Gender and sexuality in the Internet era

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Introduction

Castells (2010) has announced the death of ‘patriarchalism’ and considers this to be the result of complex economic and technological transformations in today’s world, of the formation of a globalised culture, and of the feminist movement. For Castells the death of patriarchalism is to do with the crisis of patriarchal family, namely the fall of marriage rates and the rise of divorce rates and the single-parent model of parenting. At the same time, women’s liberation (as signaled by the massive entry of women into paid work), the polyphonic and evolving course of the feminist movement, and the increasing openness of society to sexual freedom and expression (as indicated by the emergence of gay and lesbian movements), are all considered by Castells (2010) to have contributed to the death of patriarchalism.

If we are to accept Castells’ argument, we essentially accept that sexuality and contemporary representations of it influence gender roles and ensuing conflicts. Sexuality can be considered a concern of importance to the very definition of gender and the socially constructed and artificial nature of the gender roles historically attributed to women and men. Thus, contemporary sexuality discourses concerning homosexuality, lesbianism, and transgressive sexualities and their representations, particularly in new media platforms of communication, can be thought of as challenging well-established conceptions of gender attributes and roles as well as consequent norms about sociopolitical, ideological, and others forms of power distribution between the two socially constructed genders, thus attacking patriarchalism, which is often identified with heterosexuality:

The refusal to come (or to remain) heterosexual always meant to refuse to become a man or a woman, consciously or not. For a lesbian this goes further than the refusal of the role ‘woman.’ It is the refusal of the economic, dialogical, and political power of a man […] This can be accomplished only by the destruction of heterosexuality as a social system which is based on the oppression of women by men and which produces the doctrine of the difference between sexes to justify this oppression. (Wittig, 1992, pp. 13–20).

This chapter aims to discuss dominant and alternative representations of sexuality as they have evolved along with the development of new media forms and settings of communication. At the core of this chapter lies the notion of gender and gendered representations of sexuality on the Internet and in consideration of the roles of race and identity. The chapter looks at recently emerging representations of sexuality on the Internet and the ways new media such as the Internet link prevalent representations of ‘sexual’ and ‘sexuality’ to
gender. More specifically, the chapter explores how the Internet portrays gender roles and stereotypes of sexuality in biological and social terms; which sexual stories are told and retold by the Internet, and in what ways; and whether Internet representations of sexuality produce differences in individual and social sexual values and practices as well as in broader conceptions of gender and gendered roles.

The chapter attempts to answer these questions through content analysis of sexuality-related Internet sites and with reference to Internet representations of gender and sexuality. The sites analyzed concern sex tourism; homo-/bisexuality; online pornography; and rape, dating, and women’s sexuality. The content analysis finds that the Internet encourages the exposure of controversial and alternative sexualities on a new scale and through more means than mass media platforms. At the same time, ‘patriarchal’ and identity-rigid sexualities are recycled, regenerated, and re-exposed by Internet-based services and content, with the Internet thus supporting the ‘re-masculinization’ of gender relationships and the dominance of male sexuality in the framework of relevant social discourses, values, and practices.

By developing this argument, the chapter aims to reach conclusions about whether previously marginalized sexualities appear on the Internet, and whether myths of sexuality, race, and male dominance are reproduced online. In terms of its implications, this research poses questions with respect to whether patriarchalism has actually died, as Castells thinks; the extent to which new media and Internet representations of sexuality have inaugurated a time of rising change; and whether this change reflects feminist ideas or new forms of the subordination of women’s sexuality.

**Hegemonic Masculinity, Sexuality, and the Internet**

As an outcome of the latest developments in the feminist movement and rapid sociocultural, economic, and technological changes, the literature has attempted to move beyond monolithic theses concerning the concept of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) and the dominance of masculine discourses. The idea of rethinking the concept of masculinity is of particular interest to the idea of sexuality since masculinity embraces sexuality as one of its elements and uses it as the ‘vehicle’ for the empowerment of maleness and patriarchalism in all domains of life.

More specifically, what it is now argued is that a new form of masculinity has been created (Faludi, 1999; Clare, 2001), one whose hegemonic position is to be considered as quite relative, complex, and fluid. It is argued that masculinity is to be placed in a more complex model of gender hierarchy in which women also have a role to play as meaningful agents and related power and privilege statuses take a different shape in different geographies. Thus, masculinity is today arguably marked by internal contradictions that allow possible space for gender democracy and involve complex gender and social hierarchy dynamics (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). This is to say that ‘masculinities’ are marked by internal power and hierarchical battles that do not allow for a single ‘hegemonic masculinity’ to be established, while gender dynamics and the role of ‘femininities’ in interaction with ‘masculinities’ should not be underestimated.
As an outcome and since representations matter (Gill, 2007, p. 7), representations of masculinity in the media are to be revised and rethought in relation to and in a better balance with representations of femininity as well as in consideration of today’s complex sexuality dynamics. Representations of sexuality in the media in particular have long been examined as either favoring male dominance and visually placing women in the position of a passive object of male desire and gaze (Mulvey, 1975) or, lately, from a postfeminist perspective, as showing women as sexually emancipated and active participants in sexual discourses and images in the media (Gill, 2007). Especially when new media technologies – information communication technologies – emerged, many techno-enthusiasts considered that the women’s movement would be further grown and empowered, arguing that women use information communication technologies ‘to work for the movement; communicating among dispersed networks, mobilizing action in times of crisis, participating in policy debates and voicing new perspectives’ (Gittler, 1999, p. 91). Conversely, moderate appraisers of new technologies have acknowledged that women embrace technologies to pursue bold, feminist ends and that there have been, for instance, websites exclusively dedicated to women and their interests; at the same time, they argue that the Internet provides feminine, masculine, and middle-ground online discourses and practices (Ross, 2010). It has been argued that the Internet brings both ‘promise and perils’ to women, since online representations of sexuality ‘may be liberating for many women, but there is much sexual harassment online. Pornography has proliferated online, much objectifying and victimizing women and girls’ (Morahan-Martin, 2000, p. 683). Again, there are those who are pessimists, with early critics arguing that ‘the very language of technology, its symbolism, is masculine. […] Therefore to enter this world, to learn its language, women have first to forsake their femininity’ (Wajcman, 1991, p. 19). According to this latter view, new technologies such as computer technologies can provide new spaces for the regeneration of discourses favoring maleness, for instance through computer games that conventionally target male users and promote male characters while providing sexualized and stereotyped representations of women (Ross, 2010, p. 129). Also, reproduction of gendered practices can be noticed in the discursive traits of cyberspace and through the reproduction of traditional gendered communication codes among cyber-users (Ross, 2010, p. 132).

While it is common sense that the Internet is a contested medium (van Zoonen, 2002), the notion of gender and its sociobiological ramifications especially regarding sexuality are equally contested. In an effort to disentangle Internet representations of gender, van Zoonen (2002) dismisses views that approach the Internet as a masculine, patriarchal or conversely a feminine space or as a space in which transgender identities can find space. Instead, she argues for ‘the mutual shaping of gender and the Internet which takes into account the different dimensions of gender as well as the circuit of culture that constitutes the Internet’ (2002, p. 15). She believes that gender and the Internet are interconnected in multiple and complex ways, particularly through the social shaping of the meaning of the Internet when it is domesticated and variously appropriated by its users and traditional, deliberative, reversed, and individualized usage cultures, resulting in the construction of multiple and often contradictory gender discourses online (2002). Such a sociocultural and everyday-life account of the Internet offers a good insight into the complex and often contradictory role the
Internet plays in gender-directed discourses and practices, although it does not touch upon the pragmatic picture of gender discourses and messages dominating cyberspace. Especially in relation to gender sexuality, it does not account for the particular way in which people express their sexuality online and in a different or similar way to the way they do when using other media platforms.

From this perspective, it is interesting to consider and examine Ross’ argument that ‘women and men’s different Internet behaviors – with women mostly preferring discursive and relationship-focused activities and men preferring action-oriented games – mirror the more traditional sex-based behaviors we see manifest elsewhere in society’ (2010, p. 4). In support of this argument, some speak of ‘re-masculinization’ on the Internet (Chow-White, 2006, pp. 893–895), namely re-patriarchalization, where new paths and further scope are given to patriarchal ideologies and practices, not least because of pre-existing phenomena such as pornography, which essentially signify that ‘physical possession of the female is the natural right of the male’ (Dworkin, 1981, p. 203). In contrast to this thesis, others argue that, because of today’s sexualized media environment and particularly the increase and pervasiveness of sexually explicit material on the Internet (Peter and Valkenburg, 2007, p. 382), the Internet enables previously marginalized groups to come together, with more people expressing their sexual identity through multiple platforms and with online space(s) being available for the expression of alternative sexualities (Campbell, 2004). This latter argument backs the idea that more-controversial representations of sexuality can emerge online, while at the same time questioning the extent to which dominant representations of sexuality disappear online and the way gender-driven power relations evolve over time.

Such contrasting views about the conceptualization, framing, and representation of sexuality on the Internet are part of a growing general interest in the development and evolution of sexuality and the various shapes and forms it takes on the Internet and through the new opportunities and risks the Internet brings along the way (Cooper, 1998; Cooper, McLaughlin, and Campbell, 2000; Fisher and Barak, 2001; Young, 2002; Waskul, 2004; Ross, 2005). Such contrasting views are largely inspired by the two contrasting trends in cyberfeminism: ‘cyberutopian feminism which understands cybersex as liberating, and cyberdystopian feminism which sees cybersex as exploitative’ (Magnet, 2007, p. 578). On one hand, the Internet is considered to reinforce female agency and women’s sexual emancipation without women being afraid of criticisms that derive from heterosexuality-driven and other norms of the offline world. On the other, cyberdystopians argue that the Internet reproduces the rules and norms of the offline sex industry because it is controlled by it. According to this latter thesis, the Internet also gives space through anonymity and insufficient online legislation to the diffusion of sexual crimes such as the trafficking of women (Döring, 2000) and the emergence of online sexual harassment (Branwyn, 2000). The debate between cyberutopians and cyberdystopians largely influences feminist approaches to cybersex (Döring, 2000). Feminist literature approaches cybersex either from a women’s victimization perspective, interpreting cybersex as a heterosexist practice that encourages women’s online harassment, virtual rape, and cyberprostitution, or from a women’s liberation perspective, viewing cybersex as helping women who seek sexual pleasure online to explore their
sexuality more freely and safely and to enjoy more, better, and different sex. Besides and along with cybersex, the debate between cyberutopians and cyberdystopians refers to Internet sites where particular stories of sexuality are presented and diffused among online users and particular groups of interests. These are sites concerning the online pornographic industry, gay culture, the phenomenon of sex tourism, online dating, and cases of alternative or transgressive sexualities on the Internet.

Regarding pornography, today we live in an era where the question of the ‘pornographication of popular culture’ is constantly raised and a relentless debate is going on between those who declaim the ‘commodification of the sexualised female body’ and those who claim women’s sexual liberation (Ross, 2010, pp. 65–66). Regarding online pornographic content, the available evidence shows that soon after the massive distribution of Internet services, in the 1998–2004 period, there was a 1800 percent increase in pornographic Internet pages (Paul, 2005). Research has mostly focused on content targeted at male audiences with quite limited interest shown in content targeted at women (see, for example, Schauer, 2005). On one side, research has found that online pornographic content objectifies women far more than men and places an emphasis on their outer appearance and how this can be used for offering sexual pleasure to men (Peter and Valkenburg, 2007, pp. 383–384). On the other side, it has been claimed that net porn can be considered in the framework of self-aware sexual representation and for examining how people discover their sexual self (Jacobs, 2007). Others argue that online pornography constitutes an extension of the offline pornographic industry that aims to retain the strengths of the latter while taking advantage of the Internet’s characteristics (e.g. anonymity, interaction, etc.) to attract new customers. This online extension of the porn industry can empower, regardless of its gendered characteristics, women through women-targeted porn services, as long as women control technology and use it for their benefit (Ross, 2010, p. 85).

However, research achieves a stronger consensus with respect to representations of gender and sexuality on Internet rape sites. Research argues that such sites are disseminating, on an unprecedented scale, images of sexual violence against women. For instance, content analysis of rape sites has shown that women are portrayed as victims of male perpetrators in stories of rape, with sexual violence and abuse constituting typical examples of women’s representations in this category of online content (Gossett and Byrne, 2002). In this sense, rape sites arguably confirm the notion of hegemonic masculinity in its crudest, most violent and misogynistic sense (p. 704). Further, on rape sites the majority of female actors depicted (i.e. the victims of rape) have an Asian background (p. 698), also implying some racial-based abuse that serves white male dominance.

Regarding homosexuality and gay cultures on the Internet, the discussion of homosexuality generally brings in arguments about biology and determinism deriving from human nature. On one hand, biological discourses on homosexuality stress the dichotomy ‘between being born gay and choosing to be gay,’ thus significantly supporting biological determinism and treating hetero- and homosexuality as mutually exclusive (Wilcox, 2003, p. 231). Media coverage of homosexuality seems to regenerate and strengthen the
dichotomy between biological nature and choice by prominently covering science stories and arguments that bring up such a dichotomy, and in the context of other contradictory debates and discourses (Wilcox, 2003). However, the Internet is often considered a space in which gay cultures can find some room for expression, and alternative perceptions of beauty and physical attraction for people of the same gender can be articulated in more than one way (Campbell, 2004). On the other hand, the question arising is whether, through alternative representations of sexuality and by going against compulsory heterosexuality and sexual suppression overall, today’s new media technologies such as the Internet facilitate and promote the overarching goal of feminism – to, in Castells’ words, ‘de/re/construct woman’s identity by degendering the institutions of society’ (2010, p. 260).

In addition, sexuality research examines the phenomenon of sex tourism and related sites on the Internet concerning the synergy between the sex and tourism industries. The research has mostly argued that the Internet reproduces myths of sexuality, race, and male dominance through the provision of sex tourism information and services: ‘cyberspace enables sex tourists to build deeper connections between the racialization, sexualization and commodification of sex workers’ bodies and Western masculinity’ (Chow-White, 2006, p. 884). Males feel strong and powerful since travelling for sex is understood as ‘a collective behavior oriented toward the restoration of the “generalised belief” of what it is to be male’ (Davidson and Taylor, 1999, p. 39). Interviews with sex tourists show that those engaging in such sexual practices are consciously pursuing power and domination through economic sexual arrangements (Seabrook, 1996; Davidson and Taylor, 1999). Thus, Chow-White supports the argument of ‘re-masculinization’ on the Internet by remarking that:

The added-value of sex tourism in the exchange of money for sex is the guarantee of submissiveness, traditional gender roles and the ‘right’ attitude […] Sex tourism becomes a trans-national project where the pursuit of unbridled sexuality over women is intended to reassert men’s ‘proper’ place in the social order. (2006, p. 894)

In this sense, economic domination, racial inequality discourses, and dominant masculinity arguments overall frame the complex set of discourses used by sex tourism websites and their users in order to explain and legitimate such practices of sexual exploitation and trade of usually non-white women in socioeconomically developing regions of the world: ‘the tourist gaze is thus ethno-centric, chauvinistic, male dominated and patriarchal. Women in the Third World have been transformed into the victims of tourism’s cannibal economics, through the commodification and commercialization of their bodies, as the site of play’ (Rao, 1999, p. 99).

Conversely, women’s sites on the Internet such as the commercial site SuicideGirls (http://suicidegirls.com) raise the issue of women’s liberation from patriarchal practices along with that of their commercial and bodily exploitation in cyberspace. This site depicts women who adopt a particular style (e.g. punk, gothic, etc.) in the name of feminism and women’s diversity. However, it has been argued that this ‘deviant’
sexuality serves the purpose of ‘marketing’ women and their particular sexuality in a way that is good for business (Magnet, 2007). By having female models on the site posing and taking photographs of themselves, a space for the self-expression and genuine representation of women’s identity and sexuality is enabled. This is reinforced by the requirement that all models contribute to the online journal of the site to thereby also reveal their thinking (Magnet, 2007, p. 581). The site also chooses as models women who do not coincide with the Western white standard of female beauty, trying to promote and sell a sense of diversity of women of color and style (i.e. tattoos, piercing, and punk styles that symbolize the female grotesque). This may be considered a sort of commodification of diversity and difference, rather than a commitment to inclusivity, so as to increase business and profit: ‘Suicide Girls [sic] understands multiculturalism as a call to sell a more diverse range of products with no broader commitment to changing the social order’ (Magnet, 2007, p. 596).

The above arguments in the literature concerning the various kinds of sexuality-related content available on the Internet partly reveal the lack of research systematically examining a compilation of sexuality-related Internet sites, services, and content. This is precisely the research gap this chapter aims to bridge.

**Methodology**

These research questions are explored through content analysis of a sample of sexuality-related websites selected in early 2010. Content analysis is ‘the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication’ (Berelson, 1952, p. 18). It offers reliable and valid results particularly for sufficiently large bodies of text (Krippendorff, 2003) or images such as articles, advertisements, websites, interviews, and policy documents.

**Sampling**

A sample of 20 websites was taken in February 2010 (see Table 31.1). The study initially conceived a stratified sample framework of four site categories – gay, pornographic, sex tourism, and other sexuality-related sites. The sites to populate each category were found by searching via Google, entering the following key words:

- Pornographic sites: ‘porn,’ ‘sex.’
- Gay sites: ‘gay,’ ‘homophilia,’ ‘homosexuality.’
- Sex tourism sites: ‘sex,’ ‘travel,’ ‘holiday.’
- Other sexuality-related sites: ‘dating,’ ‘rape,’ ‘girls.’

In the second phase of sampling, I ordered the search results by popularity and randomly selected a number of the most popular sexuality-related sites online (five for each category). Advertisements on the selected sites and links to other sites were not part of the analysis. The four categories of site were quite distinctive.
from each other. However, some clarifications are needed with respect to the distinction between ‘pornographic’ and ‘rape’ sites (the latter being part of the ‘other sexuality-related sites’ category).

Pornographic sites can be defined as those where there is ‘material that combines sex and/or the exposure of genitals with abuse or degradation in a manner that appears to endorse, condone, or encourage such behavior’ (Russell, 1998, p. 3). Pornographic content often presents violent sexual acts (i.e. violent pornography) and thus many identify it with online rape content; however, the latter was treated separately in this study. For the purposes of the present study, rape sites are considered those explicitly defining their content as displaying ‘rape’ or ‘forced sex,’ with the aggression and coercive behavior of the perpetrator being its main element.

**Codebook**

A codebook was devised for the analysis of the websites. This codebook employed codes/variables that captured in a quantitative way the qualitative traits of the sampled sites. More specifically, the coding of the sampled material first assessed the technical and graphic design of the sites; their color synthesis; as well as the tools, services, and options site visitors were offered. Then, the coding exercise focused on content issues. It examined the dominant action element(s) portrayed on each site; the gender, age, and ethnicity of the prominent actors; the level of general and sexual activity of female, male, or transgender actors; the hetero-, homo-, or bisexual character of the sexual acts depicted on each site; as well as the degree of female and male actors’ violent behavior, sense of romanticism, degree of nudity, and involvement in networking, lifestyle, or other activities.

The codebook was tested on a pilot sample of five websites and was then fully employed for the whole sample of 20 sites. An inter-reliability test was conducted and gave 84 percent agreement of the two coders. This is a fully acceptable level of agreement, supporting the validity of the coding process followed throughout.

**Findings**

**Technical features**

Overall, sexuality-related sites have either an average (nine sites) or advanced (six sites) technical design, with the pornographic sites having a more advanced technical design than other sexuality-related sites. Also, the great majority of websites offer more than five tools to their visitors, with pornographic sites again being those with the greatest number of tools and services offered.

Graphic design appears to be less advanced than technical design, with not a single site having advanced graphics. Instead, the majority of sites (11), including all five pornographic sites, have a very basic graphic design. The gay and sex tourism sites present the most interesting graphical features. For instance, the Gay
Youth Corner site has a two-layered design and young active people in the background, with all its content and tools being offered on top of the background images of young people and consisting of light and plain graphics. The color synthesis consists of many bright colors, with the majority of sites (11) adopting light colors to ignite positivity in their visitors/members. Color along with visual elements are the key features of most websites, with relatively little reliance on text.

Activity

Sex appears to be the prevalent activity on all sites. The next most popular activity is ‘networking’ and ‘nudity’ (each appeared on 11 sites), followed by ‘lifestyle’ (10). ‘Violence’ and other activities (e.g. travel) are significant for some sites only (seven). Finally, romance seems not to be an important element for most sexuality-related sites, with only five sites containing some sense of romanticism.

Sex

Despite the omnipresence of sexual activity, the way in which sex is framed and represented as well as the weight it is given vary between the analyzed site categories. The pornographic and sex tourism sites are those that particularly promote sex acts on the Internet and mainly offer sex-related services. For instance, XXNX.com offers free pornographic videos, as well as thousands of other videos of all kinds of sexual activity for some charge. Sexual activity is the only type of activity portrayed on the pornographic sites, while visitors to those sites also have the chance to comment on sex videos and chat in a forum about sex-related matters. On the other hand, gay sites mostly have visual or textual hints about sex acts, which are, however, presented alongside a complex web of identity and lifestyle nuances concerning homosexuality and the life experience of being homosexual: ‘Welcome to gay.co.uk, your one stop portal for free chat and personals for the UK gay community. […] Whether you’re looking for gay chat, personals, dating, news, videos or gay holidays… you’ll find it here on gay.co.uk, the UK online gay community’ (http://www.gay.co.uk). The other sexuality-related sites provide some variety of approaches to sex, with some only focusing on sex secondarily and others broadening the scope of sex and placing it beyond sexual intercourse. An indicative example is the site SuicideGirls, which looks at sex through alternative conceptions of ‘sexy’ and ‘beauty’: ‘SuicideGirls is a community that celebrates alternative beauty and alternative culture from all over the world’ (http://suicidegirls.com). Even rape sites appear to go beyond sex acts, ‘enhancing’ sex with elements of power, male domination, and violence, since the epicenter of the attention is not sex itself but essentially the forceful and male-dominating character of it.

Regarding the type of sex acts mostly represented online, heterosexuality remains the prevalent type of sexuality promoted online (15 of 20 sites). This is the case even though one of the four website categories analyzed was exclusively about homosexuality (i.e. gay sites), with homosexuality being present in a total of 12 sites. Bisexuality and especially transgressive sexualities appear to be less popular, with only a minority
of sites (nine and six, respectively) referring to such sexuality types. These findings illustrate that even in cyberspace heterosexuality discourses find more space, reinforcing ideas concerning the biological construction of people’s sexuality. This is especially the case with sex tourism sites where homosexuality is completely absent, essentially regenerating well-established discourses about maleness as identified with heterosexual maleness, as well with other sexuality-related sites, such as the online dating site ‘Lavalife,’ where the sense of normality on the basis of the perceived ‘nature’ of sexuality does not give space to homosexual, bisexual, or transgressive sexualities.

Nudity

Nudity is usually considered a vital element of the content available on sexuality-related sites. In this analysis, nudity appears on 11 sites and constitutes a core element of the pornographic, rape, and sex tourism sites. Such sites use nudity as a supporting visual element of the core activity promoted by them: sex. On the other hand, dating, gay sites, and the SuicideGirls site do not target much of their content at nudity exposure. This is mainly because their tools and services are directed at activities not restricted to sex (e.g. networking, lifestyle, etc.), intending to present a partly-cloth-covered picture of the human body as a means of attraction and symbolism. This has also to do with the aesthetics accompanying particular perceptions of love, sex, beauty, and life, as such perceptions are promoted by the relevant sites. Thus, nudity appears to prevail on sites where sexual intercourse per se is placed at the core and hardly extends to or is linked with other forms of human intercourse, exchange, and identity.

Lifestyle/networking

Conversely, lifestyle and networking activities appear in about half of the sites and often they are not in directly associated with sexual activity. The gay sites especially aim at the parallel provision of non-sexual content, with links and information concerning lifestyle, entertainment, and culture, thus creating a sense of a collective experience for their members. For instance, Gay Youth Corner seems to aim at community and networking building among gay people, rather than the promotion of sex-related activities. Namely, most of its content is about community and networking as well as lifestyle, culture, arts, and family issues, thereby encouraging its gay members to share experiences, hobbies, and views that go beyond physical attraction and sex. On the other hand, sex tourism sites promote lifestyle and networking activities, which should not come as a surprise since the emphasis of such sites on sex goes hand in hand with the highlighting of other ‘pleasures’ that holiday time brings, such as networking and relaxation. Also, some of the ‘other’ sites, such as dating sites and SuicideGirls, aim to promote attraction and coupling through networking and sharing of life preferences, habits, and experiences, thus addressing ideas and themes of interest to those who are keen to engage in networking activities alongside dating and coupling activities: ‘Cats. Hockey. Death Metal. Sexaholics. There is a group filled with comments and pictures for just about any interest you can think of’ (http://suicidegirls.com/groups). SuicideGirls in particular relies on the display of a range of lifestyles and
cultures so as to support the idea of ‘alternativeness’ and to challenge mainstream discourses of femininity as a whole.

Violence

Regarding the activity element of violence, seven sites portray violence in relation to sex. Pornographic and rape sites portray violence in the form of sadomasochistic sex, as part of consensual sexual activity, or as a core element of forced sex. Research into the rape or forced sex sites in particular found that the least active agents, namely the victims of rape (i.e. women), are those about which most detail is given on the sites: ‘the iconography of Internet pornography strongly emphasize[s] the depiction of the victims’ (Gossett and Burne, 2002). This is confirmed in the present study since the online pictures and videos focus on women who are the victims of one or more men’s violent behavior, with the general pornographic sites, for instance, showing men as violent towards women during sex and in order to increase sexual pleasure. In the case of rape sites, force or violence does not prevail just for the sake of physical violence and abuse. The driving forces of portrayals of violence on these sites seem to be deeper and relate not only to the psychoanalytically complex sexual pleasure that violence and sadomasochism can ignite but also to the deep-rooted need for patriarchal discourses and values to be reconfirmed and sustained through physical domination over women and via women’s obedience: ‘Teen humiliated by ex-boyfriend; Crying victim gang rape porn; Naive Blonde Forced by 2 smiled guys; Teen Girl Used like a piece of meat’ (http://www.rapescan.com) are some of the names given to content provided on rape sites that aim at the humiliation of all aspects of a woman’s existence and identity. This is to say that, although the violence on such sites goes beyond the ‘sickest’ sexual pleasure a male can have and in fact relates back to times of patriarchal domination and slavery, it also relates to race and racism. With regard to the latter, pornographic and rape sites often display white males exerting violence on black and Asian females, with sex acts directly signaling obedience of other races to whites along with the submission of women to males.

Romance

Romance seemingly contrasts with violence, assigning a more positive character to sexual intercourse on the Internet when it appears alongside it. I say ‘seemingly’ because romance is often another way to reproduce patriarchal discourses and values, but through different means and by transmitting different messages in favor of maleness and male dominance. In this study, romance appears to be the least popular activity element of the sexuality-related sites (only five of 20 sites). This can be interpreted as an indication that sex today has been largely freed of any trace of romanticism and is mostly identified with physical attraction and satisfaction that provoke no emotional attachment. Only the gay and dating sites, and only some of them, seem to contain some level of romance in their content as they address matters that relate to relationships and love, beyond the act of sex. For instance, the site Easyflirt has a pink heart as its logo, indicating that positive emotions and happiness can be gained by using the site. This is also related to the broader emphasis of gay
and (some) online dating sites on networking, socializing activities, and the need of people for communication and contact with others. Although these are considered sexuality-related sites, sex is essentially only one of the many thematic categories they support. At the same time, they either produce alternative representations of sexuality (e.g. gay sites) or have a rather unclear and varying strategy in how they represent sexuality and specifically women’s sexual identity and expression (e.g. online dating sites). Conversely, even on online dating sites where romance is one of the action elements in place, there are more female photos displayed as a means of attraction of new users, something that points to the persistent objectification of women and the female body. Further, on the Easyflirt site one of the photos advertising the site displays a middle-age couple with the woman grasping her partner’s arm, thus indicating that women’s security and happiness are dependent on men and are subject to women’s ability to keep men on their side. In this sense, romance itself does not guarantee a perception of equality, nor necessarily an alternative conceptualization of sexuality and women’s identity.

Other

In the category of ‘other’ activity, the most prominent is ‘travel,’ which constitutes a core activity element not only of the sex tourism sites but also of some gay sites. In the latter, this is the case because travelling is often part of gay people’s culture, along with attempts to move to gay-friendly cultures that ensure freedom of expression and living. Also, gay people often travel to participate in activist events and parades in support of homosexuality: ‘Explore Gaypedia for the coolest things […] Be it a gay bar or pub, chat, event or a travel destination with a thriving gay population. Get info about Gay Pride Parades (London, Paris, Amsterdam, New York,…)’ (http://www.gaypedia.com).

Prominent actors

It is remarkable that the prominent actors in 16 of the websites are males. Even if pornography and rape sites produce pictures and videos that portray women more than men, this is to do with women’s objectification and it is reflected in the depiction of a woman’s naked body more than a man’s. The depiction of women’s nakedness and the focus on men’s genitals in particular enable those sites to exhibit the prominence of the male presence and action and the way in which women are to be used as a tool and object of male desire and satisfaction. Conversely, only on SuicideGirls, one of the gay sites, and the two dating sites do women appear to be the prominent actors (e.g. SuicideGirls) or at least as important actors as males (e.g. the dating sites and one gay site). SuicideGirls portrays girls as the main actors. However, the particular visual, aesthetic, and cultural traits of this site as well as the strategies it employs to promote a ‘girls’ alternative portrayal’ might be far from mainstream but are not necessarily uncontroversial and fully unproblematic, as the site seems to selectively and deliberately move away from the mainstream while arguing for a grassroots approach: ‘the site mixes the smarts, enthusiasm and DIY attitude of the best music and alternative culture sites with an unapologetic, grassroots approach to sexuality’ (http://suicidegirls.com/about). The dating sites
and the gay site that approaches males and females as equally important actors are probably driven by their target groups, however, they offer completely divergent representations of sexuality. A final point on this issue is that transgender actors are not the focus of any of the analyzed sites. Although some of the sites contain links to sexual intercourse in which transgender actors participate, those actors remain invisible and marginalized as they are still surrounded by discourses of ‘normality’ and the clear distinction between the two commonly recognized genders.

On the subject of the ages of the prominent actors, the majority of the analyzed websites target all age categories except for underage persons. However, when middle-aged people are depicted on pornographic or rape sites, the middle-age men are portrayed as dominating young girls and the middle-aged women are shown in sexual intercourse with younger men. In such portrayals, middle-aged men are proudly called ‘experienced’ and ‘mature,’ whereas women of the same age are mostly presented as ‘silly’ and ‘old.’ In addition, sex tourism sites exclusively focus on young women who offer pleasure to men of any age category, with women’s age becoming a critical parameter of sexual pleasure for men and an evaluation criterion of women and their sexuality. The only matching of age for older groups of people can be found on online dating sites, where ‘matching’ seems to involve age and middle-aged women and men are mostly presented as still attractive and charming.

Concerning the ethnicity of the prominent actors, white background seems to be the outstanding ethnic characteristic of the prominent actors on all the analyzed sites. This is perhaps related to the dominance of the social and sexual culture of the West in today’s sex industry and the Western capitalist model that consequently determines the content and paradigms generated online. In particular, the sex tourism sites seem to exclusively represent the Western white male community, with no black or Asian males portrayed as potentially being interested in the services offered. On the other hand, Asian, Eastern European, and South American women are portrayed as objects of erotic pleasure and prostitutes on sex tourism sites. According to statistics, Argentina, China, India, Japan, the Philippines, Poland, Russia, Thailand, and Ukraine are some of the countries that receive the most interest from those looking for a sex vacation online (http://www.travelsexguide.tv/main_nation4.htm). Also, rape and pornographic sites seem to place Asian and Eastern women at the centre of male sexual domination, with such sites dedicating entire categories of videos, pictures, and services to how white males can sexually enslave ‘weak,’ ‘sh*t,’ and ‘d*rty’ young Asian and Eastern women. Behind the discrimination based on color or ethnicity, one can observe that such representations also imply the socioeconomic and capitalist dominance of males from the West over females coming from poor, politically unstable, and culturally deviant regions of the world. Conversely, gay sites do not seem to consistently refer to ethnicity-driven discourses of sexuality, although one can find users’ posts and advertisements that often appraise ‘black’ men’s bodies and sexual performance, in a way reproducing broadly established – even among heterosexuals – discourses of physical attraction and stereotypes of body structure.
Gender activity

Regarding the degree of gender activity by type of activity, only four websites present women as sexually active and 19 websites present men as such, while 10 websites present men as exercising some degree of violent behavior, with not a single website attaching violence to instances of female behavior. Even sites with sadomasochistic pictures and videos hardly display women as the active agents in the sadomasochistic intercourse depicted, with women placed, instead, in the position of the person receiving the pain and torture that sadomasochistic intercourse commonly involves.

Beyond sex-related male dominance, men also appear to engage in networking and lifestyle activities to a greater degree than women online. More specifically, 12 sites (mostly gay and sex tourism sites) present men as engaging in networking and lifestyle activities to a large degree. On one hand, gay sites that target males unavoidably dedicate all their content to homosexual men’s activities. Further, although sex tourism sites consider women in the destination country to be a necessary companion to accompany male tourists while they are networking and entertaining themselves, they do not pay attention to female escorts’ networking activities and are not interested in what a woman can do to gain some pleasure for herself: ‘Every club we take you to, you will be able to saddle up to the bar, order a beer (or drink) and be surrounded by 4–6 beautiful, thin, smiling, petite, tanned Bi-sexual Asian women who do nothing but smile and be happy!’ (http://www.themantour.com/nightlife.aspx). On the other hand, only four websites present women as engaging a lot or to some extent in networking and lifestyle activities, mainly SuicideGirls, online dating sites, and the gay site for both gay men and lesbians. It is clear that only sites made for women and those representing homosexual women or somehow targeting both males and females give some sense of women’s lifestyle (however, whether such portrayals are balanced and really representative or not is a different discussion). So, the question here is two-fold: how many women’s sites can actually be identified and, if any, how successfully do such sites fight against the debasement of women’s identity and sexuality found on the majority of sites available online?

The only gender-based ‘equality’ in terms of level and type of activity appears for the activity elements of ‘romance’ and ‘nudity.’ All the sex-related websites expose their actors to some degree of nudity, which is usually connected to sexual intercourse. However, women appear naked more often than men, especially on the sex tourism sites, while the pornographic and rape sites usually present women as fully naked, while nudity is not always captured by the camera when in zooming on the male body. By contrast, the sexuality-related sites offer a particularly limited sense of romance, with males and females perceived as quite romantic only on the gay/lesbian and dating sites – namely, on those sites not fully dedicated to sexual intercourse. Nevertheless, as pointed out above, romance itself does not guarantee a perception of equality, nor necessarily an alternative representation of sexuality and women’s identity in particular.

Conclusion
On the grounds of these findings it may be argued that the Internet offers space for ‘patriarchal’ and identity-rigid sexualities to be recycled, regenerated, and re-exposed through online services and content, thus supporting the ‘re-masculinization’ (Chow-White, 2006) of today’s sexuality discourses, values, and practices. The sexuality-related sites in particular, for example the sex tourism sites and the pornographic and rape sites, empower the notion of ‘masculinity’ and male dominance, thus supporting those who declaim the sexual objectification of women online (Peter and Valkenburg, 2007, pp. 83–84) and argue that the perpetrators (e.g. sexually active and abusive actors) appearing online are men (Gossett and Byrne, 2002, p. 699). Further, the majority of sexually active males portrayed online have a white background, reproducing the idea of male dominance not only in sexual but also in sociocultural, racial, and economic terms.

Conversely, the Internet and its traits of anonymity, interactivity, availability of user-generated content, multiplicity, and convergence of platforms and services enable other, alternative, or non-mainstream sexualities (e.g. homosexuality, bisexuality) to be expressed on a larger scale and through further means than on mass media platforms. The Internet secures some degree of cost-effectiveness for the producers, distributors, and consumers of sex-related content and services; a sense of freedom; and potential satisfaction of all kinds of sexual fantasies and obsessions of its users. Similarly, the global character of the medium and the lack of cross-boundary legislation can bring various sociocultural trends together, often allowing transgressive sexualities to be exposed in cyberspace in a number of ways. This in turn gives support to the literature arguing that online space(s) enable the expression of alternative sexualities (Campbell, 2004). In the present analysis, homosexual sites and alternative sexuality sites such as SuicideGirls contribute to the demonstration of some kinds of non-mainstream sexuality, somewhat weakening the set of ideas that construct ‘male dominance.’ Although such instances of alternative sexuality do not prevent the reproduction of traditional male dominant discourses online and do not lead to the death of ‘patriarchalism’ (Castells, 2010), they make available spaces where counter-discourses can be articulated and hold some importance for certain parts of the online population.

Hence, conclusions regarding the research questions posed at the beginning of the chapter are, first, that the Internet portrays gender roles largely on the basis of social constructions that have prevailed in mass media technologies for many years. Most sexuality-related websites construct representations of sexuality via a discourse related to biological conditions and the rules of nature (e.g. heterosexuality) and by employing various technical and graphical means to regenerate and strengthen stereotypes of sexuality. The stories are mainly told through colorful pictures and videos, with relatively little reliance on text.

Second, and therefore, heterosexual stories that confirm male dominance are the prevailing sexual stories told and retold by the Internet. By contrast, the notions of gender equality, gender blurriness, and transgender identity seem to frame sexual stories about homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgressive sexuality only in particular online sites, namely those that target groups whose members can identify with such stories.
The third conclusion is that such Internet representations of sexuality do not seem to challenge to any significant degree the ‘dominant masculinity’ thesis, thus reproducing long-standing individual and social values and practices concerning sexuality and gender. For instance, the online porn and sex-tourism industries are a rapidly growing business that reproduces social values, cultures, and inequality practices in relation to gender roles and gendered sexuality practices in particular. Conversely, the parallel echoing of alternative sexuality voices online should not be underestimated, in particular with regard to its inclusive character and the online provision of some space to those who otherwise feel completely excluded.

These conclusions may be useful by offering some timely insights into what has so far been a fragmentarily examined topic of empirical research. As regards women’s sexuality in particular, this research has supported the contention that technology itself can inaugurate certain changes and developments in representations of sexuality, but the ‘technology culture’ and the way technology is integrated into particular sociocultural and economic contexts reveal that technology design is not sufficient to transform fundamental conventions concerning gender and sexuality. Specifically, the social shaping of technology and its appropriation by humans could result not only in the construction of multiple and often contradictory discourses online about gender-relevant matters (van Zoonen, 2002) but also in the regeneration of imbalances and particular dynamics favoring dominant masculinity discourses and practices.

<rh>References


### Table 31.1: Sample of websites

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