VOICING ONLINE: CATALYSTS AND
CONSTRAINTS FOR WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT

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of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
Communication Studies

by
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Spring 2013
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DEDICATION

To the women who lent me their voices

and the many others whose voices yearn to be heard.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the collaboration, guidance and support of numerous people. First and foremost, I offer my thanks to the women who shared their stories for this project. I cannot begin to describe how much you all have inspired me through your courage and persistence, your compassion for others, and your goals to make a difference in your communities and the world. It has truly been an honor to hear your voices.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Publication Rights</th>
<th>iii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTER

### I. Introduction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Women in Society</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women and Media</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s Alternative Media</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women Online</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of Study</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### II. Review of Literature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feminist Theory</th>
<th>14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voice</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present Study</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### III. Method

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>52</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Procedure</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumentation</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflexivity</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td>PAGE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Findings</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voicing Online</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barriers to Voice</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes of Voice</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeding Voice</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Discussion</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding Voice Online</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications and Future Directions</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References ................................................................. 118

Appendices ........................................................................... 142

A. Interview Guide .......................................................... 143
### LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Overview of Study Findings</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FIGURE</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Conceptualizing Voice Online</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Empowerment Outcomes</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

VOICING ONLINE: CATALYSTS AND CONSTRAINTS FOR WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT

by

© Jasmine René Linabary

Master of Arts in Communication Studies

California State University, Chico

Spring 2013

This study uses the framework of feminist standpoint theory to investigate how women experience voice online and under what conditions that experience leads to empowerment. Qualitative interviews were conducted with 23 women who are members of World Pulse, a global online media network, and analyzed using a grounded theory approach. Participants indicated that voice manifests online with the aid of certain conditions, such as knowledge and skills, access to resources, and offline empowerment. Catalysts for voice include invitations to speak and an emotional response to a perceived injustice. Women have expressed themselves in a variety of ways online from blog posts to sharing poetry in web presentations, but participants reported it wasn’t until the moment they experienced the feeling of being heard that their online voice was finally realized. Participants reported empowerment outcomes as a result of voicing online at the intrapersonal, interactional and behavioral levels. These have been facilitated by their
interactions with others, official validation, and their access to resources. However, as the
women indicated, they still experience a range of barriers and constraints to voicing
themselves online including external, internal and interpersonal barriers that restrain or
silence their voices. Based on the study’s findings and the participants’ own language, an
ecological analogy of a tree’s growth is offered to help explain the complex
communicative processes women experience in voicing themselves online and to provide
future directions for researchers. The findings also have direct implications for
communication scholars and practitioners looking to the web as a source of voice and
empowerment for marginalized groups.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Internet, and specifically Web 2.0 technology, has been touted as a game changer, particularly for groups who have traditionally been without voice in the public sphere. Theoretically, anyone now has the potential to be a journalist, conversation-starter or change-maker through these platforms because the power to hit “publish” lies in their hands. For marginalized groups, including women, who have been underrepresented in both the media and decision-making processes, this power to publish presents a new avenue through which to gain a voice, experience empowerment and engage in collective action. But questions remain over the extent of this power, why and how this process might take place, and the ways in which technology use may still be constrained by existing power structures and discourses. The present study explores these questions.

It is hard to deny that the Internet is transforming the ways we communicate, organize and engage. More than one third of the world’s population is online and the numbers of people and areas with access are growing (International Telecommunication Union [ITU], 2011). Although issues of access to these new technologies are still prevalent, evidence exists that suggests access is constantly expanding. In the last five years, the percentage of the world’s Internet users from developing countries has increased from 44 percent in 2006 to 62 percent in 2011 (ITU, 2011). These users now
have the capacity to seek and share information instantly across national borders and for relatively minimal cost.

As a result, this new technology has a power that many world leaders, organizations, activists and scholars are only beginning to grasp fully. Recent events have demonstrated its potential uses ranging from organizing for social change to holding governments and others accountable. Web access has played a critical role in mobilizing protests and political action, as seen in the Arab Spring uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). Additionally, outcries through social media have been responsible for forcing the hand of businesses, organizations and governments. In the United States, an uproar following Susan G. Komen for the Cure foundation’s decision to cut off funding to Planned Parenthood led the organization to reverse its decision (Hagey, 2012). Likewise, strong social-media opposition and online protests in response to the Stop Internet Piracy Act and the related Protect IP Act before the U.S. Congress derailed both pieces of legislation (Hagey, 2012). A single image, video or post going viral has similarly sparked protests as well as outpourings of support and resources. In December 2011, an amateur video went viral that showed Egyptian military police brutally beating, stripping and kicking a female protester who became known as the “Blue Bra Girl” for her exposed undergarment. This spurred what historians labeled the biggest women’s demonstration in modern Egyptian history, at least in the past nearly 100 years (Kirkpatrick, 2011).

Not surprising, the United Nations Human Rights Council unanimously supported a (non-binding) resolution affirming Internet access and online freedom of
expression as basic human rights in July 2012 (Sydell, 2012). A special report from the United Nations in 2011 emphasized the role of the web as an “enabler” for a wide range of human rights, including rights to freedom of opinion and expression, as well as human progress (La Rue, 2011, p. 7). The report called on member nations to make ensuring the access and availability of this “indispensable tool” to all a priority (La Rue, 2011, p. 22).

Many then have also lauded the capacity of the Internet for facilitating individuals’ rights to communicate and particularly its potential to provide marginalized voices with access to the public sphere (Harcourt, 1999; Mitra, 2001, 2004, 2005). Though technological and economic barriers still exist, they are considered less substantive than the acquisition of social capital needed to speak prior to the proliferation of the Internet (Mitra, 2005). Now individual citizens can exercise discursive power by voicing themselves online at relatively little cost, allowing those who previously have been silenced to speak for themselves and express their opinions. That discursive power can create space, at least a virtual space, for the ideas of individuals and groups within the larger public dialogue. In that light, the Internet is also seen as a source of empowerment for marginalized groups. Previous studies have demonstrated its empowerment potential for low-income families, sexual minorities, and ethnic minorities (Mehra, Merkel, & Peterson Bishop, 2004), as well as women from a variety of segments of society including refugee women (Siddiquee & Kagan, 2006), African-American women (Mehra, Merkel, & Peterson Bishop, 2004) and South Asian women (Mitra, 2004). While many have made this argument, the connection between the experience of voice online and its role in the empowerment process has not been fully explored.
In that light, the present study aims to investigate how women experience voice online and under what conditions that experience leads to empowerment. To put the study in context, the following sections will examine women’s status in society, media, alternative media, and the web.

Women in Society

Despite advancements, women, who represent slightly more than half of the world’s population, continue to be disenfranchised and marginalized. Women and girls are overrepresented among the world’s poor and illiterate and underrepresented in schools, paid employment and positions of power (United Nations, 2012). Though the proportion of women has slowly been on the rise, women still comprise only 19.8 percent of representatives in national legislatures and parliaments (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2012).

Women’s equality and empowerment are considered vital to sustainable development and have been recognized as having an impact on a range of development outcomes including national economic growth and poverty reduction (United Nations, n.d., 2012). This is further confirmed by the fact that one of the eight Millennium Development Goals adopted by the international community is explicitly to promote gender equality and empower women. The achievement of the rest of the goals, including reducing the spread of HIV and achieving universal primary education, is seen by UN agencies as directly linked to this goal (United Nations, n.d., 2012). With this in mind, Luthra (2003) argued that communicative empowerment specifically of the world’s most impoverished women is an “urgent necessity” for a sustainable future (p. 46).
Women and Media

Women’s right to communicate, specifically through representation in and access to the media, has been seen as central to women’s advancement. In the 1975 first world conference on the status of women held in Mexico City, leaders acknowledged the power of mass media to influence views about women’s roles in society and created programs to increase women’s access (Byerly & Ross, 2006). This was further confirmed at the fourth world conference on women in Beijing in 1995, which called attention to the role of media in perpetuating women’s inequality (Byerly & Ross, 2006). The Beijing Platform for Action called for women’s increased participation in and access to media and new communication technologies as well as the promotion of a more balanced and less stereotyped representation of women in the media (United Nations, 1996).

These calls reflect long-standing issues with women’s access to and representation within media. The media decide who gets to speak, who writes, and what is important enough to cover. Through coverage of current events, politics and opinions, the news media play a role in framing and influencing the public discussion, and in turn in setting the public agenda. (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, 2006). Therefore, the representation of women’s voices in the media shapes their ability to contribute to that discussion.

One of the primary issues is that women are missing as sources and producers of news coverage, meaning their voices and insights are not able to reach the same audience as men’s. Within news content, women’s voices are seldom heard. Research has consistently shown that women appear less often and less prominently as sources than
men in print news coverage (Armstrong, 2004; Zoch & Turk, 1998). A global study of news media showed women were just 24 percent of the people heard or read in newspapers, television and radio (WACC, 2010). While some may argue that women appear as subjects proportionately to their roles within society, Armstrong (2006) found that male sources were still more likely to appear even when men and women were in the same professional or public official roles. Additionally, men are overrepresented among newsrooms and media management, and are therefore in more of a position than women to create and influence coverage. In the same global study, 37 percent of stories were reported by women (WACC, 2010). A separate report found that women hold less than a third of top media jobs (Byerly, 2011). When men are the predominant creators of the news, some argue that coverage then reflects the opinions and values of men and neglects the other half of the population (van Zoonen, 1998).

Secondly, women have received different treatment than men in news coverage. The global study of news coverage found that 46 percent of the stories monitored reinforced gender-based stereotypes about traits, roles and occupations, while just six percent challenged them (WACC, 2010). Previous research also indicates that women and men have been framed differently in news coverage, often in ways that trivialize women (Devitt, 2002; Gibson 2009; Rhode, 1995; Sanprie, 2005; Tuchman, 1978). Scholars examining media portrayals of the women’s movement and feminists have uncovered a persistent use of women’s personal characteristics and physical appearance in ways that undermine their credibility (Bronstein, 2005; Lind & Salo, 2002; Rhode, 1995). Recent research has also identified these frames in the coverage of women
in traditionally male fields (Gibson, 2009; McGregor, 2000; Sanprie, 2005; Stabile, 2004), but select studies have extended these findings to coverage of Latinas in U.S. English and Spanish language newspapers (Correa, 2010b) and women in general (Burke & Mazzarella, 2008; Lind & Salo, 2002). These issues also become more pronounced for non-Western women who are often portrayed as sexualized objects or victims (Jansen, 2002) in need of liberation by a Western savior. A clear example is seen in the image of the veiled Afghan woman as a symbol of oppression (Luthra, 2003). As such, women’s efforts to become “agents rather than victims of history” are rarely discussed (Jansen, 2002, p. 220).

**Women’s Alternative Media**

In response to these issues, women have sought alternative ways to communicate their experiences and support their social causes. Through alternative media and women’s grassroots communication, women have strived to make changes in the mainstream media and expand the reach of women’s voices (Byerly & Ross, 2006). The history of modern women’s alternative media is often traced to early women’s rights campaigns in the 19th century in different parts of the world (Byerly & Ross, 2006). Suffrage newspapers such as Susan B. Anthony’s *The Revolution* along with other women-run reform publications in the United States allowed activist groups to disseminate their ideas when access to the mainstream was blocked (Chambers, Steiner, & Fleming, 2004). However, women’s alternative media are generally recognized as proliferating during the women’s liberation movements in the 1960s and 1970s (Byerly & Ross, 2006). Print media were the most common forms due to the cost and technical
difficulties associated with broadcast mediums. Several groups that formed during this period are still active today including international news agencies like the Women’s Feature Service and groups like the Manushi collective in India. Since the 1970s, the Women’s Institute for Freedom of the Press’ Directory of Women’s Media has continued to catalogue hundreds of women’s alternative print and internet periodicals, publishers, news services, radio and video groups, music, theatre and art, book stores and other women-run initiatives. Financial strains have been one of the primary issues facing these ventures (Chambers et al., 2004). Many have closed due to financial constraints or more recently have moved online. The Internet itself has brought a surge in feminist alternative media, initially through the production of webzines, and has become a new platform for women’s voices and activities.

Women Online

The Internet provides women, both individually and collectively, with a new means for the production and distribution of news and activism. This is because “Web 2.0” technologies have allowed those with access to reach and interact with a global audience. The term Web 2.0, popularized by O’Reilly Media and MediaLive International starting in 2004, generally refers to a shift to applications and activities that provide opportunities for user content creation and interaction online (Fox & Madden, 2006). Users can generate content by creating, contributing to or commenting on websites and by sharing photos or videos. In addition, they can use blogging and social media platforms to broadcast their opinions and document their lives as well as to build followings and network with others. In other words, “Web 2.0” opens up new avenues of
expression and engagement that reduce the cost of participation in the public sphere.
Even more than the previous efforts of alternative media, these technologies disrupt the traditional hierarchy by taking away some of the power and gate-keeping authority of traditional media and provide a means for new voices to have access to the public sphere (Gillmor, 2004; Mitra & Watts, 2002). Women’s widespread adoption of new communication technologies is transforming their life experiences and the quality, frequency and type of their participation in different aspects of society. They also are using new communication technologies in profound and interesting ways ripe for study across disciplines.

Women are a slight minority online, comprising roughly 46 percent of the world’s web population (Abraham, Morn, & Vollman, 2010). However, on average 23 percent fewer women than men have access to the web in the developing world (Kakar, Hausman, Thomas, Denny-Brown, & Bhatia, 2012). The gender gaps are most severe in developing countries with lower Internet penetration (Abraham, Morn, & Vollman, 2010). The gap exceeds 40 percent in some regions, such as in Sub-Saharan Africa (Kakar et al., 2012). In most higher-income countries, women have near parity or in some cases, such as the United States, their access exceeds men’s (Abraham, Morn, & Vollman, 2010; Kakar et al., 2012).

Women and girls dominate top social media sites including Facebook and Twitter (Taylor, 2012) and are more likely than men to create blogs (Jones, Johnson-Yale, Millermaier, & Perez, 2009). They have used these sites and resources to connect to the outside world, gain greater knowledge, increase their social status, organize on social
causes, and challenge perceived injustices (Hafkin & Huyer, 2006; Huyer, Hafkin, Ertl, & Dryburgh, 2005). Women’s media activism has taken many forms online ranging from news services sites like Women’s eNews that cover issues of concern to women to the feminist blogosphere, which includes sites like Feministing, The F Bomb, Racialicious and Jezebel. Individuals have also used online platforms to challenge the misrepresentation of women and girls, as seen in the case of a 14-year-old girl sparking a protest movement against altered images in teen magazines through an online petition she created (Italie, 2012). Additionally, organizations have utilized the networking capacity of these Internet technologies. An example is seen in World Pulse, which has created platforms and trainings aimed at connecting and amplifying women’s voices through citizen journalism and new media.

Despite these examples, one must be cautious to recognize that the Internet is not an unadulterated good, nor do all perceive it as such. First, a still present “digital divide” poses challenges to the democratic potential of the Internet and may serve to reinforce existing inequalities. The “digital divide” generally speaks to the gap between those who do and those who do not have the access (Norris, 2001) and the skills (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2011) to use computers and the Internet. This can play out as a resource divide between industrialized and developing countries as well as between socioeconomic classes and education levels within a nation (Norris, 2001). In other words, those who already have a greater share of the resources will benefit the most from the technology, furthering the disparities between the rich and poor globally. More recent studies have focused on a second divide, that of differences in Internet skills, which
seems to grow even while the access divide narrows (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2011). Those who do not have the skills, in particular those needed to access and recognize credible information or participate in its creation, will continue to be disadvantaged (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2011). For women, this means that their capacity to benefit from the Internet is dependent both on their resources, including electricity and computers, as well as their literacy and knowledge of Internet use. Evidence has also shown that the proportion of female Internet users is not necessarily associated with the country’s level of Internet penetration (Huyer et al., 2005). In other words, even if access in a region increases, this does not necessarily mean women will stand to gain.

Secondly, even though many have praised the Internet for allowing anyone to have a voice, women’s experiences may still be muted. Evidence suggests that gender gaps in popularity and influence still exist that mirror real-life power structures. In terms of influence, men still appear to dominate. Newsweek’s “digital power index” list featuring individuals nominated based on their online influence included only seven women among the 100 “significant” players on the web (“Newsweek Daily Beast Digital Power Index,” 2012; Sklar, 2012). The same is true of similar “top” lists, including recent lists of people worth following on Twitter (“FP Twitterati 100,” 2012) and Facebook (Klapper, 2012). Studies have demonstrated that men regularly outnumber women as authors of top blogs in terms of popularity and their content is more heavily linked to than women’s content (Meraz, 2008). This means that once women do have the access and skills to share content online, whether or not their voices break through may still be connected to existing (offline) hierarchies. If women’s voices do break through, they still
face challenges. Women have documented experiencing gender-based harassment simply for expressing their views online (Doyle, 2011). This could discourage women from being willing to create and share content. As a result, the Internet has both potential advantages and drawbacks for women as a means for expression and empowerment that need further exploration.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to illuminate both the power and pitfalls of the Internet and its use as a tool for voice and empowerment for women. Though many have suggested that new media – specifically the content generation and interaction possible through Web 2.0 technologies – hold the potential for voice and empowerment for marginalized groups, little research has been aimed at understanding the role of communication, and specifically of voice, in that empowerment process. Previous studies have found evidence of a relationship between online content creation and empowerment (Leung, 2009; Stravositu & Sundar, 2012), but have yet to explore how the actualization of voice contributes to empowerment and how the empowerment process takes place within that context. Unfortunately, much of the existing research in this area fails to include the voices of the empowered describing their own process of empowerment, which could provide additional insight. Based on the framework of feminist standpoint theory, this study holds that women’s own experiences and perspectives can inform our understanding of voice and empowerment online and how they interrelate. Additionally, many studies have also failed to take into account the ways in which these experiences are constrained by existing power structures and dominant discourses. As a feminist
project, the present undertaking aims to reflect the complexity of women’s varying contexts (i.e. social, cultural, political, economic, religious, etc.) as well as the conditions under which they are both empowered and disempowered through technology.

Within the field of communication studies, the intent of this project is to advance our understanding of voice and its connection to empowerment through Internet use and to develop a framework that can aid future research. Developing a more keen understanding of women's Internet use for voice in terms of its effectiveness and limitations will benefit both the women who are using the technology and the efforts of social workers, non-profits, activists, educators, technologists, and others who work to support and enhance women's lives.

The remainder of this thesis will be divided into four chapters. Chapter II reviews relevant literature related to feminist theory, voice and empowerment. In Chapter III the methods used in the current study are described. Chapter IV includes findings from this study and the resulting answers to the research questions. Chapter V provides a discussion on the study’s findings as well as its limitations. This chapter also discusses implications for scholarship and practice as well as directions for future research.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This literature review is divided into four sections. The first section will review feminist theory. Next, the concept of voice and voice online will be explored. A third section will examine empowerment theory and research. Lastly, research questions for the present study are proposed.

Feminist Theory

To understand feminist theory, it is first necessary to understand what is meant by feminism. This section will thus begin by defining feminism and the basics of feminist theory, including feminist theorizing within the field of communication. Second, feminist standpoint theory will be proposed as a framework for the present study. Lastly, an overview of feminist theories of technology will be provided.

Feminism and Feminist Theory

Many diverse histories and perspectives exist within feminism, but they generally begin with the acknowledgement that patriarchy, or an oppressive system of male domination, exists, and that this system needs to undergo change. It is important to note, along with Smith (1987), that this domination is not imposed on women by individual men but is a result of a “complementary social process” in which women are also complicit (p. 34). Therefore, feminism, as well as feminist theory, serves both as a
critique of women’s social positions and societal power structures at large as well as an
effort to catalyze social change that could improve women’s social standings (Rakow and
Wackwitz, 2004).

It is important to acknowledge that feminist theory, as well as feminism, has
been subject to criticism particularly for reflecting only the concerns of white Western
women. Feminism often has been charged with being imperialist or universalizing
(Mohanty, 2003; Spivak, 1985, 1988). Although feminist activism and scholarship have
seen a shift from a singular, hegemonic feminism to the recognition of multiple
feminisms, scholars continue to reflexively grapple with the problematic legacy of
Western feminism.

As a result of globalization and the increasing interconnectivity between
peoples, cultures and economies, scholars have suggested that the recognition of a
transnational feminism could inform and enhance feminist communication studies (Dare,
2007). Hegde (2006) argues that “theorizing the transnational collision of cultural,
economic and political forces is a central concern of feminist thought today” (p. 436).
The transnational feminist perspective calls for a recognition that gender has always
manifested globally and an acknowledgement of the implications of globalization and its
asymmetrical power relations for gender (Shome, 2006).

Within the field of communication, Rakow and Wackwitz (2004) argue that
feminist theory should be grounded in the assumption that “we are in need of deep
structural change to produce new social relations and just societies” (p. 5). They outline
four properties of feminist communication theory and research. First, feminist
communication theory should be *explanatory* by speaking of and to individuals’ experiences with gender and communication. Secondly, because of its assumption that social change is necessary, feminist communication theory is inherently *political* both in its existence and application. Third, feminist communication theory is *polyvocal* in the sense that it is created by and recognizes multiple perspectives and experiences. Lastly, they suggest that feminist communication theory should be *transformative* by facilitating new ways of understanding and inspiring social change (Rakow & Wackwitz, 2004).

**Feminist Standpoint Theory**

In seeking to uphold these four principles, this study will employ feminist standpoint theory as both a framework and a methodology to guide feminist research (Harding, 2004). Situated within feminist theorizing, feminist standpoint theory provides a valuable tool for investigating the experiences of marginalized groups, particularly women. Inspired by the women’s movements and critiques of positivism, standpoint theory had its origins in the 1970s and 1980s as a critical theory about the relationship between knowledge and power (Harding, 2004, 2007). Feminist theorists questioned the privileging of “neutral” or what was conventionally thought of as “objective” knowledge, arguing that it only served to uncritically reflect the dominant ideology and often to dismiss the experiences of marginalized groups (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1993, 2004; Hesse-Biber, 2007). Feminist standpoint theories developed across disciplines in response to this idea. Key early theorizing included the work of scholars like Patricia Hill Collins (1986), Donna Haraway (1988), Sandra Harding (1991, 1993), Nancy Hartsock (1983, 2004) and Dorothy Smith (1987), among others.
Though these scholars offered distinct theories, they all shared the premise that knowledge is socially situated and that through social processes and power structures some are positioned as dominant and some as marginalized (Harding, 2004; O’Brien Hallstein, 1999, 2000). What this means is that people’s knowledge and understandings are based on their experiences and their positions in society. Thus, feminist standpoint theory is based on the assumption that society is structured by power relations, including those between class, gender, race and other relations, that have created unequal social locations (Harding, 2007; Wood, 2005). Early scholars, like Hartsock (1983, 2004), based these ideas in Marxist thought, specifically the idea that the divisions of labor and material life structure our understandings and have consequences for knowledge (Hesse-Biber, 2007; Wood, 2005). Feminist standpoint theorists also borrowed from Hegel’s understanding of the master-slave relationship, in which he reasoned that the master and slave inhabit distinct standpoints (Harding, 1991). As a result, feminist standpoint theorists assert that women, who have been commonly disadvantaged by patriarchal culture and the sexual division of labor, hold a distinct position or standpoint that is different from that held by men (O’Brien Hallstein, 1999, 2000).

Feminist standpoint theory offers that women, and other marginalized groups, have a “double vision” or “double consciousness,” as they are situated as simultaneously outside and inside the dominant culture in ways that afford them a unique position for critical insights and observations that may not be available to those in the dominant group (Collins, 1986; O’Brien Hallstein, 2000; Wood, 2005). As such, the standpoints of women are distinct and perhaps less distorted than those held by men, who, Hartsock
(1983) argues, are interested in maintaining their own privileged position (O’Brien Hallstein, 1999; Wood, 2005). The goal of feminist standpoint theory then is to allow “women, as ‘others,’ to speak from and about their everyday experiences in order to discover aspects of the social order that have not been brought to light” (Allen, 2000, p. 179).

While recognizing that women’s social locations in relation to men’s provide them some commonalities, feminist standpoint theorists also emphasize the importance of acknowledging differences in the experiences and positions among women. Within feminist standpoint theory, gender is viewed as a structural and relational position maintained by social and cultural practices, rather than a biological certainty (O’Brien Hallstein, 1999). Viewing gender through this lens means that there are no “women” or “men,” only “women and men in particular, historically located race and class and cultural relations” (Harding, 1991, p. 179). Still, a commonly leveled charge against feminist standpoint theory has been that it essentializes women’s experiences and does not take into account women’s differences. Due to the work of Black feminist standpoint theorists like Collins (1986, 2000) and others, the focus of scholarship has shifted away from the idea of a unified standpoint for all women to seeking out the standpoints of multiple women with various social locations, experiences and traits (Bullis & Stout, 2000; Buzzanell 1994; O’Brien Hallstein, 2000). Currently theorists acknowledge that an individual can have multiple standpoints shaped by her “intersectional” social locations structured by gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, and other hierarchies (Harding, 2004; Wood, 2005). Theorists have recognized the importance of
exploring both commonalities and differences when researching women’s lives (O’Brien Hallstein, 2000).

Communication plays a part not only in the structuring of women’s social locations through dominant discourses, but also in the attainment of a standpoint (Droogsma, 2007). While feminist standpoint theorists reason that research must then begin from women’s lives and take into account their experiences (O’Brien Hallstein, 2000; Smith, 1987; Wood, 1992), standpoints are not simply social locations or experiences (Harding, 2007; Wood, 2005). A standpoint is shaped by and grows out of women’s social locations, but theorists emphasize that a standpoint is an achievement acquired through critical reflection and through struggling against the existing power structures (Harding, 2007). O’Brien Hallstein (2000) argues that a standpoint must be actively sought by the marginalized and cannot be achieved alone. It necessarily requires interaction and dialogue with others (O’Brien Hallstein, 2000). This process itself achieving a standpoint can turn “a source of oppression into a source of knowledge and potential liberation” (Harding, 2004, p. 10).

This study follows a long line of communication scholarship that has found feminist standpoint theory to be a useful analytical framework for understanding the communicative experiences of women in a variety of settings. Many of these studies have taken place within organizational communication (Allen, 1996, 2000; Bullis & Stout, 2000; Buzzanell, 2003; Dougherty, 2001). Recent communication studies have used feminist standpoint theory to explore sexual harassment as experienced by African American and Hispanic women (Richardson & Taylor, 2009), American Muslim
women’s understandings of the hijab (Droogsma, 2007), vantage points from female journalists who have quit newspapers (Elmore, 2009), and women’s contributions to political blogs (Johnston, Friedman, & Peach, 2011). Though many feminist theorists have studied the web, the latter study represents one of the few uses of feminist standpoint theory in exploring women’s actions online, though it uses it mainly as a theoretical argument for the presence of women’s voices. As such, feminist standpoint theory has been underutilized in attempting to achieve an understanding of women’s experiences with the Internet and other information and communication technologies. For the present study, feminist standpoint theory will provide the starting point and framework for investigating the ways in which women’s experiences with online content creation lead to a sense of voice and experience of empowerment.

**Feminists and Technology**

Before examining these concepts though, it is important to acknowledge feminist perspectives on technology. One of feminist scholars’ contributions to studies of technology has been a level of consciousness about the relationship between technology and gender. Just as feminist scholars have rejected the idea of science as neutral, they likewise challenge similar assumptions about technology. By uncritically assuming technology as gender neutral, feminist theorists argue that scholars overlook issues of power and inequality as well as the ways technology has served as a location for the production of gendered knowledge (Wajcman, 2004).

Feminist views on technology have often been divided into two camps: those who are pessimistic about technology’s impact on women and those that are optimistic
about technology as a source for change. Some feminist theorists, particularly in the
1980s, took a pessimistic view of technology. These scholars saw Western technologies
as a central source of male power and domination over women (Wajcman, 2004). The
Internet in particular was seen as marred by its military origins and “the white male
hacker world that spawned it” (Wajcman, 2004, p. 4). While the male monopoly of
technology and its development is seen as a source of their power, women’s general lack
of technological skills was seen as contributing to their dependence (Wajcman, 2004). In
other words, feminists argued that technology is inclined to perpetuate existing gender
hierarchies. This approach can to some degree still be seen in arguments that the Internet
and other information and communication technologies are ethnocentric or incapable of
truly empowering women (Anderson & Shrum, 2007; Gajjala, 2003; Gajjala &
Mamidipudi, 1999).

In response to these perspectives came the cyberfeminist approach of the
1990s, which argued for a more optimistic evaluation of technology, particularly of new
digital technologies. While these feminists acknowledged that industrial technology did
indeed extend masculine domination, new technologies created space for resistance and
liberation (Wajcman, 2004). Unlike the technological determinism in the pessimistic
perspective that views women as the victims of male technology, those adopting a more
optimistic approach argued for recognizing the role of women’s agency in their
interactions with technology (Wajcman, 2004). These scholars argued that digital
technologies would be women’s medium (Spender, 1995), facilitate the exploration of
multiple identities and the ability to move beyond gender (Turkle, 1995), provide
freedom from male control (Plant, 1997), and have liberatory possibilities due to their potential to disrupt gender binaries (Haraway, 1991).

Wajcman (2004) suggests the need for a middle-of-the-road approach between “technophobia” of the 1980s and “technophilia” of early cyberfeminists (p. 6). Recent conceptions suggest that technology and gender share a mutually shaping relationship that is complex and contradictory (Wajcman, 2004; van Zoonen, 2002). This multidimensional approach suggests that the meaning of the Internet will be a result of its particular contexts and uses (van Zoonen, 2002). This shift can also be seen in recent cyberfeminist scholarship, which has called for cyberfeminism to be seen as more than a “buzzword to celebrate women’s mere presence and self-expression online” (Gajjala & Oh, 2012, p. 2). As a result, cyberfeminism more broadly can be understood to represent this range of debates surrounding the relationship between gender and digital technology, as well as engagement with these technologies by women across a range of domains and disciplines (Daniels, 2009). Cyberfeminist scholars have similarly called for heightened awareness of the role of power as it plays out in the online landscape and in the structures that shape it, as well as a more “rigorous” examination of the contradictions present in women’s voices online (Gajjala & Oh, 2012, p. 3). Recognizing a multidimensional relationship between gender and technology allows researchers to address both the possibilities and constraints presented by the technology under scrutiny (Wajcman, 2004). For the present study, this means examining ways in which creating content online holds the potential for voice and empowerment for marginalized women but also the ways
in which these experiences are limited due to social and cultural practices and dominant discourses.

Voice

The concept of voice has been a popular topic in communication scholarship, though it has often been used without critical examination or clear definition (Rakow & Wackwitz, 2004; Watts, 2001). This section will explore definitions of voice and its association with agency. Additionally, the connection of voice to issues of power and the public sphere will be detailed. Third, the ethical problems associated with voice as a construct will be explored. Lastly, the possibilities for voice online will be examined including issues of the act of speaking and the ability to be heard.

Defining Voice

Scholars have recognized two distinct approaches to voice in communication studies. First, voice has been conceived as agency itself – an individual’s prediscursive ability to make her presence known (Mitra & Watts, 2002). Second, voice has been seen as active in the actual language or discourse of a text or public performance. In an effort to reconcile these conceptions, Watts (2001) instead argues that voice then is not a “thing” that is owned or resident in a person or a text but is instead a “happening” or dialogical phenomenon (p. 185). Attempts to provide grounding for voice as a theoretical construct then have generally recognized it as a complex phenomenon that involves not only the ability to speak but to have speech “heard and be taken into account in social and political life” (Rakow & Wackwitz, 2004, p. 95). Following Watts (2001) and Mitra (2004, 2005), this study recognizes voice as a contested and situated construct in which a
marginalized speaker gains the position of agent through the process of speaking and (potentially) being heard in a discursive space.

Role of Agency

Agency then plays a key role in this conceptualization of the speaker as agent. According to Bandura’s (1986, 2001) social cognitive theory of human agency, people are not just onlookers of the world but are active contributors (2006). As such, human agency is demonstrated when an agent purposefully seeks to influence her functioning and life circumstances through intentionality, forethought, self-reaction and self-reflection (Bandura, 2001, 2006). Perceived self-efficacy is seen as foundational to human agency (Bandura, 2001, 2006). This form of efficacy refers to the belief that one has the capabilities to execute the actions necessary in a given situation or to achieve a desired outcome (Bandura, 1982, 1986). This is seen as essential for providing individuals with incentive to act or persevere in trying circumstances (Bandura, 2001, 2006). Bandura (2006) argues that on the Internet individuals with a sense of efficacy will be the ones to voice their viewpoints and participate online.

Feminist standpoint theorists have argued that women experience what O’Brien Hallstein (1999) called constrained agency. Women are seen to be active agents who are able to make sense of their lives within the constraints of particular social and historical contexts that shape but do not fully determine them (O’Brien Hallstein, 1999, 2000). This view acknowledges woman’s experience of oppression without reducing her to a passive victim. As it applies to voice, this implies that the speaker whose voice does
break through may be constrained by the existing power structures and limited by dominant discourses.

**Power and Discourse**

Power then is also critical to any understanding of voice. Dow (1997) argued that voice is inherently a political issue, as it is essentially an issue of power. Within society, Foucault (1972, 1980) suggested that discourse, knowledge, and power are interrelated. Specifically, discourse operates under the “rules of exclusion,” which dictate what is prohibited in terms of what can be discussed, when and where one may speak, and who is allowed to speak (Foucault, 1972, p. 216). While discourse can produce and maintain power relations, it also serves as a medium through which power can be renegotiated. Within the construct of voice, Alcoff (1991) asserts that “who is speaking, who is spoken of, and who listens is a result, as well as an act, of political struggle. Simply put, the discursive context is a political arena” (p. 15). Therefore, the access or lack thereof to voice can be complicit in structuring power relations (Mitra, 2004). As such, researchers argue that voice can have far-reaching consequences (Mitra, 2005), particularly for marginalized groups who gain such discursive power and, in doing so, access to the public sphere.

**Public Sphere**

The public sphere then can be seen as the realm in which voice can take place, and therefore, access to it in some capacity is necessary for any experience of voice. Drawing from the influential work of Jürgen Habermas and fellow scholars, the public sphere has been defined as a discursively constituted arena in which individuals come
together to discuss topics of common interest and, in so doing, construct public opinion (Fraser, 1992; Habermas, 1991; Habermas, Lennox, & Lennox, 1974; Hauser, 1999). Scholars have outlined several key assumptions to Habermas’ normative ideal of the public sphere including open access for all, the “bracketing” or setting aside of inequalities, rational deliberation with peers, and a sharp distinction between public and private with private or particular interests excluded from the public realm (Calhoun, 1992; Cho, 2009; DeLuca & Peeples, 2002; Fraser, 1992). In its ideal form, this provides an opportunity for democratic participation for all.

However, many feminist scholars have been critical of Habermas’s public sphere as originally conceptualized for being associated with men of privilege and dependent on the exclusion of women and other marginalized groups. They have also criticized Habermas and others who did not explicitly treat or recognize the problems that may be inherent as a result. This comprises what Fraser (2010) calls the “legitimacy critique,” as scholars then question the validity of what passes for public opinion when not all members of the public have the capacity to participate in the same way as others (pp. 81-82). Fraser (1992) argued that the public sphere, as articulated by Habermas, is “indispensable,” but may need to be reconstructed to account for issues of power and privilege in order to create a truly democratic and participatory realm where citizens can experience voice (p. 111).

As a result, many, including Habermas, have recognized the existence of a multiplicity of spheres, as opposed to a singular public sphere. Fraser (1992) argues for subaltern counterpublics that serve as discursive arenas in which participants from
disenfranchised or minority groups can formulate a common identity, articulate opinions and needs not part of the wider conversation, and seek to disseminate their own counter-discourse (Asen, 2000; Fraser, 1992). These countercultures allow for those who are traditionally marginalized to gain a voice. Felski (1989) first proposed a model of a feminist public sphere as a counterculture through which to provide a critique of social relations from the perspectives of women. Felski (1989) acknowledges that, although it does not claim universality, in the ideal the feminist public sphere is based on a common identity among women as a result of a shared experience of gender-oppression. In response to criticism that this does not account for the multiple and intersecting social positions of women, Felski (1989) then proposes the existence of “coalitions of overlapping subcommunities” that share a common concern about gender oppression but are distinguished by intersections of race, class, religion, profession and other locations (p. 171). The idea of a feminist public sphere that overlaps with others in addition to a dominant public sphere accounts for the ways in which women have been able to express opinions and concerns among themselves and within society as a whole (Byerly & Ross, 2006), and in doing so gain a voice.

Problematics of Voice

Though uncovering women’s standpoints and voices has been a key task for feminist scholars, projects such as this are necessarily filled with paradoxes and dangers (Luthra, 2003). Luthra (2003), following Spivak (1988), describes the search for voice for marginalized women as “illusory at best, and as complicit with current exploitative
structures at worst” (p. 48). As such, it creates ethical concerns about privilege, responsibility and authenticity.

The notion of voice first raises questions about who is even able to speak. In her canonical work, Spivak (1988) posed the question, “Can the subaltern speak?” in effect arguing that the subaltern, generally referred to as a member of oppressed and subordinated groups in society, has neither the social capital nor the discursive space to speak (Mitra, 2001; Prasad, 2003). This often results in the subaltern, who is unable to claim the position of agent for herself, being spoken for by others (Mitra, 2001). Therefore, it becomes the task of criticism to examine the discourses that seek to retrieve the subaltern’s consciousness and their role in reproducing the subaltern’s position (Prasad, 2003, p. 24).

As a result of this critique, scholars have recognized the dangers of claiming voice as well as the difficulties inherent in authentically speaking as and for women (Alcoff, 1991; Rakow & Wackwitz, 2004). Some women’s voices are heard more than others and can silence others by assuming shared experiences (Lugones & Spelman, 1983). These tensions emerge through language choices as well as through the act of speaking.

Language itself is not neutral (Rakow & Wackwitz, 2004). Language “choice” as well as the structure of certain languages can be sites of struggle, particularly in the era of globalization. This presents a dilemma for cross-cultural interactions as the question of whose language to speak, and particularly forcing people to speak or chose one language over another, can have potentially damaging consequences (Rakow & Wackwitz, 2004).
Additionally, certain discourses are given authority and privileged over others. Feminists recognize that male talk is given more authority than female talk (Rakow & Wackwitz, 2004). However, issues of speaking about, for and as women also apply to the different positions of privilege and oppression within and among women (Alcoff, 1991; Dow, 1997). Understanding those differences is considered “crucial to unpacking the politics of social location” (Dow 1997, p. 247).

The issue of speaking for others presents a challenge to those who do hold a position of privilege and what is seen as a responsibility to speak out against oppression (Alcoff, 1991; Rakow & Wackwitz, 2004). A desire to “give voice to women,” as many researchers, activists and organizations purport to do, is similarly problematic (Rakow & Wackwitz, 2004). Rakow and Wackwitz (2004) argue that feminists must confront the fact that “our own privilege and interpretations shape the selection and presentation of what other women who may or may not wish to speak ‘as women’ have to say” (p. 97). Scholars have argued for a need to critically examine and unpack the impetus to speak, the social locations and discursive contexts of the speaker, and the effects of discourse (Alcoff, 1991; Dow, 1997). Alcoff (1991), agreeing with Spivak (1988), argues that the answer is to create conditions for dialogue and in so doing speak with rather than for others (p. 23).

With these issues, any effort to recover the voices of marginalized women may seem like a doomed project. Yet, it is still a project worthy of our attention. As Lorde (1984) stated, “Where the words of women are crying to be heard, we must each of us recognize our responsibility to seek those words out, to read them and share them and
examine them in their pertinence to our lives” (p. 43). Therefore, to proceed, examinations of voice call for both care and reflexivity, so as not to continue the silencing of certain voices and privileging of others (Luthra, 2003).

**Conceptualizing Voice Online**

This is particularly true in the case of claims that new information and communication technologies can facilitate voice and participation by presenting new opportunities for individuals to have access to the public sphere and to be heard. Some have argued that the Internet in particular holds the potential for voice for the marginalized (Mitra & Watts, 2001). Cyberspace has created a new “discursive space” in which the relationships between power and spatial location have shifted, allowing for
openings for traditionally marginalized groups to engage and reach a global audience
(Mitra & Watts, 2002, p. 486). Existing literature suggests that the actualization of voice
online has several key components, which will be discussed in this section and are
represented in Figure 1.

Speaking online. Before marginalized individuals can experience voice they
must first be able and willing to speak. With the assistance of Web 2.0 technologies,
individuals can chose to broadcast their views and experiences online through a variety of
means, such as creating or contributing to a blog or website, sharing photos or videos, or
posting to and interacting on social media platforms.

Though the Internet holds the potential for women to speak, women are still
confronted with a number of barriers that can silence or restrict their expression. The first
primary barrier is access (Huyer et al., 2005; Norris, 2001). However, once they gain
access, women experience a number of other language and cultural barriers. This includes
the dominance of English-language browsers and search engines which limit the visibility
of blogs and websites in other languages and restrict access to those who have English
language skills (Newsom & Lengel, 2003, 2004). Additionally, in certain nations some
voices are purposefully silenced by government entities in ways that range from subtle
disruptions in access and blocking sites to imprisonment or even murder (Newsom &
Lengel, 2004).

Women also need the skill sets and competence to be able to create content
online. van Deursen and van Dijk (2010) have identified four Internet skill sets
individuals can develop related to both the medium and content of the web. Operational
skills allow an individual to utilize an Internet browser, search engine, and other web forms (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2010). With formal Internet skills, individuals are able to navigate the Internet without becoming disoriented (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2010). These two medium skills are considered necessary prerequisites for content-related skills (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2010). The latter includes information skills, or the ability to locate and evaluate information, and strategic skills that allow one to take full advantage of the Internet to reach goals (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2010). In terms of skills, most studies seem to demonstrate that men and women do not significantly differ in skill level, once other factors such as access, experience and education are taken into account (Hargittai & Shafer, 2006; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2011). While some research shows that men tend to be more likely than women to share their creations online, this finding has been mediated by self-perceived skill level, suggesting that when women and men had or perceived they had the same skill level they were just as likely to post content (Hargittai & Walejko, 2008). Women, however, tend to perceive themselves as less competent in their online skills (Hargittai & Shafer, 2006). This correlates with findings that suggest psychological factors, including perceived competence and intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, are key predictors of content creation (Correa, 2010a). Correa’s (2010a) findings among U.S. college students suggested that these perceptions might supercede actual skill levels in predicting content creation. Although women do not perceive themselves to be as competent as men at creating content, Correa (2010a) found that women were significantly more extrinsically motivated than men to generate content. In other words, they found it more useful than men.
Scholars have identified a number of motivations that drive individuals’ willingness to contribute content online, particularly to blogs. According to uses and gratifications theory, individuals actively seek out media that meet, or gratify, specific needs (see Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974; Palmgreen, 1984). These needs can then be seen as motivators for producing content.

Following uses and gratifications theory, several studies have sought to ascertain individuals’ motivations for producing online content. Interviews with 23 bloggers in California demonstrated motivations including documenting one’s life, expressing opinions and commentary, providing an outlet for feelings and emotions, articulating ideas and thoughts, and forming and maintaining an online community (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004). Similarly, in a content analysis of roughly 180 blogs, Papacharissi (2007) found that the primary motivation for authoring a blog was for a sense of self-fulfillment from expressing oneself. Consistent with these prior studies, Leung (2009) identified four categories of needs that serve as motivators for producing user-generated content. These are recognition needs (i.e. to establish a personal identity or gain respect), cognitive needs (i.e. to refine one’s thinking or broaden one’s knowledge base), social needs (i.e. to express feelings and share thoughts and experiences), and entertainment needs (i.e. to pass the time) (Leung, 2009, pp. 1336-1337). Findings demonstrated that recognition and social needs in particular were significant motivators for content generation (Leung, 2009).

In sum, for a woman to speak online she needs to first have the access and needed skills to navigate the technology. She must also surmount cultural and language
barriers. Lastly, she must have the motivation and the sense of perceived competence to create content.

**Being heard.** The act of speaking through generating content online may not be enough to experience voice. As the earlier definition of voice implied, most conceptions of voice require not only a speech act, but the ability of that talk to be heard. Posting content online does not necessarily mean that someone will read or engage with it. This raises questions of when talk can be considered voice (Rakow & Wackwitz, 2004). Watts (2001) describes voice as both an emotional and ethical occurrence that is *answerable*. In essence, voice is actualized in the public acknowledgement of others (Mitra & Watts, 2002; Watts, 2001). Therefore, what is read, watched or acknowledged on the web could determine who gains a voice and who is ignored (Mitra & Watts, 2002). This becomes especially challenging as numerous voices compete to be heard online. This sort of atmosphere raises concerns over the relative success a marginalized individual can have.

The web does, however, present the opportunity for many voices to come together and form discursive communities that can serve as counterpublics through which the voices of the marginalized can demand acknowledgement from the dominant (Mitra, 2001). Some cyberfeminists have argued that a feminist counter-public could be present on the web (Chambers et al., 2004). However, researchers are not clear yet on whether women’s online activities and voicings do represent the development of a public sphere, or simply lead to in-group communication (Chambers et al., 2004). Voices of the marginalized are often limited to the spaces designed for them and not always heard or
acknowledged outside those spaces (Newsom & Lengel, 2003). In other words, the conditions under which women can be heard as part of the dominant public discussion are still undetermined.

Some have suggested that authenticity is key to gaining acknowledgement and discursive power (Mitra & Watts, 2002). An authentic voice is one that speaks of a lived experience in an “ethical and accurate genuine way” (Mitra & Watts, 2002, p. 490). Mitra and Watts (2002) suggest that authenticity is a “multi-dimensional construct” that includes “truth, accuracy, eloquence, and an ontic connection with lived experiences” (p. 490). On the Internet then, some are seen to have more “legitimacy” to speak because of their background and social locations (Mitra, 2004).

However, a debate remains over how essential being heard is to the experience of voice online. Mitra (2005) has argued that merely the potential of being heard is enough online and, as a result, the moment of creating the speech should be the “determinant moment” rather than when it is heard (p. 379). Marginalized individuals may not have had the opportunity to speak in their own authentic voice before, and that experience could be empowering in itself (Mitra, 2005). In this case, being heard would be considered less valuable than an individual gaining the ability to speak. On the other hand, the ability to interact with others online presents an opportunity for dialogue and that could lead to the achievement of a standpoint, according to feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 2007; O’Brien Hallstein, 2000).

By providing a space in which those usually denied space in the public sphere can be heard and gain discursive power, voice is a concept that has long been tied to the
emancipation, and therefore empowerment, of marginalized individuals (Mitra & Watts, 2002; Watts, 2001). Through experiences with voicing, individuals are able to take control of their representation in the public sphere and acquire a sense of agency.

According to Zimmerman’s (1990) model of learned hopefulness, efforts to exert control may lead to an increase in one’s sense of empowerment. More specifically, Rappaport (1995) argues that one’s own narrative can be considered a resource and to gain control over that resource as well as the ability to influence a collective narrative or discourse can be empowering. Additionally, individual agency achieved through the Internet, such as that acquired through the experience of voice, is thought to contribute to empowerment to the extent that users believe their efforts can result in the achievement of desired outcomes (Flanagin, Flanagin, & Flanagin, 2010), or, in other words, the extent of one’s perceived self-efficacy. Ostman (2012) suggests that this could possibly be demonstrated when “young bloggers who develop a loyal crowd of followers commenting on their posts might gain the skills and confidence necessary for voicing political ideas and standpoints,” which in turn might lead to participatory behaviors offline (p. 5). As such, the process of repeated self-expression through the creation of online content, as well as the sense of self derived from the acknowledgment of and interaction with others, could plausibly lead to empowerment outcomes.

Empowerment

Empowerment has been a widely used term across a broad range of disciplines with various conceptualizations and interpretations (Hur, 2006; Lincoln, Travers, Ackers & Wilkinson, 2002; Luthra, 2003; Narayan, 2005). As Young (1994) stated,
“Empowerment is like democracy: everyone is for it, but rarely do people mean the same thing by it” (p. 89). Part of the difficulty comes in the fact that empowerment is seen to take different forms for different people and in different contexts (Zimmerman, 1995). Some, such as Rappaport (1984), have argued that perhaps empowerment is easier to define by its absence, as seen in characteristics such as alienation, helplessness and powerlessness.

The following sections will seek to define empowerment based on its connection to issues of power, critical consciousness and dialogue. The tensions and contradictions within empowerment will also be examined in the process of explicating what empowerment means. The construct of psychological empowerment used in the present study will then be expounded followed by an examination of existing research on empowerment outcomes derived from Internet use.

Power

Any definition of empowerment is first and foremost tied to concepts of power. Most conventional definitions situate empowerment as power over individuals or resources (Parpart, Rai, & Staudt, 2002). This form of power is often conceptualized as a “zero-sum” game in which power is finite and possessed at the expense of others (Rowlands, 1997; Townsend, Zapata, Rowlands, Alberti, & Mercado, 1999). This conceptualization of power over implies that for women to gain power, men will have to lose power (Rowlands, 1997). Power over suggests a form of domination or control. However, it is this form of power that is intimately connected to resistance (Townsend et al., 1999).
Scholars have also called for more nuanced understandings of power. Relying on Foucault’s (1982) conceptualizations, power is not possessed but exercised between and among individuals who are for the most part free to act (Parpart et al., 2002; Rowlands, 1997). For Foucault (1972) power then is inherently relational and constituted in discourse and action. This view allows for an understanding that power pervades all relations within a society (Parpart et al., 2002). Feminists have drawn from Foucault but have also invoked a gender analysis of power relations (Rowlands, 1997). This includes recognizing the ways in which internalized oppression can bar women from exercising power (Rowlands, 1997). As such, feminist theorists have recognized the importance of conceptualizations such as power to, power from within, and power with for understanding empowerment (Rowlands, 1997, Townsend et al., 1999).

*Power to* effect change is seen as a form of “generative” power that “creates new possibilities and actions without domination” (Rowlands, 1997, p. 13). This is the concept of power most clearly tied to agency, as it involves the individual as agent in her own life (Townsend et al., 1999). Meanwhile, *power from within* refers to the inner or spiritual strength of individuals (Rowlands, 1997). Within empowerment, it is tied both to the recognition of systems of oppression and a sense of self (Rowlands, 1997; Townsend et al., 1999). Finally, *power with* others recognizes the power that is derived from a sense of community and collective action (Parapart et al., 2002; Rowlands, 1997). It is the “capacity to achieve with others what one could not achieve alone” (Townsend et al., 1999, p. 31). All four conceptions of power – *power over, power to, power from within* and *power with* – can play an important role in conceptualizations of empowerment.
**Critical Consciousness**

Also foundational to empowerment is the development of a critical consciousness. Most scholars trace the origins of empowerment theory to Paulo Freire’s (1973) concept of “conscientization.” This term refers to the process by which people build a critical consciousness of their social, political and economic circumstances, particularly through engaging in dialogue (Freire, 1973). This understanding then leads to action against oppression (Freire, 1973, Rowlands, 1997). The importance of “consciousness raising” to empowerment has been particularly noted by feminist scholars, who suggest that developing individuals’ reflexive and critical abilities can result not only in a personal transformation, but a reciprocal empowerment of others that can lead to collective action (Young, 1994).

**Dialogue**

As noted by Freire (1973), dialogue is central to the development of a critical consciousness and, therefore, to the empowerment process. Young (1994) defines empowerment as a process in which individuals who are relatively powerless take part in dialogue and through doing so come to an understanding of the determinants of their powerlessness and recognize the possibility of acting together for social change. Based on their findings among women dairy farmers in India, Papa, Singhal, Ghanekar, and Papa (2000) argued that women’s empowerment can be seen when women engage in discussions that result in decisions to improve their community’s quality of life. It can also be demonstrated through communication and action aimed at social change (Papa et al., 2000).
The empowerment process then is inherently interactional (Albrecht, 1988). Thus scholars have asserted that empowerment should be understood as a fundamentally communicative process through which individuals perceive that they can gain control over their lives and circumstances (Papa et al., 2000; Papa, Singhal, & Papa, 2006; Riano, 1994; Rogers & Singhal, 2003). Scholars from other disciplines have also acknowledged the interactional component of empowerment including those in development (Melkote & Steeves, 2001; Naryan, 2005), organizational studies (Cheney, 1995; Papa, Auwal & Singhal, 1997), feminist studies (Collins, 2000; Young, 1994), and community psychology (Rappaport, 1984; Zimmerman, 2000; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988).

A number of communication scholars have recognized the importance of communication for empowerment particularly within organizations (Albrecht, 1988; Buzzanell, 1994; Chiles & Zorn, 1995; Pacanowsky, 1988). Recent studies of empowerment have primarily taken place within health communication (de Souza, 2011; Oh & Lee, 2012), media studies (LeRoux-Rutledge, 2008) and organizational studies (Gill & Ganesh, 2007). A few of these studies touch on themes of the present study including the role of computer-mediated communication. Oh and Lee (2012) found that a sense of empowerment gained from engaging in online communities influenced Korean diabetes patients’ intentions to communicate with their doctors. Additionally, studies have explored women’s sense of empowerment. In interviews with white women entrepreneurs in the United States, Gill and Ganesh (2007) identified an emergent empowerment the women experienced by negotiating constraints. However, these women experienced what the authors’ called “bounded empowerment,” which is contextual and
not absolute (p. 286). The effectiveness of empowerment through media campaigns or participatory communication has also been examined. LeRoux-Rutledge (2008) found through focus groups of Afghan women that a targeted radio program provided listeners with specific goals and aspirations and had some impact on empowerment goals. Despite these recent efforts to advance knowledge of empowerment, still relatively little is fully understood about the empowerment process and how communication plays a role in that process (Rogers & Singhal, 2003), particularly because this process is context-dependent. Additionally, scholars have called attention to the ways discourses of empowerment, specifically women’s empowerment online, can be counterproductive and constraining (Gajjala, Zhang, & Dako-Gyeke, 2010). Further attention then is needed to how communication can be both empowering and disempowering.

**Tensions in Empowerment**

As such, the empowerment process is full of paradoxes and contradictions (Papa et al., 2000; Rogers & Singhal, 2003). It is a complex effort that can also be disempowering (Papa et al., 2006). Empowerment in one sphere may not spill over into other spheres and may in fact lead to oppression in other spheres (Papa et al., 2006). Papa et al. (2006) argue that empowerment and oppression represent a *dialectical tension* within the process of social change.

The concept of dialectics within communication is derived from Bakhtin (1981), who regarded every utterance as the “contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies” (p. 272). For Bakhtin (1981), these were the forces of unity (centripetal) and the forces of difference (centrifugal), whose interaction constitutes
social life (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Other scholars followed by developing dialectical theories of human communication by recognizing the oppositional tensions present in human relationships (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Rawlins, 1992). A dialectic tension thus refers to the simultaneous existence of oppositional forces and tendencies (Papa et al., 2006). It represents a “both/and” relationship rather than an “either/or” dualistic relationship (Papa et al., 2006, p. 43).

Most definitions of dialectics are grounded in four key assumptions: contradiction, motion, totality, and praxis (Papa et al. 2006). First, contradictions refer to the “dynamic interplay between unified opposites” within human relationships and social systems (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 8). Second, motion recognizes that the continuous spiral of activity and change is fundamental to social life. Third, totality demonstrates an assumption of the “constant interconnection and reciprocal influence of multiple individual, interpersonal and social factors” (Rawlins, 1992, p. 7). Lastly, and perhaps most pertinent to the present study, praxis encompasses the idea that human communicators are subjects, who make choices about their own actions, but also objects, which are shaped by historical and social contexts that restrict subsequent actions (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Rawlins, 1992). Within the context of empowerment, this dialectical tension plays out as individuals are pushed and pulled between forces that both empower and oppress (Papa et al., 2006).

Several scholars have acknowledged such a tension within empowerment experienced through information and communication technologies. Many have argued that simplistic celebrations of women’s empowerment online may do more harm than
good by failing to acknowledge the complexity of the empowerment process as well as the constraints of existing power relations and dominant discourses online (Anderson & Shrum, 2007; Gajjala, Zhang, & Dako-Gyeke, 2010).

Importance of Context

Additionally, while it may be a universal value or phenomenon, empowerment is context dependent (Narayan, 2005; Zimmerman, 1995), which makes it difficult to both define and measure. Behaviors and other outcomes that may indicate empowerment in one context may signify something different in another context (LeRoux-Rutledge, 2008; Narayan, 2005). Narayan (2005) offers the example that a woman moving outside her home may represent an empowerment outcome in certain contexts but would not be a relevant indicator for a woman in a society that does not restrict women’s physical mobility (p. 17). As a result, some scholars have suggested that empowerment should be considered an open-ended construct and that the development of a universal measure or definition would not be appropriate (Zimmerman, 1995). Narayan (2005) argues that socio-cultural contexts need to be examined at the analytical level and in the choice of measures. This can be especially challenging for studies whose participants may be situated in various contexts. LeRoux-Rutledge (2008) argues that rather than using context-specific indicators, studies should use similar indicators across contexts and then bring in cultural and contextual factors as part of the interpretation and analysis stage of the research process to allow for comparison while still taking context into account. It is important then to recognize the contexts of women who speak online and their uses of the Internet are not isolated from their offline socio-cultural locations. Based on studies of
Internet usage by low-income families, LGBT communities and African-American women, Mehra et al. (2004) argue that the achievement of empowerment through Internet use differs based on the context, goals and experiences of the particular marginalized group under study as well as what that group considers meaningful.

Definition

Based on this literature, empowerment can then be understood loosely for the purposes of this study as a complex, context-dependent process through which individuals interact with others, come to understand the sources of their oppression, perceive themselves as having the power to effect change and gain control over their lives, and act on those beliefs either individually or collectively. It is a process fraught with tensions as individuals deal with the competing forces of oppression and empowerment.

It is important to note that empowerment can be thought of in terms of both processes and outcomes. Empowering processes can involve a series of experiences or actions through which individuals generate or are provided opportunities to influence the decisions that affect their lives, access resources and gain a critical understanding of their social environment (Zimmerman, 1995, 2000). Empowerment outcomes are the resulting effects of these processes that provide a measure or means of operationalizing one’s level of empowerment (Zimmerman, 1995, 2000). Rowlands (1997) argues that conceptions of empowerment must include more than the visible outcomes and pay attention to the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to act.

Psychological Empowerment
While empowerment as a multi-dimensional construct can also occur at the organizational or community level, this study is specifically interested in the empowerment that occurs at the individual level of analysis known as psychological empowerment. This is considered to be one of the least studied dimensions of empowerment but an important one in that it can lead to and is actualized in proactive behavior and action (Naryan, 2005).

Scholars studying this concept have consistently recognized the presence of three key aspects to an individual’s experience of psychological empowerment. Often referenced is Zimmerman’s (1995) *nomological network for psychological empowerment*, which, based on several prior studies, proposes three components to understanding empowerment that may appear in varying degrees in each individual. These include an *intrapersonal* component, which reflects individuals’ beliefs about themselves, an *interactional* component, which relates to individuals’ understanding of their community and socio-political environment, and a *behavioral* component, which considers the direct actions individuals take individually or collectively to influence their environment (Zimmerman, 1995; 2000). Zimmerman’s conceptualizations have been used by other scholars to categorize or operationalize empowerment outcomes, including by Siddiquee and Kagan (2006) in a study of refugee women in a community Internet project in the UK, LeRoux-Rutledge (2008) in examining the effects of radio on empowerment of Afghan women, and Leung (2009) in exploring the influence of online content generation and civic engagement on psychological empowerment. Similarly, Rowlands (1997) put forth *personal, relational, and collective* dimensions of
empowerment, which recognize the distinction between one’s sense of confidence and capacity, one’s ability to exert influence in a relationship and in decision-making processes, and one’s involvement in collective action. Additionally, in a study of women’s own perspectives on empowerment, Sheilds (1995) identified three themes of empowerment including an internal sense of self, the ability to act based on that sense of self, and a sense of connectedness, which were later used by Stravositu and Sundar (2012) to test women’s psychological empowerment derived from blogging.

The present study borrows Zimmerman’s terminology as well as the conceptualizations of Rowlands (1997), Sheilds (1995), and others in recognizing psychological empowerment as represented in three categories of outcomes (see Figure 2). First, an intrapersonal category could include cognitive outcomes such as perceived competence and self-efficacy, or beliefs that one has both the skills and capacity to act in a specific context. Second, the interactional category could include the development of critical awareness as well as the problem-solving and leadership skills needed to take action. Third, the behavioral category could recognize direct actions including community engagement, participation in collective action, or other actions aimed at influencing one’s social situation. Zimmerman (1995) suggests that using such measurements of psychological empowerment is possible in a specific setting, but that the conceptualizations “must be connected to the experience of the research participants as they state it, and contextually grounded in their life experiences” (p. 596, emphasis in original). This is especially important to consider given that empowerment is assumed to materialize in different forms for different people. Therefore, these categories and outcomes could be considered guides to the research process, rather than absolute or universal measures for psychological empowerment.

Empowerment and ICTs

Based on the belief that information and communication technologies can foster development outcomes, researchers have explored their potential for empowering marginalized populations, including women. Most studies have focused on empowerment resulting from the increased access to knowledge and resources that individuals gain
through information and communication technology trainings and projects. Technology is described as playing a “psychologically empowering role in assisting with the efficient and effective means by which information can be accessed” (Pinkett & O’Bryant, 2003, p. 194). In their study focusing on refugee women in the UK, Siddiquee and Kagan (2006) found that through engagement with technology women gained the competence and autonomy to navigate the Internet to meet their own needs, access to knowledge and resources that led to a critical awareness, and the ability to seek alternative and reliable sources of information about their home countries without having to rely on their community for that information. In addition, case studies of ICT development projects in various parts of the world have shown that by developing information technology skills women gained greater knowledge and, as a result, increased their self-esteem (Hafkin, 2002; Hafkin & Huyer, 2006). Many of these women were also eager to pass on what they had learned to others (Hafkin, 2002). However, these same case studies demonstrated that gender relations still played a large part in shaping the diffusion of technology (Hafkin, 2002). Nath (2001) also argued for the importance of information access as well as communication and networking as means for women’s empowerment through these technologies. Networking is considered a means for women to share knowledge, build consensus and organize collective action (Nath, 2001).

Few studies have examined the empowerment potential for those who create online content. Two studies by Stravrositu and Sundar (2012) provided evidence of the potential for women to experience psychological empowerment through blogging. These studies suggested that women who use blogs as personal journaling to share their
experiences and personal thoughts incur empowerment through a sense of community while women who create filter blogs, which focus instead on social and political issues, gain a sense of agency (Stravositu & Sundar, 2012). Leung’s (2009) research suggested that those who most actively participate in creating content online are the most psychologically empowered, especially in terms of their perceived self-efficacy. Online content creation was found to have a small but significant effect on psychological empowerment (Leung, 2009). These limited, and strictly quantitative, studies establish evidence of an association between content creation and empowerment, but further research is needed to understand why this might be the case and how users may be empowered (and disempowered) through the process.

Present Study

Existing literature and theories suggest that women have the potential to experience voice and, as a result, empowerment through the Internet, but additional research is needed. Previous studies have demonstrated evidence of this connection through outcomes of psychological empowerment (Leung, 2009; Stravositu & Sundar, 2012) but were limited by methods that did not allow for a deeper understanding of the empowerment process through women’s own viewpoints and experiences. Feminist standpoint theory would suggest that women’s experiences and standpoints should be the starting place for knowledge and understanding (Wood, 1992). The theory holds that knowledge is socially situated, and marginalized groups, including women, are situated so that they may have distinct and crucial insights unavailable to the dominant group (O’Brien Hallstein, 2000; Wood, 2005). Additionally, individuals can possess multiple
standpoints as a result of their intersecting social locations (Harding, 2004; Wood, 2005). As such, women’s perspectives should provide unique insights into their experience of voice and empowerment in an online setting, which may not be accounted for in existing theory and research.

Previous research and theorizing suggests several important steps in the process through which women may come to experience voice and empowerment online. Voice is theorized to include both an individual’s public speech act as well as the acknowledgement that the speech has been heard, through which the speaker gains a sense of agency (Mitra, 2004, 2005; Rakow & Wackwitz, 2004; Watts, 2001). What is unclear from existing research is at what point voice has occurred. As such, a first research question asks:

RQ1: How does voice manifest online?

Research suggests that to speak online (i.e. create content that broadcasts one’s experiences or viewpoints) one must have access to the technology (Huyer et al., 2005; Norris, 2001), overcome cultural and language barriers (Newsom & Lengel, 2003, 2004), and develop needed skill sets (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2010). An individual also appears to need the motivation and a level of perceived competence in order to create online content (Correa, 2010a). Additionally, scholars point to ways in which certain voices can be silenced or constrained. The ability to achieve voice and empower oneself through creating content online could have important consequences for marginalized groups (Mitra, 2005). However, suggestions of barriers and constraints that could limit these outcomes need to be further explored. Thus, a second research question asks:
RQ2: What barriers and constraints exist to women’s experiences of voice online?

Although voice may be considered a valuable outcome in its own right, many have suggested that the experience of voice can be empowering to the individual (Mitra & Watts, 2002; Watts, 2001). Borrowing from community psychology and feminist scholars, the outcomes of psychological empowerment in particular could fall into three key categories – intrapersonal, interactional and behavioral outcomes. As such, a third research question asks:

RQ3: What are the outcomes of voice online?

Lastly, though many scholars have invoked empowerment in their studies, empowerment as a communicative process and in particular the role of voice in this process is not completely understood. Therefore, a fourth research question asks:

RQ4: Under what conditions does voice lead to empowerment?

Since this study uses feminist standpoint theory as its foundation, the frameworks and definitions established in the literature can only be seen as limited guides. Any understanding of women’s experiences must be grounded in the perspectives of the women themselves. Additionally, empowerment itself is inherently context-dependent. Therefore, the contexts of women’s experiences must be taken into account.
CHAPTER III

METHOD

Participants

As the goal of this study was to examine the processes of voice and empowerment, it was important to access populations that had likely experienced these processes. Participants for this study were recruited using a purposive sample of self-identified women who are active members of World Pulse’s online community. World Pulse is a nonprofit media network and was selected for this study based on its mission to promote, connect and empower the voices of women globally. The organization, based in Portland, Ore., was founded in 2003 by international journalist Jensine Larson. World Pulse’s services include an online magazine, digital action campaigns, the Voices of Our Future media training program, and the Pulse Wire, an online community newswire and social networking site with members from more than 190 countries.

World Pulse staff members were consulted by email and conference call in the process of developing this study. The organization provided additional background information about the population and assistance in identifying potential participants. As a result of these conversations, two populations of World Pulse members were approached to participate in this study. These populations were selected because of their active engagement with creating content online. Both provide for a cross-cultural sample and participants that share some similar online experiences based on their involvement in the
World Pulse community. Prospective participants from both groups were contacted by private messages to their World Pulse account inviting them to participate in the study. Those who were interested were asked to respond with their preferred external email address at which point they received further information about the study.

First, women who have completed the Voices of Our Future training program were invited to participate. The Voices of Our Future program, which has gone through three cycles, provides citizen journalism and new media training and mentorship for women who were identified as potential grassroots leaders during an application process. The roughly six-month training program involves online learning modules with support from program partners and is accompanied by up to five writing or reporting assignments. The participants are paired with both a mentor and an editorial “midwife” to provide one-on-one support and guidance throughout the process. Many of the participants’ assignments are published on World Pulse’s website and some are featured in its online magazine or picked up by external media. Approximately 88 women have gone through the program to date and could be contacted through the site for participation in this study. These invitations yielded 12 completed interviews from Voices of our Future correspondents.

Additionally, approximately 53 women who have been recognized for their involvement on the site with a “Vocal Contributor” badge on their profile were also invited to participate in the study. To have received the badge, these women have met World Pulse’s criteria for demonstrating frequent and sustained engagement on the website. More than 250 individuals have received this badge. Those who were Voices of
our Future correspondents or volunteers, World Pulse staff members, or identified as men were excluded from the sample. To maintain the diversity of the sample and limit the initial invitation pool, a quota sampling technique was used by inviting only the first three women to receive the badge from each country to participate. This resulted in 11 completed interviews.

In total, 23 self-identified women completed the study. The age range of the participants was 23-55, with one who did not provide her age. The participants currently reside in 18 different countries including Australia, Bangladesh, Barbados, Belgium, Brazil, Cameroon, Chile, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Kenya, Myanmar, Nigeria, the Philippines, South Korea, the United Arab Emirates, and Uganda. However approximately one-third of the participants are living outside what could be considered their home country and therefore at least six other countries are represented in part including Argentina, France, Maldives, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Syria. The majority of participants indicated that where they live could be considered urban, while six participants said they lived in rural areas or some combination of the two. The religions of the participants were varied with seven indicating some form of Christianity, five indicating they were atheist or did not identify with a particular religion, three indicating they were Muslim, two were Hindu, one was Jewish, one was Buddhist, and the remaining three were “spiritual” or exercise some combination of religions.

Procedure

To understand how these women experience voice online and how that experience contributes to the empowerment process, narrative interviews were conducted
after receiving IRB approval. Interviewing is considered a way to gain understanding of the lived experiences and perspectives of participants (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

Specifically, narrative interviews allow participants to structure and make meaning of their own experiences (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Additionally, interviews have been used to bring forth and render visible the voices and experiences of marginalized individuals (DeVault & Gross, 2007), which is particularly relevant to the present study’s attention to voice and its use of feminist standpoint theory.

Since the present study is about individuals’ Internet use, interviews were conducted online to maintain the “contextual naturalness” of the study’s context (Mann & Stewart, 2002, p. 604). Interviews conducted over the Internet additionally provide access to a global sample that otherwise would not be accessible (James & Bushner, 2006). Researchers have argued that mediated interviews do provide in-depth data in the same way as more traditional, face-to-face interviews (Kazamer & Xie, 2008). The present study mainly utilized email interviews, as email does not require the bandwidth and level of technology access that other online platforms such as Skype do. Asynchronous interviews conducted by email have the added capacity to allow the participants more control over the process and their responses, therefore reducing the power of the researcher (James & Bushner, 2006), a goal of feminist research. However, Kazamer and Xie (2008) argue that it is important to let participants choose the medium for the interaction whenever possible, as this can also increase rapport and balance the power relationship between the researcher and participants. Participants were given the option to
conducted the interview through a different channel and three women opted to conduct the interview through a Skype call and one through a Skype chat.

Following James and Bushner (2006), interview question sets were sent one at a time and often followed up with additional questions based on the participants’ responses or a need for clarification to simulate the dialogue that takes place in face-to-face interviews. Participants’ progress was tracked through a spreadsheet that logged dates of last response and stage of the interview. To increase retention, reminder emails were sent when no response had been received in more than a week.

To preserve the confidentiality of participants, the interviews were conducted outside of the World Pulse messaging system and through email accounts the participants identified as appropriate and secure. Additionally, measures were taken to secure the account used to engage with participants including enabling a two-step verification process and further password protection. At the completion of the study, email exchanges will be kept in a secure, password-protected format.

Much of participants’ involvement in the Voices of Our Future program or on the World Pulse website has required them often to interact and write in English. Therefore, the initial invitation was sent in English to all participants. While not ever explicitly stated or required, interviews were primarily conducted in English. This is not without recognizing that forcing individuals to choose one language over another does have consequences for the research process (Rakow & Wackwitz, 2004), even if that forcing is done implicitly by starting the conversation in a particular language. Language use will be further discussed in the study’s limitations.
Instrumentation

Participants engaged in a series of interview exchanges. As part of a pre-interview, the women were first asked a series of biographical questions, including their age, self-identified gender and ethnicity, religion, country of residence, education and work or professional experience. They were also asked basic questions about how and how often they access the Internet, what they do while online, and what barriers they face in terms of access and use of the Internet to help guide the interview.

The interview itself consisted of four question sets with only two to four questions each based on themes examined in the literature review (See Appendix A). The question sets covered the topics of voice, being heard, empowerment and challenges faced by participants. These were often followed by brief supplemental or clarifying questions. Each question set was formatted to ask participants to think about a specific incident, to describe that experience and how it made them feel, and to answer additional questions related to that experience or feeling. Participants were told that the questions were not meant to be exclusive to their experiences with World Pulse. They were asked to reflect on the entirety of their online experiences and answer based on what had been the most influential and important for them personally.

The first question set asked participants to think about one of the first times they felt they had a voice in an online setting with additional questions such as, “What early experiences online helped you to ‘find’ your voice? In other words, what paved the way for this experience?” Supplemental questions for this set included, “What drives you
to continue expressing your voice online?” and “What (if any) other aspects have been influential in the development of your voice?”

A second question set asked participants to think about a time when they felt they had been “heard” online with the additional question, “What specifically gave you the feeling that you had been heard?” Supplemental questions for this set included, “What do you think is necessary in order for you to feel heard online? For instance, is it enough just to put something you wrote out there or what do you need in order to feel heard?” and “How important is being heard to you? In other words, what does it mean to be heard?”

The third question set asked participants to think about a time they felt empowered while creating content online with the additional question, “What does empowerment mean to you?” Supplemental questions included, “Are there any other ways you feel these experiences have had lasting impacts on your life, outlook or actions? How so?” and “Has creating content online ever inspired you to take action on behalf of yourself or others?”

The fourth question set asked participants to think about a time they experienced challenges or barriers to expressing their voice online with additional questions such as “If you have overcome these challenges, how did you do so?” and “If these challenges are ongoing, how do you deal with them? What do you need to be able to overcome these challenges?” This set was often followed by supplemental questions like, “Aside from your experiences described here, have you ever felt disempowered or discouraged by your experiences online in any way? If so, please share about these
experiences” and “Are there any other risks you feel you face in using your voice online?”

Lastly, participants were asked to review their interview responses and reflect on their experience as part of a fifth and final question set. This set included questions such as, “What have you learned about yourself and your experiences online through this process?,” “What sticks out to you as most important about your experiences online based on your responses?” and “After reflecting on your experiences, what do you feel that you need, if anything, to be able to fully express your voice online?” In addition, a few supplemental questions about the research process (i.e. “Would you be interested in participating in a review of the findings?”) and clearinghouse questions (i.e. “Is there anything else you would like to add?” and “Do you have any questions for me now that the interview is complete?”) were asked.

Analysis

Full transcripts were compiled from the participants’ email exchanges, generating approximately 201 single-spaced pages of data. Interviews ranged in length from 5 to 31 single-spaced pages. Participants were assigned codes as they completed the interviews for the purposes of analysis. Transcripts were then analyzed qualitatively using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A grounded theory approach is considered implicitly feminist as it allows for meanings to emerge organically from the words of the participants themselves unencumbered by existing theory (Clarke, 2007).

Primary and secondary readers conducted an initial read of the first 20 transcripts in the order they were completed to gain familiarity with the data. Both
readers had training in qualitative methods and familiarity with the existing literature. This was followed by subsequent readings aimed at identifying themes in each woman’s individual responses through open coding as well as their relationships to larger emergent categories, or clusters of related ideas. A third reader, who had training in qualitative methods and a background in feminist scholarship, also conducted readings of the first one-third of the transcripts and engaged in discussions with the primary and secondary readers on emergent themes to provide additional insights. Conducting data analysis in a group provided the opportunity to bring various perspectives together to produce multiple readings and codes (Clarke, 2007). It also provided an opportunity for reflexivity and “consciousness raising” among the readers (Clarke, 2007).

After multiple readings of the first three transcripts specifically, a coding sheet was created that was used with rereads of subsequent transcripts to catalogue instances of emergent categories and codes for each woman individually. This coding sheet included emergent categories related to voice including “conditions,” “catalysts,” “feeding,” “constraints,” and “outcomes,” along with an “other” category to allow for new findings to still emerge. A constant-comparative method was then used as part of an ongoing process to compare incidents within the data and refine category definitions (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Coding of individual interviews was then combined into a larger codebook at which point axial coding was undertaken to make connections between the categories and unearth deeper meanings. At this stage, transcripts were reread with these emergent categories to ensure all coding efforts are exhaustive. Through this process, all interviews received at least five readings. Three additional
interviews were completed at this time. Analysis of these interviews found that while each individual woman’s experience and context is unique, no additional themes emerged regarding the categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Reflexivity

As a feminist scholar, this study is necessarily a reflexive process. Hesse-Biber and Piatelli (2007) argue that feminist reflexivity is a “holistic process” that seeks to expose and interrogate power and privilege through the entirety of the research process. As such it is not sufficient merely for me as the researcher to acknowledge my privileged position as a white, middle-class, Western woman in the United States. As DeVault and Gross (2007) write, “research relations are never simple encounters, innocent of identities and lines of power, but, rather, are always embedded in and shaped by cultural constructions of similarity, difference, and significance” (p. 191) As previously discussed, efforts at “giving voice” to any individual or group are fraught with dangers. Such efforts must be wary of continuing to silence certain voices and privilege others (Luthra, 2003).

To account for my own role in this, I have attempted to actively interrogate my position and role in the research process, minimizing my impact wherever possible, through discussions with other scholars and with the participants themselves. To do so, I engaged additional readers in discussions on meaning, voice, power, and difference at various stages of the research process and sought out other voices. Additionally, I practiced reflexive sampling (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007) by stopping at various stages of the research process to gage how my own assumptions and position might be
influencing the research process. I have tried, not always successfully, to be mindful in my role as researcher of the various constraints facing the participants, particularly related to language, time, and technology access, when conducting the interviews.

Several mechanisms were also used to ensure as much power, input and voice for the participants as possible. First, as part of the research process, participants were asked and encouraged to review and reflect on their responses during and after the interview to ensure accuracy and to establish standpoints. Email interviews were selected both for access purposes and because they are thought to produce a more reflexive interview. Email interviews allow participants to critically reflect on their responses by thinking through their answers before submitting and revisiting earlier parts of the interview as it progresses through a continuous record of emails (James & Bushner, 2006). This reflexivity is especially crucial for the achievement of a standpoint, as described by feminist standpoint scholars. These scholars have argued that what is needed is conscious reflection by the participants on their social and political position and their understandings of that position (O’Brien Hallstein, 2000). Participants must then be invited to play a role in interpreting and ascribing meaning to their experiences (Wood, 1992), and they were asked to do so in the final question set that provided an opportunity to reexamine their responses and draw meaning from them. Their responses to those questions were referred to and drawn from in the analysis process.

Additionally, in an effort to reduce my power and influence as researcher and to provide respect to the perspectives and standpoints of the individual women, the analysis is supported with as many of the participants’ direct words and language choices
as possible. I have attempted to place the women’s own words in positions of prominence before my own and to be attentive to the individual voices of each participant by making sure their voices are heard throughout the findings section.

Lastly, member checking was conducted. Participants were sent a preliminary draft of the findings and asked whether their experiences are accurately represented in the results. Thirteen participants responded to this request and all indicated that the findings reflected their experiences and voices.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The study’s findings will be outlined in four sections. First, the findings for research question one exploring the manifestation of voice online will be discussed. Second, results for research question two regarding the barriers and constraints to this experience are reported. Next, the outcomes of voice online, research question three, are described. Lastly, findings for research question four regarding the conditions by which voice leads to empowerment are examined. An overview of the findings can be viewed in Table 1.

Participants’ words in this chapter are reported as originally written or stated. All punctuation choices and emphasis is their own. The country indicated is reflective of where the woman currently resides, not necessarily her home country.

Voicing Online

Research question one asked: How does voice manifest online? Through their interview responses, participants revealed four primary components to their experience of voicing online – conditions, catalysts, speech acts, and being heard. First, participants demonstrated a variety of conditions and then catalysts for voice online. Then, voice materialized through diverse online speech acts from blogging to sharing poetry. Lastly,
Table 1

*Overview of Study Findings*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Codes/Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voicing Online <em>(RQ1)</em></td>
<td>Conditions for Voice</td>
<td>Knowledge and Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Access to Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Offline Empowerment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catalysts for Voice</td>
<td></td>
<td>Emotional Response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Invitation to Speak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sense of Responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sense of Safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech Act</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ex. Blog/Social media post</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being Heard</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ex. Positive feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barriers to Voice <em>(RQ2)</em></td>
<td>External Barriers</td>
<td>Financial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Technology and Information Access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural Norms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal Barriers</td>
<td></td>
<td>Fear of Response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Perceived Competence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Actual Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Barriers</td>
<td>Offline Responses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Online Responses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Online Communities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Loss of Confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Restraining Voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Silencing Voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Missed Opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes of Voice <em>(RQ3)</em></td>
<td>Intrapersonal</td>
<td>Self-Confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sense of Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Drive to Act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Emotional Release</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
consistent in participants’ responses was the importance of being heard to their experiences with voicing themselves online.

**Conditions for Voice**

“Talking about it, I realized my experience online is mostly determined by experiences that happened « in real life ».” As this woman in Belgium indicates, both implicit and explicit in participants’ responses were conditions that served as prerequisites for their online voice. Specifically, their knowledge and skills, access to resources, and offline empowerment informed their activities online.

**Knowledge and Skills.**

Perhaps it was because I was educated in the English language and had the opportunity to be further trained in the masters level. In college and graduate school,
we were trained to speak out regardless of what others think of your ideas. I had the confidence to do so because my school was a liberal and premier university.

Many participants made mention of their education and profession-specific trainings as important in shaping their experiences and confidence to speak, as a woman from the Philippines did here. Participants in this study were highly educated. All indicated they completed at least eight years of schooling with all but two having completed some sort of university education and more than half with master’s degrees.

Participants also displayed detailed local, cultural or domain-specific knowledge throughout their interview responses that they have gained through their work, offline activism and other experiences. One woman demonstrated this when she stated, “As a gender officer who works directly with survivors of sexual violence in world largest refugee camp and in cultural setting, I have a lot to tell the world.” Half of the participants made mention of their professional or work experience specifically in their responses. All of the participants indicated some sort of professional experience when directly asked, with most working in areas of social and development work, education, and business. Many cited activist work like volunteering with NGOs or successful involvement in campaigns or projects related to children’s and women’s rights. A few participants also mentioned engaging in creative work such as writing songs, scripts, or poetry offline. Several women indicated they had engaged with print media in some form whether it was submitting to newspapers, producing magazines, or writing books.

Access to Resources.

I think, I guess, while talking to friends who are politically active or who are also vocal about human rights or women’s rights and just hearing their stories or reading
people’s stories or reading newspaper articles and different opinion pieces and just feeling I also want to be a part of that.

As this response from a woman in Germany suggests, participants pointed to supportive and active social networks offline as well as their increasing access to information as influential in their development of a distinctive voice. Respondents also mentioned seeking out and reading about certain issues through books, news articles and blogs. Many of the women specifically noted coming into contact with feminist writings.

Though only a few specifically mentioned it early on, the women in the study required access to technology, and therefore the financial resources to do so. Participants indicated they access the Internet almost daily and often for several hours at a time. At least half access the Internet on multiple devices and at multiple locations.

**Offline Empowerment.** “My decision to go online last year to share my past was also significant but nothing could compare to the time I threw my husband's stuff out of the house and reported him to the police.” For one woman in the Philippines, a victim of domestic violence, offline empowerment was an essential prerequisite to having a voice online. Several participants told of silencing or trauma in their personal lives ranging from those like the quoted woman who dealt with abusive or controlling spouses to women who dealt with depression and struggled with their identity. Participants indicated that either on their own or with the help and support of others, they had to overcome these offline challenges at least in part prior to voicing themselves online.

**Catalysts for Voice**

“The more I did, the deeper the feeling of injustice and illogicity rose. To the point I simply ‘had’ to begin saying something.” Beyond the conditions for voice online,
participants, like the woman from Italy quoted here, also indicated that there came a point in time that a specific trigger or catalyst provided them with the impetus to speak online. Four primary catalysts were identified in participants’ responses including an emotional response, an invitation to speak, a sense of responsibility, and a sense of safety.

**Emotional Response.**

Therefore, whenever we interact, this is the feeling I get, 'no one is concerned of the plight of the rural women' they are armless. It is here then that I thought of how best I can 'shout' and make someone hear my/their voice and something be done.

The most common motivation to break their silence online, as typified in this statement from a woman in Uganda, was an emotional response to situations or events that were perceived to be unjust. More than half of the participants mentioned instances where they were personally affected by a strong sense of injustice that compelled them to speak.

**Invitation to Speak.** “My husband saw the World Pulse website and joined, he later told me that ‘He saw a website there all the women were writing exactly like me.’ I decided to visit the website and I was glued till today.” What this woman from Nigeria shares was an equally common experience among the participants. Many first spoke because they were asked, encouraged, or enticed to speak by a significant person – a close friend, spouse, relative, boss, or event organizer. In one case, a participant’s mother-in-law provided her with funds to access the Internet. In addition, others indicated that a call to participate or an invitation from an organization to get involved provided them with the motivation to speak.
Sense of Responsibility. “It was an avenue to use my experience -- my voice to represent the voiceless -- the neglected individuals, some of whom were since kidnapped and killed by ritual killers while nobody raised alarm.” Another participant from Nigeria chose to voice online an encounter she had as a teenager, an experience she did not feel comfortable sharing offline. She and several other participants stated they had a sense of duty or responsibility to speak based on their own experiences so that others may be willing to speak and awareness could be raised about their experiences.

Sense of Safety.

No one had any expectation of what I write because none would knows me in person other than through my written voice. I can introduce who I am through my written voice. I was glad in a sense as it was new start for me. I felt safe. It was the sense of safety that encouraged me to increase my contribution as a member of the group.

For a few participants like the woman quoted here, the moment of speech happened once they felt that a particular online community was a safe place to share their stories. These participants suggested that they spent significant time reading on the websites before joining in. It was when they had a sense that the “climate” was open and that their contributions were “really welcomed” that they felt able to speak.

Speech Acts

Participants reported a variety of speech acts they engaged in when they chose to voice themselves online. The most common speech act was writing a blog post or article either for their own blogs or for World Pulse. The second most common act involved posting to social media sites like Facebook, Orkut, and Twitter. While most of these acts involved a traditional, one-way written text, participants also experienced voice
in other ways such as through Skype conference calls, discussion boards, emails, and online courses. The type of writing varied as well including narratives, editorial or opinion-based writing, poetry and music lyrics.

**Being Heard**

“To me having a voice begins with being listened to.” As suggested by this comment from a woman in Uganda, the majority of the women indicated that following their first speech act online, the experience of being heard was a key moment – the moment in which they “had a voice.” One woman in Germany demonstrated this when she shared the following:

And so I joined the group, and I listen there and I shared my views. It was nice because I was included in the conversation and people were giving me positive feedback, and I felt that you know it was helpful for me to share my ideas. So I felt that that was one of the first times that I was being heard or sharing my viewpoint with other people.

Nearly all of the participants explicitly mentioned either the phrase “being heard” or a response of some sort to their speech in their narratives about their first experiences with voice online. Some literally answered the question about the first time they felt they had a voice by starting their response with, “The first time I felt I was heard or seen…” These experiences of being heard were often directly linked to participants’ experiences of empowerment, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

**Barriers to Voice**

The second research question asked: What barriers and constraints exist to women’s experiences of voice online? Participants disclosed a range of obstacles and impediments to voicing themselves online. These came in the form of specific external,
internal, and interpersonal barriers to voice as well as related outcomes from these constraints on their voices. Many of these barriers are interrelated and can reinforce each other. It is also important to note that the impact and severity of these barriers varies for each woman depending on her context and has often been influenced by her education, employment, socio-economic status, and culture.

External Barriers

Participants face specific external and material barriers to using their voice online including financial difficulties, access to technology and information, physical risks, time constraints, and cultural norms.

Financial.

After writing and writing, nothing comes out of it that can put food on my table or pay my children's school fees or even pay my internet connection, sometimes, i do not see any usefulness in online writing for poor women, it is good for those in advance counties who can alwo do little things that will give them money… The voice cannot survive without food on my table.

As evidenced by the testimony from this woman in Nigeria, a strongly reoccurring barrier for participants is financial. Poverty in particular restricts and limits women’s voices. The inability to meet basic needs like food and shelter takes a priority over any attempts at self-expression. Several women indicated they needed a fixed income or paying job in order to meet their needs and facilitate their goals. Lack of money also means that some women struggle to pay for or gain access to technology, as is discussed in the next section.

Technology and Information Access.

I am constantly confronted by the challenges of financial inability to have access to computer and internet. I am also frustrated by lack of an alternative means to power
supply. I couldn’t afford to buy a power generating machine, even if I have one, I need to be buying fuel and grease all the time. It is the tradition in my country that people resort to the use of power generating machine in the absence of unstable power supply in Nigeria. These are set-backs to accomplishing my set goals online.

As the words of another women in Nigeria indicate, participants have struggled to gain consistent Internet access. Problems identified by participants included the slowness of the Internet, the lack of Internet services particularly in rural areas, the distance to cyber cafes, the cost of technology, erratic service, power and electricity issues, limited times to be online, lack of existing infrastructure, and noise within cyber cafes that make it challenging to focus. Some of the women have taken extreme measures to gain access including walking miles to Internet cafes or, in one woman’s case, denying herself food to save some money to pay for a computer. For several participants, issues of inconsistent electricity and Internet service caused delays in the interview process, illustrating that this issue is persistent.

Some participants have also reported that governments in their countries censor or attempt to control access to information online and offline. In addition, a few participants mentioned laws that curtail freedom of speech or the lack of laws to protect those who do speak online.

Security.

Since I am active in [country name] revolution and internet is the main tool to reach the world, one of the main risks I might face is threats to hurt me or one of my family members. This is why I use an alias name, though I am getting more brave but not entirely brave. There is also threats to hack my accounts (email-facebook) and publish my info online by the regime’s supporters, so an alias name might keep them away from me.
Many participants like the woman just quoted have received open threats directed at themselves or loved ones. They have also faced and endured physical risks. One participant told a story of receiving a threat from a group that she would “go the way of my forefathers” if she did not stop writing about the group. Another participant shared that she is uncertain as to whether she will ever be able to return to her home country for fear of the physical risk. At least one participant had to delay the interview due to facing offline safety issues (unrelated to the interview itself). Other participants have received threats to varying degrees including a participant who received a “warning” to be “mindful and careful” of her writing about certain religious issues. Some participants have also been traced, monitored, or received threats of or experienced actual hacking.

Cultural Norms.

I once went to police to report a cyber case where an imposter was using my facebook account to conn money from my friend. The response I got from police was shocking. They asked me what a lady like me was doing in Face Book. ‘You people will get into more trouble using facebook, recently a woman was raped in [name] (suburb) by a group of men because she connected to these people on facebook and agreed to meet them in a certain place.’ They looked surprised when I told them I purely use F for professional use only. people here tend to believe that decent people should not be networking online.

As this woman’s anecdote reveals, being active online can have offline repercussions in certain contexts influenced by cultural, social and religious norms. In some cases, participants indicated that this was tied to the discussion of certain topics, expressing particular opinions, or just to Internet use in general. Participants referred to this as the potential for “social suicide” or “stigma by society” that could result from speaking out, sharing too much, or acting counter-cultural online.
Time. “Being employed, a single parent and engaged in a number of spiritual and social development work, I go online as time permits.” As demonstrated in this statement from a woman in the Philippines, time constraints have limited some of the participants’ involvement online. Several women mentioned other responsibilities, family life, and work that takes them into the field, particularly into rural areas without access, that restrict the amount of time they can commit to voicing themselves online.

Internal Barriers

In speaking to her needs to be able to fully express her voice online, one participant said, “Short to say, but, I’m afraid, huge: Being sure I’ve something of value to tell.” Participants were very attentive to their own internal struggles. One participant numbered off 14 challenges she faces, most of which were internal, including “to see my worth,” “to believe others care about me,” and “to believe there are people who really want to help.” Consistent among participants were three primary internal barriers – a fear of response, perceived competence, and actual skills.

Fear of Response.

I’m being open to the encouragement but also being open to the scrutiny. And so the thing is on the one hand you want to amplify your voice, you want the issue to be discussed, you want… whatever. But on the other hand there’s still a part of me that’s like, “Oh my gosh. Is it OK? Is the spelling correct? Did I speak in Standard English? Oh my gosh.” You know what I mean? So there is that balance. I don’t know. It’s an ongoing journey. So I don’t know what to say in terms of how I feel about it other than it’s a double-edged sword.

Participants, like the woman from Barbados quoted here, were acutely aware that speaking publicly comes with certain risks and many feared the possible responses of others. This was often expressed as a fear of being criticized, ridiculed or open to scrutiny,
shame, or stigma. A few participants also indicated they struggle with a desire for approval that dampens their willingness to speak. They spoke of not wanting to “cross the line” or to “turn others off” with their words. This fear was often directly linked to an intrapersonal need for confidence.

**Perceived Competence.**

I think the barrier I encounter most of the time when I’m online if I am to write something is that I’m not feeling qualified enough to write on it or that I don’t have enough tools to really grab the issue properly and express it well. And then I think I feel, you don’t know enough about it and other people would write much better about this topic in general than you could do.

Like this participant from Belgium, many of the women seemed to doubt their own knowledge and qualifications to speak or their writing abilities. This was either explicitly stated or implied in statements like “I’m not a journalist/writer” or a participant’s suggestion that she’s not a “real” specialist. These perceptions about their competence seem to inhibit their abilities to speak out.

**Actual Skills.**

The main challenge was to write in English because there were very few online fora in Hindi when I started out. My English was not so good and so I had to get my posts edited before putting them online and that took time. Given that I am mostly in the field and only rarely online except in patches this posed a problem and it was frustrating at times.

Close to a quarter of the participants expressed that their level of proficiency in English has been an ongoing challenge. This came out not just in their direct responses to questions, like was evidenced in this response from a woman in India, but in some of the email exchanges when several participants would apologize for their “non-English” English. Additionally participants mentioned limited online skills as a barrier.
**Interpersonal Barriers**

These women have also faced challenges based on some of their interpersonal relationships. Actual interactions with others offline and online as well as their involvements with online communities have served as sources for discouragement at times for many of the participants.

**Offline Responses.**

Also, the hardest part was when I met the offline. Some of them suddenly did not want to greet me at all, some of them who did not look like the care actually read my stuff. And when I wrote about sex, I have got creepy men who thought that I would have sex with everyone because I was so open.

Many participants, including the woman in Indonesia quoted here, have experienced negative reactions or responses from family and others they engage with offline. These have included comments from family members telling them “Perhaps you didn’t want to speak out on that” to male figures, like husbands or fathers, expressing doubt about the significance of their online activities. In some cases, online writing has led to offline sexual harassment.

**Online Responses.**

In my work and political activism I have to interact with people using rules quite distant from mine. A lot of aggressivity. Sexism. Bragging. Love of technology for its own... You feel unwelcome, from time to time. I feel this is mainly a matter of language - as if connecting to the Internet lowers inhibitions of many insecure people (guys, very mostly).

Participants, as one woman from Italy suggests, have endured all kinds of discouraging and disparaging interactions online. These have ranged from moments of misunderstanding to experiences of harassment and verbal attacks by detractors to accounts of fraud and manipulation. While affirmative responses from others were seen
as important to their online experiences, negative reactions also stood out to participants for making them “stop and think twice” about what they said online.

**Online Communities.** “I have also noticed that most onliners are very passive wanting to have a sense of belonging but offering very little substantial contribution which might not bring changes to identified problems online.” Several participants reported being discouraged by their engagement with different online communities. This included participants who felt frustrated by unmet expectations about other “onliners,” as one woman from Cameroon indicated, and specific communities. At least one participant reported feeling “used” by certain online organizations. Others reported that community norms make them feel unwelcome, out of place or excluded. One woman compared the experience at times to “entering an all-male coffee bar with all people stopping their talk and watching you in astonishment...” In some cases these feelings were related to aggressive, macho, and competitive male-dominated environments but in at least one other case, a participant reported issues of envy, resentment, insecurities and anxieties she felt were reflective of competition among women.

**Outcomes**

“Not expressing one’s own voice is, as far as I’ve experienced, a very effective way to feel powerless.” Attempting to cope with these barriers and constraints has been challenging for the participants. Their responses indicate several intrapersonal outcomes that lead to choices to restrain or silence their voices. In addition, external constraints have also resulted in missed opportunities for the participants.

**Loss of Confidence.**
The challenges particularly make me feel despondent. Not being able to do what I aim at doing makes me feel that I am being wasted in the world when I have a lot to contribute via online to improve human living.

Participants various experiences with these external, internal and interpersonal barriers have resulted for some, as one woman from Nigeria indicates, in a lack of confidence and feelings of powerlessness. Many participants reported needing more confidence, bravery, and courage. They also reported that their experiences with these barriers were “demoralizing,” made them feel “imprisoned,” “emotionally hurt,” “inferior,” “frustrated,” “inadequate,” or “limited.”

Restrainting Voice.

While I feel strongly about certain social issues, I feel that I’ve always been limited by the possibility that this outspokenness may expose me or my family to certain security risks. So I tend to choose my words carefully and not focus on controversial local issues in my own country.

Many participants, including the woman from the Philippines quoted here, have reported being more cautious with their online contributions as a result of some of the barriers they’ve experienced. This has involved instances of self-censorship, “more observing, less doing,” “tapering back,” making “inconsistent” contributions, and maintaining a “low profile.”

Silencing Voice. However, in certain cases, these barriers or constraints have led to the silencing of certain participants. One woman in Bangladesh speaks to her own struggles with this:

Personally my father, he used to say, ‘Ok, you are writing. Ok, you are getting feedback. Then what?’ Then I used to think, “Then what?” It’s really challenging for me, like I’m writing, I’m getting feedback, and people are reacting toward my article, but I don’t know what is the next step. It’s really challenging me sometimes
not to write… It’s not that he’s discouraging me, but in a way he’s telling the truth, right? I don’t find any effect from that online things...

In some instances, participants indicated that they stopped writing altogether (at least for a time), stopped writing about specific political or religious issues or taking a side on them, or stopped working with certain groups.

**Missed Opportunities.**

The only thing that bothers me is, although i always intend to learn and when i look for training and other fellowship opportunities my limited training and education has obstacle in getting those opportunities. how can the journalist like us can improve our level and knowledge and skills if we don't get the international level training, i wonder.

Like this participant residing in South Korea, the women also documented missed opportunities as result of their external barriers, particularly their financial constraints. Participants have been unable to attend conferences or trainings, join groups, or launch projects. One participant also shared that she had been unable to participate in a conference call because of her Internet access and the lack of Skype capabilities at a local Internet café. While these missed opportunities were explicitly mentioned, participants’ difficulties with technology and information access suggest that there may be other opportunities that have been lost.

It is important to note that most of the participants have also experienced a variety of positive outcomes from continued actions online, which will be discussed later in this chapter, and have continued to speak. These outcomes though suggest that at times barriers may constrain the impact of those positive experiences.
Outcomes of Voice

The study’s third research question asked: What are the outcomes of voice online? In their responses, these women reported empowerment outcomes as well as external social change as a result of their voicings online. Most participants interpreted their experience of empowerment and their role in social change as gradual. This was evidenced when a woman in Barbados said, “But again I reinforce the fact that the little things that add up into the big thing that helps with empowerment and encourages me to share my voice and speak on things that impact me or my community.” Several participants used metaphoric language to explain this process such as “rippling effect” or “chain reaction.” A participant in the Philippines described it this way, “Whether the action is little or big, I don't mind. There is a saying that little bubbles make the water boil.” This gradual process of empowerment was seen to pick up steam over time as a result of the response participants received to their voicings online. Those responses will be further discussed later in this chapter.

Empowerment outcomes fell into three categories that also corresponded with those in the literature review – intrapersonal, interactional and behavioral outcomes (Zimmerman, 1995; Rowlands, 1997; Sheilds, 1995). This section will explore each of those categories in turn followed by the reports of external actions.

Intrapersonal

There is nothing impossible for me to do.....and tehre is no one I cannot meet in life as long as I am determined, no one has two heads, even Preisdent Obama is a man I can meet if I set my mind at meeting him. No impossibility when you are empowered.
Participants’ language both directly and indirectly exhibited intrapersonal outcomes as a result of their voicings, as a woman from Nigeria indicates here. These included increased self-confidence, sense of agency, drive to act, and self-esteem. For some women their early experiences with voice also provided an emotional release.

**Self-confidence.**

The experience of empowerment impacted my life a lot. I became more confident and more brave to fight for my rights. My voice became louder and I do not hesitate in doing things my way. My vision for the future became more clear and my picture of my self became also clear. I am not intimidated by anyone and I am comfortable in my own skin.

A majority of the respondents echoed statements like this one from a participant in the U.A.E. and reported increased confidence. This was often also tied to their perceived competence. Through their experiences with voice online, they felt more confident that they had the skills and the knowledge to speak, more confidence in their writing specifically, and therefore were more willing to voice themselves than they were before. This confidence also appeared for some to translate into other domains such as work or home. One woman from Cameroon mentioned that people who know her have even approached her to ask where she developed “such boldness and courage to speak out loud” or asked her if she is the same person they knew while in college.

**Sense of Agency.** “The power to change things is within my capacity, and with that which internet offers, I-- the internet user-- I am a change agent.”

Most participants articulated a strong sense of agency following their online experiences. Many women made a statement similar to this one from a woman in Nigeria. Examples included “I have the potential to effect change” and “WE CAN make a difference.”
Participants appeared to feel strongly that, particularly with the aid of the Internet, their voices could be transformative. The participants also demonstrated increased self-efficacy, an essential component of agency. A woman in Australia stated, “I feel free and capable to do anything.” Participants indicated they believed they have the knowledge, skills, and capacity to effect change.

**Drive to act.** “I feel challenged all the time wanting to participate more, learn more, take less work for the publishing of my personal texts, and wishing one day leave my country and go meet the people who gave me these discoveries.” Participants, as a woman in Brazil demonstrates here, repeatedly mentioned a drive to act as a result of their early experiences with voice. This was expressed as being encouraged to do more, becoming more active, continuing on, or a sense of resilience. In some cases, the interview process itself fed this drive, as one woman shared during her reflection, “I hope that these experiences will encourage me to make more of effort to become more actively involved and to share my views with a wider audience.”

**Self-esteem.** “I feel appreciated, important in other people’s life, feel satisfaction of my work, relevant in this world, I feel, I need to keep up and raise up to the challenge/keep the pace.” As this participant in Uganda suggests in her statement, many women reported that their online experiences contributed to their sense of self-esteem. Participants said they felt “useful” and “important” in their communities. Many shared that this increased self-esteem contributed to a feeling of internal satisfaction.

**Emotional Release.** “I felt relieved actually after I talked about what happened because I couldn’t talk about it in my community or even to close friends. I felt that I
shook off a burden of guilt and started a healing process.” This participant opened up online about her first marriage, how she got out of it and how she was perceived as a result. For her and several others who were unable to speak in offline settings, speaking online provided an emotional release and brought them a sense of peace. One participant who wrote her story on child sexual abuse said, “It gave me a great relief to speak and be heard by concerned women and to get encouraged.” At least a third of the participants indicated that their early experiences with voice in particular were “highly therapeutical.” While this often happened in cases like the one of the woman quoted, some participants indicated that when they have been particularly angry about an issue and have written about it, this experience has had a cathartic effect.

**Interactional**

“Also, the fact that I have access online. I might as well use this medium to reach the people that I want to reach. It's like a given power, and of course, I don't want to waste it.” Participants testified that through their experiences with voice online they have gained a sense of critical awareness and increased their knowledge and skills.

**Critical Awareness.** “Sharing my story from my local experience, I realized that other people from other parts of the world have similar issues coming from their own local environments.” Participants consistently indicated that their online interactions had made them more critically aware in several ways. First, many participants used a phrase similar to, “I am not alone,” realizing like the participant from Nigeria quoted, that they have support and that other women have gone through similar experiences. Second, other participants offered examples of ways that they have been actively reflexive in their
interactions and worked to challenge their own assumptions and prejudices. During questions that invited participants to reflect back on the interview, several noted that they valued the chance to reflect and engage in a process of “continuous discovery.” One woman from Italy illustrates this process of consciousness-raising for her through the interview:

Yet reading back, especially in my answers to latest two questions as I felt more confident and relaxed, I realized how much stereotyping I am still applying. Gender is good indicator. This astonishes me quite a little bit, as my not so common life experience gave me plenty of opportunities to realize how dangerous stereotyping is. Evidently I was more ‘part of the game’ than I believed to be.

Lastly, as they increased their involvement online, participants demonstrated “a realization of the power” they have been provided through their access and use of the Internet and with it a sense that “power is not disjoint from responsibility.” As a result, many women indicated they felt a sense of obligation to give a “voice to the voiceless” or to the “marginalized” groups in their own communities. Perhaps what most encapsulates their interactional outcomes is that participants very commonly expressed that they have become more conscious communicators, learning how to speak ethically and effectively in online settings, as a result of this realization of power. A participant in Brazil put it this way, “I also know that the language used in the texts I will be ethical and acutely care for others who are reading. The word has power and I'm aware of the strength of my written words and my voice.” Others expressed it as a need to use the freedom of the Internet “appropriately and responsibly,” “to bear in mind that readers come from different socio-cultural and political backgrounds,” and “be considerate and open to the ideas and feelings of other.”
Knowledge.

All the time i have been online for any serious project, I feel empowered. Though I am being heard, i also do learn alot from other contributors who are heard online too. The knowledge i acquired from one online project, i usually use that knowledge either in solving some problems around me or apply it to another online project.

As indicated in this statement from a participant in Cameroon, women described their online interactions as highly educational. They reported broadening their understandings on a variety of topics and developing their own expertise. The women have learned about the tools and different mediums of expression available online. They have also sought out information about feminism, about other women’s experiences globally, and about other cultures. As this response suggests, they have recognized that the knowledge they have gained can be actively applied in their writing, activism and work places. Most importantly from an empowerment perspective, several participants reported having knowledge of how to leverage opportunities to make a difference and how to use the Internet as an effective advocacy tool.

Skills.

The VOF training is a great boost to my writing skills; for the first time, I learnt and practiced digital storytelling. I gained confidence reporting on issues happening in my community, as well as being imparted with basic skills I need as a woman with an ambition to transform the world around me. The training exposed me to the intricacies of using web 2.0 for women’s empowerment. I never dreamt of acquiring these skills-- I was empowered.

According to participants like this woman in Nigeria, their experiences online have contributed to strengthening and broadening their skill sets. These have included their writing, language, interpersonal, and platform-specific skills. In addition, many have
actively sought ways to gain additional skills or improve their existing skills, such as through trainings like the Voices of Our Future training or online courses.

Behavioral

Participants’ online experiences with voice have also resulted in behavioral outcomes where they have taken direct action. These have included engaging in activism, passing it on to other women, and making changes in their personal and public lives.

**Engaging in Activism.**

I just shared a article on my journal on worldpulse. I do hope it gets some attention. A [country name] journalist have been beaten to near death and now fighting for life. Yes, if I was living in [country name] I would be scared but I do not think that will make difference now! I want to be strong and I want to keep the people who are doing the right to be heard.

Since their initial experiences with voice, participants like the woman quoted have reported a variety of instances in which they have continued to speak out both on similar platforms and through other mediums. They have given reports to U.S. embassies, spoken on radio programs and TV shows, participated in interviews, and been published by a variety of online and print media. A few also reported just generally being more outspoken online and offline as a result of their experiences with online voice. In addition to their written or spoken activism, the majority of the participants have also engaged in other ways including signing petitions, advising policymakers to enact legislation, working with others to publicly denounce sexism, persuading others to support policies, participating in protests, and signing letters to places like the United Nations and the White House.
Passing it on. “My motivation is to see how women feel more confident, courageous and powerful after reading me or hear me. It's the sparkle in her eyes where I also reflect. Because I am every woman.” As one woman in Chile indicates, several participants expressed that they have also made efforts to encourage other women to voice themselves in various ways. Many have done this through both online and offline volunteering to help mentor, teach or counsel women and girls. One participant in Belgium wrote about establishing contact with a woman in another country who had an idea for a project. With her background as a teacher and facilitator, she was able to use her own skills to help the other woman reach her goals.

Making a Change.

In this new proposal to be a reporter, and an experience never dreamed I saw myself at 55 years modifying my professional route. It was a social educator and agent of cultural production, still am, but I'm also a reporter. I know I have strength in words.

Participants documented ways in which they are making changes in their personal lives and taking on new public projects. In their personal lives, participants like the woman quoted have made career changes but have also formed partnerships, stood up for themselves at work, left what they perceived as unhealthy professional and personal relationships, and applied for fellowships and other programs. In public settings though, several indicated their desire, plans, or actual efforts to start organizations including NGOs, social enterprises, anti-corruption projects, and online women’s magazines or other websites. One participant specifically mentioned working with a friend she met online to develop an intervention for slum women. This project received funding and is now being implemented. Another participant wrote about menstruation practices in her
home country and then coordinated a girls’ toilet project that inspired other similar projects.

**External Action**

Also through twitter, I met a [country name] woman, who wanted to meet me for sharing with me her story about gender violence. She told me that she had divorced her husband and suffered violence for 20 years. As her husband was one of power, she had not gotten the police took a complaint, or a judge to seriously consider the case. I invited her to write in my blog, so that she could speak and what happened was intense and wonderful. People in the city began to read his story and went viral. My blog got 6000 hits in one day, The media interviewed her and made a coverage about her situation and for the first time after 20 years the police registered her claim and she got protection from her agressor...When I actually realized what I was doing had caused specific changes in a person's life, from an online contact, and now that person had better life and headed to overcome their history of violence gender, you know, that justifies everything, just that, justifies everything. When I am aware that I can actually do something for someone, even listen, without judgment, that feels very powerful.

This woman’s narrative demonstrates the very real ways participants’ online voices have lead to external action for others on both small and large scales. In some cases, it has resulted in other women sharing their personal stories. According to these women, others have been inspired to start blogs, speak out, or take action. A few participants reported that someone from another country actually came to visit a project they had been working on after reading about it online. One woman shared an example in which someone received a medical procedure as a result of the participant publicizing a need. On a large scale, certain voicings have resulted in legal action or contributed to a law being implemented. In one instance, a participant worked with a fellow activist who filed a complaint with the police against a Facebook group that was “condoning of violence against women, with very sexist messages.” The group was later suspended and its administrators were cited by local police.
Feeding Voice

The fourth, and final, research question asked: Under what conditions does voice lead to empowerment? Participants’ responses attest to three primary conditions that facilitate the empowerment process. These conditions include interaction, official validation, and access to resources. What is often implied in these conditions is that women first and foremost need sustainable means to overcome the barriers and constraints discussed earlier in this chapter. Some of these findings suggest ways to do so.

**Interaction**

It’s kind of like standing in a room that you know people are present and you say something and everyone is silent, you are less likely to continue, if you understand what I mean. But if even it’s one person it can bounce it back and it becomes a conversation.

This response from a woman in Barbados illustrates the most salient theme from all of the interviews – the importance of a response in providing confirmation that participants had been heard. This was so important that several of the participants asked the researcher to “hear” them either indirectly by including links to their writing or directly by asking the researcher to read and comment on something the participant had written.

For a few participants even negative responses such as those involving harassment only fuelled their sense that they were being heard in meaningful ways, as a woman in Chile indicated when she said:

But above all, I know my voice is heard by the amount of people who want to silence me. If there are people out there who take the time to follow my activities, spying my blog and track my posts on forums and then harass ... because I love it, is
because I'm putting my finger exactly where they do not want. I'm kicking ass and are feeling the force of my kick and that means I am generating a change.

Through their narratives, the women identified two important components to their interactions online – quality and scope.

**Quality of Interactions.**

I would say when people comment on it and in the comments I can see something, an aspect that I haven’t seen before, and that makes me think that they really read it, they really paid attention and it triggered something also in them… It’s always nice to see that someone paid enough attention to take even just one minute and write something. But definitely I would say it’s about the quality of the comments rather than just getting the most comments.

As a woman in Belgium states in her response, the sense that someone took the time to actually “hear” or “listen” to what they were saying was particularly important to participants, as was the interaction it facilitated afterward. For some participants, this did not always happen right away, and may even occur offline when someone stops her on the street or at the supermarket and says, “Wow, I saw your post on Facebook” or “Oh, I saw that thing that you posted and I realized you were doing this and that and this is what I think about that.” As this suggests, participants are not just receiving written comments attached to their stories for these reactions. They also reported receiving emails, private messages, or phone calls from individuals wanting to develop a correspondence or to share their own stories or interpretations. Of particular importance to participants were instances of encouragement, positive feedback, and mentorship as well as times when others asked a question or for their opinion on a subject.

Part of this experience involved developing meaningful relationships with a group of online supporters. The majority of participants mentioned gaining or seeking
friendships as a result of voicing themselves online. These online relationships with often “physically distant companions” provide a constant support network that encourages the participants to continue speaking. These networks were even referred to using familial terms like “family” or “sisters.”

**Scope of Reactions.** “The story attracted and connected me to a wide range of people from across the world. I became popular among women, human rights and disability activists in my country.” Some participants, such this woman in Nigeria, specified that evidence of the extent of their reach and connection to an “international community” was particularly valuable in letting them know their voice had been heard. A few participants mentioned getting “quite a lot of readers” and provided specific measures of this such as “500 readers,” “6,000 hits,” or “36 million impression tweeting.” However, more meaningful to the participants seemed to be the extent of their reach on a global scale. Many more participants mentioned being “read internationally” or gaining access to the “whole world.”

**Official Validation**

The fact that in just 2 days after posting the video showing the livening conditions of the workers, with interview from their children, families and friends, the government responded from headquarters made me to believe that my cry was heard. And the fact that a UK human rights activist sent me the email gave me the feeling I was been heard locally and globally and responsible/positive actions taken to better the victims lives.

In addition to their interactions with readers, participants like this woman in Cameroon also indicated that acknowledgement from an “official” entity has been important in their development of their voice online. This has come in the form of both recognition by different entities and the amplification of their voices.
Recognition.

When I joined World Pulse, late last year, I started sharing my points of view online while trying to understand what WP was all about. I was surprised that after being a member for a few days, I was considered one of the VOCAL CONTRIBUTORS. It is then I understood that my voice was felt online.

This participant from Cameroon highlighted a series of “official” recognitions that made her feel her voice had value starting with the receipt of a “vocal contributor badge” on World Pulse, followed by being invited to join a translator’s group online and even her selection to be interviewed in this study. Many other participants also documented instances in which their work received some sort of response from an organization, media source, or other entity they considered meaningful. This recognition took on several forms including being nominated or awarded for their work, being selected for a training, having their work be promoted by an organization, being featured in a profile or interviewed, or being recognized with a “badge” or title on a website. The desire for this sort of recognition was further confirmed by the fact that several participants wanted to know how they were selected for the interview and whether or not they had been nominated by World Pulse. For some, official recognition also came in the form of high profile invitations such as to attend meetings of government agencies, conferences, or trainings. Some women also reported receiving invitations to speak at a panel or on a radio program or to participate in a campaign.

Amplification.

The article emerged the top globally… UN officials including UN Women Executive director and UN High commissioner for Refugees visits the Refugee camps for the voice i raised. I personally meet UN women while holding my recommendation letter on her hand. She congratulate me for the impact of my letter.
Participants like this woman in Kenya have recounted instances in which their voices have been amplified to places of power and to other media outlets. The United Nations and in particular UN Women were mentioned as places their voices had reached. Participants also shared that scholars and journalists had picked up on their stories and given their accounts “broader exposure.” Additionally, they reported times when their writing had been reproduced, translated into other languages, or used in research.

**Resources**

The women also indicated their continued voicing online was in part facilitated by their access to additional resources. In particular material and informational resources were mentioned as well as having opportunities to speak available to them.

**Material.**

I only commented in a World Pulse award-winning article by [Name] -- an American Pulsewire member. [Name] felt encouraged by my online comment on her article and volunteered to assist pay my tuition and other related costs to the Women’s Human Rights Institute. By this singular gesture, I felt so empowered in many ramifications-- my career in human rights and women’s issues, as well as my disability project in Nigeria received a boost.

This participant received direct financial support from a woman she interacted with online. This material gain facilitated her gaining access to an information resource -- a training -- that impacted her actions in multiple domains. Other women reported that access to financial support, technology, and safe places helped enable their voices.

**Informational.**

Actually I finished two social trainings online and both of them broaden my thinking and skills. One was given by social enterprise and another one is online journalism by World Pulse…I was so proud and pleased to attend both training.
This participant in Myanmar (Burma) was one of many women who had engaged in training that provided additional knowledge and skills. Half of the participants had gone through World Pulse’s Voices of Our Future training. All but one of them explicitly mentioned the training and most discussed its importance in their experiences of voice and empowerment online. In addition, other participants mentioned gaining access to other sources of information including books, podcasts, and articles as influential.

**Opportunities.**

I believe that all of the tools are there. If anything, it is about continuing to have opportunities posted on websites like WorldPulse to reach different audiences and continuously challenge you to try different mediums of expression (vlogging, writing, voice files etc.).

Several participants like this woman in Barbados emphasized the importance of having promoted opportunities to contribute. These could include publicly expressed or personally addressed needs, calls for assistance, invitations to engage in campaigns, and reminders from social media networks.
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

This exploratory study extends existing research and provides insights into the potentials and limitations of the Internet as a source of voice and empowerment for women from their own perspectives. Specifically, findings from interviews with women in various socio-cultural locations have opened up new ways of understanding the process by which women voice themselves online, how voicing contributes to empowerment outcomes, and the role of communication in this process.

This chapter begins by offering an ecological analogy to help explain the process of voice and empowerment online and discusses the ways in which it emerges through the study’s findings. Next, implications for communication and feminist theory in general and understandings of voice and empowerment in particular will be explored. This chapter will also examine the implications for women accessing the web and offer recommendations for practitioners and groups working to promote women’s access to and use of technology. Lastly, the limitations of the study are addressed.

Understanding Voice Online

“In that case, as in many others, ‘empowerment’ was a planted seed. It took time to germinate and grow. But in the end, it blossomed.” Through the participants’ interview responses an analogy emerged that can provide a productive avenue to speak
about and understand the nuanced and complex processes women experience in voicing themselves online. In qualitative research, analogies and metaphors are seen to be useful means to describe results, provide structure, and make sense of complicated findings (Aubusson, 2002; Schmitt, 2005). The proposed analogy surfaces not just in what the women said but how they chose to share their stories of voicing online. Common phrases, lay terminology, and similar language choices used by the women across interviews to describe how their voice emerged and what voicing online is like for them led to the selection of a specific ecological analogy that is believed to be representative of their individual and collective experiences: the growth of a tree.

This study suggests then that the process of a woman voicing herself online can be understood as analogous to the growth of a tree from seedling to maturation – a dynamic process that begins with latent voice (the dormant seed), stimulated by a catalyst(s) that influences the woman to begin voicing online (seedling breaking through the soil), followed by the development of voice (tree’s growth), and ultimately outcomes that occur as a result of voicing online (tree bears fruit). As in a tree’s growth and maturation stages, women’s voices face a variety of internal and external challenges and barriers that continuously shape or restrict the growth and strength of their online voice. The remainder of this section will first explain the ways this analogy is appropriate for use in the study and then outline parts of it in full as they relate to the emergent findings and speak to existing literature.

Aside from its fidelity to the study’s findings, this analogy is appropriate in relation to the data in several other important ways. First, it stems from the participants’
own language. This is most clearly evidenced in the words from a woman in Italy at the beginning of this section. In addition, several participants mentioned that their efforts online or offline “bear fruit” or “yielded no fruit.” Empowerment was also described in the interviews as “an important fertilizer.” Second, this analogy is based in nature and can therefore be understood across cultures, which is important when speaking to the experiences of a global sample. Third, it allows room at every stage for the individual differences of each woman related to her culture, context, and experiences, while also recognizing some commonalities in the process of voicing online. Just as every tree is different, as is each environment, soil and the conditions the tree faces, each woman is uniquely situated, and this analogy allows for those important differences to be taken into account. The use of this analogy then helps avoid the pitfall of essentializing all women’s experiences as the same, a common critique of feminist research (Harding, 2004).

While the analogy contains many images that help illustrate women’s experiences with voicing online, it can be generally broken down into three processes – growing voice (leading up to its emergence), feeding voice (developing voice and bearing fruit), and sustaining voice (dealing with constraints).

**Growing Voice**

First and foremost, a seed must sprout and to do so it requires the right conditions to germinate. This represents the early process by which voice emerges online. First, just as a seed rests in the ground, a woman’s latent online voice is situated within a specific offline context. Each woman may move through this phase at various speeds. For some, their voice may remain latent for many years, as a woman feels unable to speak in
her home, work, or community. Several women indicated their inability to speak in their offline contexts. This was due to social or cultural norms or even a significant other who did not “allow” them to speak publicly.

Others may start to germinate early, depending on their context, much in the same way that certain soils are less harsh and contain more nutrients to facilitate growth. When women experience empowerment offline, this can fertilize their voice by giving them a sense of “liberation,” increased confidence and a sense of self-efficacy that could translate to other domains. Through gaining knowledge and skills as well as access to resources, women push down the roots they need that will support their online voice later on. These roots have various reaches and strengths.

Facing Barriers. A seedling will push up toward the light but may be barred from breaking through the surface by barriers that are more or less permeable. Similarly, a woman may move toward speaking online, but may face certain challenges that prevent or delay her from doing so. Previous studies have indicated that access is a primary challenge (Huyer et al., 2005; Kakar et al., 2002), but that women also face a number of language and cultural barriers (Newsom & Lengel, 2003, 2004) and need the skills (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2010, 2011) and motivation to speak (Leung, 2009; Nardi et al., 2004).

Many of the barriers women in this study shared are gender-specific, as they predominantly affect women. Cultural norms are a clear example of this as they relate to both women’s roles in society and online. A participant residing in Australia illustrates how persistent these issues are for women:
The first thing I learnt at school was “All are equal only the actions makes us good or bad regardless of gender, colour, creed or ancestry” My challenge was if this is the case “Why am I not treated equal” The answer “You are a girl” This is an ongoing challenge up to date even when I moved to a western culture.

As other participants suggested, cultural perceptions about web use also affect whether people feel being online is appropriate for women. Previous studies have similarly found that women’s own perceptions of whether or not the Internet is considered “appropriate” for them to use serves as a barrier to women’s web access (Kakar et al., 2012).

Additionally, perceived competence impacts women’s willingness to speak online. As one woman from Barbados said, “I really thought that I was a pathetic writer. Why would I do that? There are other people who know how to do those things. Those are always the common thoughts amongst me and my peers.” This finding is consistent with others who have indicated that women tend to perceive themselves as less competent than men do, particularly related to their online skills or abilities to create content (Correa, 2010a; Hargittai & Shafer, 2006; Hargittai & Walejko, 2008).

Even financial and technology access constraints to a large extent can be seen to disproportionately affect women, as women represent a higher percentage of those in poverty, a lower proportion of those in the labor force, and typically earn less than men when they are employed (United Nations, 2012). These issues also then clearly intersect with a range of other issues, particularly socio-economic status both at the individual and country level.

Sprouting. However, like a seedling that is encouraged by the warmth or water to force itself through the surface, a woman’s impetus to speak online may be catalyzed
in various ways. This motivation can come from a friend who suggests she join a social media network or apply for a training program. It could also come from a profound sense of injustice raised by incidents ranging from political situations in Gaza or Syria to gender-based violence like a highly publicized gang rape in India to witnessing or experiencing the plights of rural women. However, even though the woman has taken the first step, just like the seedling, her voice is not finished – it has just begun to grow.

Feeding Voice

Next, a seedling must continue its process of growing into a tree with various branches of different lengths, thicknesses, and number of leaves. To do so, it must be fed consistently. The sun, which feeds the tree, and the rain, which provides nutrients to the roots, facilitate its growth. As all of the participants indicated strongly, their voices have been fed by their interactions and the validation they received from others, including official sources. This feeding can create a powerful “chain reaction,” as one woman in Chile explained:

One of the most surprising and impacting thing about my presence in social nets is the chain reaction: I write a blog post, published it in my blog, someone shares, on facebook, on twitter, on their own sites, in forums and communities, I receive messages, tweets with a link to my own blog saying “You have to read this !” comments and words of encouragement. And someone always comes up with a proposal to materialize in real life: an invitation to a conference, an interview on radio or in a newspaper, a call to join a campaign or activity.

Like the sun, the encouragement and recognition that come from these experiences of “being heard” provide fuel for women to continue voicing themselves and stimulates action. For most, being heard is the determinant moment for voice, not necessarily the moment of creating it as others have suggested (Mitra, 2005). While just a
speech act can be powerful for a woman who has been unable to speak offline, for most of these women it appears that is not enough. One woman put it this way:

I realized how speaking and being heard involves *two* voices, at least. There is your one, speaking in a voice. And there is another, speaking back, in her own. In the middle there is a seed of recognition, of inspiration, a commonality.

As a tree will grow toward the light, a woman will continue to voice herself in places where she feels validated. Additionally, the resources women gain online – including material and informational resources as well as opportunities to speak – provide nutrients that help strengthen their roots – their knowledge, skills, and access to such resources.

**Bearing Fruit.** All of this feeding can lead to the production of fruit – or the outcomes of voice. A tree first flowers and through pollination by others is able to bear fruit. For a woman’s voice, this fruit takes the form of empowerment outcomes for the individual or external actions taken by others. The empowerment outcomes found in this study generally align with the categories other scholars have commonly recognized (Zimmerman, 1995; 2000). For the women in this study, these outcomes have included *intrapersonal* outcomes such as increased confidence and a strengthened belief in one’s ability to effect change, *interactional* outcomes such as increased knowledge of how to use the web as an advocacy tool and a critical awareness of one’s own position of power, and *behavioral* outcomes including writing or posting a video about a cause online and starting an organization.

Essential to this process is the presence of others. It is through interaction and dialogue that these outcomes are achieved, in the same way that flowers require
pollination. Thus, this study further confirms that empowerment is an inherently communicative process (Papa et al., 2000; Papa, Singhal, & Papa, 2006; Riano, 1994; Rogers & Singhal, 2003). In particular, the participants’ responses indicate that the experience of voicing oneself – both in the speech act and its actualization in the acknowledgement of being heard by others – plays a role in the empowerment process by providing an opening for this dialogue and contributing to the formation of a critical consciousness.

It is through these women’s interactions and the validation of their self-expression that sense-making and consciousness-raising have taken place. This was demonstrated in one woman from Indonesia’s reflection:

I have learned that being honest about who we are is the only thing that can make me connect with others. 2. I also learned that sharing our experiences can help others who probably carry the same guilt, shame, or fears know that they are not alone. 3. I observed and experienced that disagreement was unpleasant but it did not kill me. 4. And bravely express your opinions and being assertive about what I feel, need, and want were actually much better than being submissive, repressive, and passive aggressive.

Feminist standpoint theorists reason that these experiences lead to the achievement of standpoints (Harding, 2007; O’Brien Hallstein, 2000). Scholars have argued that knowledge from the achievement of a standpoint can be a potential source for resistance that may serve as a catalyst for social change (Wood, 2005), and that seems to be the case here. Through their experiences with voicing themselves online, these women have made sense of their own experiences by situating themselves first in their own cultural context but also in a global context among women through interactions that tell them they are “not alone.” They further demonstrate this through nuanced descriptions of
their own cultural norms and structures, particularly their awareness of the repercussions of acting counter cultural. They continue to actively interrogate their own positions of power through consciousness-raising moments in dialogue with others. One woman in Chile referred to being the “first recipient” of her activism and the “first to be questioned” by herself. A woman from the Philippines expressed it this way, “When we find out voice, we must also learn how to control it to make it more powerful and meaningful. It is never enough to just speak but to make this voice matters.” In their reflections, they have been able to articulate standpoints that recognize their power and their constraints, and in doing so seek opportunities for transformation.

Growing in Community. It is important to recognize that a woman does not voice herself online in isolation. She is surrounded by other voices at various stages of the same growth process. Just as one seed can overtake another, overshadow it, or consume all the resources, women can constrain or discourage another woman’s voice. However, more often, other trees can also cross-pollinate or lend another tree its support, as women do through the communities and friendships they form online and offline. The fruit of the tree can also result in seeds that spread elsewhere, as women who have achieved outcomes of their own attempt to pass it on to others. One woman explains:

Empowerment for me is to help myself and others to realize their rights, strengths, and potentials to achieve the life they want to live. I have met people who were afraid to speak up about what they really feel or what their truest dreams are because they were afraid to be let down by their loved ones and most people in general and when I was able to encourage them to tell me the truth and support them to achieve their goals, they feel empowered.

As indicated by the role others can play to both empower or disempower women’s voices, they continue to face many challenges.
Sustaining Voice

Lastly, a tree needs an environment in which it can flourish. Many aspects of these women’s environments may be beyond their control and they are shaped by where they are planted. In the context of voice, this is demonstrated as women continue to face external barriers that are specific to their social, cultural, and economic locations including gender-specific cultural norms, security concerns, financial constraints, and issues related to technology access. While a woman may be able to overcome some of these barriers initially in voicing herself online, they are still present and can become more pressing over time. These environments can be limiting, as one woman expressed, “Although I learnt and changed so much, but still, the application of what I have learned in society still falls short because I don't live in an environment that allows me to thrive the way I want.”

While some trees are more resilient than others on their own and can adapt to grow in the harshest conditions and despite facing a variety of challenges, that is not the case for all. Similarly, some women continue to be plagued by internal barriers while others are able to more easily overcome them. Several women indicated they continue to struggle with their internal fears related to responses from others, their lack of confidence or their perceived competence. One woman in Germany expressed it this way, “I need to feel enough confidence in myself to not fear being exposed to harsh criticism. While I know that all of us are at one point or another affected when someone belittles or demeans us, I would like to feel strong enough and encouraged that I can freely express myself online.”
Tending to Voice. In the same way that a careless or even well-meaning gardener can also restrain the tree’s growth or redirect it for its own gains, online communities or organizations may even unintentionally damage women’s voices. One woman expressed concerns that some online organizations appear to only want to “use” her writings, “As a poor woman, I know that what we want is not an organization that will publish our sorrows but the organization that will do all within its power to lift us out of poverty.”

Weathering Opposition. A tree also faces weather and weeds that limit or redirect its growth or cause it to decay. Interpersonal barriers often serve in this role as women are discouraged from using their voices or seeking opportunities by the online and offline responses they receive from others. Sometimes the messages are conflicting, as women receive support online but negative reactions offline. This was a woman from Cameroon’s experience:

When I started posting articles, videos about my social work and would receive comments and inspiring remark from the global readers, whereas back in my community, I am ignored and intimidated, frightened and made to believe that what I am doing makes no sense or is a bridge of the social norm and can be incriminating.

In certain instances these factors lead women to restrain or silence their voices in specific areas. Several women mentioned they stopped writing for a period of time.

Constraining Growth. Just as a tree can simultaneously grow in one direction while being constrained or barred in another, women voicing themselves online experience a similar phenomenon, as the previous comment indicates. All of these external, internal, and interpersonal barriers can work to limit women’s voices to only
certain outlets or domains. The experiences of the women in this study speak to a
dialectical tension between empowerment and oppression across domains (Papa et al.,
2006). While all of the participants were able to name challenges they have experienced,
a majority of the women also attempted to describe this contradiction of being
simultaneously empowered and constrained. Women spoke of not considering themselves
“fully empowered” or needing “more empowerment” and one compared it to “driving
with the hand brake pulled.” When asked to define empowerment, a participant from
Nepal described it this way:

Empowerment for me is a decision making power and access to social, political,
education. It also includes the right to their own reproductive health. But in our
nepali society, it is very difficult for a woman to do that. Although we have access
and power to make decisions (little has been improved), we have many obstacles
like our culture, our conservative thinking in the society and our own mental
brought up. For example; i can raise voice on many of the social issues in my
society online, while in day to day life i have been facing many things that i can not
even count on and it is too many to write about. In one way our culture gives so
much respect for women but in other way it is also obstacle for a girl or a woman to
be the woman of this 21st century.

In addition to work that has recognized this phenomenon as reflecting a
dialectical tension (Papa et al., 2006), researchers have referred to this contradiction in a
variety of ways including as “constrained agency” (O’Brien Hallstein, 1999, 2000),
“bounded empowerment” (Gill & Ganesh, 2007), and “contained empowerment”
(Newsom, 2003; Newsom & Lengel, 2003). Specifically, contained empowerment, a
theory developed by Newsom (2003) related to women’s experiences online, suggests a
liminal power that is constrained by social norms and takes place in spaces designed to
empower the marginalized (Newsom & Lengel, 2003). This legitimate empowerment
provides an avenue for reimagining and challenging hegemony, but can be limited in its
impact and reach (Newsom & Lengel, 2003). This theory suggests that personal empowerment experienced through blogging or other forms of online content creation may not transfer to women’s lived experiences offline (Newsom & Lengel, 2004). The present study then lends support to this concept as it relates to women’s experiences with voice in online settings.

In sum, this analogy of a tree’s growth provides a means to understand the complexity and tensions inherent in the process of women voicing themselves online. It provides structure while still accounting for women’s diverse experiences. Examining the process of growing, feeding, and sustaining voice can be fruitful for researchers going forward. Scholars seeking to learn from women’s voices could look to the analogy proposed in this chapter as a means to understand women’s experiences online and to ask questions about these processes. Specifically, researchers could pursue questions about what constitutes a meaningful feeding interaction for women online as well as under what conditions women’s experiences with voice online translate to offline outcomes. The analogy could also be utilized as the framework for a method that could allow women to map their own experiences with voice online from the early conditions that provided a foundation for them to speak to the fruit that has been borne from their experiences. This could serve then as a tool both for the women themselves as well as for scholars and practitioners to gain deeper understandings of their online experiences.

Implications and Future Directions

This exploratory study expands current understandings of communication, gender and technology, and feminist theory as they relate to both voice and
First, these findings extend knowledge on the role of communication in the empowerment process, particularly in the context of information and communication technologies. Communication has played an integral role in this process for women. Participants indicated it has been through their interactions with and validation from others that they have achieved a critical awareness, gained a sense of self, and strove to take action. Previous studies have primarily examined the role of increased access to knowledge and the obtainment of information technology skills in facilitating women’s empowerment online (Hafkin, 2002; Hafkin & Huyer, 2006; Pinkett & O’Bryant, 2003; Siddiquee & Kagan, 2006). While the women in this study did speak to the importance of those factors as conditions for voice and in feeding their voices, it was the communicative element to their experiences online that seemed to play a primary role in their empowerment. It is not just their ability to speak online but specifically their feeling of being heard that they have named as significant. A few previous studies have suggested a relationship between online content creation and empowerment (Leung, 2009; Stravositu & Sundar, 2012). However, this study takes a step further by illustrating the importance of the interactional component of expressing oneself online in facilitating voice and, as the participants indicate, empowerment outcomes.

Second, while this study does indicate that women can achieve a variety of empowerment outcomes through voicing themselves online, these experiences are still constrained by a variety of internal and external barriers as well as discourses that attempt
to disempower or discourage them from speaking. Many of these barriers are gender-specific as are many of the discourses that attempt to exclude or discourage them on the basis of their positions as women and specifically as women who are activists for gender-related causes. These findings further confirm that many women continue to experience a “contained empowerment” online (Newsom, 2003; Newsom & Lengel, 2003), that may not translate into other domains. As a result, women reflexively struggle with the inherent tensions present in voicing themselves online, providing evidence that digital technology and gender continue to mutually shape women’s experiences (Wajcman, 2004; van Zoonen, 2002).

Third, using feminist standpoint theory, this study provides an opportunity to hear women who have lived these processes of voice and empowerment and experienced these tensions. This study is grounded in the voices and perspectives of women, but it also goes a step further by providing opportunities through the interview and analysis processes for the reflexivity and dialogue that are key to the achievement of a standpoint that can in itself be empowering. Particularly, the opportunity to reflect at the end of the interview resulted in many women critically assessing their own experiences and interactions, leading to crucial insights for this study and some empowerment outcomes. One directly stated, “Re-reading and remembering I got a tiny surprise: to some extent, the ‘me’ who began the interview was not exactly the same ‘me’ now!” They also implied that their invitation to participate and their conversations with the researcher, who several identified as now part of their online community or “family,” fed both interpersonal and interactional empowerment outcomes aside from critical awareness,
such as their desire to act and knowledge of how to conduct interviews. These findings support what scholars have argued is the empowerment or liberating potential of both the achievement of a standpoint and the use of feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 2004).

**Directions for Scholars**

For communication and feminist scholars, this study suggests a need to continue to look at the communicative processes mediated by the web that provide the potential for marginalized voices to be heard and to gain access to the public sphere, as well as the ways these processes can lead to empowerment outcomes and action for social change. Scholars should also actively interrogate the ways in which women and other marginalized groups are constrained in their attempts to voice themselves online. To do so, communication scholars should continue to adopt methods that respond to the lived experiences of the marginalized. Researchers, and in particular feminist scholars, should seek to work with women and practitioners on ways to address the gender-specific discourses and barriers that restrain women’s voices and experiences.

**Recommendations for Practitioners**

As such, these findings also provide directions for practitioners including individuals, organizations and governmental agencies looking to take action on issues of women’s empowerment and equality, especially as they relate to technology. It is important to note there is no one-size-fits-all solution; not all women are the same nor do they face the same barriers or to the same degree. However, the voices in this study represent real lives and experiences, and a lack of action has real consequences for women’s experiences around the globe. Calls for increasing access to technology for
women and girls and other marginalized groups even in the most recent studies do not go far enough. While access is a crucial piece of the puzzle, this study indicates that facilitating women’s voices and empowerment outcomes through the Internet is more complex than that. In fact, even a few of these reports have implied that some women who do have the access, financial resources, and education to do so are not engaging online (Kakar et al., 2012). Kakar et al (2012) suggested that women may only need “one last encouragement” (p. 13). Therefore, in addition to addressing issues of access and education, those looking to take action should consider the following recommendations:

First, invite women to speak. This was a strong catalyst for the participants to voice themselves online and is one that practitioners have the most viable control over. Invitations from significant persons seem to be particularly influential. An actionable step could be for online networks and organizations to regularly encourage those already active to invite others to join their websites. These groups could also provide opportunities, such as campaigns, prompts, or competitions, for women to speak.

Second, provide opportunities for interaction and validation. Participants spoke to the importance of being heard and of meaningful interactions in their experiences of voice and empowerment. Programmers can consider developing online tools and platforms designed to provide additional opportunities for interaction and dialogue. Developers of new tools should be mindful that the level of Internet access required to use these resources can affect women’s abilities take advantage of them. Additionally, online networks and organizations can recognize women’s voices through site badges as World Pulse does but also through awards, opportunities, and resources.
Mentorship such as that facilitated by World Pulse’s Voices of Our Future program seems to be effective in nurturing women’s voices. Encouraging mentoring on a broader scale outside of training programs like this, where perhaps a woman who is more experienced online is paired up with a woman who is new to a website, could increase the possibility of meaningful interactions that lead to empowerment outcomes.

Third, reflect on the role you might be playing in restraining women’s voices. Practitioners should continue to reflect on the ways in which gender as well as other issues such as race, class, culture, sexual orientation, religion, etc., continue to shape and structure women’s experiences online and the ways they are complicit in these processes. For example, the tech industry should take heed in designing online spaces for women and attempt to create spaces that are multi-faceted and seek to nurture women’s voices at different stages of their development. Online networks targeted at women should specifically engage in discussions on how best to provide opportunities for women who are in a variety of contexts, specifically women in poverty who may feel their voices are under supported.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, hear women. This act alone, as this study’s findings indicate, can be powerful. Practitioners can do this in several ways including responding to women’s voices with encouragement and other positive feedback, speaking directly to women by mentioning them by name, asking thoughtful questions about their experiences, and amplifying their voices to stakeholders. Additionally, practitioners should actively seek out women’s voices from a variety of socio-cultural locations to speak to their needs and propose their own ideas for solutions. Conversations
that include those who are most directly impacted could result in innovative ideas that can more adequately address their needs and barriers. This study provides a starting point by outlining external, internal and interpersonal barriers faced by women from their own voices. Responding to those could be a first step.

Roles for Women

Women from a variety of socio-cultural contexts have a role to play in seeking solutions. This study speaks to the power of voicing themselves online, having faith in their own competence, and finding sources of support. It also demonstrates that women already have many insightful solutions they feel would help them fully express their voices online. Suggested solutions included investing in the education of women and girls and specifically education on Internet usage, increasing access by making information and communication technologies more affordable and available in rural areas, financially empowering women particularly with opportunities for paid labor and stable sources of income, creating online communities that actively seek solutions to social and political issues, providing online translation services, inviting marginalized communities into forums that allow their voices to be heard, and providing opportunities for action that translates offline. Women then should continue, as they have done, to advocate for themselves in discussions about these issues at local and global levels, engage with others in dialogue, and seek avenues to make their voices and own solutions heard.

Limitations

While the method of this study did provide access to a global sample, provide opportunities for reflexivity, and allow the women to complete it at their own pace and on
their own schedule, the method also had some limitations. Retention for serial email exchanges became a challenge as most participants required at least one if not multiple reminders to respond. Many women indicated they had busy schedules including traveling to the field or conferences, meeting deadlines, or dealing with family-related issues. While women’s time commitments and barriers were taken into account in designing the interview guide, fewer exchanges may have increased retention. Two participants said they would have preferred the questions all at once. However, this may not have provided the level of reflexivity or opportunities for follow-up and dialogue.

Several of the participants also dealt with access issues throughout the interview, such as inconsistent Internet or electricity. This demonstrated the persistence of these barriers to women being active online.

By seeking out women who are actively voicing themselves online already, this study does not speak to the voices of women who are not online regularly, who have not voiced themselves online, or who may not have the necessary conditions and resources to do so. Since some of the participants indicated they have stopped writing at various points due to the barriers they face, there may also be women who have continued to remain silent whose voices are not accounted for here. Additionally, it became clear that despite the barriers they face, this study’s participants still have a certain degree of privilege. All are fairly educated and access the Internet almost daily, and many on multiple devices. Previous studies have demonstrated that these conditions are usually true of those who are most active online (Kakar et al., 2012). Future studies should attempt to reach women who are not considered active online in an effort to
understand the obstacles they face and any experiences they have had with voice and empowerment processes.

Another limitation of the study was the use of English as the primary language for conducting the interviews. Language choice is an ever-present dilemma for cross-cultural interactions, and specifically for research of this nature. My power as the researcher was evident when after my initial invitation to participate in the study, participants seemed obligated to respond in English and perhaps lost their “choice” in the matter. This might also have deterred women who did not feel confident in their English skills from participating in the interview. Several who did participate continuously apologized for their English skills. In this sense, I became acutely aware that this served to reinforce existing power hierarchies that privilege English. Since English is not the native language for most of these women and their skills were at various levels, this created openings for misunderstandings or misinterpretations at times during the interview process. Meanings and perhaps crucial insights into the process were likely lost as a result of experiences that did not translate easily into English or for which the participants did not have the language to express. However, this limitation also presented an opportunity in which at least one woman exercised her knowledge and skills to challenge the presumption of English while also facilitating our interaction. She wrote her narrative responses in Portuguese and used an online tool – Google Translate – on her own to also offer English translations and provided both within each exchange. This spoke to the ways in which women can use the web to gain access to cross-cultural interactions while also not being restricted by existing hierarchies. With tools like Google
Translate, though they still have some limitations, international research is now easier than ever before and researchers should be encouraged to make use of these and other resources when speaking with a global sample.

Conclusion

This study reveals that women’s experiences with voice online are complex. While each woman voices herself and in doing so gains control over her own identity and narrative online, her experiences on the web are often shaped and constrained by a variety of offline and online conditions, interactions, and barriers. As previous studies have projected, the Internet does present potential for the empowerment of marginalized groups (Harcourt, 1999; Mitra, 2001, 2004, 2005). Women in this study experienced significant empowerment outcomes through their experiences with voicing themselves online. However, these experiences are still constrained and many women face substantial challenges. Since they are confronted with a variety of constraints at different levels of severity, there is no easy solution. Despite this, scholars and practitioners should strive to hear the voices of women and work with them to study and seek out practical solutions to these barriers. In the end, it will be the women themselves who will continue to overcome, given the right conditions, resources, and support, and use the web as a tool for voice, empowerment and social change, as a woman from the Philippines explains:

It is seeing for myself that such online efforts actually bear fruit. People notice, react and act. When the action becomes bigger, institutions, governments and leaders listen and are also moved to take action. The concerted effort of many, which at times initially start from one or a few, creates a rippling effect that spreads to thousands...even millions. That is a strong reason that motivates me to go on and express my beliefs and be a voice to the many voiceless ones.
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INTERVIEW GUIDE

These questions and instructions have been designed to guide participants in a conversation about their experiences with voice and empowerment online.

Procedures
- Send invitations using the private messaging system in World Pulse to participants in the Voices of our Future program and other “Vocal Contributors” based on the member directory. Those who are interested are asked to respond with their preferred external email address.
- Email interested participants the e-mail script that is part of the interview protocol.
- Follow up at the prescribed email address with pre-interview questions.
- Send each question set one at a time followed by any follow-up and clarifying questions. Include instructions with each email.
- Send reminder emails as needed to encourage participants to continue the interview.

Invitation Sample
My name is Jasmine Linabary and I am a graduate student and former journalist. As we kick off the new year, I would like to invite you to participate in an exciting study that will help us understand how women like you have come to find their voices online. Your contributions to this effort will support World Pulse’s programs by providing anonymous feedback to improve and strengthen its work going forward. Your responses will also be vital in helping to pave the way for other women to find and share their voices.

Participation in the study is voluntary and will take place over a series of brief email exchanges. If you are interested in finding out more and possibly participating in the study, please indicate your interest by responding to this message with your preferred email address. You will then be contacted with additional information and I would be happy to address any questions you may have.

This project is supported by World Pulse, though your participation will remain confidential. If you have any additional questions or concerns, you may also contact Online Community Manager Scott Beck at scott@worldpulse.com.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you and appreciate any interest you may have in participating.
E-mail Script (Informed Consent)
Thank you for your interest in participating in this study. Again, my name is Jasmine Linabary, and I am a graduate student in Communication Studies at California State University, Chico. My background is in journalism in the United States. The goal of this project is to better understand how the Internet is used as a platform for women’s voices. This project is part of my master’s thesis and will help World Pulse and other organizations in designing training programs and providing resources to amplify women’s voices. Your contributions to this effort are vital to help pave the way for other women to share their voices online. Please know that your participation in this study is completely voluntary and there are no consequences at all if you decide not to participate or want to discontinue the interview.

This email is meant to answer some basic questions you may have.

How will the interview take place?
Since it would be difficult for us to meet in person, this interview will take place over a series of emails. This will allow you to take your time as you consider your responses and to respond at a time that is convenient for you. However, I want you to be comfortable with how we conduct the interview, so if you would prefer to conduct the interview over a Skype call or chat, I would be happy to discuss those options with you.

What will I be asked to do?
To start, you will be asked a few biographical questions and questions about your Internet access and use. These will be followed by five question sets, including a question set that will give you a chance to review and reflect on this experience. Each question set will include two to four questions. You will be sent one question set at a time. These would be followed by brief supplemental or clarifying questions as needed.

How much time will this take?
You can move through the interview questions as quickly as you wish. The questions have been structured so that it should not take more than 10-15 minutes of your time for each set. If you completed one question set a week, the interview would be completed in a maximum of five weeks.

Who will see my responses?
Your name and identifying characteristics will remain confidential and will not be included in any papers or documents produced from this study. This includes any reports I make to World Pulse and related agencies. This is why these interviews are being conducted through external email addresses rather than through messages in World Pulse. I will make every effort to ensure your privacy. I have taken additional measures to secure my private email account and, at the completion of the study, I will remove our emails exchanged from the email system, to the extent that is possible, and transfer them into an external, password-protected file system.
A final report of this study’s findings will be made available to World Pulse and other interested agencies. Findings will also be published as a masters’ thesis at my university and may result in additional academic publications.

I’m interested in participating. What do I do now?
If you are still willing to be a part of this study, please reply to this message and confirm that this is the appropriate and secure email address you would like me to use in corresponding with you for the duration of the study. That reply will be considered your agreement to take part in the interview. If you have any questions or concerns, you may contact me at 406-210-4386 (US), or my advisor Dr. Stephanie Hamel at 530-898-4478 (US) or shamel@csuchico.edu.

Thank you for your time and interest in participating. If you have any questions for me at this point, please feel free to ask them now or as they come up during the study.

Pre-Interview
Before we begin the formal interview, I have a few biographical questions. These questions will give us basic information about the participants in the study as a whole and better understanding of your specific experiences. Additionally, I have a few basic questions about your Internet access and use that will help guide the interview.

Please answer at your level of comfort. Know that you are not required to answer a question you feel uncomfortable with or that would pose any risk to you.

Biographical Questions
-What is your current age?
-How do you define your gender?
-How do you define your ethnicity?
-Do you identify with a particular religion? If so, what?
-In what country do you currently reside?
-Would you describe where you live as more rural (country) or urban (city)?
-How many years of formal education have you completed? Alternately, what is the highest degree or certification you have achieved?
-What has been your work or professional experience, if any?

Internet Access and Use Questions
Please share with me how you access the Internet.
-Where are you when you are accessing the Internet (i.e. at home, at someone else’s home, at work, at an Internet café, at some other public facility, other)?
-What do you use to access the Internet (i.e. a desktop computer, a laptop, a mobile device, multiple devices, other)?
Please tell me a little bit about the time you spend online.
- How often do you access the web? For example, how many days in a week or a month do you access the Internet?
- How much time do you spend online when you do access the Internet?
- What are you doing most often when you are online? Please share some of the main activities you engage in while online.

Lastly, please describe any barriers you personally face in terms of your access to and use of the Internet.

**Question Set Instructions**

This is the first of five question sets, the last being an opportunity to review and reflect upon your responses. Here are some basic instructions. I ask that you please respond to these questions at the top of your reply email so we can continue our ongoing conversation (i.e. you can write the question numbers in your reply and respond or free write your responses rather than filling in the answer below each question within the email I've sent you). Please also do not delete any part of the email dialogue, as it is our record of our conversation. You are welcome to make reference to our earlier discussion in your answers to present questions or add additional thoughts.

Please note that these questions are not meant to be exclusive to your experiences with World Pulse. In answering these questions, please reflect on the entirety of your online experience and answer based on what experiences have been most important and influential for you personally.

I want to keep this fairly informal, so please feel free to contact me if you have any questions about this or need any clarification on the questions. I may, likewise, email you back with supplemental or clarifying questions regarding your responses to this and other question sets.

I recognize that you are busy and have many other commitments in your life. I appreciate the time you are willing to take to answer these questions. Your responses are extremely valuable to this research process. I ask that, if at all possible, you respond within one week of receiving each question set. Of course, the sooner you respond, the sooner the interview will be complete.

**Question Set #1: Voice**

For this question set, I would like you to think about one of the first times you felt that you had a voice online.

1. Please tell me the story of this early experience. What were you doing? How did this experience make you feel?
2. What early experiences online helped you to “find” your voice? In other words, what paved the way for this experience?
Follow-ups to Set #1

- It seems like your experience with [specific details] was particularly impactful for you. What specific experiences with [name of website] or other websites would you say have been the most influential in shaping or developing your distinctive voice online? How so? For example, was there a specific writing that you did that you feel was particularly influential or response you got?
- What drives you to continue expressing your voice online?
- What (if any) other aspects have been influential in the development of your voice?

(if needed for further prompting)

**Question Set #2: Being Heard**

*For this question set, I would like you to think about a time when you felt you had been “heard” online.*

1. Please describe this experience of being heard. What happened? How did this experience make you feel?
2. What specifically gave you the feeling that you had been heard?

Follow-ups to Set #2

- What do you think is necessary in order for you to feel heard online? For instance, is it enough just to put something you wrote out there or what do you need in order to feel heard?
- How important is being heard to you? In other words, what does it mean to be heard?

**Question Set #3: Empowerment**

*For this question set, I would like you to think about a time you felt empowered while (i.e. before, during, and/or after) creating content online.*

1. First, what does empowerment mean to you?
2. Please tell me about this time that you felt empowered online. What were you doing? How did this experience make you feel?

Follow-ups to Set #3

- Are there any other ways you feel these experiences have had lasting impacts on your life, outlook or actions? How so?
- Also, has creating content online ever inspired you to take action on behalf of yourself or others?

**Question Set #4: Challenges**

*For this question set, I would like you think about a time you experienced challenges or barriers to expressing your voice online.*
1. Tell me about those challenges. What did that experience entail? How did it make you feel?
2. If you have overcome these challenges, how did you do so?
3. If these challenges are ongoing, how do you deal with them? What do you need to be able to overcome these challenges?

Follow-ups to Set #4
- Aside from these experiences, have you ever felt disempowered or discouraged by your experiences online in any way? If so, please share about these experiences.
- Are there any other risks you feel you face in using your voice online?

Question Set #5: Reflection
For this final question set, I would like you to read back through your interview responses and reflect on this experience.

1. What have you learned about yourself and your experiences online through this process?
2. What sticks out to you as most important about your experiences online based on your responses? Another way to think about this might be, what's maybe one or two things you think people should learn or reflect on from your experiences?
3. After reflecting on your experiences, what do feel that you need, if anything, to be able to fully express your voice online?
4. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Follow-ups to Set #5
- Do you have any questions for me now that the interview is complete?
- Would you be interested in participating in a review of the findings?