Kvetch: Information Sharing in an Online Wedding Forum

Monica Rettig

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Last fall, my partner and I decided to get married. Alongside feelings of joy about our commitment, I felt overwhelmed with the sense of a suddenly imposed set of expectations. I felt uncomfortable with this fiancée creature; a woman whose days were now to be consumed with fretting over linen rentals and the cost of boutonnieres. The reductive stereotype of the ‘bridezilla’ is rampant in films, reality television, and water cooler conversation. In her critically acclaimed investigation of the wedding industry, One Perfect Day: The Selling of the American Wedding, Rebecca Mead sheds light on the modern-day wedding and the commercial myths that have created it. Mead defines the bridezilla character as:

a young woman who, upon becoming engaged, had been transformed from a person of reason and moderation into a self-absorbed monster, obsessed with her plans to stage the perfect wedding, an event of spectacular production values and flawless execution, with herself as the star of the show (2008, p. 1).

Unnerved by this representation, I followed a recommendation to explore Indiebride.com as an online source for alternative wedding discussion. Upon accessing the website, I was amazed by the level of activity and content in the discussion in the forum, ‘Kvetch’ (http://kvetch.Indiebride.com). Posts addressed topics including deciding to wear a red dress instead of white, planning your Star Wars themed reception and opting out of a gift registry. Intrigued by the information sharing happening in this space, I planned this enquiry.
The following is a study of the informational behaviours on the online forum, Indiebride. Indiebride describes itself as "a site for the independent minded bride" and the editor, Lori Leibovich, explains the goal of the non-profit website is "to explore the whole marriage process, the highs, the lows and the complexities" (Our Vow, n.d.). In addition to interviews and essays, the site also offers a space for user-generated content through a marketplace, etiquette column, and -- of interest to me -- a forum called Kvetch. According to Leibovitch, "If the wedding process leaves you feeling confused, tired, irritated, joyous, suicidal -- or all of the above -- head for our chat area Kvetch" (Our Vow, n.d.).

By focusing on this particular type of virtual community, this study offers a case study of online fora, and affords the oft-stereotyped world of engaged women a more nuanced representation. The population of interest is the users of online wedding fora. Since the forum is an anonymous and/or pseudonymous online space, it is difficult (if not impossible) to make specific descriptions about the population in question. An assumption made about the members is that they are mostly women with an interest in wedding planning.

For the purposes of this project, I will focus on the following information phenomena:

- What is the nature of information behaviour on Kvetch?
- How does information sharing occur on Kvetch, and other online wedding fora?

**Literature Review**

Online fora are an example of what Gary Burnett terms “virtual communities”. According to Burnett (2000), virtual communities function as social spaces supporting textual “conversations” through which participants can find both socio-emotional support and an active exchange of information. Burnett’s research led to the development of a thorough ‘typology’ of information exchange in virtual communities. He proposes the following categories: non-interactive behaviours (lurking), hostile interactive behaviours, and the much broader category of collaborative interactive behaviours.

The activity that occurs on fora such as Indiebride is also referred to as “collaborative information use” (Hersberger et al., 2007). A limited number of studies related to online discussion groups exist within the Information Science field, and these tend to focus on very specific user groups. Curran and Abidi (2007) conducted an experiment in which they offered emergency clinicians an asynchronous discussion forum as an effort to support information exchange and practice knowledge.

Much of the ethnographic analysis of postings on fora has been focused on consumer
research. A genre of studies exists on virtual communities of consumption, understood as “affiliative groups whose online interactions are based on shared enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, a specific consumption activity or related group of activities” (Kozinets, as cited in Hewer & Brownlie, 2007, p. 110). Searching on this topic retrieved a sole article treating this specific genre of forum: Nelson & Otnes analyzed major commercial wedding sites, focusing on the discussion of cross-cultural ambivalence (2005). The authors found that multicultural couples planning a wedding tend to use coping mechanisms including non-purchase of ritual elements, and modification of cultural norms.

**Research Design**

The research design for this project is two-part: First, the information behaviour on Kvetch was studied. Second, a user of online wedding fora was interviewed and observed. The metatheoretical perspective that frames this inquiry is an ethnographic approach.

**Part One**

For the study of Kvetch, the field is the forum webpage. It is available to the public, but in order to have access to the site’s full functionality, I have registered as a member. Due to the public access nature of the site and with respect to the likely disruptive nature of declaring the presence of an observer, I did not make my presence as a researcher known to the members of the forum (see Appendix A for excerpt of data).

I collected all messages posted in the Anxiety room on Kvetch on March 10th, 2009. This captured a variety of active discussion topics. The Anxiety room was selected because it is a highly active room (second only to the ‘Nothing to do with Weddings’ room). In addition, this room offers a microcosm of the entire Kvetch forum because it is not thematically specific.

**Part Two**

After completing research on Kvetch, I performed an interview with Miranda C. Miranda was planning an unconventional wedding and had been using online wedding fora in her preparation. I asked some general questions about her use of online wedding fora, and then asked her to show me how she uses a bridal forum (see Appendix B: Interview Plan). I studied her behaviour to see if it related to...

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1 The privacy of this subject will be protected by employing a pseudonym in the reporting of results.
findings from the Kvetch virtual community study (see Appendix C for transcript excerpt).

**Preliminary Findings**

*The Vernacular*

Online wedding fora have a shorthand of their very own. Acronyms are typical of online text-only communication, especially in the case of common, longer phrases. Examples include BTW (by the way), IMHO (in my humble opinion), and ETA (edited to add). Yet online wedding fora share a considerable list of acronyms specific to this community. In fact, there is an entire thread on Kvetch on this topic, “Re: Commonly Used IB Acronyms,” (IB, of course, being the acronym for IndieBride). Shorthand is used casually throughout conversations: one member comments, “So FH and I are honeymooning in Greece … ”; another member quotes her maid of honour, “MOH: So he[‘]s upset you don’t want to wear a white dress?”; while one user complains, “FMIL is making me and B crazy at the moment.”

Acronyms such as FH (future husband), FMIL (future mother in law), and BM (bridesmaid), serve a number of observed functions. Abbreviations maintain anonymity in a public forum where highly personal discussions take place. In our interview, Miranda expressed that this was an important consideration for her: Instead of referring to her partner as Steve, Miranda uses these abbreviations to preserve her and his privacy.

When asked about her online wedding forum use, Miranda explained that she is an active member of weddingbells (http://forums.weddingbells.ca), a forum hosted by major Canadian bridal magazine weddingbells (M. Rettig, Personal communication, March 22, 2009). Throughout our conversation, she referred to the forum as WB, and fellow users as “WB-ers.” Similarly, Kvetch members refer to fellow users as IBs. For example, regarding Ireland travel tips offered on the Summer of Love ‘09 (June-August) thread, a user remarks, “I am confident that the strong IB recommendation will help me make my case.” The WB and IB labels move beyond the mere convenience of a shorthand, and allow the users a vocabulary with which to describe membership in a community.

Burnett considers abbreviations in virtual communities to be a form of language play in the category of humorous behaviours (2000). While some abbreviations have a playful element, such as STDs in the stead of Save The Dates (a notice sent to guests in advance of a formal invitation), I argue that the acronyms function more as an identifier of the adept and active user, versed in the language of the forum. Clever use of appropriate abbreviations,
especially those specific to wedding themes, marks the writer as a practised member of the community and one who speaks the language.

**Call and Response**

Conversation on Kvetch is peppered with requests for feedback, advice and creative solutions. Members frequently post a description of their problem or challenge and a proposed solution, asking the community for input. In the First in Line thread, one user posted:

> Hey, I have a question. So, my 'processional' is only our two daughters, and then me. It's not long enough for an entire song. So -- do I just stop the song in the middle when I get to the front? We can't just stand up there and wait for the song to end, can we? Will that be weird, just cutting it off like that?

In the span of one day, this post was met with three responses suggesting the processional song be faded out, and discussing how other IBs will be handling this moment in the ceremony. Eventually, the original poster wrote, “Okay, you talked me into the fadeout everyone. Thanks. Man, these weird little last-minute things are what get me.” The assumption on Kvetch is that the community consists of other individuals who have considered similar questions and come up with their own solutions, or have attended weddings and can share their experience. Burnett calls this behaviour, “queries presented directly to the community,” and categorizes it as “specific information-oriented behaviour” (2000, n.p.). According to him, this is the clearest type of explicit information behaviour within a virtual community (Burnett, 2000).

While the user is sometimes looking for opinion, it is common for members to post requests for more ‘hard’ data. This might include vendor or product advice and references to external sources. Initially, Miranda said that she did not make heavy use of the forum for product or vendor reviews. Yet, in further discussion, she said that she did use the weddingbells forum before going dress shopping and read reviews of Toronto bridal gown stores. When asked why she used the WB reviews, Miranda said,

> To get a sense of, if I go to the place, what to expect: Are they going to be nice? Are they going to be ridiculously rude? Are they gonna try to get me to buy a dress? Are they gonna come into the change room with me? … It's scary for a bride who has never been to a dress store and goes to one where they have a change room attendant … It can cause a lot of anxiety and I know that there are some brides that will avoid a store at all costs because of that. (M. Rettig, Personal communication, March 22, 2009)

Miranda has taken advantage of the information sharing of other Toronto-area members who have posted about their experiences in bridal boutiques around town. In this way, she becomes a better-informed consumer. While reviews are sometimes posted on the impetus of the reviewer, they are often in response to the queries of others. Through the use of the search functionality or looking in the appropriate room, Miranda takes advantage of queries and responses occurring among community members. As Burnett describes this explicit
knowledge sharing, “members of virtual communities are ... beneficiaries of the information seeking activities of others” (2000, n.p.).

Fostering Community

The Anxiety room was selected for closer study not only because it offers a microcosm of Kvetch, but also because it is the location of a series of user-created threads designed for IBs working under a similar timeline. A few of the existing threads include “First in Line '09 (Jan – May),” and “Early Birds Looking Around the Bend, or Trying to stay Zen for 2010.” Most online wedding fora have these sections: for example, weddingbells has a collection of rooms called “Countdown Corner,” with titles such as “6 - 9 Months away” and “Under 3 Months to go!” The suggestion is that users might find much in common with others at similar stages in the planning process.

In “First in Line ’09,” one member took on an administrative role, creating a post with the thread members’ names and wedding dates in chronological order (See Figure 4). One user responded to the list with, “Wherever you are, froufrou - good luck tomorrow!” This list functions as an update for the thread’s members, sharing the news on whose wedding date is quickly arriving. Thus, the members within the thread work to gather the members together and make explicit their shared experience. Since the ostensible driving force of the wedding forum is preparation for “the big day”, users build relationships and connections based on shared timelines.

Miranda had mentioned that, since she is planning a destination wedding in Las Vegas, she is a minority among WBs. She went on to describe how, even within the WB community, those planning destination weddings do not always experience the support of other members:

It's kind of segregated into regular brides and destination brides: people say, I know I'm going to get flamed by the DW-ers (referring to those planning Destination Weddings), or ... you'll say, 'this is my timeline,' and they'll say, 'that's nice you're a DW-er: it doesn't matter.' It's kind of like you're brushed aside because you're doing something different. (M. Rettig, Personal communication, March 22, 2009)

When asked whether she had explored other fora to find discussion more related to her wedding plans, Miranda said that she found better Vegas discussions elsewhere, but found it too difficult to be an active member on multiple wedding fora: “I only lurk on that one (referring to TheKnot.com). I don’t post ... While I feel a
sense of connection with them because of the (wedding) location, at the same time it’s like – worlds apart” (M. Rettig, Personal communication, March 22, 2009). Even though the weddingbells forum does not provide Miranda with advice that relates specifically to her destination wedding plans, she actively contributes to the community “because the people on it make me want to be on it.”

In spite of, or perhaps because of the sense of being a minority as a DW in the WB community, Miranda made efforts to reach out to other members in her situation:

I find there’s not as much of a community feeling in the destination weddings. So I try my best, like I’ll go through and see who has an upcoming wedding and I’ll say, ‘Ooh! Happy wedding week!’ See this one’s me (pointing to a post, see Figure 5) ... Sometimes people like to feel like, “oh, people care and they know when I’m getting married. ... at least this way people feel like [they are] special and then other people will [respond and] say ‘ooh exciting!’ (M. Rettig, Personal communication, March 22, 2009)

Miranda is also performing community fostering activity: She brought the group’s attention to lisadolly’s upcoming wedding date (See Figure 5). Several users responded to Miranda’s post, echoing her best wishes. Gestures such as the “top of page repost” and “happy wedding week” offer a challenge to the information scientist: Is this information sharing or emotional support? Can it be both at the same time? According to Burnett, “empathic behaviours: emotional support” fall in the category of “behaviours not specifically oriented toward information” (2000, n.p.). He concedes that little research has been conducted into the types of interactions within virtual communities that may be used to provide emotional support, but suggests that these actions generally work to, “create an environment that is felt by participants to be supportive and welcoming. Indeed, … emotional support and information sharing may be closely linked in such situations” (Burnett, 2000, n.p.).

While explicit queries to the community are easily identified as information exchange, the sorts of behaviours that foster community and reinforce a sense of ‘not being alone’ exist in a certain liminal space. The evidence from this research suggests that empathic activities cannot so easily be categorized as non-information behaviour.

Reflections & Conclusions

As a result of the study, we can start to sketch out some conclusions about the information sharing and behaviour on Kvetch and other online wedding fora. Language and the use of theme-specific abbreviations play a role in the development of community identity and belonging. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these virtual communities have a strong tradition of being a space for members to share knowledge, post queries, and refer others to useful sources. Finally, behaviours that contribute to the strength of the community are common and take a variety of forms; this type of activity is
sometimes indistinguishable from information sharing behaviours.

This study points towards various avenues for future research. A few ideas raised by this research are:

• exploring the relationship between wedding fora and cultures of consumption;
• the location of wedding planning in the discussion of serious leisure (Is it a project or a hobby?);
• the comparison between Kvetch and other wedding fora; and,
• a broader exploration of the informational behaviour in “alternative” or “non-traditional” wedding planning.

The consideration of the informational role of emotional support, in both virtual and non-virtual communities, is also especially thought provoking.

On a personal note, the more I studied the fora, the more I found that I wanted to be an active member. I saw the possibilities for helpful feedback, and hoped to be a part of that community. Inspired, I started to post a little more frequently. I returned to the threads hopefully over the next few days, and was disappointed to see that almost no one had responded to my questions. I have concluded that I have not invested enough in the forum, and cannot expect to have resounding support from IBs if I have not made myself present through frequent posts. Now that the wedding is less than five months away, I expect to make use of the Kvetch forum, both for specific information queries (such as recommended fonts for DIY invitations) and emotional support (“My aunt can’t handle the fact that she’s not invited to our private ceremony — help!”), and the plethora of issues that fall somewhere in between.
### Appendix A: Excerpt from Kvetch posts, Anxiety room. March 10, 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forum</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Handle</th>
<th>Message</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>Re: First In Line '09 (Jan - May)</td>
<td>umlaut</td>
<td><strong>Bosanka</strong>, I posted a reply to you on your other thread, cause I feel goofy today. &quot;Is the internet down today?&quot; -- tech support caller</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>goose</td>
<td>Bosanka, two pieces I loved were Minuet and Serenade (each done by Jeremiah Clarke, I believe). Both are said to be best with organ and trumpet, but our organist said he rearranged Serenade for organ so that might be an option. We haven't heard it yet, so can't vouch for the quality of the arrangement...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>alynotfrommcali</td>
<td>As far as music goes, I know that our recessional is going to be the music from original Super Mario Bros. We bought a recording of it by an orchestra in Japan. I'm walking down the aisle to Canon in D, just because I really love that piece. It's a bit cliche, but I have pictured it that way ever since an episode of Sunset Beach (Meg &amp; Ben's non-wedding) played it as the processional. For a first dance song, I'm drawing a blank, as is FH. I've resorted to asking him &quot;how about that song&quot; during TV shows and car rides. His answer is always NO.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>phillytrans</td>
<td><strong>Goosie</strong>, I just googled that tune and composer and in doing so, found a pretty incredible resource from a random Catholic church in Chicago. It may have given me a lead on a processional piece (the Bach prelude) but more than that, it lists a piece for a vocal solo which made me cry (When Love is Found) which is awesome because a friend of mine who is a professional singer said she would sing at the wedding, but I hadn't found anything I liked yet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>plant</td>
<td><em>alynotfrommcali wrote on Tue, 10 March 2009 10:31</em> As far as music goes, I know that our recessional is going to be the music from original Super Mario Bros. This is the funniest thing I've ever heard. Absolutely hysterical. We were thinking the Peanuts song, but this may have to go into the hat. Misspenny, I like the elvis song, and I checked out the Vitamin String Quartet. Very cool. They do a version of &quot;She will be loved&quot; by maroon 5. That might not be rocker enough for you though. I sort of think it's great to rock out for the recessional, but it's nice to have something a little more mellow in the beginning to leave room for a build-up. Beastly boys, and the metallica song are very exciting though, so if that's what you're going for, that'll do it. Good luck!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>goose</td>
<td>I should have just mentioned that site! That's where I found both of those pieces while trying to find organ music for our Catholic ceremony that didn't feel overdone to me. So, I process to Serenade (assuming we like the arrangement) and we recess to Ode to Joy. Joy is a very prominent theme in our readings, so it seemed appropriate! eta: By which I mean, I'm so glad you found stuff you like! That's a really good feeling and those are lovely! [Updated on: Tue, 10 March 2009 10:51]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bosanka</td>
<td>Gosh, I am so jealous of those of you who are choosing non-classical music for your ceremonies. Seriously. Because there is nothing I'd love more than to have an all U2 wedding. I'm not kidding you. Maybe I can convince someone to let us recess to City of Blinding Lights (a friend of mine did this a few years ago and it was amazing...)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
MellySue: I’m glad we get to just choose whatever we want— but, that’s because it’s an outdoors, non-church ceremony. I can’t even imagine knowing where to start choosing organ music.

I just got a no RSVP that I was hoping would be a yes. Maybe it was karma because I was happy about the no I got yesterday. Looks like our RSVPs are starting to wrap up and I can guestimate right now that our number is somewhere around 60-65, 70 at the very most once the last few trickle in. I can deal with that number.

herwa: Ooh, that website IS great. I can’t listen to the samples here at work, but I’ll definitely be checking that out tonight at home!

Appendix B: Interview Plan
March 22, 2009

- Camera
- Voice recorder
- Consent form
- Note pad & pen
- Consent form (extra copy to M.)
- **Project basics**: studying the information seeking, sharing, and use that takes place on online wedding fora – especially interested in “alternative” wedding planning (whatever that may mean!)
- Plan:
  1. Discuss use of online wedding fora
  2. Ask M. to demonstrate how she uses a forum of her choice

Questions:

**PART ONE**

- Tell me about when and why you started using online wedding fora in the planning for your wedding.
- How would you describe your activity? Do you post very often? Or, do you mostly read others entries?
- Had you used fora before?
- Have you ever posted a question to the forum?
  - If yes, what kind of questions were they: were you asking for advice? About vendors or products? About dealing with friends and family?
- Have you ever posted responses to other members’ questions?
- How do you use online wedding fora in comparison to other ways for your wedding planning: ie/ speaking to existing friends and family.
- Would you describe your wedding plans as ‘non-traditional’ or ‘alternative’?
  - If yes, has this fact affected your decision to use online fora?
- Do you ever use the fora to discuss stuff that is not directly related to weddings?
- Tell me about the wedding forum(s) that you frequent: which one(s) do you like best? Why?
PART TWO

- Please show me how you usually use one wedding forum – if possible, one that you haven’t already visited today, or the one that you use the most.
- What do you usually do when you first open the site?
- How do you decide what to read & what to respond to?
- Are there any specific threads or rooms/areas that you find most relevant to the issues that you are dealing with?
- Are there certain members that you have gotten to know through their activity on this site?
- Can you tell me about a time when you found the site’s information sharing especially helpful?

Appendix C: Excerpt from the Transcript of M.C.’s Interview

Questions:

1. **Tell me about when and why you started using online wedding forums in the planning for your wedding.**
   - Aug 2008, led to a website from a wedding magazine acquired from a wedding show, noticed forum, was familiar with forums because partner used mixed martial arts and poker forums
   - Poked around for a little bit, then signed up – weddingbells
   - Interesting because people would post questions and you’d think oh that it is a good question
   - Because weddings are a once-in-a-lifetime experience it’s great to learn from people who have done because you don’t know what it is you should be doing, and what it is that you actually need to be doing.
   - Can’t really rely on your partner very much for assistance in that department

2. **How would you describe your activity? Do you post very often? Or, do you mostly read others entries?**
   - They have a status that correlates to how many posts you have
   - When you sign up you’re a lurker or a newb or a newbie so it became a little bit of a game for me because I didn’t want to be a lurker because it sounds so perverted (laugh). It’s not negative, it just designates you as a new person so you kind of have a little more tolerance if people don’t know how to post pictures or search before they ask a question.
   - Described how a newbie’s behaviour ie/ not searching before asking a question would be responded to with tips on how to use the site, lead them to rules
   - Wanted to see how many points I could rack up, or get to the different levels
   - In BestDestinationWeddings.com there is a name, points, and posts – bank your points and buy gifts for your friends (icons)
   - They show how many people have viewed the post, so you feel badly just reading and not responding especially if it’s a girl who feels like she’s in melt-down mode, you feel bad just looking. So I’m a little half and half
   - There are certain parts that are only available to members (otherwise freely available to read for non-registered members), there’s one section called relationship rescue – girls with serious issues… sometimes it’s really sad, my husband or fiancé beat me …
   - Weddingbells is linked with magazine, CanadianBride
   - Also signed up for cheapobride.com: I didn’t find it very useful, there aren’t very many ppl using it and it doesn’t update very often
3. Had you used forums before? 14:50
• Never.
• I know S spends countless hours on x forums … what does he get out of it? Why can’t I have my own forum?

4. Have you ever posted a question to the forum?
a. If yes, what kind of questions were they: were you asking for advice? About vendors or products? About dealing with friends and family?
• I’ve actually asked very few questions. I usually just respond because – I don’t know.
• Dealing with what brides refer to as “at home reception” so if you get married away, come back and have a party – I just didn’t know who to invite or how to invite them or yeah.
• Feedback
• Yeah, a couple of the girls: why you want to invite all on the list, etc. (not good feedback?)
• (with reference to bestdestinationweddings.com) I find it better to have a Canadian opinion
• (rather than asking q’s, more frequently replying to posts)
• (when asked about whether she had tried searching the forum for reviews of products/vendors/reception venues?) I tried, I didn’t find it as useful as doing my own research um just because we wanted it to be slightly different and a lot of people just kind of go with the same chapel and the same reception location
• just wasn’t what we were looking for
• (… about vegas scenery etc.)
• also neat to see what other people are spending, that comes up a lot. There are these polls: how much are you spending, what are you spending your money on
• money is like the biggest
• just to see how much x amount would take you
• (find any other vegas brides?) there actually aren’t that many, it’s actually surprising
• I think most destination brides are looking for the all inclusive … (more on vegas…)

5. Have you ever posted responses to other members’ questions?
• Yes yes yes yes, that’s about all I do
• What do you get of it? Feel like you’ve got something to share from all your research?
• There’s also a miscellaneous section so it has nothing to do with weddings. Sometimes it’s just really fun – people will say, hey I’m looking for a new car, what do you drive and why do you love it?
• Um, I think because it is quite anonymous and you create an online personality and you could say whatever you want and no one is going to call you out. You could find a photo of a giant tiffany’s ring and post it and say “look how much my husband loves me”
• No one can really say that’s not you – You kind of look because I’m a bride and none of my friends are getting married at this point. And they don’t want to listen to me talk about wedding-related stuff.
References


