonderful people and unpleasant people. Even among people who grew up with both parents, there are both wonderful people and unpleasant people.

でもね、あなたはこの国の、すべての「離婚による母子家庭で育った人」をご存じですか。私も両手で数えきれないほど知っています。素晴らしい人もいれば嫌な人もいます。両親の揃った家庭で育った人の中にも、素晴らしい人もいれば最低の人間もいます。

Sarcastic

Example 29

“I see (laughs). Well, from now on maybe it is wise for you to ignore absolutely anyone from single-mother families! I do not want to have any connection with people like you anyway so its to our convenience... Oh, but Fuman¹¹-san? It is advisable for you to stop judging other people’s viewpoints by your biased viewpoint.”

そうなんだ (笑) じゃ、これから母子家庭の人を片っ端から無視したほうが賢明かもねっ！私もそういう人とは関わりたくないから都合いいわ。。あ、でも不満さん？人の見方を片寄って見るのはやめたほうがいいと思うよ。

Example 30

“Anyway, people have their own respective ways of thinking; I pray that among Fuman-san’s relatives and friends, there will be no one from single-parent families. This is because they will be pitiful. (laughs)”

とにかく考え方は人それぞれですが、不満さんの身内やお知り合いの方に「片親家庭」が出来ないことを祈ります。その方がかわいそうですからね。笑

¹¹ ‘Fuman’ is a nickname used by the individual who posted the flaming message. ‘Fuman’ (不満) translates to discontent in the Japanese language.

5.2 The Internet as a medium shaping interpersonal behavior

While it is presumptuous to assume that the computer itself is the sole influence on communicative outcomes, the medium does affect the ways in which messages are packaged and processed. Two features of computer-mediated communication, visual anonymity and text-based communication, significantly affect interpersonal behaviors in an online environment. A high degree of self-disclosure and sharing of personal experiences found in this BBS suggests that participants tend to disclose significantly more information when visual anonymity is present. As communication is conducted solely via text-based messages, participants are spared from the potential physical repercussions their messages might generate. Moreover, participants face less social constraints and inhibitions in verbalizing less socially desirable content such as abortion, divorce, pre-marriage pregnancy and domestic violence. Besides the Internet's capacity to facilitate online supportive exchange among participants, the computer-mediated environment is also conducive for random ventilation of feelings through expression of emotions that results in a therapeutic emotional release. The sharing of personal experiences also reinforces a sense of solidarity among participants.

However, the anonymity present in the online environment can also result in highly negative consequences such as anti-normative and aggressive behavior which was displayed in the flaming message posted by one participant. Ironically, the flaming message only served to reinforce the sense of community and solidarity among members as they re-assert their values and defend their positions. The characteristics identified in

this paper illustrates that while the medium shapes interpersonal behavior, it does not result in homogenization of outcomes as there is a need to consider the extent and the circumstances in which the medium is used.

5.3 Face-to-face interviews with single mothers

Face-to-face interviews with three Japanese single mothers, Kaori-san, Michiko-san, and Satomi-san reinforced the findings from this study. The respondents started off as passive viewers of the BBS and after an extended period of observation, decided to participate by posting an introductory message. Through their participation, they managed to obtain practical information and advice with relative ease of access. Prolonged participation in the BBS encouraged the formation of a close-knit online community for the regular participants, and the respondents befriended each other from the BBS before organizing offline social activities among themselves. Satomi-san noted that it was comforting to know each other online as it made face-to-face meetings less awkward. The anonymous nature of the BBS allowed them to freely express their thoughts without fear of embarrassment or violation of social norms.

A virtual social life may form a further dimension to a person's 'real' social life as it provides further opportunities to meet other people and to establish social networks. All three respondents were engaged in part-time employment and they found immense difficulty in establishing social networks due to time constraints and incompatibility with immediate social contacts such as colleagues and neighbors. Thus the BBS was useful for

single mothers to seek companionship and a common understanding due to their similar status as single mothers. While the respondents meet up offline on a regular basis, the BBS and other forms of computer-mediated communication supplement their daily contact and updates.

Kaori-san and Satomi-san acknowledged that the use of the BBS as a ventilation board helps them to release their pent-up emotions as they have no one to share their problems with. Kaori-san related her experience of suffering from a bout of depression after her divorce and her parents were threatening to disown her as they found the divorce “a disgrace to the family”. She found that she could not confide in anyone and she started relating her experiences on the BBS. Although she was not expecting any response, she received three emails from unknown participants who offered words of encouragement. Despite that participants on the BBS were all faceless strangers to each other, Kaori-san felt comforted that there were others who understood her predicament and were supportive of her.

While posting messages on the BBS, all three single mothers concurred that they did not have to pay much attention to sentence structure and grammatical patterns as they were typing out their thoughts in an unrestrained fashion. This style of communication was evident from the messages analyzed in this study. Messages resembled personal narratives written in conversational, casual style and the frequent occurrence of typing errors indicate that participants do not proofread before posting messages. The ease of

participation in computer-mediated environments offers participants an unperturbed space for releasing repressed tensions in a relaxed manner.

Chapter 6

CONCLUSION

6.1 Summary of Findings

As previous research has shown, the Internet has progressively widened channels of communication and revolutionized the ways in which social individuals interact with each other. While recognizing that the online environment places several constraints on communication styles, it is also important to acknowledge the ingenuity of Internet users in overcoming the limitations of online communication.

The content analysis presented in Chapter 4 illustrated that the Internet provides an important dimension of social support for the participants of the BBS. Results showed that participants of the BBS actively engaged in exchange of social support by sharing practical information and advice, offering comfort and encouragement, creating shared social realities, and reinforcing a sense of empathy. Social support exchanged was of a specific rather than a general nature in that it was sought on the basis of a specific need at a particular time, in relation to, for example: parenting; employment; divorce; or child custody. Online social support networks provide an information bridge to many other sources of expertise unavailable in real life as advice provided is based on real life experiences. Moreover, the accessibility of the Internet meant that online social support is available when both professional and non-professional sources of support are likely unavailable, enabling participants to post and retrieve messages at their convenience.

In the BBS, informational support was found to be most frequently exchanged among participants, single mothers as well as non-single mothers alike. However, online social support involves more than simply providing information and advice about particular matters; it also provides esteem and emotional support. This is achieved by way of a dialogue with other users, whereby participants have to narrate their personal stories, their experiences, and ongoing life events. In this sense online social support may also contribute to ontological security whereby individuals have to create and recreate their biographies, and can reflect upon them in the light of the reactions and experiences of others. The anonymity of online interactive platforms allows users to maintain their desired level of privacy, and the resulting disinhibiting effect encourages self-disclosure as participants seek to re-affirm their identity, legitimize participation, and reinforce a sense of shared reality. Awareness of the existence of others in similar trying situations within the online social network generates a sense of solidarity and companionship, enabling the development of intimacy and trust.

Moreover, sharing personal information allows for benchmarking and social comparison between participants. In the process of comparing ourselves with others, we can either compare ourselves with those doing better than ourselves (upward social comparison) or those doing worse (downward social comparison). Within a self-help context, the two forms of comparison serve two independent functions: downward social comparisons may improve a person's mood and self-esteem by showing that there are others worse off, while upward comparisons may provide a guide for action. Online

communicative platforms alleviates stress by providing an avenue for the release of pent-up emotions, and the process of ventilating allows one to reframe the situation in a more positive light. The process of verbalizing one's emotional problems produces a normalizing effect and mitigates feelings of depression, generating positive health and psychological effects.

As this study has shown, there are hazards associated with computer-mediated communication, the most obvious instances being unsolicited and aggressive exchanges. However, the response to the flaming message demonstrated the social cohesiveness of the participants of the BBS. The flaming message presented an opportunity for participants to come together in support and reaffirmation of each other through their defense against the allegations brought against them.

6.2 Limitations of computer-mediated communication

The Internet possesses immense potential for facilitating the exchange of social support online. However, the digital divide persists as Internet accessibility is limited to those who are financially able to afford a computer and an Internet connection. The scope of this thesis is limited to the online community of single mothers who are equipped with the appropriate computer facilities and knowledge of the Internet. Although intense competition among Japanese Internet service providers have forced prices to be more affordable, Internet connection remains beyond the reach of many single mothers who are struggling to make ends meet. Moreover, some single mothers' initiation to the Internet

may be impeded by the lack of knowledge in operating computers and accessing the Internet. While the Internet facilitates the exchange of social support and the flourishing of social networks, the dimension of instrumental support is hardly found in the online environment. Single mothers are unable to obtain physical assistance such as financial aid or material goods from participation in the BBS, items which are much needed for survival.

6.3 Supplementary nature of computer-mediated social support

The emergence of online communication modalities has fostered a new dialogue among scholars as to whether these virtual subcultures are worthy of our attention or whether they are simply ephemeral, imagined communities which are too fleeting, too superficial, and too “virtual” to warrant serious exploration. However, it is important to remember that Internet users are real people logging in from real places and ethnographic accounts of online communities have illustrated the existence of lasting relationships between members in various online communities (Rheingold; 1995, Watson; 1997, Reid; 1996).

Findings from this study support current literature which posits that the Internet does not undermine human relationships due to its anonymous and cues-filtered out nature. Instead, the communicative capability of the Internet encourages the burgeoning growth of online communities and sustains social support networks as illustrated by the BBS for single mothers. Contrary to computer-deterministic assertions that the

limitations of computer-mediated communication render inferior interaction between individuals, this study has shown that participants of the BBS are not confined by the medium and are engaged in meaningful interaction and spurring supportive networks. Through their involvement in the BBS, participants were not merely seeking factual information; rather, the knowledge that there were others who were caught in similar situations and could empathize with them provided these participants a source of comfort and solidarity.

This study recognizes that computer-mediated communication is a supplementary mode of communication which, in conjunction with other communicative modes such as the telephone and face-to-face interaction, serves to connect isolated individuals. The increased use of online communicative platforms such as emails, newsgroups, and blogs need not represent the demise of traditional forms of interaction. Instead, these innovative communicative platforms stimulate increased contact and encourage the formation of social networks amongst Internet users. Although computer networks are inadequate in facilitating the exchange of various aspects of social support such as instrumental aid, it is important to note that the online medium supplements other forms of social contact available between individuals.

6.4 Implications of study

At the micro level, the BBS and other forms of online forums for single mothers provides an avenue for individuals to establish supportive social networks develop

meaningful relationships. At the macro level, these forums can serve as a vehicle for policymakers and social workers to understand the issues that single mothers face and develop policies to address these problems. Through a selection and analysis of an advice column which appeared in *Yomiuri Shimbun*, one of Japan's largest three national newspapers, McKinstry and McKinstry (1991) posit that content from advice columns of national newspapers is a useful indicator of the common mentality of a society and provide a window into the life of individuals within the society. The advice column provided an insight into the social reality of Japanese society that surface as personal issues for the average Japanese. Similarly, the BBS for single mothers is a reflection of their personal opinions and life experiences which is often unheard of. Single mothers may find it difficult to convey their concerns to the appropriate authorities due to embarrassment or fear of discrimination. In the BBS, they are free to express themselves and readers can gain a more profound insight into their thought processes.

The perennial issues which single mothers are grappling with indicate the inefficiency of the Japanese welfare system in addressing their needs. Single mothers in Japan are plagued by poverty due to collective factors which include a decrease in financial aid from the state (Appendix B), and an inadequate implementation of the child support payment system (Appendix C). Social policymakers have been slow in responding to the changes in family structures and despite the dramatic increase in single-mother households, the policy which has been consistently pursued is the reduction of welfare budget for such families. However, the Internet can be a potential platform for social change as its wide-reaching capabilities increases the social presence of single

mothers and connects them to form a collective whole capable of lobbying for the rights of single mothers.

This paper has illustrated that technology can serve as a useful tool of social communication and networking. The Internet provides an avenue for single mothers to converge in virtual space to establish social networks, obtain information and advice, seek comfort in solidarity, ventilate emotions, and find new ways to help each other cope with their shared problems in an asynchronous manner through the BBS. Humans have an intrinsic need for interaction, themselves being social beings. With the advent of advances in Internet technologies, accessibility to computer-mediated communication will increase with falling costs and improved infrastructure, which will translate to increased connectivity among humans.

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APPENDIX A

Sample of messages taken from BBS



The screenshot shows a web browser window with the address bar displaying "こみゆにけーしょんぼーど" and "Microsoft Internet Explorer provided by SingNet". The browser's menu bar includes "File", "Edit", "View", "Favorites", "Tools", and "Help". The main content area displays a message thread:

投稿者:しろくま 投稿日:2004.02.15(日) 15:10:03 --- [返信](#)

ミッフィーさん

はじめまして。私もDV被害者です。今は、子どもと2人の暮らしです。

ネット上には、DV被害者を支援するサイトがいくつかありますよ。
お勧めは、「尼僧紅蓮のDVかけ込み寺」「女綱」「cherry blossoms」です。

DV被害者は、元夫から身を隠さなければいけない場合もありますし、PTSDやうつ症状が出る場合もあります。まずは、ゆっくり休んだ方が多い場合が多いです。

子どもを連れて家を出て、それから看護学校に通った人もちゃんといます。

体験者の声を聞いてみるといいですよ。

削除キー: [削](#)

投稿者:あん 投稿日:2004.02.14(土) 10:31:55 --- [返信](#)

Re: 離婚したいのですが。。

> ミッフィーさん。状況はちょっと違うのですがレスさせて下さいね。
私は未婚でもうすぐ6ヶ月になる子供がいます。(離婚経験もあり) 妊娠がわかる2週間前にリストラされ、出産予定日の2日前までバイトでしのぎました。現在は無職です。そろそろ貯金も残り少なくなってきたのであせりもあるのですが、先のことを考えて私も医療系の資格をとるために学校に行くことに決めました。私はミッフィーさんよりも10以上年上ですよ。28歳なんて若い若い!!大丈夫!一緒に頑張りましょうよ!でも、離婚はじっくり考えた方がいいですよ。

投稿者:かほ 投稿日:2004.02.14(土) 10:08:33 --- [返信](#)

APPENDIX B

児童扶養手当 (*Jidô Fuyô Teate*)

Child Rearing Allowance (for single-mother households)

As part of measures for single-mother households, the Child Rearing Allowance is given to a mother or other persons having custody of, and rearing a child less than 18 years old, who does not share a common household income with the child's father and whose earnings for the previous year is less than the threshold. The amount of the Child Rearing Allowance was two-tiered: the full amount and partial amount. To receive full assistance of 42,370 yen per month, the household's annual income must be below 2,048,000 yen for a family of two (mother and a child). To receive a partial assistance of 28,350 yen per month, the household's annual income must be below 3,000,000 yen. In August 2002, several changes were made to the provision of the Child Rearing Allowance. The amount granted to each single-mother family is now tapered according to the income. The full amount remains at 42,370 yen per month for one child, 47,370 yen per month for two children, and for each additional child, 3,000 yen. However, the income threshold for the full amount has been reduced to 1,300,000 yen, and for those with income between 1,300,000 yen to 3,650,000 yen, the amount is reduced gradually. Those with income above 3,650,000 yen are not eligible to receive the Child Rearing Allowance. The mother's income after deductions is compared to the threshold to determine the eligibility. The new system also factors in child support paid by fathers, income that was not previously included in calculations.

Source: Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2005. Available from <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/wp/hakusyo/boshi/05/index.html>.

APPENDIX C

養育費 (*yôiku hi*)

Child Support

According to the latest government survey, only 34% of divorced mothers had functioning support payment agreements with their children's fathers. While the government recognizes that securing child support is important for a child's growth, there are currently no penalties for fathers who default on child support payments. Revisions to the child support scheme in November 2002 consisted of encouragement for fathers to make an effort to maintain payments and the introduction of a simpler method to calculate the amount of child support a father is entitled to provide. In a bid to improve the child support system, minor revisions were made in March 2004. To facilitate the agreement of child support and to expedite the payment process, a handbook listing methods of calculation and collection of child support was published and distributed to various public organizations.

Source: Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2005. Available from <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/wp/hakusyo/boshi/05/index.html>.