

Developing ‘Community’ in an Online Chat Environment

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Sex is a multi-billion dollar industry and it thrives online. The word ‘sex’ itself consistently ranks as the most searched for term on the internetⁱ ⁱⁱ. However, despite its prevalence and hold on the online economy (social and financial), there is a stigma associated with accessing online sexual materials. Barak and Fisher found that 30% of Canadians admitted to accessing online sexual materials in the previous 30 daysⁱⁱⁱ. Similarly, Schneider states that 25% of internet users report visiting internet sex sites at least once a month^{iv}. Given the stigma associated with admitting to access sexual materials, the true number may possibly be much higher. Most internet sexuality researchers reference Cooper and Sportolari’s ‘three As’ of the internet that make it such a popular venue for the sexual: access, affordability and anonymity^v. In particular, for women and those who are sexual minorities or have proclivities towards the exotic, the internet may be a safer place for sexual expression and experimentation than others. As well, there are fewer consequences for breaking norms and mores surrounding the sexual. For this, it is no surprise that sexual material prevalent online and that millions of people in the comforts of their own homes (and often workplaces) access sexually related materials every day.

Online sex communication, as a specific type of online sexual activities, is a textual representation of sex typically taking place between two or more people mediated through the use of the internet. The purpose of this textual representation and communication is understood to be the sexually arousal, stimulation and gratification of one or more parties. However, this paper argues that online sexual communication is about far more than sex; it serves as community builder, and as a way for a group to establish and police its social norms and mores.

Virtually all research on internet sexual communication consists of research on cybersex within chatrooms, forums, and groups based upon shared sexual interests, practices or identities. For example, there has been research into the conversations of gay chub/ bear and muscle groups^{vi} and various BDSM communities^{vii}. As evident from both the existing research on online sexual conversations and practices of sex on and offline indicate that a great deal of conversation about sex occurs in online forums dedicated to bringing together people based on their sexual practices or identities^{viii}. This is what makes the study of sexual conversations in a forum that is not formed on the basis of shared sexual practices or identity interesting: sex was never a part of the formal agenda within this specific chat forum^{ix} and yet it in the corpus it plays an immensely critical role in the forum.

The community guidelines of the chat forum Walford^x state that sexual conversations are against the rules, however, in practice, this rule is not maintained. Walford has existed in various forms since 1992 and involves real-time chat. Like with MOOs and MUDs^{xi}, the forum has different virtual buildings and different modes and methods of communicating. Participants can be in a private “room” and still talk to all those signed currently logged onto the site, or to only those on their ‘friends’ list’ or they can invite someone into their particular location and talk just to them ‘locally’ or they can single out any individual, or number or individuals currently logged on, who are in different areas of the forum and talk to them. Participants often engage simultaneously in multiple conversations and frequently simultaneous conversations with some of the same people (possible through the ways that they can communicate with each other). There is a massive corpus of conversations over a period of many years.

The focus of this research is on how sexuality and sex are discussed in the forum because of sexuality’s designation as a ‘private’ or sequestered topic whilst flourishing online. Other socially sequestered topics include criminality, sickness, death, mental illness and nature^{xii}. Of those none other is so widespread on the internet. It was immediately evident that sexuality and sex talk play a primary role in the participants’ conversations. For example, it is

not common, accepted practice in the offline social world (unless in a very particular environment) to greet ones friends and acquaintances by spanking them. However, in Walford this behaviour is accepted and relatively common.

Early researchers of dynamics in cyberspace conversations and groups, typically those studying MUDs and MOOs or those hypothesizing about cyber-communication without researching it in any particular context argued in support of Turkle that cyberspace affords people new opportunities to manipulate or play with gender than what was previously conceivable by most people^{xiii}. Cyberspace was heralded as a place where anything goes and where people could choose their identities based on whim or fantasy rather than those that often go unspoken and assumed offline. What these early researchers failed to consider is the investment that people place in their online communication. Although some online communication may stay online, with increasing time spent and personal investment the realms of online and offline meet. Coinciding with this is the expectation that online and offline identities or what sociologist Erving Goffman would identify as “faces and lines” match^{xiv}. While people may seek out others online who have similar interests or identities there is the expectation that in photos and offline people match their online representations and presentations.

Many of the participants in the forum I am researching have met offline. There are clusters of participants in specific areas of America, Canada, the UK and Europe and these clusters regularly meet. As well, participants on occasion meet with participants from other geographical locations. Participants often post links to photographs of themselves while still others communicate on the site while simultaneously using an external site to “webcam” with each other. Numerous current and former offline partnerships occur between members. All of these indicate that participants have a relatively high level of familiarity with each other and investment in the forum.

The familiarity of members in the forum and the lack of offline social boundaries mediating their discussions lead to a multitude of ways in which sex is discussed within a single social organism. Within the forum sex talk can be used as a method of greeting others such as the earlier mentioned spanking or snogging. Sex talk can also be used as a time-filler during conversation lags such as the use of an automatic command to simulate snogging or shagging both in a randomly selected style for a randomly generated number of seconds. Occasionally their discussion about sex is used to push boundaries of acceptability in the name of humour; an example of this is their conversations on bestiality. Sex talk is used in the forum to mediate the heteronormative at times such as in the case of responding to jokes concerning male heterosexuality to virtually and textually ‘gay bash’ by beating the other to death for daring to jokingly flirt. As well there is sex talk gossip regarding the sex lives of other Walford participants); relationship support in terms of discussing the details of one’s own sex life (this usually occurs in the forum in one on one mixed sex conversations); cybersex; discussions of personal habits and proclivities such as discussing pornography collections or sexual interests/preferences); and online flirting, of course.

Participants talk about these topics in accordance to group codes. When they choose the ‘wrong’ way to discuss sex, their transgressions are noted and remarked upon by other members. Consistently talking ‘inappropriately’ in the forum, which tends not to mean a topic too outlandish but one not discussed in the expected setting, usually sets the individual up for ostracism from other members of the group and to be an object of both gossip and derision. For example, members that talk in the ‘town pub’ and ‘unfiltered friends’ lists’ about their love lives are avoided or shut down by other members.

Participants’ online sex is often between members who are offline couples. Rather than occurring using the ‘direct’ one-on-one command, I have found that more often it occurs using a ‘private’ ‘local’ setting. This means that the participants go to the same virtual room to engage

in sex. Yet, to discuss sexual relationships they use the 'direct' command. Both commands do the same thing, yet the different purposes for each are socially ascribed.

The most extreme examples regarding social policing in the corpus relate to male sexuality. Heterosexuality is stringently policed and members force a self-described "nice guy" but fiercely heterosexual and almost "cad" image for the men to embody online. As such the language and actions of the men is more restricted. As well as instances of the preservation of male heterosexuality as mentioned earlier men's language and virtual behaviours are more closely monitored than those of women. For example, earlier I stated that that participants often greet their entire friends' list or everyone in the same public location as themselves with spanking, kissing, shagging or licking; in practice, this is an action that the women, in particular, are 'allowed' to do without violating group mores. Men tend to greet the same lists by typing more traditional, and the offline socially expected, greeting of saying "hello." Occasionally, they will make gender specific greetings, such as kissing or hugging the women and shaking the hands of the men. The social policing of heteronormative masculinity underlies much of their communication.

In conclusion, it is not surprising that sexuality holds greater currency than only the sexual. What is surprising is the amount of online communication in a non-sexually based forum. For example, over one three day period, quantitative analysis showed that "sex" was one of approximately every 250 words (1/301 direct, 1/257 direct same room, 1/213 local) – and that only measures the frequency of the word "sex". This research demonstrates that the use of sexual communication is not merely about the sexual but is important in the development and social policing of group norms and mores. This is important as group norms and mores are intrinsic in communities. As well, the use of sexual communication as a way of demonstrating the expectations among and for group members is an important finding as it contrasts ideologies that those engaging in online communication engage in sexual and or gendered risks. This research shows that while the opportunity for greater risks and increased transgressions exists, when it is acted upon in settings outside of where it might be expected (such as in forums dedicated to sexual issues, interests or proclivities) the group expresses distain and disapproval. Thus, the lack of traditional and entrenched social expectations does not stop the development of expectations, norms and mores, to be developed within that particular setting.

Through studying the contexts, purposes and meanings of online sex communication in the forum Walford it is evident that in some ways their conversations challenge social expectations for public conduct, they also tend to reconfirm dominant cultural ideals. Furthermore, while the online realm may be a more forgiving environment in some ways, the methods of social policing amongst group members are often quite overt. The consequences for failing to follow the social norms and mores may not always lead to the same consequences as doing so offline, there are consequences nonetheless. It appears that sex, or as least talking about it, is about much more than just sex.

Notes

ⁱ Jonathan James McCreddie Lillie, "Cyberporn, Sexuality, and the Net Apparatus," *Convergence* 10 (1) (2004): 43-65.

ⁱⁱ Mark Griffiths, "Excessive Internet Use: Implications for Sexual Behavior," *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 3 (4) (2000): 537-552.

ⁱⁱⁱ William Fisher and Azy Barak, "Internet Pornography: A Social Psychological Perspective on Internet Sexuality," *Journal of Sex Research* 38 (4) (2001): 312-323

^{iv} Jennifer Schneider, "A Qualitative Study of Cybersex Participants: Gender Differences, Recovery Issues and Implications for Therapists," *Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity* 7 (2000): 249-278.

^v Al Cooper and Leda Sportolari, "Romance in Cyberspace: Understanding Online Attraction," *Journal of Sex and Relationship Therapy* 22 (1) (1997): 7-14

^{vi} John Edward Campbell, *Getting it Online: Cyberspace, Gay Male Sexuality and Embodied Identity* (London: Harrington Park Press, 2004).

^{vii} Katelyn McKenna and John Bargh, "Coming Out in the Age of the Internet: Identity Demarginalization Through Virtual Group Participation," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 75 (3) (1998): 681-694.

^{viii} For studies of on and offline sex, many of which focus on the health risks associated with finding sex partners online or offline among specific groups of men who have sex with men see, for example:

Graham Bolding et al., "Gay Men Who Look for Sex on the Internet: Is There More HIV/ STI Risk With Online Partners," *AIDS: The Official Journal of the International AIDS Society* 19 (2005): 961-968.

Joseph T.F. Lau et al., "Prevalence and Risk Behaviors of Chinese Men Who Seek Same-Sex Partners Via the Internet in Hong Kong," *AIDS Education and Prevention* 15 (6) (2003): 516-528.

^{ix} It is necessary for me to make a brief statement regarding the ethics of researching this chat site. Participants understood that the forum was being hosted (though not tied to or directed by) the Department of Computer Science at Queen Mary, University of London and that the material in the forum could be used for research purposes among departmental researchers. It does not appear that participants' conversations were altered by the knowledge that they could be used for research purposes. Occasionally participants joked about the forum being used for research. Perhaps participants were unconcerned because many of them spend a great deal of time on the forum and have invested personal interest with other members.

^x Walford is a pseudonym.

^{xi} MOO refers to a Multi Object Oriented synchronous chat forum, while MUD refers to Multi User Dungeon (or Domain).

^{xii} For a more detailed description of socially sequestered areas of human life see:

Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

^{xiii} Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995).

^{xiv} Erving Goffman, *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Penguin Books, 1959).

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