Sybaritic Cyberspace: A meta-analysis of computer mediated sexual communication literature, 2000-2010

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Abstract

Online sexual communication presents an intriguing subject particularly for communications researchers. As one scholar puts it, “online sex is essentially a type of conversation” (Ben-Ze’ev, 2004). The internet is at first glance, a byword of sexual freedom, and for some, opportunity – but how free are users, really? Via a meta-analysis of recent scholarship, this thesis attempts to uncover what these conversations can tell us about the nature – and future of– online communication, sexuality, and sexual content.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The Problem

Online communication studies have enlightened scholars about the particulars of our latest and (seemingly) ubiquitous way of interacting with one another. While analysis of online communication encompasses a (necessarily) wider area, the study of online sexual activity has been largely relegated to the subjects of pornography and/or its effects on users (Cooper, 2002; Griffin-Shelley, 2003; Doring, 2009). Though work on computer mediated communication theorists acknowledge the relationships between users forged online can be very strong and lasting (Rheingold, 1993; Griffin, 2009; Walther, 1992), most examination of the most intimate examples of such relationships remains focused mostly concerned with pornography and online sexual chatter. This meta-analysis of scholarship seeks to build upon previous analysis of online sexual activity (Doring, 2009).

The Importance of this study

Conducting a scholarly investigation of previous research regarding online sexual communication could provide an academic overview of what has become an important part of sexual/romantic interaction and existence, including thematic issues that surround such interaction. A starting place for such an overview can be found in French philosopher Michel Foucault’s introductory volume of his three-volume History of Sexuality (1978). In it, Foucault explores the ideas of sexual repression, compartmentalization, and discourse in past and current periods. Foucault’s work could serve as a loose framework to determine if – and to what extent -
these themes and issues reflect computer mediated communication as a medium for progressive sexual discourse, or for the reinforcement of existing mores.

Definitions of terms used

I will be using Cooper’s (2004) and Doring’s (2009) definitions of OSA and OSC as follows:

**OSA:** Online sexual activity (OSA) may consist of sexual activities and content, including but not confined to: pornography, sex education, sexually-themed businesses, online sexual communities, etc. (Cooper, 2004, 2002; Doring, 2009; Boies, 2002).

**OSC** refers to online sexual communication, which includes communication for the uses of OSA, as well as interpersonal sexually based conversations and communications within the groups above. (Cooper, 2004, 2002; Doring, 2009; Boies, 2002).

**CMC:** Computer Mediated Communication: “communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computers” (Thurlow, 2004, p.14).

**CMSC:** computer moderated sexual communication: includes OSC, but also encompasses the more interpersonal and asynchronous forms of communication like IM, chat, Twitter, Facebook, texting, etc.

**FtF:** Face to face, i.e. in-person, meeting of users or groups.

**IRL:** In Real Life; as in referring to offline (behavior, existence, or issues).

**MMOG:** Massively Multiplayer Online Game: an online game involving large numbers of participants, often involving roleplaying in a virtual world or environment, such as World of Warcraft or Second Life.
Organization of Chapters

This analysis will be divided into chapters regarding the following: 1) introduction of the subject, 2) a review of the pertinent literature, 3) scope and methodology of the research, 4) analysis of the literature, and 5) summary and conclusions of the literature and analysis.

Chapter one will introduce the relevance of recent topics of scholarship regarding online sexual communication and activity. The importance of balanced scholarship in this area was discussed, as was the issue of continued study and understanding of online sexuality as an extension of human interaction and communication. A list of terms and definitions used in this study and previous scholarship was also presented.

Chapter two will present a review of literature to explain the philosophical and theoretical basis for the study. This literature review also summarizes the recent scholarship and points out several areas of focus: general overviews, dating/flirting, pornography, commodification and other problems, and intimacy. Along with Foucault’s ideas of sexual discourse as a possible reinforcement of repression or an opportunity to express true (and positive) human sexuality (Foucault, 10-11, 1978), the theoretical foundations of computer moderated communication, particularly social information processing and social-identity helped frame the current research.

Chapter three will outline the scope, limitations, and method of the meta-analysis. Chapter four will provide the analysis itself, to be concluded in chapter five.
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Scholarship regarding online sexuality has exploded in recent years (Cooper, 2002; Griffin-Shelley, 2003; Doring, 2009). This section reviews the literature pertinent to online sexuality and introduces the philosophical and thematic foundations for the meta-analysis.

Philosophical Underpinnings

In his ‘History of Sexuality, Michel Foucault fondly references the seventeenth century, a time during which attitudes towards sex held “a certain frankness” (Foucault, 1978, p.3). Not a sexually anarchic period – or attitude, it seems, but an honest one, acknowledging sex as part of the human condition, held in human contact and communication: “direct gestures” and “shameless discourse” (Foucault, 1978, p.3). With the passing of time, however, came a more hypocritical Victorian sensibility: politely compartmentalized sex as a means to repress and control citizens and their communications about it. Knowledge and with it, discourse, about sexual topics were socially taboo. Swept away (supposedly) from polite minds, sex took on a secret and unsurprising commercial aspect: access could be bought; sexual communication with the “Other Victorians” – those outside the socially acceptable, sexually null, norms – was quietly available for those who could pay. Quietly being the primary focus; for to let loose sexual discourse would surely have been to loosen not only the tongues of citizens, but the reins of power for those who were the gatekeepers of access and knowledge.
Foucault reminds us, “repression is the fundamental link between power, knowledge, and sexuality since the classical age” (Foucault, 1978 p.5). And at first glance, it would seem that the internet, with its cacophony of ads, sites, games, tweets, pictures, and movies promising – and delivering – a seemingly infinite webiverse of sex on command, is the polar opposite of Victorian hypocrisy. We are not repressed, we say. And we don’t just say it; we Skype, we instant-message (IM), chat, cybersex, download and email – we virtually shout our sexual freedom from the proverbial rooftops and Wi-Fi hotspots. But, as Foucault would caution, the mere discussion of sex is not rebellion: we must also examine the discourse itself, and what pleasures, knowledge, and power lie therein (Foucault, 1978). The result, one hopes, is to create honest sexual discourse and ultimately, a kind of truth about pleasure and ourselves (Foucault, 1978). But to arrive at such a truth, one must also be honest in the examination of the discourse; scholarship that ignores the possible benefits and liberties of CMSC is just as complicit in the repression as that which glosses over the dangers and underlying portrayals of inequality and power. When we only pay lip service to our sexually liberated communication online, without inspection or insight, we make of ourselves modern versions of Foucault’s Victorians, relegating sex — and the sexual parts of ourselves— to the commercial alleyways of the internet.

**Theoretical Framework**

For the purposes of this research two primary communication theories were utilized: social information processing theory (SIP) and the commodification of culture. Here, SIP frames how online sexual communication works between users; the commodification theory shows how the CMSC is used. Together, they can be used to form a framework of the nature of online sexual communication.
**Social Information Processing theory**

The idea of computer-moderated communication as impersonal is disputed by Joseph Walther's perspective of social information processing. Given the limitations of most CMC methods, users cannot rely on the physical cues (eye contact, etc) to gather and process information. Thus, in order to form impressions of fellow participants and relationships users compensate for nonverbal communication cues by using verbal cues (i.e. the words themselves) over time (Walther, 1992, 2007; Griffin, 2009, p. 142). Amassed over time, participants not only form impressions of online relationships and partners, but they can eventually reach the same level of affinity found in traditional face-to-face communication (Griffin, 2009, p. 142). In other words, though it takes longer, online encounters can be (and are) begun as effectively online (Walther, 1992, Hardey, 2004, Griffin, 2009, p. 142).

Additional factors in social information processing are anticipated future interaction (Griffin, 2009, p. 143) and the hyperpersonal perspective. Anticipated future interaction states that users likely to correspond again are more likely to do so on a personal level (p. 143). As one online correspondent reports, “It is easy to get into deep issues with someone who is really a stranger. That is the best thing about the system. There are no barriers so that you get to know and trust each other well before either think to meet” (Hardey, 2004, p.216). Meanwhile, the hyperpersonal perspective claims that the relationships and communications online are more intimate than their offline counterparts (Griffin, 2009, p. 144). This intimacy is in part manufactured, as “users exploit the technological aspects of CMC in order to enhance the messages they construct to manage impressions and facilitate desired relationships” (Walther, 2007 p. 2538). Via selective editing and self-presentation, message senders may craft messages for optimal positive impression by the recipient, including taking on specific elements that their
partner would find desirable and presenting them in a way desirable to the potential partner (2539). A common example of this phenomenon can be summed up in the simple joke: “Don’t you know everyone online is gorgeous?” (Waskul, Douglass, and Edgley, 2004, p.27). Recipients of such messages idealize partners based on their similarity and desirability (Walther, 2007). This mirroring of expectations and confirmations through the “mutual interaction via the bias-prone communication process” (Walther, 2007, p. 2539), can create a heightened sense of intimacy between users and within user groups. This exaggerated feeling of closeness is well-suited for online sexual activity and communication– a fact well-understood by creators and consumers of online sexual content (Waskul et al., 2004, p. 9; Whitty, 2008, p. 193). It is also feeds into the second of the theoretical frameworks for this thesis: the consumption and subsequent commodification of online sexual content. Adult actress Jessica Drake puts it thus: “You can download anything I’ve been in for free, but you can’t download personal attention.” (Icon, 2009).

Commodification of culture

The internet exemplifies the latest in a series of media that promote commodification of culture – in this case, sexual culture. Jeremy Tunstall puts it thus (as cited in Baran & Davis, 2009): “Elites…take bits and pieces of folk culture, weave them together to create attractive mass culture content and then market the result as a substitute for everyday forms of folk culture” (Baran & Davis, 2009, p. 331). Thus, those in power not only subvert legitimate local cultures, but also earn profits doing so. Replace ‘folk’ with ‘sexual’ and the nature of online sexuality – particularly pornography – is apparent. Baran and Davis also discuss the consequences of such selective marketing: select elements, dramatization, intrusion of everyday life, and subtle disruption (Baran & Davis, 2009). Arguably, all of these are present in online
sexuality: researchers study what views and norms are portrayed in online depictions, and how those depictions reflect upon the offline world (Jacobs, 2004; Zheng, 2007; Whitty, 2008).

‘Internet culture’ has changed the way users approach sexuality (Cooper, 2002; Doring, 2009; Purdue, 2004, p.260, Rheingold, 1993). The commodification of culture – the process by which pieces of an existing culture are dismantled, parts selected, repackaged for mass consumption and/or sale (Habermas, 1989, Tunstall, 1977, Baran & Davis, 2009, 334) – is especially pertinent for online sexual communication. The billion-dollar online porn industry is a reflection of the billions of users who, at any given moment, are creating or consuming sexual content online. Between the hyperfluid, hyperpersonal nature of online communication and the literally ready-made technology for the wholesale marketing, use, and sale of computer-moderated sexual activity, users find themselves in the balance.

The Literature

The scholarship seems to be focused on several areas of online sexual activity and/or communication and their respective revelations about that particular discourse: Dating/flirting, sex within specific online communities (such as Second Life), general overviews of online sexuality, and pornography. All cite varying degrees of intimacy (whether manufactured, expected, or experienced), and often the positive or negative impact of the discourse in general, including repressive echoes of sexism, patriarchy, etc.

At its core, research regarding online sexual communication is the study of human interaction. Early qualitative works, such as Cooper’s 2000 article Sexuality in Cyberspace, are indicative of investigation into not only how the internet shapes such contact, but why. While early (1990s) studies focused on the psychological issues surrounding online pornography
(particularly consumption and addiction) (Griffin-Shelley, 2003), the addition of communication studies such as Manitovani’s study of seduction and Scott & Mottarella’s 2006 exploration of online relationships bridge the theoretical divide between computer-as-instrument (that which acts upon users) and computer-as-medium (that which users act through).

Studies in the past decade also mirror the technological availability of CMC and CMSC: though studies have been conducted since 1983 (Griffin-Shelley, 2003, p. 355), within the last ten years, scholarship has moved from more general topics such as Sexual representation (Slade, 2001); theories and methods (Whittaker, 2003), online romance (Hardley, 2004); and of course, pornography and the individual (Jacobs, 2004) (Boies, 2002), to the more specialized subjects of media as culture (Baran & Davis, 2009); online communities as commodities (Fernback, 2007); pornography and social networking (Icon, 2009); and pornography and male dominance in specific online communities (Zheng, 2007, Woods, 2007). Specialization, a narrowing down of ideas, is certainly a natural course of scholarship. Researchers’ topics appear to have also followed the trend as more users participate in computer moderated communication in general – and computer moderated sexual communication in particular.

Within these studies, however, is a distinct divide between the relatively innocent subjects of online dating and flirting (Hardley, 2004; Manitovani, 2001; Pauley, 2007) and the considerably more explicit subjects of pornography and online sex (Ben-Ze’ev, 2004; Boies, 2002; Cooper, 2000, Jacobs, 2004, Zheng, 2007). The fact that the same users participate in both sexual and non-(or not-quite-as-) sexual realms of CMC remains largely ignored; researchers seem reluctant to point out crossover between the two, despite logic to the contrary (Ben-Ze’ev, 2004; Hardley, 2004; Jacobs; 2004). While certainly every person online has not necessarily viewed or participated in explicit content or activity, every person that has done so is a member of the greater
online community. This lack of acknowledgement relegates the two into distinct categories, and by their disassociation, possibly places value and judgment on each: an exact mirror of the repressive compartmentalization Foucault mentions.

Concern with the effects of sexual content is an understandably popular theme: the commoditization of intimacy and sex, and their connection to the dehumanization and exploitation of users (particularly women and children) is outlined in some form in much of the work, as it has been since the beginning of online study (Griffin-Shelley, 2003; Doring, 2009). Such focus in later works includes a reflexive view of online exploitation, in that it mirrors issues in the greater offline world (Zheng, 2007; Whitty & Fisher, 2008).

Though the negative issues of exploitation, addiction, and commoditization loom large, some researchers do find positive aspects of online sexual discourse. Educational resources, sexual expression for marginalized groups or persons who may not otherwise have access to such being chief among the brighter topics (Cooper, 2000, 2004; Doring, 2009). For example, for isolated members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, fetish, and S/M communities, “The Internet can provide a safe means of affiliating and relating to these peoples where these communities are less common and/or visible, such as rural locations” (Cooper, 2000 p.525). Doring echoes the important presence of these online groups to establish contact and empower individuals who would otherwise be isolated, and adds that the internet also can help those who are sexually underserved or ignored; for example, older persons, the disabled, or conventionally unattractive can shop for explicit material using online adult commercial sites that welcome them, “in contrast to often not very female-, elderly, or handicapped-friendly offline sex shops” (Doring, 2009 p. 1094). The anonymous interactivity of the internet holds a certain cachet as well: “Any physical handicap can be made [to] disappear; senior citizens can become young lovers” (Doring, 2009, p.1095) Some
studies also mention instances of such marginalized groups and/or persons creating their own sexual content, experiences, and more importantly, context, online – battling personal and group repression on their own terms, and perhaps on a larger scale in addition to the smaller one on-screen (Zheng, 2007; Whitty & Fisher, 2008; Doring, 2009).
CHAPTER 3: SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

Scope of Study

Online sexuality as a social force gained academic respect in the 1990s, as the internet gained popularity along with the phenomenon of internet pornography (Doring, 2009, p.1090). Despite increasing academic attention to the subject, many articles focus on the phenomenon of internet pornography and its effects on users. While online pornography is certainly one aspect of online sexual activity, interpersonal interaction is by no means limited to that one area; the realm of online sexual activity spans across a far wider range of subjects, including sexual education, entertainment, support, commerce, exploration, and peer-to-peer contact (Cooper, 2004 p. i). This paper will investigate the academic scholarship regarding the specific interpersonal communication (peer-to-peer) aspects of online sexual activity, and thus provide a meta analysis of that literature.

Methodology of the Study

Academic study of internet sexuality has been conducted since 1993 (Doring, 2009, p. 1090). In order to keep the discussion relevant, this thesis will focus mainly on academic writing within the past ten years. Source articles, books, surveys, online resources, and other materials were found using the Psych Info, Communication& Mass Media Complete, and Computer Source databases. Keyword searches combined internet- and sexual- themed terms (e.g. online sexual activity, sexual communication internet, online intimacy). Web searches of Google and Google Scholar were also used to research names of primary sources, including presentations and other sources not found on the academic databases. Over 200 relevant academic works
published between 2000 and 2009 were identified; additional sources were found and added from the aforementioned primary readings, and during revisions of this work.

As computer mediated communication research has exploded in the past decade, it makes sense to explore the current findings; in this work, in order to produce an overview of recent scholarship on online sexual communication we will conduct a meta-analysis, thus “look[ing] at research trends or themes in the published literature.” (Rubin, 2005 p.222). By doing so, this analysis seeks not only to illuminate possibly overlooked trends, but to also open discussion into the possibilities (as opposed to the limitations) brought up in the literature (p.222). While scholarship regarding internet sexuality is varied, so much work has been done on the subject of internet pornography, that to explore it specifically would have been misleading and expanded the scope of the analysis to the point of uselessness. Thus, the scope of the analysis was kept narrowed to include articles that pertained specifically to the subject of online sexuality/sexual activity relating to user communication and interaction. Kept to these guidelines, themes began to emerge from the literature and research. Most notably, that online sexual activity is a potent and fluid form of communication, with meaning forged between users equally strong – if not stronger than – its in-person counterparts; that this communication is not only indicative of how individuals immediately interact sexually, but has the potential to affect current offline relationships – and future on- and offline sexuality and relationships. With such fluid, intimate (and sometimes lasting) meaning created between users, individual intention -- as opposed to inherent positive or negative use of the intimate, informative, or entertaining possibilities presented by online sexual activity -- is the real force of online sexual communication; objective, critical appreciation and scholarship will be the key to understanding this newest aspect of our intimate lives, and our outlook thereof.
CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS OF THE LITERATURE

Previous studies

The scholarship of communication and the internet is not without previous analyses. Three works in particular bear mention here: the 2002 Communication research about the internet: a thematic meta-analysis (Kim, S, 2002), Eric Griffin-Shelley’s 2003 literature review The Internet and Sexuality: a literature review (Griffin-Shelley, 2003), and the 2009 article The Internet's impact on sexuality: A critical review of 15 years of research (Doring, 2009). All investigate the study of the internet via meta-analyses. The first takes a quantitative look at themes in research methods and theories. The second takes a chronological snapshot of early internet sex scholarship between 1983 and 2002. The last takes a more qualitative view of research on online sexuality. All of the studies stress the importance of internet research to gain information and insight about how the internet can impact future communication, clinical, and research trends and understanding (Kim, 2002; Griffin-Shelley, 2003; Doring, 2009). However, Doring alone goes a step further, suggesting how scholars may arrive at such insight: by adopting “strategies [that require] a greater openness on the part of academic research and teaching to the potentials for constructive sexual Internet activities” (2009, p.1099).

Griffin-Shelley’s review shows early research to be quantitative in nature, mainly concerned with empirically identifying the problematic nature and issues of the new medium (2003). Though his review focuses primarily on psychological research, Griffin-Shelley acknowledges the overlap and inclusion of communications study (2003). The theoretical constructs and data from this period are meant to serve as foundation for further study (Griffin-Shelley, 2003, p.363). Researchers Sung Tae Kim and David Weaver (2002) take this a bit
further, focusing on the themes within the scholarship. Their article applies a four-phase evolutionary model developed by Wimmer and Dominick (Kim & Weaver, 2002, p.523) to compartmentalize the research and methods. According to the authors, there were more quantitative articles than qualitative, and research methods were more non-quantitative (p.527). Ultimately, they concluded there was more communications research interest, focusing on law and policy issues about the internet itself (Kim & Weaver). Public perceptions about the internet and applications for education and instructional application were also investigated (Kim & Weaver). The authors also reported communications researchers’ increased interest in internet usage and its effects on users (Kim & Weaver). They acknowledge that there is work yet to be done, particularly in the areas of meta-analysis of communication research about the uses and effects of the internet (Kim & Weaver).

Almost as if in answer, Doring’s 2009 article zeroes in on the subject of internet sexuality "on a qualitative level," despite the significant increase of academic publications on internet sexuality (p.1090). Doring asks the question, "What do we currently know about internet sexuality, about its various forms of manifestation and effects? And what do we not know?" (p.1090). "To date, no review articles have been published that provide a systematic overview of the current body of scholarship in the field" (p.1090). The goal of Doring’s work “is to present a structured overview of the current state of research on internet sexuality” (p.1090).

Most of the research, she finds, has been done on the usage of online pornography, specifically its ill effects: addiction, negative role models, abuse, unrealistic views and expectations, etc. (p.1093). Sex education, its quality and access have been documented, but less studied are the aspects that involve more marginalized behavior: sex workers, sex shops, sexual contact, and sexual subcultures (p.1098).
As a counter to the current scholarship, the author specifies user agency as a focal point to understand and study online activity: “[internet users] are not understood as the victims of deterministic media effects, but rather as active media users who are able to consciously and selectively use, interpret, and co-create online content according to their needs and are also capable of rejecting it” (p.1091). Doring thus speaks in terms of risks and opportunities regarding users’ actions. As active users of the internet – and the explicit material therein – users are also participants in consuming — and creating — not only the material and a market for that material to be distributed, but a culture in which it is profitable to do so. Even so, the summary presents a scholarship more interested in risk than opportunity, focusing on users as ‘victims of questionable content’ and thus “blind to positive learning effects in the sense of gaining sexually related internet competency (e.g. improved self-regulation of consumption, critical evaluation of online sources, open discourse regarding online sexual activities with sexual partners and peers, etc)” (p.1098). The Internet’s positive effects of sexuality unfortunately have yet to be explored; from current scholarship, the openness and willingness of researchers to do so remains to be seen (1099). Study yet remains to be done on several topics, including “qualitative studies concerned with how online sexual activities or contents are selected and processed cognitively and emotionally by individuals” (p.1099).

My goal in this thesis is to build on these previous works by incorporating the CMC – specific theory of social information processing and commodification theory to themes particular to recent scholarship regarding the singular topic of online sexuality and communication.

General overviews of online sexuality
Online sexual contact (OSC) and online sexual activity (OSA) are active (as opposed to passive) behaviors; users create meaning via their interactions, just as they do offline (Doring, 2009, p. 1096). This observation in the literature is in line with Joseph Walther’s social information processing theory of computer moderated communication: that users form impressions of one another by gathering, then using information about each other. Information is gathered over time and without the use of nonverbal cues (eye contact, body language, etc.). The sole mode of information and impression sharing is textual signs and symbols, such as words, abbreviations, photos, and emoticons (Griffin, 2008 p. 139; Walther, 1996; Waskul et al., 2004; Woods, 2007). Obviously, within the social context of online sexual community and communication, the nature of such signs and symbols is already highly charged with meaning. And meaning isn’t the only thing highly charged: as one researcher quipped, “The key to pornography is perception” (Lorenz, 2006); the same key unlocks most online sexual activity. This is explained by SIDE (social-identity-deindividuation) theory: without offline (Face-to-face, or other real life, physical) contradiction, users with common interests or groups can select what messages to send (and ultimately, receive), perceiving similarities instead of differences during interaction, attributing more positive (and similar) meaning to partners and groups (Griffin, 2008, p.145). Messages and content become hyperpersonal –intensely intimate, magnified -- ; potent aspects not only of computer mediated communication, but expressions of sexuality and sexual mores as well. (Griffin, 2008, p.144).

These interactions are “intimate yet separate,” a new kind of interaction that is very different from the passivity of the broadcast culture: users take active roles in participating and creating the relationships, and thus are more invested in them (Cooper, 2000, p.532). Those who indulge in these behaviors, however, face concrete and serious problems, such as abuse,
exploitation, compulsion and addiction, which stem from interpersonal issues such as vulnerability, intimacy, resistance and reality, etc. (Cooper, 2004 p.iii). The possibility of becoming addicted to online pornography and sexual content is an ever-present threat (Cooper, iii; Doring, 2009, 1093). Despite this danger, however, online sexuality could improve sexual relationships as a whole (Cooper, 2004, p.iii) That the internet also presents a unique opportunity for the gathering and dissemination of sexual and reproductive health education is a definite positive (Whitty, 2004, p. 193).

**Dating/flirting**

Dating and flirting online are clearly goal oriented pursuits, although they may not seem so at first (Ben-Ze’ev, 2004, p.30). Users employ several types of seductive strategies to reach those goals. Due to the absence of physical communicative cues and restraints, however, flirtatious (and sexual) interaction *feels* more intimate and open, even if it is still restrained by very specific rules, expectations modes of exchange, and strategies (Manitovani, 2001, p.152). And make no mistake, there are rules: “netiquette” not only governs behavior but actually contributes to the feeling of intimacy by creating and sustaining trust; presumably so that the relationship can continue offline (Hardley, 2000, p.215). Though this is not to say that unrealistic expectations don’t occur: in fact the hyperpersonal nature of online communication leads users to routinely form unrealistic and positive impressions of their relationships – and partners (Pauley, 2007 p. 415). For the most part, however, in the world of flirting and dating, successful dating/flirting means the end of the online-only aspect of the online communication, online sexual entertainment or contact straddles the line between screen and brain precariously.
Pornography

“The key to pornography is perception”, “but good cyber is all in the mind” said Tina Lorenz at a 2006 computer conference presentation. The previously passive viewing of pornography still exists online, but with the advent of new communicative technologies, it is now possible to not only view explicit content, but create and participate in it. Not only to be novel, but to survive: “You’ve got to give [users] something special…a more personal experience, give the consumer an extra something” (O’Brien, 2009), said one actress. “Even at its most basic peer-to-peer file-sharing and/or click-and-watch forms pornography has become a series of interactions, from being able to follow actors on twitter to sharing files with other users. Though users are quite clear that the ‘interaction’ is highly manufactured and often for profit, that they are willing – and desirous to participate anyway – speaks to the nature of this medium. A representative from Adam& Eve, an adult toy company, intimated that connection as part of a business model: “For us, creating a bond with a fan is just as important as overtly selling product,” (Icon, 2009).

Commodification and other issues

Few would argue that the ‘internet culture’ has changed the way users approach sexuality. The subversion of the relatively public nature of sexual entertainment and sexual communication became a billion dollar industry based upon the interactivity of its users (Purdue, p. 260). This subversion of access did not result in an democratic online utopia of sexuality, but merely a novel means by which users could create – and consume – sexual content.
Sex as a commodity is hardly new; it sells everything from cars to surgery. However, the commodification of the public sphere – the process by which pieces of an existing culture are dismantled, parts selected, repackaged for mass consumption and/or sale (Habermas, 1989, Tunstall, 1977, Baran, 2009 p. 334; Rheingold, 1993) – is especially present in online sexual communication. The informal conversation, the very interactivity of the internet itself stops acting as discourse (or intercourse) between users and becomes a public sphere when it is larger than its users (Rheingold 1993). And public sphere, Rheingold says, can be altered, used, sold: ‘It is also possible to alter the nature of discourse by inventing a kind of paid fake discourse’ (Rheingold, 1993).

The process of technology creation, followed by consumption and entertainment then the consumers’ adaptation of needs and desires mirrors the evolution of online sexuality (Purdue, 2004, p 261). Not only is the content itself for sale, but the means by which to create and consume it is as well; sex-based businesses were the first to become profitable online – not merely because of content, but because they created and perfected the technology to create, access, distribute, protect, and market it (Purdue, 2004, p. 271-273). Mainstream businesses followed in their technological, if not ideological, footsteps, including dating sites, chat rooms, online games, and other less-salacious entities. The interactivity internet technology affords thus creates another business opportunity; the retail-oriented communities Fernback discusses are easily compared to the online caches of sexual communities, dating sites, massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) and the like: “Like other commodities in the industrialized world, community can be exploited as a form of wealth that can be cultivated, mined, or sold like other capital commodities” (Fernback, 2007 p.316).
While the internet is unique in that any user can also be a creator of content, the prevailing mores online echo that of the offline: female, minority, and non-heterosexual users find themselves up against the same discrimination and prejudices they do offline (Zheng, 2002, p.2; Purdue, 2004 p.292, Nakamura in Magnet, 2007, p.588). Women and marginalized groups, in particular, struggle to define themselves positively in the medium, often relegated to the same submissive and objectified roles and views they face offline (Cooper, 2000; Jacobs, 2004; Zheng, p.2). For example, Multi-User Domain (MUDs) designers often do not create alternatives to white characters on their sites; female pornography participants in the MMOG virtual world of Second Life primarily mimic the exaggerated hourglass figures, poses, and attributes found in their offline counterparts (Magnet, 2007 p.589; Zheng, 2007 p.9). Despite growing diversity in online sexual participation, the decision between ‘giving them what you’ve got’ and ‘giving them what they want’ seems to go more often toward the latter. Thus, the exchange between creators of content and its consumers is becoming more complicated as individuals must navigate between their personal interests, fantasies and identities — which may deviate from sexual norms — and the stereotypical “prepackaged sexiness” that is more common, and therefore more saleable, to a buying public (Jacobs, 2004, 79). This selective repackaging allows for less intrusion into the everyday thoughts and lives of users — a more inviting world for users to immerse themselves — and their dollars — into (Baran, 2009 p.336). While issues of obscenity and censorship challenge notions of community, online sex remains extremely accessible and profitable (Perdue, 2004, 290; Jacobs, 2004,71-72).

The commodification of sexual content and material makes it difficult for any change to occur in sexual mores (Jacobs, 2004, p.74), and often internet communities mirror their users’ cultural beliefs (Zheng, 2007, p.14). In other words, people would rather be aroused than
challenged – especially when it comes to ideas like male dominance, abuse of power, and (especially female) sexual autonomy (Zheng, 2004, p.17). While the increase in dialogue and communication in sexual communities – and even between online sexual partners hints at the possible democratization (if not decommodification) of sexuality and sexual content online, it remains to be seen if such will occur. Thus, the societal problems of sexism, racism, and heteronormativity are doubly entrenched in online sexual discourse: the greater (offline) world that it mirrors, and the discourse users create within the online sphere. The lack of diversity within multi-user domains, for example, “speaks volumes about the assumptions technology designers carry with them” (Magnet, 2007 p. 589). For example, racialized stereotyping is a selling point for nonwhite models on the alternative porn site SuicideGirls.net: “When a woman of color is profiled, her body inevitably becomes a signifier of the exotic” : an Asian model is “delicate” or “dolllike”; an African-American model is described as “soulful” (p.590). “Racialized features…signify her position as a sex object. None of the white models are introduced in this way” (p.590). The use of internet as an increasingly public sphere makes it clear that the only force to combat the inevitable result of “a cheapening of valued social institutions and cultural ideals, and the vast sphere of public communication (including online communication) pivots around the discourse of commercial entertainment rather than critical inquiry” will be…critical inquiry (Fernback, 2007, p.316) As more users and researchers contribute to the conversation, their individual voices, perspectives, and concerns will be larger than the lowest common denominator of stereotypes and mere reinforcement of the status quo.
Critical Evaluation/Discussion

Many of the researchers treat manufactured intimacy as a given, but do not go into much detail about why ‘good cyber is all in the mind’ – only that it happens, and that such a platform leads to the suspension of belief (and maybe good sense) on the part of users. What this means to online communication (and OSC specifically) is that users are particularly invested in this mode of communication, and thus have a large stake in how it shapes everyday, offline communication and relationships. The validity of the concrete studies about flirting, seduction, technique, and rules make the ‘dating’ world seem far from the ‘sex’ world of the internet – which is misleading; only one article mentions an overlap; the others seem content to distance themselves from the less innocent domains of sex communities and porn (Ben-Ze’ev, 2004; Cooper, 2000; Hardey, 2004; Mantovani, 2001). This is problematic because often the same users frequent both types of sites – sometimes simultaneously – and may use the same type of rules, techniques, and have the same expectations of both. As Ben-Ze’ev states, “Since online sex is essentially a type of conversation, which is also an essential part of flirting, the distinction between online sex and flirting is not clear cut and the two activities often overlap” (p.33). In short, the meaning users generate from the types of sites are not so far apart. It was refreshing to see a bit of optimism in the way of how the internet can be used to treat sexual problems and the stress on the importance of understanding the medium as a place fraught with obstacles to be overcome. The tone seems to be more ‘know your enemy’ than “know thyself”; research seems extremely cautious about supposing that any real good could come from online sexual activity – much less studying it (Doring, 2009, p. 1098) While understandable, the prudishness of such a stance leaves scholarship tentative and even unwilling to examine all the facets of what has become a huge part of modern sexuality, relationships, and communication.
CHAPTER 5: SUMMARIES AND CONCLUSIONS

Limitations of the Study

The basis of this analysis was to examine current study on online sexual communication, as well as investigate how this relatively new medium is understood and used by participants as well as scholars. The study was limited to focusing on primarily academic writing, but included some pertinent information from such additional sources such as participants and creators, to provide context and further explanation where appropriate. To exclude such accounts could have narrowed the scope of the study to purely academic theory but in light of the subject matter, to do so could also meant the exclusion of important contextual and cultural information.

Obviously, pornography is an important aspect of online sexual communication and activity. However, to focus solely on this one aspect, with its accompanying issues and dangers, particularly exploitation and abuse, would have derailed the study. There has been significant study of pornography and its dangers, although specific investigation of pornography and its effects upon CMSC may yet prove useful.

The selection of literature for this meta analysis was intended to give an overview of current scholarship; however, the inclusion/exclusion of studies could be misconstrued as bias. The inclusion of thematic and philosophical framework was meant to curtail such tendencies, and ensure balanced conclusions, lest this research be as prone to over-positive outlook on the subject as some research has been of negativity.

Further areas of study

Much research remains to be done regarding the more interactive technologies (Twitter, Facebook, Skype, etc.) and the applications of Social Information Processing theory; particularly
in the area of CMSC. Study of the semiotics of such exchanges would also be helpful in discerning how these theories work in practice. Study on the methods and effects of commoditization of CMC and CMSC particularly, could help gain insight on how users and combat that influence.

Conclusions

Researchers remain fascinated by the reality of and OSA, recognizing it as a valid new addition to the realm of human sexuality and communication. However, the focus on the ill effects of OSA and especially the exploitation of goal-oriented phenomena of the hyperpersonal model and SIDE theory, seem to beg the question of the authenticity of CMSC. Though users’ intentions differ wildly, the common will to connect with others draws and keeps users online.

From recent study, it is clear that Foucault’s “irruption of (virtual) speech” has resulted in an online (and offline) cacophony of sexual discourse. Scholars are generally positive about the freedom of online sexual communication and the opportunities it presents for access and challenges to current sexual power structures. But this freedom and opportunity remains, for the most part, untested by users, who instead choose to echo the dominant power structures, playing them out in how they create and consume online sexual content. Pockets of educators, CMC participants, gamers, pornographers, and scholars, present their sexuality on their own terms; and while such challengers grow in number, they struggle to compete both ideologically and economically; sexual egalitarianism can be a hard sell.

This consumption and creation of OSA as reinforcement of the sexual status quo, combined with the commodification of that status quo, keep the internet a repressed space – the compartmentalization of sex as a commercial activity, void of real discourse and meaning. The
commercial function of the internet is being emphasized at the cost of its more democratic uses: “the net has become a homogenous environment that reproduces unequal conditions for access and participation…pampering and pacifying rather than educating and stimulating consumers” (Jacobs, 2004, p.80). Surely this concern – and very real tendency – is at the heart of the future of online sexual and interpersonal communication. The complete commoditization of online sexual material and contact would at best, render it completely separate (and perhaps worse) than that created by its users; at worst, it would create a homogenized space that influences its users to imitate it.

In the end, it is participants’ own unwillingness to truly take advantage of the opportunity CMC affords that poses the most danger. Without challenges to the commodification not only of sex, but discourse, and the inequalities within those arena of CMC, users will remain “Other Victorians” - relegated to clandestine, circumscribed and coded types of discourse, (Foucault, 1978, p.4) both on and offline. It remains to be seen, however, if users of this new medium will ultimately create sexual content, education, thought, and discourse as another facet to the human experience and reveal the ‘truth’ about sex; or if this new medium will merely reinforce old cultural and political mores of sexism, subjugation, and commerce – the last frontier of Foucault’s other Victorians.
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