

**DISCOURSES OF DESIRE:  
THE NORMATIVE IN ONLINE SEX TALK**

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PhD Thesis

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## **DECLARATION**

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the University of London regulations, and that the work in this thesis is my own.

## ABSTRACT

This thesis, grounded in feminist sociology and queer theory, examines sex, sexuality, and desire in naturally occurring synchronous conversations within a non-sexually themed online community. Although the community is rooted in computing culture (i.e., a multi-user domain) and is not sexual in scope or purpose, sex talk is prevalent and persistent in the corpus. Seventy-five conversational logs, each covering 24 hours of conversations, are analysed using qualitative sociolinguistic discourse analysis.

The findings demonstrate that the participants engage in sexual conversations (e.g., automated sexual commands, joking, self-disclosure, cybersex) that make use of the spatial and technical resources available to them, and that there are clear boundaries in the language used for sexual conversations. Sexual conversations are found across virtual spaces in this community and are based on in-group talk, often to create social belonging and shared meaning between speakers. While participants sometimes challenge existing social discourses of sexuality when adopting group-specific norms and narrative styles, they often enact them, particularly in regards to heteronormative heterosexuality and gender.

This thesis proposes that sex and sexuality can be seen in relation to the *social comprehensive*, which includes individual agency, social infrastructure, everyday experience, discourses, and shared meaning. The framework underscores the relevance of sex and its relationship to the larger social world in spontaneous and everyday conversations about sex and desire from an online community. It contributes to our limited scholarly knowledge of how people discuss sex, allowing for the examination of the discourses that emerge in and through speakers' words, the stories that they tell, how they are told, and to whom.

For Harold and Betty Kennedy, and Elgin Mykietiak

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	9
<b>LIST OF EXAMPLES</b>	10
<b>LIST OF TABLES</b>	12
<b>LIST OF FIGURES</b>	13
<b>LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS</b>	14
<b>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION</b>	15
1.0 INTRODUCTION	15
1.1 THEORY AND METHODOLOGY	17
1.1.1 COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE	18
1.2 THE STUDY	20
1.3 CHAPTER SUMMARIES	24
<b>PART 1: SOCIAL THEORY</b>	28
<b>CHAPTER 2: SOCIOLOGICAL AND QUEER PERSPECTIVES OF SEXUALITY</b>	29
2.0 INTRODUCTION	29
2.1 GENDER AND SEXUALITY	31
2.1.1 HEGEMONIC GENDER AND SEXUALITY	33
2.1.2 POWER AND POLITICS	35
2.2 SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO SEXUALITY	38
2.2.1 CLASSICAL SOCIOLOGY (C. 19 <sup>TH</sup> CENTURY)	39
2.2.2 POST-WAR SOCIOLOGY (1945-ONWARDS)	42
2.2.3 SYMBOLIC INTERACTION	46
2.2.4 FEMINISM AND SEXUALITY	50
2.2.4.1 FEMINIST SOCIOLOGY	51
2.2.4.2 CRITICAL HETEROSEXUALITY	54
2.3 QUEER THEORY	57
2.3.1 QUEER THEORY AND THE POLITICS OF SEX	60
2.3.2 PRACTICING QUEER THEORY	62
2.4 QUEER SOCIOLOGY	65
2.5 CONCLUSION	68

<b>CHAPTER 3: THEORISING SEXUALITY</b>	<b>70</b>
3.0 INTRODUCTION	70
3.1 QUEERING THE SOCIAL WORLD	72
3.2 MAKING SENSE OF SEXUALITY	73
3.2.1 THE SOCIAL COMPREHENSIVE	76
3.2.2 QUEER SOCIOLOGY AND THE UN/MARKED	79
3.2.3 SOCIAL NORMS	81
3.2.4 LAWS AND NORMS	83
3.3 HETERONORMATIVITY	85
3.3.1 THE GOOD SEXUAL CITIZEN (AND MARRIAGE)	87
3.4 IDENTITY	94
3.4.1 ENABLING AND CONSTRAINING	94
3.4.2 SIGNIFICATION	97
3.5 TRANSGRESSION	101
3.6 CONCLUSION	104
<b>PART 2: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE</b>	<b>107</b>
<b>CHAPTER 4: SPEAKING AND TYPING DESIRE</b>	<b>108</b>
4.0 INTRODUCTION	108
4.1 LANGUAGE AND SEXUALITY	110
4.1.1 NONNORMATIVE SEXUAL IDENTITY	111
4.1.2 SEXED BODIES	114
4.1.3 HETERONORMATIVITY IN CONVERSATION	115
4.1.4 DESIRE IN LANGUAGE	119
4.1.5 SEXUAL COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE IN ONLINE RESEARCH	121
4.2 ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES OF ‘ONLINE SEXUAL ACTIVITIES’	123
4.2.1 THE HISTORY OF SEX AND TECHNOLOGY	124
4.2.2 THE ONLINE SEX ECONOMY	125
4.2.3 CENTRALISING THE WEB	127
4.2.4 PARTICIPATION	128
4.2.5 ADDICTION AND COMPULSIVE USE	129
4.2.6 SEX ONLINE AND HIGH-RISK SEX OFFLINE	132
4.2.7 YOUTH	133
4.2.8 DEMARGINALISATION	134
4.2.9 CYBERPORN	137
4.2.10 SEX BLOGGING	139
4.3 CONCLUSION	141
<b>CHAPTER 5: WALFORD</b>	<b>143</b>
5.0 INTRODUCTION	143
5.1 SITUATING WALFORD	144
5.1.1 JOINING WALFORD	

5.1.2 CONVERSING AND THE COMMAND SYSTEM	148
5.1.3 SETTINGS	149
5.1.3.1 DIRECT COMMUNICATION	151
5.1.3.1.1 FRIEND LISTS	151
5.1.3.1.2 NON-FRIEND LISTS	153
5.1.3.2 LOCAL COMMUNICATION	153
5.1.4 AUTOMATED COMMANDS	154
5.1.5 PRIVACY	155
5.2 METHODOLOGY	156
5.2.1 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS	163
5.2.2 PROTECTIONS TAKEN	167
5.2.2.1 INFORMED CONSENT	167
5.2.2.2 SITE PSEUDONYM	168
5.2.2.3 USERNAMES	169
5.2.2.4 IDENTIFYING INFORMATION	171
5.3 CONCLUSION	172
<b>CHAPTER 6: THE NORMS OF SEX TALK</b>	<b>174</b>
6.0 INTRODUCTION	174
6.1 SEXUAL NORMS IN CONVERSATION	176
6.1.1 CONCRETE SEXUAL NORMS	176
6.1.2 POLICING NORMS	177
6.2 THE USES OF SEX TALK	182
6.2.1 AUTOMATED SEXUAL COMMANDS	183
6.2.1.1 KISSING BANDITS	184
6.2.1.2 AUTOMATED SHAGGING	188
6.2.1.3 FROM KISSING TO SEX	191
6.2.2 SEXUAL JOKING	193
6.2.3 SHARING SEX LINKS	197
6.2.4 WEBCAMS AND WEBCAMMING	201
6.2.4.1 GENDER ON DISPLAY	201
6.2.4.2 SEXUAL DISPLAY IN CAMMING	203
6.2.4.3 CAMWHORES	207
6.2.5 SEXUAL SELF-DISCLOSURE	210
6.3 CONCLUSION	211
<b>CHAPTER 7: CYBERSEX</b>	<b>213</b>
7.0 INTRODUCTION	213
7.1 CYBERSEX AS A COMMUNICATIVE ACT	215
7.1.1 POTENTIALS OF CYBERSEX	216
7.2 CYBERSEX NARRATIVES IN INTERACTION	218
7.2.1 NARRATIVES	219
7.2.2 DYADIC AND HETERONORMATIVE	223
7.2.3 SPACE	225
7.2.4 STYLE SHIFTS	231
7.2.5 MUTUALITY	234

7.2.6 INTIMACY	237
7.3 CONCLUSION	244
<b>CHAPTER 8: HETERONORMATIVITY AND GEEK CULTURE</b>	<b>247</b>
8.0 INTRODUCTION	247
8.1 MALE/FEMALE/NEUTER: INDEXING GENDER	248
8.2 ‘I’M NOT GAY’: INDEXING HETEROSEXUALITY	251
8.3 GEEKS AND NERDS	259
8.3.1 GEEKS AND NERDS IN WALFORD	262
8.3.2 WOMEN AND GEEKS	268
8.4 CONCLUSION	272
<b>CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION</b>	<b>274</b>
9.0 INTRODUCTION	274
9.1 CHAPTER SUMMARIES	277
9.2 MAIN CONTRIBUTIONS	282
9.3 FUTURE WORK	284
<b>APPENDIX: CONSENT FORM</b>	<b>286</b>
<b>GLOSSARY</b>	<b>288</b>
<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>297</b>
<b>WEBSITES MENTIONED</b>	<b>321</b>



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# LIST OF EXAMPLES

## EXAMPLES IN CHAPTER 6

6.1 SOCIAL NORMS 1	178
6.2 SOCIAL NORMS 2	181
6.3 AUTOMATED SNOGGING 1	184
6.4 AUTOMATED SNOGGING 2	186
6.5 AUTOMATED SNOGGING 3	187
6.6 AUTOMATED SHAGGING 1	188
6.7 AUTOMATED SHAGGING 2	189
6.8 SNOGGING TO SHAGGING	191
6.9 SEXUAL JOKING 1	195
6.10 SEXUAL JOKING 2	195
6.11 SEX LINKS	197
6.12 CAMMING 1	204
6.13 CAMMING 2	205
6.14 CAMMING 3	206
6.15 CAMWHORES	207

## EXAMPLES IN CHAPTER 7

7.1 CYBERSEX NARRATIVES	221
7.2 SPACE 1	226
7.3 SPACE 2	228
7.4 MUTUALITY	234
7.5 INTIMACY 1	237
7.6 INTIMACY 2	240
7.7 INTIMACY 3	243

## EXAMPLES IN CHAPTER 8

8.1 INDEXING HETEROSEXUALITY 1	250
8.2 INDEXING HETEROSEXUALITY 2	254
8.3 INDEXING HETEROSEXUALITY 3	256
8.4 INDEXING HETEROSEXUALITY 4	257
8.5 INDEXING HETEROSEXUALITY 5	258

8.6 GEEKS AND NERDS 1	264
8.7 GEEKS AND NERDS 2	267
8.8 WOMEN AND GEEKS	270

## LIST OF TABLES

5.1 BASIC COMMUNICATION COMMANDS	150
5.2 FRIEND LISTS	152
5.3 DECODING A CHATLOG TURN	161

## **LIST OF FIGURES**

5.1 A LOCAL CONVERSATION TURN	160
5.2 A DIRECT CONVERSATION TURN	160

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- AIDS** – Acquired immune deficiency syndrome  
**BBS** – Bulletin board systems  
**BDSM** – Bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, sadism and masochism  
**BTDT** – Been there, done that  
**DSM** – Diagnostic Statistical Manual  
**FLIST** – Friend list  
**HCI** – Human-computer interaction  
**HIV** – Human immunodeficiency virus  
**IM** – Instant messaging  
**IMC** – the Interaction, Media and Communication research group in the School of Electronic Engineering and Computer Science at Queen Mary, University of London  
**IRC** – Internet relay chat  
**LGBT** – Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender  
**LGBTQ** – Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer; may also include those who questioning their sexuality, asexual, or intersex  
**MMORPG** – Massively multi-player role-playing game  
**MOO** – Multi-user domain/dungeon object oriented  
**MSM** – Men who have sex with men  
**MUD** – Multi-user domain or dungeon  
**OSA** – Online sexual activities  
**SO** – Significant other  
**XML** – Extensible mark-up language

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

We know very little about sex in interaction, and even less about the language of sex and desire; how people communicate about sex, the discourses that emerge in and through their words, the stories that they tell, how they are told, and to whom are important but under-emphasised in contemporary discourses of sex in society and culture. In this thesis I focus specifically on answering some of the questions that emerge regarding online sex talk. There has been a great deal of research on sex in relation to the web, and it has been examined using multiple disciplines, theories, and methods. In particular, there has been an emphasis on the *potential* effects of sex and the web (see Chapter 7). Sex online has been positioned in the literature simultaneously as having equalising, demarginalising, democratic, liberating, and empowering potential (e.g., Attwood 2009a; Campbell 2004; Doring 2000; McKenna et al. 2001; Wysocki 1998), and the potential to be damaging, exploitative, compulsive, addictive, and anti-social (e.g., Carnes 2003; Cooper et al. 2000; Daneback et al. 2005; Delmonico and Carnes 1999; Putnam 2000). In addition, much of the research in the field relies on secondary data, including discussions with

participants about their online sexual conversations (Attwood 2009a; Ferree 2003; Schneider 2000), surveys in which participants answer questions regarding their online sexual practices (including their conversations) (Cooper et al. 2004; Daneback et al. 2005; Daneback et al. 2007; Ross et al. 2004), and participant observation in which the researcher is a participant in the community that they study (e.g., Mowlabocus 2008; Nip 2004a, 2004b; Wysocki 1998).

The importance of sex must be underscored. While it is a personal topic, I argue throughout this thesis that it must be understood in relation to the social world, and to what I refer to as the *social comprehensive*. When people talk about sex or sex-related issues, they also communicate something of their desires, values, stances, and beliefs. However, those personal aspects of sexuality are situated within social understandings of sex, desire, and the erotic. They are also based on shared meanings between conversational participants, the discourses that emerge from the speakers narratives, and the everyday experiences in which these naturally occurring conversations occur.

The social and socio-political aspects of sexuality provide a necessary context for the examination of sex in interaction and conversation. Sex offers sets of issues that all sides of the political spectrum mobilise around regularly. Public and state involvement in sexual cultures is well-documented (e.g., Cahill and Tobias 2006; Carabine 1996; Warner 1999b; White 2006) and debates about same-sex marriage are at the forefront of many Western countries in the contemporary period. Laws and norms continue to promote heteronormativity and problematise other types of sexual expression, and I argue that conversations about sex must take this contextualising information into account.

Yet, at the same time that sex stirs moral panics about who people desire and how they express their desire, there is increasing interest in exposing society as ‘pornified’ (Paasonen et al. 2007) or ‘raunched’ (Levy 2005). Examples of this could include sexual displays in advertisements (Gill 2009), the mainstreaming of pole dancing as sport (Holland and Attwood 2009), and the proliferation of online pornography (Hardy 2008). The expansion of sexuality and pornography into mainstream culture and the economic success of online pornography shows a schism between pornographic media, the cultural artefacts of sexuality, and the ways in which sexuality is regarded when tied to individuals and the social landscape. The sexual permissiveness that permeates cultural artefacts is



heteronormative, and it is rarely extended into individuals' everyday sexual expression.

In order to understand how people communicate about sex, I analyse conversations from a corpus of online conversations that occurred in real-time among participants in various rooms in a chatsite. I adopt a sociolinguistic approach to the data that is qualitative and discursive to explore how these conversations can be understood using sociolinguistic frameworks, feminist sociology, and queer theory. I further examine the conversations placing them within the social context, attentive to the social comprehensive, or the interleaving of the individuals, social structures/institutions, shared social meanings, discourses, and everyday experiences, within which they are situated.

## **1.1 THEORY AND METHODOLOGY**

Social theory provides a framework for understanding society and interaction within it. The subject matter of this thesis is sex in interaction and society and the adoption of any social theory would need to take these elements into account. Although there are numerous perspectives that one could adopt, of which each would have a different outcome on the focus of the analysis, I bridge together two theoretical perspectives in this thesis (and take them both further in the process).

Sociology is rooted in understanding the material realities of women's and men's lives, and the relationship between individual experiences and social structures and institutions. In terms of research on sexuality, the examination of critical heterosexuality within feminist sociology has made profound contributions to the understanding of heterosexuality as an institution and its relationship to and in the lives of women and men. Feminist sociology is also helpful in understanding the importance of everyday, gendered experiences in the construction of sexualities, and the role that these experiences and institutions play in the lives of people and the organisation of the social world.

In addition to feminist sociology, queer theory perspectives can offer a great deal to the study of sexual conversations. Queer theory is a theoretical

framework that has tended to deal with social issues surrounding sexuality through the use of literary and textual analysis (e.g., Butler 1999; de Lauretis 1994; Fuss 1991; Halberstam 2005; Sedgwick 2008). Queer theory emphasises the deconstruction of categories and encourages an analysis that dismantles the ways in which normative sexuality, and sexual expectations, permeate the social, personal, political, and cultural.

The combination of these two approaches means that the importance of the social context of the speakers' conversations is not de-centralised. In addition, the main themes of queer theory such as identity and sexual citizenship, heteronormativity, and transgression remain salient. I also use concepts such as *appropriate gender*, *appropriate sexuality*, *gay assimilation*, and *social signifiers*, all of which I define based on this combined theoretical approach. In Chapters 2 and 3 I argue that sociological analyses of sex and queer theory positions, despite differing emphases, are quite similar and can be effectively and usefully combined in order to understand the social. I work to bring the central contributions of both approaches together in a new way in Part 1, and use that theoretical perspective for understanding and analysing the conversations in Part 2. I emphasise the social aspects of sexuality and conduct an empirical analysis of how it plays out in the material realities of interaction, thus ensuring that this theoretical approach is well-suited for better understanding the importance of sexuality as an element of the social.

### **1.1.1 COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE**

In this work I examine the discourses of sexuality that emerge in real-time online conversations about sex in a nonsexual community of practice. The adoption of the *community of practice* approach is a favoured approach in feminist sociolinguistics and I argue here that a version of it has been adopted in most studies of sex on the web as well. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992), following Lave and Wenger (1991), developed the community of practice approach as a framework for examining nonnormative difference (e.g., gender) in communication and interaction. This perspective views difference not as a

universal category that is static across space and time but as variable and dependent upon the different communities with which people engage. Thus, gender and other elements of difference (e.g., race, ethnicity, class, religion, disability, sexuality, etc.) are examined in the context of a specific community.

Many studies of online sexuality have focused on sexual communities, such as LGBTQ communities or other sexual subcultures (e.g., Campbell 2004; King in press; McKenna et al. 2001; Mowlabocus 2008; Munt et al. 2002), and while this approach can be informative about sexuality in these contexts, it is also specific to those communities of practice, even if the researchers did not intend for this to be the case. While studying how sex is discussed in sexual communities of practice can tell us a great deal about sexual communities, sex, and communication, those findings are framed within the communities of people brought together by a shared sexual interest, practice, or proclivity. When a shared sexuality is the basis for the community, sexual communication will be found because it is common ground for the participants. However, studying sex in *nonsexual communities of practice* can bring about its own set of complications. For example, people may not necessarily discuss sex if that is not the purpose of engagement and thus do not necessarily anticipate it as either an acceptable topic of conversation or as one that will allow them to create shared meaning within a single discourse. Furthermore, if they do discuss sex (and if my sample is indicative, people do talk about sex outside of sexual communities of practice) there is no telling of the immediate context situating their conversations about sex.

Although there has been research on specific sexual communities and subcultures on- and offline (e.g., Faderman 1992; Kulick 1998; McKenna and Bargh 1998; Mehra et al. 2004; Mowlabocus 2008; Nanda 1998; Nip 2004a; Wilkinson 2009), including research in sociolinguistics (e.g., Baker 2002; Hall 1997; Leap 1996, 1997, 2002; Moonwomon-Baird 1997, 2000) there has been far less research on how people *talk* about sex online (e.g., Campbell 2004; del-Teso-Craviotto 2006; King in press). Furthermore, it could be argued that the literature on online sex conversations has used sexual communities of practice (see Section 4.1.5) and not more ‘comprehensive’ communities.

There are a number of reasons why it has been difficult to access sexual conversations, on- or offline, for sociolinguistic examination. For example, most studies of synchronous or real-time conversations about sex require the

researcher's presence. In terms of online research, this has meant that often the researcher needs to be present in a specific room of a chatsite, gathering data either as an active participant in the conversation or as a lurker (non-active participant). While this has worked for some researchers (e.g., del-Teso-Craviotto 2006; Hudson and Bruckman 2004; King in press; Mowlabocus 2008), it is not an ideal scenario for research because it often raises serious ethical concerns (e.g., informed consent, data collection, anonymity, naturalness of conversation) and the data is limited to the conversations for which the researcher was present (I consider these issues in Chapter 5).

## 1.2 THE STUDY

My empirical research consists of a qualitative analysis of conversations from 75 chatlogs over an 18-month period in 2003 and 2004.<sup>1</sup> I am not a member of the community, nor was I present in the chatsite where the conversations occurred. The Department of Computer Science (now the School of Electronic Engineering and Computer Science) at Queen Mary, University of London had access to the complete chatlogs from a multi-user-domain (MUD) over this period, which is discussed in detail in Chapter 5. Participants gave their ongoing informed consent each time they connected to the community, which is referred to as Walford. A one-way hashing algorithm replaced the usernames in the chatlogs automatically and prior to contact any researchers (myself or other researchers using the chatlogs) had with the logs. As a result of these chatlogs, I had access to all conversations from the MUD during this time period: those in public spaces as well as those in private rooms. I did not use any direct quotes nor refer to any content that could be used to identify the participants. The complete list of precautions I took is in Section 5.2.2 and the form that was approved by the Queen Mary, University of London Ethics Committee is included in the Appendix. The total size of the corpus from where these conversations are drawn is approximately one million conversational turns, or almost one Terabyte of data.

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<sup>1</sup> In the conclusion of this thesis (Chapter 9) I discuss how quantitative methods can be

The study focuses on online sexual conversations and the discursive conventions governing them to discuss the norms of sexuality and sexual expression in this online setting and in the larger social world. In order to understand how people talk about sex, I argue that it is essential to also understand the sociocultural elements that shape what is said, to whom, where, how, and in what contexts. My analysis is indebted to online research of sexuality and sociolinguistic work, but the theoretical contributions of this work advance a feminist and sociological version of queer theory. I discuss sociological contributions to sexuality as well as those from queer theory in Chapter 2, and in Chapter 3 I move forward a position that focuses on the social dimensions of identity and sexual citizenships, heteronormativity, and transgression. This theory advances the empirical contributions by situating them within a particular framework and nesting body of theory.

The data demonstrate that sexual dialogue is much richer than what has been found in other examinations of online sex talk, including cybersex (which is a textual representation of erotic activities taking place in multi-party conversations). For example, participants use complex privacy settings to manage their conversations and engage in certain kinds of sex talk in particular settings. In this context, the various types of sexual conversations are mediated through different communication commands indigenous to online interaction. For example, in Chapter 7 I argue that in the chatlogs I examined cybersex conversations occur between participants who are currently present in the same virtual room.

More than their use of conversational settings for their different kinds of sex conversations, a striking finding is how the narratives of sex conversations reconfirm hegemonic gender, sexual hierarchies and positions, and heteronormative sexual ideals in a nonsexual community of practice. Participants counter hegemonic and heteronormative sexuality in some ways: discussing sex online and partaking in cybersex are two of these. However, they also reconfirm notions of good sexual citizenship (Section 3.3.1), and the consequences of sexual transgression (Section 3.5). Sexual communication, even in nonsexual communities of practice such as Walford, can be a way to forge a group identity within the existing norms of a community. The participants' conversations are heterosexual in scope, topic, and intention, and concurrently promote and

privilege a dominant heterosexual lifestyle. However, their conversations counter some of the research on sexuality in online settings. At the same time as they are heteronormative, the participants' behaviour cannot be seen as antisocial.

The chat forum that is discussed in the empirical chapters of this thesis could be referred to as overwhelmingly heterosexual. The sexual conversations that take place are of heterosexual content, and at many times represent hegemonic heterosexuality, or heteronormativity. Therefore, one might question why I have chosen to write a great deal about nonnormative or queer sexualities. As I noted earlier, there has been an impressive body of research from within queer theory that has been interested in the institutionalisation of heterosexuality. Feminist sociologists such as Ingraham (1996, 2005, 2008), Jackson (1996, 2005, 2006), Kitzinger (2005a, 2005b, 2009) and Richardson (2000, 2005, 2007) have developed theoretical positions that are partially indebted to queer theory, although they may not necessarily align themselves with such an approach. It can be argued that queer theory and explorations of nonheteronormative sexualities offer profound insights into social inequality and the ways in which the sexuality is part of the social world. Furthermore, queer theory, and the desires, experiences, and practices of sexual minorities provide a great deal of insight into the social norms of sexuality.

Norms and ideals are articulated more readily in the moments when they are disputed or lost than in the instances when they are adopted or advocated. This will be made more evident when I review the literature on social norms in Sections 3.2.3 and 3.2.4. Queer theory provides an effective framework for critiquing heterosexual performance. In addition, I would suggest that it is problematic to assume that sexualities are separate from each other. Sexualities are constructed in relation to each other, and any attempt to theorise a single sexuality must be contextualised more broadly within larger discussions of sexuality; there are no single, fixed, solitary sexualities in the social world. It would be difficult, if not a near impossible task, to attempt to contribute to the social aspects of sexuality without recognising the dimensions that frame the social aspects of sexuality.

Thus, the data allows me to: (1) articulate the connections between heteronormativity, sexual identity and citizenship, and transgression. I then link these to notions of group belonging and identity with respect to sociolinguistic

paradigms. In the empirical chapters of this thesis, I then demonstrate how these issues play out in online conversations about sex and sexuality; (2) use the empirical results of my study of conversations to demonstrate the breadth of sex talk and its purposes in a nonsexual community of practice; (3) make contributions to feminist sociology and queer theory, sociolinguistics, and the social sciences and online research more generally in respect to the empirical findings of sex talk conversations which include the uses of sex talk, the narrative elements of cybersex, and the ways in which geek identities can reconfirm and conform to dominant gender and heteronormative positions.

Some of the major findings of this thesis include: (1) an elaboration of the connections between sociology of sexuality and queer theory, including an argument of how the two perspectives can be linked theoretically and in such a way that it can be adopted for empirical research; (2) a discussion of how sex is social in the theory section of this thesis (Part 1) as well as in the empirical section when analysing sexual conversations from the Walford corpus (Part 2); (3) evidence that there are norms and conventions in sex talk and that sex talk serves specific purposes within a community which provides further evidence of the social aspects of sex; (4) evidence that online sex talk, including cybersex, can be used for belonging in a community, demonstrating a knowledge and adeptness at interacting in ways that push the boundaries of acceptability in the community without subverting the norms and conventions that exist; (5) a definite narrative structure of cybersex which is supported by the empirical evidence gathered from naturally occurring cybersex conversations; (6) an argument that geek identity can sometimes reconfirm hegemonic ideas of masculinity and heteronormativity.

## 1.3 CHAPTER SUMMARIES

**Part 1** focuses on the theoretical perspective that drives this work, and **Part 2** emphasises the empirical study, although it is motivated by the theoretical content and contributions of Part 1. **Chapter 2** is a literature review of the social theories of sexuality within the fields of sociology and queer theory, and provides the foundation for the theoretical perspective that is described in Chapter 3 and is adopted in the analytical chapters of the thesis. This chapter focuses on the ways in which sociologists and queer theorists have examined sexuality. Although both perspectives can be understood as adopting anti-essentialist views of sexuality, whereby sexuality is envisioned as socially constructed and acted upon rather than a fixed and inherent part of the self, they have reached these positions from diverse paths.

I operationalise the terms gender and sexuality at the beginning of the chapter because they are used in deliberate ways throughout the thesis and in particular discuss *appropriate gender* and *sexuality*. Following this, I review sociology's contributions to the field of sexuality. I start by discussing classical sociology and move through various traditions of the discipline including Post-War (1945-onwards) sociology, ethnomethodology, deviance models, and feminist sociology. After situating this discussion, I then move into a discussion of the contributions of queer theory in order to demonstrate that although these perspectives are viewed as different, that they are quite complementary and that queer theory may offer additional insights to sociological perspectives of sexuality. Following this discussion, I discuss sociological projects that have adopted queer theory positions. This chapter lays the theoretical foundation for Chapter 3 as well as the other chapters of the thesis.

In **Chapter 3** I discuss social norms and develop a version of queer sociology that is attentive to the contributions of sociology and the strengths that feminist sociology in particular can add to queer theory, particularly in regards to the dimensions of social life. I argue that there are five dimensions to social life which together comprise what I refer to as the social comprehensive: individuals and their agency, structure and institutions, shared social meaning, discourse, and everyday experiences. I frame my discussion within these dimensions. I then



discuss three key areas where queer theory has offered a great deal of insight: heteronormativity, identity, and transgression. I argue that heteronormativity frames contemporary ideals and aspirations regarding dominant perspectives of sexuality and that identity may be better examined if we discuss sexual citizenship, and the meanings that are ascribed to belonging as a sexual citizen. The notion of the sexual citizenship and identity, as well as the pervasiveness of heteronormativity provide a way to understand sexual conversations in Walford and a framework for understanding sexual transgression within both sexual and nonsexual communities of practice.

**Chapter 4** is the first empirical chapter and where I review the relevant literature on sex and sexuality within sociolinguistics as well as in online settings. While there have been some sociolinguistic examinations of sexuality that use data from online conversations (e.g., del-Teso-Craviotto 2006, King in press), this is an emerging field of research. Therefore, I also show how sex has been researched in online settings. I note that the sociolinguistic and interactional sociology research in the field can be divided into four main categories: nonnormative sexual identity, sexed bodies, heterosexuality in conversation, and desire in language.

Although the field of literature on language and sexuality, particularly that which uses online corpora, is relatively recent, there is a large body of research which examines sex in online settings. It is possible to divide this literature into 10 broad categories and I discuss all of these areas, many of which overlap with each other. Although this literature is broad and encompasses many disciplines, it provides a context for the understanding of sex online. A common theme that emerges is that despite the breadth of literature, sex in online environments is rarely tied to the social except in relation to its potential effects (which vary depending upon the perspective of the researcher). I tie my later discussion of cybersex (Chapter 7) to this point.

In **Chapter 5** I discuss Walford, the chatsite used for the empirical work in this thesis. I describe it as a *talker-style MUD*, multi-user domain, in which many users are simultaneously connected to the site and travel through the virtual terrain of the MUD, talking to each other in real-time. I explain how these MUD conversations, similar to real-time conversations in other MUDs, are not indexed by search engines and can only be seen by those currently logged into the site, and

who are additionally either present in the same room as the speaker or listed as a recipient to the communication. The Walford chatlogs are not publicly available. The conversations in Walford were recorded as corpora for linguistic analysis as part of an agreement between Walford and the Department of Computer Science at Queen Mary, University of London. The chatlogs are stored on a secured server, behind a firewall, and only those conducting research on the chatlogs have access to them via their personal login to the Department's network system.

I also explain the process of joining Walford as well as the communication settings and commands that are available to participants in the site. In addition to this discussion, I note the ethical considerations faced in this research and the precautions that I have undertaken in order to minimise the participants' risks and uphold the rigor of the study, such as the process of gaining ongoing informed consent by the participants, as well as protecting the anonymity of the site and the participants.

**Chapter 6** is the first of three analytical chapters and articulates the existence of social norms in Walford which provides the basis for the following discussion on the uses of sex talk in this community. I use the framework I discussed in Chapter 3, referring to literature on sexual norms, heteronormativity, and transgression. I note specific types of sex talk in Walford, including: automated commands, sexual joking, sexual link sharing, the discussion of sexual webcamming, and sexual self-disclosure. Although these are distinct types of sexual conversations, there are striking similarities in the sexual discourses which Walford participants develop. In addition, these norms, while often heterosexual and heteronormative, are not necessarily grounded in offline social norms. Rather, I argue in Chapter 6 that the use of social and group-specific norms and conventions in sex talk allows the participants to develop a sense of mutual understanding, belonging, and a shared social reality.

Cybersex conversations are the focus of **Chapter 7**. I emphasise the ways in which *potential* is maximised in many of the discussions of cybersex in the literature, as a way of understanding cybersex in relation to the social world. Once I situate cybersex and argue in support of viewing it as interaction and communication, I suggest that cybersex involves a shared narrative that is developed by the participants. In addition to the existence of narratives in cybersex, I note that there are specific elements present in this type of sex talk in

Walford and discuss the ways in which cybersex conversations are grounded in the material realities of the social world and social comprehensive. Heteronormativity features in cybersex conversations in my corpus, including a tendency towards dyadic, or two-party, cybersex, as well as space, shifts in speaker narrative style, mutuality, and intimacy.

In **Chapter 8** I draw upon the theoretical discussion in Chapters 2 and 3 to focus on the intersection between dominant heteronormative discourses and geek or nerd social labels and identities. Walford participants index their gender and sexuality in conversations that are not sexual in nature. I argue that there are three ways for participants to index heterosexuality in conversation: references to their sexuality, demonstrations of sexual interest and preference, and renunciations of homosexuality. While the first two are general and could be used by members of other sexual categories to index their sexuality, the third would need to be differently indexed to be applicable to other sexual groups. The presence of geeks and nerds in academic literature is noted and I discuss how Walford participants position themselves (and others) as geeks. I argue that geek identity in Walford is linked to a precarious masculinity and that this leads those who are geeks to index their heterosexuality as a strategy for transcending the label of geek even momentarily.

# **PART 1**

## **SOCIAL THEORY**

## **SOCIOLOGICAL AND QUEER PERSPECTIVES OF SEXUALITY**

### **2.0 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter focuses on the ways in which sociologists and queer theorists have examined sexuality. Although both perspectives can be understood as adopting anti-essentialist views of sexuality, whereby sexuality is envisioned as socially constructed and acted upon rather than as a fixed and inherent part of the self, they have reached these positions from diverse paths. Sociologists have focused on the lived experiences of people in various sexual categories, and, more recently, as a result of queer theory positions, on issues of sexual citizenship and heteronormativity (e.g., Bell and Binnie 2000; Carabine 1996; Evans 1993; Jackson 1996, 2005, 2006; Richardson 2000, 2005; Seidman 2005; Wiegman 2006). Queer theorists have tended to adopt positions drawing from a combination of poststructuralist, feminist, and gay and lesbian theories, and some illustrate their arguments through literary and film analysis (e.g., Butler 1999; de Laetis 1994; Garber 2000; Halberstam 2005; Sedgwick 2008). While queer theory positions are unified in that they are different articulations of the same theoretical paradigm (a point I will elaborate on), sociologists have employed a variety of

frameworks for studying sexuality. In doing so, sociologists have often formulated their arguments of the social nature of sexuality through their empirical studies.

This chapter begins with the operationalisation of *gender* and *sexuality* (Section 2.1). Throughout this thesis I use these concepts in deliberate ways, and thus I establish how I will be conceptualising them. Following that discussion, I move into a review of the sociological literature of sexuality (Section 2.2). I provide a historical context, commencing with an overview of sexuality in classical sociology (Section 2.2.1), moving into post-World War II discussions (Section 2.2.2), and then to the work from the 1960s onwards (Sections 2.2.3 and 2.2.4). Sociological research on sexuality has flourished during the last 50 years and this is the period I focus on, exploring the contributions of diverse scholars working from various sociological traditions including ethnomethodology, deviance models, and labelling theory. Feminists have made profound contributions to the understanding of the sociology of sexuality, and I discuss twentieth century and more recent feminist sociological research of sexuality and, particularly, its ties to gender (Section 2.2.4). After situating the history of the sociology of sexuality, I discuss queer theory to elucidate how taking on the issues and concerns of queer theory can strengthen a sociological approach to sexuality (Section 2.3). I then focus the discussion on sociologists' explicit engagement with queer theory (Section 2.4). In addition, in this chapter and in Chapter 3, I demonstrate that although sociological and queer theories may seem radically different, many of these differences can be viewed as broadly stylistic, varying according to disciplinary objectives and not necessarily operational positions. The results of this combined theoretical approach, which will be further articulated in the next chapter, will be displayed in the empirical chapters of this thesis which incorporate sociolinguistic methodologies to examine naturally occurring conversations about sex.

## 2.1 GENDER AND SEXUALITY

Throughout this chapter I refer to the concepts of *gender* and *sexuality*, which are relevant to both the theoretical and empirical examinations I make in this work. Although gender and sexuality are distinct, drawing from the feminist and queer theories underpinning this thesis they are inextricably connected (cf. Wilton 1996). The understanding of the concepts must be done in relation to each other.

*Gender* refers to the embodiment of the social meanings ascribed to *being* a ‘man’ or ‘woman’ and to *doing* ‘femininity’ or ‘masculinity’ (West and Zimmerman 1987). *Sexuality*, by which I mean sexual identifications or the sexual directions in which a person orients, is tacit in the default gender system. Within the default gender system, which is often assumed ‘normal’, the convention is that people are expected either to be born boys who become men that embody masculinity or girls who become women that embody femininity. Heterosexuality is both anticipated and expected in the standard gender system; it is presumed unless lost or disavowed.

Although Richardson (2007) asserts that because gender and sexuality are separate it may be possible to extract gender from sexuality, I would suggest that heterosexuality is implicit in the default gender system and the heterosexual unit, with a man who does ‘masculinity’ and labelled a boy at birth and a woman who does ‘femininity’ and labelled a girl at birth, is considered the natural, complete, and complementary union (West and Zimmerman 1987). Schilt and Westbrook (2009) assert that heterosexuality demands both this binary and trajectory of gender. The association of gender with heterosexuality led Wittig (1981) to argue that gender and sexuality are connected to such an extent that lesbians are not ‘women’ because the current gender system ties being a woman to heterosexuality (and the gender oppression she sees as inherent in heterosexuality). Another perspective is that offered by Ingraham (1996) who suggests that gender and sexuality are linked to such a degree that it is more appropriate to refer to gender as ‘heterogender’ because to do gender in an appropriate way often means to do it as a heterosexual.

*Appropriate gender* refers to the cultural prescriptive that people classified as men are masculine and those who are classified as women are feminine. Gender nonconformity or *inappropriate gender* then refers to those practices or identities that transgress these norms. Another way to understand the connection between appropriate gender and sexuality or sexual desire is through Butler's work on what she refers to as 'intelligible genders'.

'Intelligible' genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire. In other words, the spectres of discontinuity and incoherence, themselves thinkable only in relation to existing norms of continuity and coherence, are constantly prohibited and produced by the very laws that seek to establish causal or expressive lines of connection among biological sex, culturally constituted genders, and the 'expression' or 'effect' of both in the manifestation of sexual desire through sexual practice (Butler 1999:23).

Butler's argument here is that those genders that are instantiated and comprehended easily have a social alignment with biological sex, gender, and sexuality. It is this alignment that influences how all other configurations of biological sex, gender, and desire are defined by society. Yet, the simplistic and linear alignment, which treats one relationship between biological sex, gender, and desire as normal, is constructed or constituted in laws and norms. Butler's view recognises the importance of heterosexual desire in 'intelligible' or hegemonic gender.

Sexual practices (i.e., *sex*) and desires lead to sexual identities or positions of orientation that affect the ways in which people are viewed and view the world (cf. Ahmed 2006). Although the standard way of defining sexuality is in relation to the subjects one desires (i.e., framing sexuality in terms of heterosexuality, bisexuality, and homosexuality), sometimes people engage in sexual practices that seem incongruous to the ways they identify or align their sexuality, and they may do so without feeling conflicted (Califia 2000); alternatively, people may define their sexuality based solely on their sexual practices (Califia 2002). *Social labels*,<sup>2</sup> or the identities that others ascribe to people, can be in conflict with both identities, or how people define themselves, and their practices. An example of this might be women who identify as lesbian who have sex with men who identify

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<sup>2</sup> I also use the term 'social signifiers'.



as gay; in this instance a particular sexual practice might be more salient than the body one does it with (Califia 2000). Another example of this may include homosexuality in institutional settings where access to heterosexual sex may be limited, such as prisons, which are single-sex and where there is limited sexual access to those outside of the environment; people in these settings may then engage in sexual and/or romantic same-sex relationships whilst retaining their heterosexual identity. Because sexual practices or rearrangements do not necessarily reflect sexual identification, some researchers now use the phrase ‘men who have sex with men’ (MSM) rather than ‘gay’ in their studies (e.g., Bowen 2005; Ross et al. 2004; Valleroy et al. 2000). The use of this new practice-driven social label adds nuance to identities and markers that *appear* fixed or uncomplicated. The incongruity between identities and practices has led Lambevski (2004:304) to refer to these as “unpredictable microsocial sexual rearrangements”. In order to be attentive to the nuances that can exist between sexual practices and sexuality (as both an identity and social label), I treat sexual practices and sexuality as distinct. When sexual practices are presumed to be in alignment with sexual identities or social labels, and the link between gender and sexuality is overlooked, it is difficult to analyse either gender or sexuality. Social labels and sexual identities can be deployed as political tools for classification, but they are situated within a wider context, which supposes gender and sexual norms, as well as coherency between sexual desires and sexual identities, and between sexual identities and social signifiers.

### **2.1.1 HEGEMONIC GENDER AND SEXUALITY**

As Halberstam (1998b:118) states, “we continue to live in an age of gender conformity and therefore heteronormativity”. In dominant heterosexual culture there is the assumption that to ‘do’ gender well, or to pass as a feminine woman or a masculine man means passing as heterosexual (Butler 1993a; Nielson et al. 2000). Hegemonic masculinity requires not only adopting behaviours that appear masculine but renouncing femininity as well (Coates 2007). Because homosexuality and heterosexuality are constructed in relation to each other

(Butler 1999), lesbians are often assumed to be masculine (e.g., *butch*, *leatherdyke*, and *bulldagger*) and gay men too feminine (e.g., *faeries* and *twinks*) (Butler 1993a; Cameron 1997; Coates 2007; Heasley 2005; Pascoe 2007; Wilchins 2004; Wilton 1996). In actuality, both suppositions, that heterosexuals are gender appropriate and that queers are gender inappropriate, are often not found to be the case, i.e., there are masculine gay men (e.g., *bears* and *muscles*), feminine lesbians (e.g., *femmes* and *lipstick*), and heterosexual men and women who are incorrectly assumed to be gay identifying because they ‘look gay’, i.e., are viewed as gender inappropriate (Campbell 2004; Green 2002; Heasley 2005).<sup>3</sup> The transgression of gender norms often supposes homosexuality (O’Driscoll 1996; Neilson et al. 2000). Conversely, it is because of the association of gender ‘appropriateness’ with heterosexuality that the femme lesbian or queer can be rendered invisible, in terms of her sexuality (and gender, if femme is viewed as a gender), or presumed to be heterosexual (Halberstam 1998a, 1998b; Harris and Crocker 1997; Walker 2001).

Halberstam (1998a, 1998b) articulates how heterosexuality and gender are disrupted in homosexual relationships using the example of butch and femme couples in lesbian culture (see also Nestle 1992). Munt (1998) explores how butch and femme gender identities have been criticised by mainstream heterosexual culture and lesbian culture for the ways that they perform gender explicitly (although not necessarily without shame). Some lesbian feminists, including Rich (1980), have been critical of gender because of the ways it is implicit in heterosexual relations. Jeffreys believes that gender is inherently problematic and that the idea of the gender outlaw, whether butch/femme, transgender, or drag, is

a comforting ploy which allows persons who wish to see themselves as progressive to continue to gain excitement from practices of dominance and submission without experiencing any political discomfort... One could argue that the ‘gender outlaws’ are in fact loyalists rather than rebels (Jeffreys 1996:89).

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<sup>3</sup> Examples of heterosexual women who sometimes deviate from stereotypical gender expectations of femininity are working class women, including those working in the trades, and rural women. These examples also show how gender is tied to social class as well as sex. Gender expectations for women are often those for middle class women. In contrast, middle class men are sometimes seen as lacking masculinity. Therefore, it is possible to observe the middle class as more stereotypically feminine and the working class as more stereotypically masculine.

Jeffreys' criticism is based in the assumption that butch/femme lesbian/queer identities replicate heterosexual relationships as well as the subordination of the feminine and the dominance of masculinity. This assumption is based in cultural essentialism and can only be held if it is believed that masculinity is *inherently* dominant and femininity *essentially* subordinate and subjugated which she argues to be the case (Jeffreys 1996, 2003; see O'Sullivan 1999 for a critique of butch/femme gender from the vantage point of a 'former' femme). This perspective also holds that there is a single type of either masculinity or femininity, yet this does not hold up within heterosexual and heteronormative constructs; i.e., femininity and masculinity are variable across socio-economic status, race, ability, age, religion, and so forth. For example, the gender expectations for heterosexual African American men and women differ from those for white heterosexuals, even without considering other factors such as age or socioeconomic status (Carter 2007; Pascoe 2007).

### **2.1.2 POWER AND POLITICS**

The ways in which men's dominance and gender oppression is enacted and supported in heterosexual relationships has been a consistent theme in feminist analyses of sexuality (e.g., Jackson 2005; MacKinnon 1982; Wittig 1981). One proposed solution to this has been 'political lesbianism', in which women consciously choose to engage in same-sex relationships (not necessarily sexual) as a political reaction to the subordination of women in society. This position claims to offer an alternative to the power differentials seen to occur in heterosexual relationships by asserting that homosexual desire is "desire based upon sameness instead of difference of power, desire which is about mutuality and which is more suited to the egalitarian future that feminists wish to create" (Jeffreys 1996:77). However, others have argued that it is neither useful nor practical to conflate desire for the same sex with the desire for the 'sameness of power'. Firstly, the erotics of power have been well documented (e.g., Foucault 1985, 1986, 1990; Fung 2005; Lorde 1984; Valverde 1985; Wetherell 1995). Secondly, with multiple axes of difference, it would be difficult to assume a

relationship in which the parties had equal footing on all axes and in all aspects of their lives. For example, a difference in age or income contributes to a difference in power, as does a person 'on top' in a sexual act.<sup>4</sup> Jeffreys (2003) sees gender as inherently unequal, either dominant or submissive, and interprets both masculinity and femininity as a deviation from homosexual desire, and a replication of heterosexual inequality.

The idea that gender is necessarily oppressive and that any expression of 'femininity' can be read as submissive and subordinate is, I would argue, limiting.<sup>5</sup> However, there are a number of other, more substantial issues that are relevant. Firstly, in advocating for the repeal of any performance, behaviour, interest, proclivity, act, or livelihood that could be read as gendered, people are not necessarily left with equality. Instead, the privileged position is that of 'androgyny'. Bright (quoted in Faderman 1992:593) argues that the 'drab stylelessness' of this repudiation of gender in women's same-sex relationships meant that "everyone was doctrinaire about how you should look and act: short hair, no makeup, denim overalls, flannel shirts, hiking boots. It was 'hippy masculine'". Bright's description illustrates the policing that can diminish the choice to act or dress feminine. If there were gender equality, then there would be little need to devalue the feminine.

Feminist sociologist Smith (1987) asserts that the idea of the neutral and gender-free tends to be an adoption of the masculine and of male-centred ways of being. As a result, doing away with gender renders power invisible not obsolete. For example, androgynous fashion means removing all those items understood as feminine or womanly from the wardrobe. There are women and men who enjoy

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<sup>4</sup> It is notable that Jeffreys is critical of lesbian penetrative sex. In a paragraph about the emphasis men place on conquest and penetration in sex she states that "[i]n lesbian relationships there is no necessity for either partner to assert manhood through sex, and sex is likely to take very different forms, or even to seem relatively unimportant" (2003:157). On the next page she argues for the "delights of equality" in "lesbian love-making" which is understood as two women lying on their sides lovingly caressing each other's entire bodies for hours (Jeffreys 2003:158). Jeffreys treats her own desires as if they should speak for all lesbians (or women who have sex with women) and is unwilling to acknowledge that not all penetration is submissive, let alone that someone can dominate from a receptive position. In addition, her argument could be seen as playing into the heteronormative model described by MacKinnon as "man fucks woman: subject, verb, object" (1982:541).

<sup>5</sup> I would argue that the supposition that any expression of 'masculinity' can be read as oppressive or dominant is equally problematic.

wearing gendered clothing (and *doing* gender, more generally), who may assert that their appearance and what they wear, whether gender ‘appropriate’ or gender ‘inappropriate’, to then take those choices away is *not* liberating (Bell et al. 1994).<sup>6</sup>

Jeffreys seems to associate a ‘false consciousness’ (cf. Marx 1972b) with all gender expression and assert that gender performance ought to be replaced with a generic sameness, a sameness that in being genderless is rather gendered (as Smith 1987 notes). What Jeffreys does not account for is that gender expression can be liberating, particularly when actors make the conscious choice to enact, whilst aware of other possibilities, and when they do so in ways that are subversive or transgressive,<sup>7</sup> as the data in later chapters indicate. Secondly, the idea that gender is inherently problematic presumes it to be the terrain of heterosexuals; it suggests that any gender performance, including those by people identifying as LGBTQ, are replicating heterosexual gender. Thus, it treats hegemonic heterosexual gender as if it is the original and all other embodiments of gender as copies, as Butler argues:

The repetition of heterosexual constructs within sexual cultures both gay and straight may well be the inevitable site of the denaturalisation and mobilisation of gender categories. The replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the heterosexual original. Thus, gay is to straight *not* as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy (Butler 1999:41, emphasis in original).

Here Butler articulates that gender is constructed in heterosexuality but that *because* gender is constructed in heterosexuality, the masculine and feminine are created; they are not natural categories. Thus, masculinity does not inherently signify dominance, nor does femininity necessitate submissive subordination; rather, it is the *culture* that assigns these values to the presentations and social performances. For example, when lesbians enact butch and femme they may be demonstrating the performativity of gender and in doing so disrupt ideas that masculinity represents male dominance and that femininity is inherently subordinate.

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<sup>6</sup> See also Bordo (1989) for a discussion of a feminist reappropriation of femininity.

<sup>7</sup> Transgression is discussed later in Section 2.3.2 and Section 3.5.

This challenges ideas of cultural essentialism that assert that women are one way and men another (e.g., Gilligan 1982),<sup>8</sup> as well as lesbian feminists critical of butch-femme identities (e.g., Jeffreys on butch self-hatred), and those asserting the naturalness and normalcy of heterosexual gender relations (e.g., Griffin 1978). A point that I develop in subsequent chapters is that while gender categories are socially constructed, it is possible to see that the hegemonic gender categories are rooted in the idea that heterosexuality is natural, expected, anticipated, and ideal. Far from being natural, gender and sexual categories require continual maintenance enacted through discursive performance. It can be argued that gender and sexuality are connected to such an extent that it is impossible to thoroughly analyse sexuality without also analysing gender (Jackson 2005).

## **2.2            SOCIOLOGICAL            APPROACHES            TO SEXUALITY**

Although it may not be evident from the bibliographies and indexes of many queer theory texts, sociologists have contributed profoundly to discussions of sexuality. In addition to the small number of sociologists who have adopted queer positions,<sup>9</sup> over the course of the last 50 years sociologists have made important arguments to the social understanding of sex and sexuality. Sociologists were at the forefront of social constructionist arguments of sexuality and in countering essentialist positions about the naturalness of gender and sexual difference (Section 2.2.2). Although it was radical in the late 1960s and early 1970s to argue that sexuality was socially constructed, and indeed it remains radical in much of mainstream public discourse today, that position is now taken for granted within queer theory. In addition, sociologists conducted meaningful empirical research that made the lives of gays and lesbians visible (Section 2.2.2). Feminist sociologists differentiated and linked gender and heterosexuality to

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<sup>8</sup> Although feminist cultural essentialists believe that there are differences between men and women, they also support gender equality.

<sup>9</sup> This literature is discussed in Chapter 3.

demonstrate gender hierarchy is inextricably combined with institutional heterosexuality (Section 2.2.4). More recently, these discussions have been made explicit, with critiques of heterosexuality that draw from material feminist perspectives and notions of the heteronormative from queer theory (Section 2.2.4.2).

## 2.2.1 CLASSICAL SOCIOLOGY (C. 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY)

Classical sociologists were silent on issues of sexuality for the most part, and, as a result, sexual practices and sexuality are absent or inadequately addressed in many of the comprehensive theoretical sociological texts that underpin the discipline (e.g., Durkheim 2002; Marx 1972a, 1972b; Weber 2003). At the same time, discussions of sexuality in the nineteenth century were flourishing outside of the discipline, and, in keeping with what would be the theme for much sexual research for the next hundred years, the scholarly focus was on sexual proclivities and ‘sexuality’ that could be classified as deviant; homosexuality and paraphilias fell into that category. As both Foucault (1990) and Faderman (1991) point out, this was the time when the categories of the modern homosexual and lesbian subjects were developed.<sup>10</sup> Influential were Krafft-Ebing’s (1997) case studies of sexual perversity in *Psychopathia Sexualis* which were first published in 1886. Krafft-Ebing understood sexual practices that could not be considered procreative as perverse, which may or may not have had religious undertones. Therefore, homosexuality was perverse whilst various sex acts, consensual or not, between a man and a woman were viewed as ‘abnormal’ but not sexually pathological.

Freud (2001) contributed to this model in his representations of sexuality in his early-twentieth century writings, including *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* at the turn of the century. These essays detailed his work on the stages of psychosexual development and the idea that perversion could be found in

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<sup>10</sup> Although homosexual practices and other variations of nonnormative sexual engagements are evident throughout history, Foucault takes the position that the social meaning changed at this time and the practices people engaged in became salient social labels, i.e., *the homosexual* emerged.

otherwise healthy people. Although he focused more on the micro-family environment of early childhood and its role in adult sexuality, the idea that sexuality was not biologically-based changed the ways in which sexuality was understood. Although Krafft-Ebing and Freud may be the most well-known writers of sexuality from that period, their work can be situated as part of a mainstream discourse. Weeks (1985:67) states that between 1898-1908 there were approximately 1,000 articles and books on homosexuality published in Europe. However, the examples of Krafft-Ebing and Freud are indicative of how the interest in sexuality and nonnormative sexuality at the time was focused on individual case studies and the psychological aspects that contributed to those types of sexual appetites and practices.

Sociology's 'founding fathers', Weber, Durkheim, and Marx, under-emphasised sexuality whilst explaining industrialisation, modernisation, and social change.<sup>11</sup> All three of them observe sexuality as natural, assumed, and thus largely outside of the realm of sociological inquiry. For example, Weber discusses sex only in relation to its functional purposes in the creation of the 'household community':

Sexual relationships and the relationships between children based on the fact of their common parent or parents can engender social action only by becoming the normal, though not the only, bases of a specific economic organisation: the household (Weber 2003:157).

As understood by Weber, sexual relationships mattered only in a functional sense. Thus, he separates sex from eroticism, desire, and power. Some contemporary feminists, including Sydie, have made extensive critiques of Weber's analysis of patriarchy because "he regarded the access to power and domination by men as natural, inevitable or simply right" (Sydie 1994:54). Indeed, Weber does assert that there is a 'natural' relationship between mothers and their (biological) children in the context of household organisation:

Of all the relationships arising from sexual intercourse, only the mother-child relationship is 'natural', because it is a biologically

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<sup>11</sup> Although Engels' work tends to be subsumed into that of Marx, he made radical propositions about the oppression of women as rooted in both the ownership of property and bourgeois, monogamous marriage which required that women sell themselves into sexual slavery.



based household unit that lasts until the child is able to search for means of subsistence on his own (Weber 2003:156).

Thus, while Weber understands the social purposes of other types of personal relationships at the institutional level, such as religion, and observes modern society as inherently oppressive, he assumes that sexuality serves only a functional purpose, and that both that purpose and sexuality are not tied to society, which could be seen as a similar position to that of Krafft-Ebing.

Durkheim (2002) addresses gender more directly than Weber, particularly in *Suicide*. In this book he discusses how gender and family differences affect rates of suicide, finding that marriage is better for men than women. Although in his research married people commit suicide less frequently than unmarried people, single men are more at risk than single women because of gender differences in their experiences of 'chronic domestic anomie'. Durkheim observes that unmarried men commit suicide more frequently because their unmarried lives have fewer goals and less regulation. However, he holds the view that married women experience 'chronic domestic anomie' because women's already limited life options are further limited in marriage. Sexual practices and sexuality are not discussed.

In keeping with the theme of inequality that is evident in Durkheim's work, Marx's analysis of capitalism and social inequality rests a great deal on material inequality. Despite considering the ways in which this is harmful to women as well as workers, women's inequality is seen as a less serious issue and is only mentioned in relation to class oppression including prostitution (cf. Marx 1972a, 1972b). Also important in Marx's analysis is the separation of public and private spaces, which he sees as the result of the industrial revolution. However, Marx under-theorises factors relevant to the private sphere, including gender and sexuality.

In contrast, Engels (1972) discusses the ways in which women's oppression is tied to private ownership of property and marriage in the second section of "The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State" first published in 1884. Engels condemns monogamous marriage, which he sees as "the subjugation of the one sex by the other" (p.739) and 'bourgeois':

In both cases [Catholic and Protestant] this marriage of convenience turns often enough into crassest prostitution –

sometimes of both partners, but far more commonly of the women, who only differs from the ordinary courtesan in that she does not let out her body on piece-work as a wage-worker, but sells it once and for all into slavery (Engels 1972:742).

Here Engels argues that marriage under capitalism turns women into slaves. However, he also makes the argument that the problems he feels are inherent in marriage under capitalism (i.e., women's unwaged sex work and problematic monogamy) will end with the collapse of that system. This, he describes, will lead to an improved situation for "*all* women" (p.745, emphasis in original) because "then, no other motive [for marriage] remains than mutual affection" (p.750). Engels underestimates the social scripts and norms that encourage marriage. However, the discussions of gender inequality coming forth in Marxist thought have had a great deal of influence on feminist theory and activism, and feminist sociologists had extensive dialogue with Marxism (e.g., Barrett 1980; Hartmann 2003; Vogel 1983).

One reason for the historical neglect of sexual practices and sexuality in sociology is that their privileged gender and sexual social position allowed Weber, Durkheim, and Marx, among others, to see sexuality as natural and outside of social construction (cf. Seidman 1996). As educated, white, heterosexual men, they experienced a level of privilege that many others did not. The result of this privilege meant that, "their own science of society contributed to the making of this regime whose centre is the hetero/homo binary and the heterosexualisation of society" (Seidman 1996:4). This lack of a bifurcated consciousness then allowed classical sociologists to see their own privileged positions as normal and natural. As a result, they were able to neglect and under-theorise gender, and overlook sexuality in their analyses.

### **2.2.2 POST-WAR SOCIOLOGY (1945-ONWARDS)**

Empirical research on sexual activities was prominent in the post-war period (e.g., Kinsey et al. 1953). However, despite the interest in empirical research on sex, sociologists stayed silent in discussing and researching sexuality. For example, although sociologists Parsons, Park, and others were writing on

urbanisation, social organisation, and normative behaviour, like the classical sociologists, they neglected sexuality for the most part. When sexuality featured in Parsons' analysis, as with Durkheim and Weber, it is seen as functional (e.g., Parsons 1954). It could be argued that sociologists of this period neglected sexuality and were able to take it as inherent instead of social for the same reasons as their predecessors: their positions of privilege and membership in the hegemonic social categories meant that they were less likely to question the construction of sexuality, or its ties to the social world.

It was not until the sexual revolution of the 1960s that sociologists began to take sexuality more seriously as a subject matter. While sexuality remained absent from the grand, or meta-narrative, sociological theories, a small number of sociologists began studying it. Reiss's 1961 paper on 'queers and peers' was one of the first sociological studies on the sociology of sexual practices. Reiss was interested in examining the relationship between teenage boys working in the sex trade ('delinquent peers' or 'hustlers') who are fellated by older men, whom Reiss refers to as 'adult queers'. Reiss establishes this sexual interaction as deviant:

Every boy interviewed in this study who voluntarily established contact with fellators was also delinquent in many other respects. The evidence shows that contact with fellators is an institutionalised aspect of the organisation of lower-class delinquency oriented groups. This is not to say that boys outside these groups never experience relationships with adult male fellators: some do, but they are not participants in groups which sanction the activity according to the prescribed group standards (Reiss 1961:109).

Instead of focusing on the way in which Reiss treats the hustling relationship as deviant, it is much more interesting for the purposes of this thesis to see that Reiss's work can be observed as one of the earliest sociological attempts to view a sexual community as based on a shared practice. It is necessary to situate Reiss's work in its sociohistorical context (i.e., the post-war American South). At the time he was conducting his research 'queer' was a pejorative, yet he observes 'group standards' among the hustlers and 'learned behaviour' (Reiss 1961:111). These are groundbreaking findings because he makes the argument for the social construction of sexuality. Reiss's 'queers' and 'peers' are not 'naturally' or innately queer; rather they have learned the behaviours and adopted the group norms that can be observed within their subculture. His research advanced both

sociological and sexual research by challenging notions of what the larger society views as natural and unnatural sexualities.

Subsequent to Reiss's study, some sociologists approached sexuality from within the framework of the sociology of deviance. Sexuality was a marginal topic within sociological research, and it may be that the deviance framework allowed those studying sexuality to do so within a major sociological tradition. The research of sexuality for much of the late 1960s and early 1970s focused on understanding the 'subcultures' of 'abnormal' sexualities or sexual practices. Sociologists adopted social constructionist perspectives. More specifically, one can argue that most could be classified as either drawing upon Mead's tradition of labelling theory (e.g., Gagnon and Simon 1974; McIntosh 1968), symbolic interaction theories (e.g., Garfinkel 1984; Humphreys 1970; Plummer 1975), or sociohistorical (e.g., Weeks 1977).

Gagnon and Simon's *Sexual Conduct: The Social Sources of Human Sexuality* (1974) was one of the first sociological studies focused on understanding the influence of the social world on sexuality. Like their predecessors, they were primarily concerned with sexual deviance: homosexuality (they included chapters on both gay men and lesbians)<sup>12</sup>, prostitution, and prison sex. Unlike Reiss, they were interested in destigmatising these 'deviant' practices. It is worth noting that by positioning these nonnormative sexual practices as deviant, heterosexuality (especially the heteronormative) is used as the comparative base without critical examination of the concept and construction.

McIntosh's paper originally published in 1968 stands in contrast to Gagnon and Simon's work because she focused on the social category, rather than 'condition', of homosexuality. McIntosh, whose article could be considered ahead of its time, used labelling theory, which stresses the influence of terms and descriptors on individuals' behaviours and identities, to observe how homosexuality existed as an identity or social category. Her viewpoint allowed her to see homosexuality as different from an affliction, ailment, or illness. MacIntosh was interested in how the construct of 'homosexuality' shaped the identification. At the time, homosexuality was pathologised as mental illness, and

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<sup>12</sup> Their decision to include a chapter on lesbians is worth noting as most of the sociological literature of the time (excluding McIntosh) focused exclusively on homosexual men (e.g., Humphreys 1970; Plummer 1975).

her position helped to establish a framework for studying sexuality, and especially gay and lesbian identity, that did not use deviance or medicalisation as its starting point. Drawing from MacIntosh's work and Foucault's writing on both power and the history of sexuality, was Weeks who examined the social history of homosexuality (1977, 1981, 1985). His work is important because while MacIntosh, Gagnon and Simon and others made gay and lesbian experience visible Weeks helped to give it a social history and context.

Plummer's 1975 book *Sexual Stigma* was also greatly influential to later social science in the area of gay and lesbian studies. Plummer (1975) used symbolic interaction, and particularly Goffman's (1963) work on stigma and contagion, to explore the area of sexual deviance and, particularly, the stigma associated with male homosexuality. He describes the ways in which the sexual world is based in social needs.

Quite apart from the need to describe and explain the multi-faceted nature of sexuality for its own sake, such study also touches upon all those matters that have been of a central and lasting concern to sociologists: the problems of the nature of sociological explanation, order, change, and meaning (Plummer 1975:5).

Here Plummer also makes clear the ways in which sociological studies of sexuality contribute more generally to the discipline. In his view, sexuality is not separate from the rest of the social world, and its study is relevant to basic sociological issues.

This generation of sociological research on sexuality was critical in refocusing nonnormative sexuality and homosexuality, reframing the emphasis from deviance to social construct. It gave a presence to gay and lesbian identities and practices, which had largely been ignored, and forced a concurrent reconceptualisation by questioning the appropriateness of classifying it as a form of deviance. It also helped to lay the foundation for gay and lesbian studies.

### 2.2.3 SYMBOLIC INTERACTION RESEARCH ON SEXUALITY

The contributions of symbolic interactionists<sup>13</sup> in understanding sexuality need to be understood in greater detail for a number of reasons. Firstly, the rich data and findings derived from symbolic interaction research have been widely influential in understanding nonnormative sexuality. Secondly, the focus on the fine details of interaction and social codes remain relevant today.<sup>14</sup> Finally, symbolic interaction has been adopted by a new generation of researchers in online research,<sup>15</sup> thus making this literature relevant to this thesis.

Sociologists using research techniques derived from symbolic interaction and ethnomethodology were among the first to consider the importance of interactions in framing the construction and deployment of ‘deviant’ or nonnormative sexual activities and gender (e.g., Garfinkel 1984; Humphreys 1970; Reiss 1961). Garfinkel (1984) wrote a groundbreaking and lengthy case study about Agnes, a 19-year-old woman thought to have been born intersex and raised as a boy until she was 16 years old. The research makes a strong case for the social construction of gender and heterosexuality, and its social values. Garfinkel states explicitly the consequences if others were to perceive Agnes as abnormal:

punishment, degradation, loss of reputation, and loss of material advantages were at risk should the change [in gender or ‘sex status transfer’] be detected. In almost every situation of interaction the relevance of the secret operated as background knowledge (Garfinkel 1984:136).

In other words, Agnes’s gender construction is not important merely in terms of maintaining a Goffmanesque ‘face’ (1959, 1969), or social presence, but because there would be serious consequences for failing to ‘pass’. As a result of this

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<sup>13</sup> Symbolic interaction is a sociological perspective that emphasises social interaction at the micro-level.

<sup>14</sup> For example, Humphreys’ research on the tearoom trade was relevant in the media discussion following US Rep. Larry Craig’s sex scandal in 2006, including discussions in *The New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* newspapers. Craig, a Member of Congress in the state of Iowa, was charged with soliciting homosexual sex in a Minneapolis airport toilet.

<sup>15</sup> This is presence is notable within HCI (human-computer interaction) and social psychology.

constant process of enacting, she was at risk of being found to be an ‘imposter’. In this, Garfinkel distinguishes between ‘natural’ women and those *performing* as women who experience the fear of having their ‘secret’ exposed.

Garfinkel details Agnes’s process of learning to ‘act like a lady’ and how others in her social network made comments about her ‘ladylike’ manner (p. 146). However, he does not let Agnes’s interaction and biography speak for themselves. Instead he actively creates a narrative that Denzin (1990) argues can be understood as homophobic.<sup>16</sup> Homophobia (and transphobia) are evident in his judgments about what makes Agnes a “real” woman and different from both gay men and transgendered women.

Her measurements were 38-25-38. She had long, fine dark-blonde hair, a young face with pretty features, a peaches-and-cream complexion, no facial hair, subtly plucked eyebrows, and no makeup except for lipstick. At the time of her first appearance she was dressed in a tight sweater which marked off her thin shoulders, ample breasts, and narrow waist. Her feet and hands, though somewhat larger than usual for a woman, were in no way remarkable[...] There was nothing garish or exhibitionistic in her attire, nor was there any hint of poor taste or that she was ill at ease in her clothing as is seen so frequently in transvestites and in women with disturbances in sexual identification. Her voice [...] had the occasional lisp similar to that affected by feminine appearing male homosexuals. Her manner was appropriately feminine with a slight awkwardness that is typical in middle adolescence (Garfinkel 1984:119).

Garfinkel offers a lengthy account of Agnes’s appearance (1984:119) which suggests that while she may have had a ‘secret’ (i.e., that she was raised as a boy and learned how to be a woman as a teenager) she appears so convincingly womanly that he, as a heterosexual man, eroticises her, objectifying her on the basis of her physical appearance. His voyeuristic account mentions her body a number of times, including her ‘measurements’, her ‘tight sweater’, and her ‘thin shoulders, ample breasts, and narrow waist’ – all of which contribute to the sexualisation of Agnes as a woman. Although he states that there are some ways in which her appearance deviates from the ‘usual’: her larger than average hands and a slight affectation in her speech, these are overcome by her ‘appropriate

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<sup>16</sup> I would add that in addition to being homophobic, Garfinkel’s narrative could also be viewed as transphobic, or discriminatory against members of the transgendered community, and sexist.

femininity' (e.g., her appearance was neither 'garish' nor 'exhibitionistic'). It is the eroticisation of her appearance, perhaps more than the appearance itself, which leads to his observation that she is 'appropriately' feminine.

Despite his detailed findings, Garfinkel's narrative and analysis can be seen as problematic. His analysis of the social construction of gender is strengthened rather than diminished by the information that Agnes was born male, and, thus, actively transitioned her gender. Agnes demonstrates that she was able to learn and perform gender in such a way as to seem 'appropriate' to the white male heterosexual researcher, or cisgendered.<sup>17</sup> Although Garfinkel does not directly discuss heterosexuality and the construction of heterosexual relationships, he does discuss her relationship with her boyfriend, and thus the case of Agnes demonstrates that there is an association of heterosexuality with ideal gender performance. One of the most salient features in Garfinkel's analysis of the construction of gender is in how he argues effectively that Agnes's behaviours were tied to being a *heterosexual* woman. In choosing to keep the narrative focusing on intersex rather than transgender issues, Garfinkel leaves us with an excellent case study and fine insights leaving future researchers to make his assertions of the construction of sex and gender more profound.

Humphreys' (1970) work on the tearoom trade was influenced by the work of Garfinkel and other symbolic interactionists. He conducted meticulous research on the behaviours of men seeking anonymous, casual, homosexual sex in public toilets, which is referred to as the 'tearoom trade' in America or as 'cottaging' in Britain.<sup>18</sup> Humphreys' research focuses on the communicative interactions and he provides rich detail about the codes and norms implicit in tearoom encounters. He argues that the tearoom trade consists of subtle socialised behaviour and that those who are not members of the subculture would find it difficult to pick up upon the cues.<sup>19</sup> The unwritten rules of the tearoom trade include: not exchanging

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<sup>17</sup> The prefix 'cis' is from Latin, meaning "on the same side". When added to 'gender', *cisgender* refers to the alignment of gender identity with the gender an individual was assigned at birth. Just as in chemistry, cis in this context is used in contrast with 'trans', meaning in Latin 'on the other side' or across.

<sup>18</sup> Although rich, it has been argued that Humphreys' study would be unable to proceed under contemporary ethical guidelines (e.g., Haggerty 2004).

<sup>19</sup> His findings serve as evidence in contrary to positions that assert that homosexual sex in public toilets and parks makes these spaces unsafe, particularly for women and children (e.g., Jeffreys 2003).



biographical information, avoiding teenagers, approaching only those demonstrating interest, not gossiping about others involved in the trade, and honouring agreements (e.g., paying if it had been agreed upon, and only engaging in behaviour that was mutually agreed upon). The rules function as a “protective code, a set of norms common to all ephemeral encounters of a homosexual nature, which no ritual performance may violate” (Humphreys 1970:48). The often unspoken interaction taking place in the tearooms Humphreys studied gives strong evidence of the subtle codes concerning sexual behaviour. In addition, his work shows the importance of non-verbal group-specific codes: such as toe tapping, note passing, head signalling, and the use of ‘glory holes’.<sup>20</sup> His research explores the world of a marginalised sexual category and allows non-members to see the richness of participation and the complexity of the communication networks between members.

Humphreys’ work demonstrates that the use of non-verbal codes has been important for members of nonnormative sexual groups who would make themselves vulnerable by being explicit about their desires. This is the case especially for those involved in the tearoom trade, as Humphreys argues that many participants identify and live as heterosexuals, often projecting heteronormativity. Another example of a non-verbal communication system among sexual minorities would be the use of handkerchiefs in the gay BDSM (bondage discipline/dominant submissive/sado-masochism) community that was popular in the 1970s. The colour and position of the hanky indicated whether one was dominant or submissive and the kind of sex that one was seeking.<sup>21</sup> The symbolism of the hanky is group- or subculture specific; mainstream culture was not aware of the code and non-members would not have associated handkerchiefs with the leather subculture. The secret codes adopted by members of marginalised sexual categories create a communication system that minimises the members’

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<sup>20</sup> Humphreys (1970:65) describes a glory hole as “a small hole approximately three inches in diameter, which has been carefully carved, at about average ‘penis height’, in the partition of the stall[;] it may be used as a means of signalling from the stall.”

<sup>21</sup> See *The Leatherman’s Handbook* (Townsend 1994) for a discussion of the Handkerchief Code. For an example from popular culture, reading Bruce Springsteen’s iconic cover art for his 1984 album “Born in the USA” using the hanky code would see the red handkerchief in the rear right pocket as a way of indicating an interest to be anally fisted (the positioning of the hanky in the right pocket means that he is seeking sex as a ‘bottom’ or receiver and the colour red symbolises fisting).

risk of exposure for breaking the societal sexual code. Therefore, while most people were wearing handkerchiefs as handkerchiefs, without awareness of the code much less participating in it, those involved in the gay and BDSM leather subculture could wear handkerchiefs whilst simultaneously communicating salient facts about their sexual practices or identities.

The contributions of symbolic interactionists in researching sexual deviance, the construction of sexuality, and the codes employed by individuals to operate within their subculture whilst also living in larger social frameworks less accepting of their interests and activities, have provided a depth of knowledge about the intricacies and precautions taken to communicate nonnormative sexual desire in ways that maximise personal safety. However, this research typically studies 'deviant' sexual cultures, such as those involved in the tearoom trade or hustling.

#### **2.2.4 FEMINISM AND SEXUALITY**

In addition to the sociological research on sexuality from the position and critique of the sociology of deviance (achieved through the exploration of topics such as homosexuality, public sex, and prostitution/hustling) feminist theory provided an alternative framework for studying sexuality and exploring its importance. As with other areas of feminist scholarship, feminist sociology emerged as a result of earlier feminist work. Particularly influential to feminist sociologists were the early twentieth-century writings of Gilman (1973), Sanger (1973a, 1973b, 1973c, 1992) on women's sex work and the need for reproductive freedom (both in the form of contraception and sexual knowledge), and Goldman (1973, 1992).<sup>22</sup> Sanger was especially critical of what she saw as the inequality in marriage:

The institution of marriage makes a parasite of woman, an absolute dependent. It incapacitates her for life's struggle, annihilates her social consciousness, paralyses her imagination, and then imposes

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<sup>22</sup> For more information about early feminist writing see the excellent collections edited by Rossi (1973) and Schneir (1992), which provide invaluable sociohistorical context to the essays.

its gracious protection, which is in reality a snare, a travesty on human character (Sanger 1992:322).

In this article, Sanger was concerned with how marriage could be seen as destroying women and rendering them dependent upon men. Rather than focusing on the economic or labour issues that Engels used to base his critique, she focuses on the intellectual debasement she sees in marriage (e.g., loss of imagination and social consciousness).

There was a lack of feminist writing from the late 1920s until the 1949 publication (1953, for the English edition) of de Beauvoir's seminal book, *The Second Sex* (1989). In this text, de Beauvoir opened the door for discussions about the social construction of gender and gender inequality. Her work, along with that from the early or 'first wave' of feminism, in conjunction with grass roots feminist activism of the late 1960s and early 1970s, encouraged further feminist dialogue. Feminist consciousness-raising groups became popular as the desire for women to have a place to speak out about inequality, sexism, and misogyny grew (Driefus 1973). Radical feminism offered incisive critiques of society and women's place within it (e.g., Firestone 1979; Millett 1970). At this time the focus was primarily on 'women's issues', that is, concrete areas particular to the material realities of women's lives that needed examination. Access to abortion, women's health, and domestic violence were amongst the most discussed topics. A critique of heterosexuality lies underneath many of these issues and both radical and lesbian feminists discussed the ways in which it is constructed (e.g., Barrett 1980; Dworkin 1981; Firestone 1979; MacKinnon 1982; Millett 1970; Pateman 1988; Wittig 1981).

#### **2.2.4.1 FEMINIST SOCIOLOGY**

In an analysis of feminist research published in sociology journals from 1974-1983, Ward and Grant (1985) assert that four major themes emerge in the literature, despite varied feminist approaches to studying sexism.<sup>23</sup> They are: the

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<sup>23</sup> Lorber's (1998) *Gender Inequality: Feminist Theories and Politics* is an excellent resource for distinguishing various strands of feminist thought.

under-representation of women as research subjects; the focus on male dominated parts of social life and organisation; the use of theories, concepts, and analytical frameworks that privilege men's experiences; and the use of men and their lifestyles as representative and the norm (Ward and Grant 1985:140). Feminist sociologists, as Ward and Grant make clear, were interested in deconstructing existing sociology, and in researching and making visible women's experiences. Groundbreaking research of this period included Chodorow's (1978) analysis of motherhood and the importance of women in 'social reproduction'; Hochschild's (1975, 1983) research on women's emotional labour; Oakley's (1974) landmark study on housework and domestic labour; and Eichler's (1980) research on the double standard involving the socialisation of girls.<sup>24</sup>

Feminist sociology has made substantial contributions to *materialist feminism* or, in other words, a feminism rooted in Marxism, critical theory, and the lived experiences of women's lives. These analyses made invaluable links between women's lives and the importance of women's economic freedom and equality (e.g., Hartmann 2003; Pateman 1988). In addition, some researchers explored the inequality present in the public sphere. Fraser (1992), for example, critiqued Habermas's (1991) conception of the public sphere as formulated on the exclusion of women which relegated the 'home', 'family' and 'domestic labour' as outside and peripheral to the public sphere.

However, other feminists have criticised feminist sociology and feminist thought more generally for the exclusion of many women from analysis (e.g., Cannon et al. 1988; Collins 2000; Davis 1983; hooks 1981; Ingraham 1996). Those overlooked include women of colour, the working class and poor, rural women, and non-heterosexuals. Although feminist social science has given voice to the experiences of women and places women as the subjects of research, white, middle-class, heterosexual women and their experiences have been treated as both representative and the norm.<sup>25</sup> In other words, early feminist sociologists were often guilty of the same four limitations that Ward and Grant directed towards

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<sup>24</sup> Comprehensive reviews of feminist sociology in this period are available in Eichler (1977), Stacey and Thorne (1985), and Ward and Grant (1985).

<sup>25</sup> It bears mentioning explicitly that research focusing on white, middle-class, able-bodied, urban, heterosexual women is not a bad thing, and never was. In fact, it was necessary in order to counter the over-representation of her male counterpart as 'normal'. The problem lies in those instances when this subject is taken for granted as representative of all women and is regarded as the norm.

sociology: their research over-represented some women; they focused on women's social life without recognising how 'social life' and social organisation are dependent upon other social signifiers; their theories and frameworks were designed and supported by the first two issues presented; and they positioned the women of their research as representative and normal.

This is not to suggest that all feminist research or all feminist sociology ignored the lives of women outside of the normative. Indeed, there was research by feminist sociologists that explored the experiences of 'other' or 'outsider' women (e.g., Collins 1986; Luttrell 1989; Rich 1980; Rubin 1984). The areas neglected in feminist research provided new opportunities for feminist sociologists to render visible the experiences of women whose experiences and lives had been neglected: women of colour, rural women, women from the global East and South, poor/working class women, and non-heterosexual women.

The connection between gender and sexuality itself can be found explicitly in lesbian feminist texts that challenge the invisibility of lesbian women in art, literature, social science, and even within feminist ideology and politics. For example, Rich argued thirty years ago that the subordination of women is tied to institutionalised or 'compulsory' heterosexuality, and she challenges researchers to prioritise this point.

Historians need to ask at every point how heterosexuality as an institution has been organised and maintained through the female wage scale, the enforcement of middle class women's 'leisure', the glamorisation of so-called sexual liberation, the withholding of education from women, the imagery of 'high art' and popular culture, the mystification of the 'personal' sphere, and much else. We need an economics which comprehends the institution of heterosexuality, with its doubled workload for women and its sexual divisions of labour, as the most idealised of economic relations (Rich 1980:659).

In this quotation from Rich's conclusion, she calls upon social scientists, specifically social historians and economists, to recognise the importance of sexuality in feminist topics. In other words, Rich makes the argument that sexuality needs to be studied in conjunction with 'women's issues'. However, the argument throughout the text presupposes that although heterosexuality may be 'compulsory', thus allowing Rich to challenge the 'choice' of heterosexuality (p. 632, 633, 637, for example), the category of women is stable and fixed.

Furthermore, although Rich articulates a lesbian continuum that includes non-romantic connections between women, while effectively challenging a binary and easily distinguishable divide between homo/heterosexualities, she does not level a challenge towards binary gender categories.

#### **2.2.4.2 CRITICAL HETEROSEXUALITY**

Although heterosexuality has been critiqued in feminist analysis for some time, in the mid-1990s feminist sociologists such as Ingraham, Jackson, Richardson and others began to analyse heterosexuality and heteronormativity from a perspective that utilises both materialist feminism and queer theory. Such an approach is influenced by research-led discussions of both heteronormativity and male dominance. Male dominance is seen as essential to the analysis because of the way in which the hierarchical gender system are embedded in heterosexual relations.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, gender inequality within heterosexual relations has been an enduring focus for feminist research; a more recent critique is the tie between gender inequality and the construction of heterosexuality. Feminist sociologists such as Smith (1987) have argued effectively that the everyday and mundane interaction in people's lives reproduces gender and class hierarchies and subsequent subordination. Smith further asserts that it is not possible to understand inequality without looking at the influence of everyday interactions. As discussed in Section 2.2.4.1, feminist sociologists have used various ontological positions to investigate women's experiences; however, the interaction, behaviour, and experiences studied and analysed often take for granted a heterosexual identification or positioning. Ingraham (1996, 2005) describes feminist sociologists who critique the gender system but omit its tie to heterosexuality as partaking in 'thinking straight' (2005) or 'the heterosexual imaginary' (1996).<sup>26</sup>

The heterosexual imaginary is that way of thinking which conceals the operation of heterosexuality in structuring gender and closes off

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<sup>26</sup> Ingraham states that her use of 'imaginary' is derived from Jacques Lacan (who, in turn, was indebted to Althusser's work). Refer to Ingraham (1996:168) for further details.

any critical analysis of heterosexuality as an organising institution. The effect of this depiction of reality is that heterosexuality circulates as taken for granted, naturally occurring, and unquestioned, while gender is understood as socially constructed and central to the organisation of everyday life (Ingraham 1996:169).

Ingraham's concept of the *heterosexual imaginary* argues that there is a belief that heterosexuality is normal and natural which renders it invisible to everyday life, social research, and analysis; however, this heterosexuality is imagined in the sense that it is cultivated and constructed. Heterosexuality and heteronormativity, although common, are not natural, and involve acculturation and socialisation from early childhood. For example, it could be argued that female children are encouraged by cultural representations, families and other adults, and items marketed to them (and the adults in their lives) to think of themselves as princesses who will marry princes in life trajectories similar to those in fairytales and animated films that are marketed towards them; dolls, plastic kitchens, and tea party sets are seen as typical toys for girls to use to 'play' to be adults (i.e., gender appropriate women), while toys marketed towards boys of similar ages include replicas of guns and cars; and boys and girls alike are teased about having boyfriends and girlfriends from an early age. Heterosexuality is *constructed* by the positioning of it as part of everyday or anticipated life.

A queer position could assert that these childhood performances and gender-appropriate heterosexual performativity engrain adult gender-appropriate, heterosexual performativity. For example, Gray (2009) articulates the relevance of childhood difference in the narratives rural queer youth. Gray finds that a number of her participants report that they felt 'different' from other children before they were able to articulate that their difference was in what they desired. Cokely (2005) analyses how the heterosexual imaginary and heteronormativity are salient features of Disney movies from the 1930s to the present. Disney animated features are essentially fairytales, complete with beautiful princesses, dashing princes, wicked middle-aged single women, and kind grandmotherly types. She notes that marriage is an explicit goal for most of the female protagonists in the films she studied, and that this is especially the case for white female protagonists.

Similarly, Best's (2000, 2005) research shows how the heterosexual imaginary is also central to teen movies about high school proms and to the ways

in which American teenage girls conceptualise their proms. The prom is both a symbol and a rite of passage of heterosexuality. Best (2005:194) notes, “that the high school prom (as both a representation and event) privileges heterosexuality seems almost too prosaic a claim to make. But it is the assumed transience of heterosexuality in this cultural space that is so significant.” In addition to being a heterosexual rite of passage, Best argues that the prom is actively constructed as heteronormative. She notes that some schools “still require students to attend their proms with dates of the ‘opposite’ sex”, and that the crowning of prom king and queen celebrates an idealised heterosexual couple (2005:194). The narratives from films and magazines geared towards teenage girls also celebrate the prom as a night for romantic heterosexual love.

In a similar vein, Ingraham’s (2008) study of the symbolism of ‘white weddings’ as the idealised celebration and acknowledgement of heterosexual romantic love is another example of the way in which heterosexuality is institutionalised in the social discourse. In Chapter 3, I discuss the importance of weddings to sexual citizenship, but it is worth noting here their enormous presence in the discourse of what constitutes a ‘normal’ life. Walsh (2005) notes that for poor women the romantic ideal of marriage is quickly overcome as they consider the benefits and limitations of marriage, but that for those who are middle class the idealisation of marriage and weddings is more pronounced. The primacy of the ‘white wedding’ as an anticipated, ideal middle-class life event may be one factor on why the right to marry has become a pivotal issue in mainstream (i.e., middle-class) LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) politics and activism.<sup>27</sup> Critical heterosexuality provides a framework for understanding the ways in which heteronormativity and assumptions of heterosexuality are implicit in everyday interaction as well as in more formal social organisation. Furthermore, the perspective shows the ways in which heteronormativity can aid in the construction of sexual difference.

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<sup>27</sup> See Maskovsky (2002) for an analysis of how marriage can be used by middle-class and affluent members of the LGBT community to gain social respectability.



## 2.3 QUEER THEORY

The word *queer* has a history as a pejorative label for gays and lesbians. Before it became as offensive as any racial slur, it was used to refer to something wonky, bent, strange, or odd (Ahmed 2006; Halperin 2003). When queer theorists use the term it is, in part, about the reclamation of a word that has been used *against* gays and lesbians. However, it is also used in contrast to a ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’ approach that supposes a fixed identity. Queer has also been ‘reclaimed’ by sexual nonnormatives, including lesbians, gays, bisexuals, those who are transgendered, heterosexuals with sexual interests that are excluded from a normative heterosexuality (e.g., those practicing BDSM, polyamory, etc.), and others who do not believe that their desires or practices are treated as intelligible. *Queer* is used in defiance to normative expectations, understandings, and ways of being and living. Halberstam (2005:6) uses queer to refer “to nonnormative logics and organisations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time”. From this, queer means approaching understanding from the position of the outsider (Jeffreys 2003:35) and attempting to understand the issues of community, identity, and activity in relation to the importance of sexuality in how those areas of life are organised.

Like many other theoretical frameworks (e.g., Marxist, feminist, critical, and so forth), queer theory crosses through and intersects disciplines. Queer theory draws on a diverse source of material: most notably, feminist theories, gay and lesbian theories and politics, and also postmodern/poststructuralist frameworks. Its roots and much of the seminal work in the area originates from the humanities, particularly in English literature and textual analysis. Butler’s (1999) and Sedgwick’s (2008) books both call into question the dichotomies associated with gender and sexuality, and privilege the poststructuralist ideas of multiplicity, fluidity, and complexity in experience, identity, discourse, gender, and sexuality. The ‘natural’, cultural essentialism, and fixity are radically critiqued in relation to sexuality as well as other social and cultural signifiers. Texts are reread to explore these ideas and to expose the performances associated with identity. In contrast, a collection of essays edited by Warner (1993) includes chapters from primarily humanities-based scholars who use queer theory to

underscore an activist agenda, which is based in transgression, performance, and nonnormativity.

Queer theory can be seen as both disruptive and disconcerting. It emphasises a break from normality and a contestation of the ‘normal’ (cf. Warner 1999b). Queer theory produces frisson on two levels: first it deconstructs micro-categories fundamental to identity, and secondly, through the deconstruction of those categories it forces an analysis of the systems that make those categories constitutive (Butler 1999). Uncomfortable with the artificial binary of homosexuality/heterosexuality and notions that gender or sexuality can be viewed as natural, queer theory takes aim at questioning the analytical categories of sexual and gender identities as well as the ways in which these are embodied and performed (Fuss 1991; Sedgwick 2008). Although this may seem similar to the arguments posed by feminists and gay and lesbian researchers on the social construction of gender and sexuality, queer theorists encourage the rethinking of the identity politics that those frameworks use. In other words, queer theory argues that the binary categories used, such as men/women, masculine/feminine, and heterosexual/homosexual, are unstable, fluid, and insufficient at explaining nuanced and less easily classifiable experiences and positions, including other forms of sexuality and being (e.g., bisexuality, pansexuality, asexuality, transgender, female masculinity, intersex, and drag).

Queer theorists such as Kulick (1998) and Valocchi (2005) argue that the homosexual/heterosexual binary is not only problematic because it is a binary, but because there are other ways to define sexuality. Furthermore, as Kulick’s (1998) research on the Brazilian *travesti* demonstrates, other cultures *do* define sexuality differently. Sometimes the practices that people engage in are more important than who they do them with. For example, in a paper first published in 1983 and reprinted in *Public Sex*, Califia (2000) writes about being a lesbian who has sex with gay men who does not identify as bisexual because his sexual encounters with men are based on a shared sexual interest:<sup>28</sup>

I no longer believe that there is some ahistorical entity called homosexuality. Sexuality is socially constructed within the limits imposed by physiology, and it changes over time with the surrounding culture. There was no such thing as a Castro clone, a

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<sup>28</sup> Califia is now a man, and I have used the gender pronoun he adopts.

lesbian-feminist, or a Kinsey Six a century ago, and one hundred years from now these types will be as extinct as *Urnings*.<sup>29</sup> This is not to say that in a sexual utopia we would all be bisexual. There is nothing wrong with having sex exclusively with members of your own sex (or the opposite sex). I simply question some of the assumptions or attitudes that have grown around the fact that some gay people have an erotic preference for same-sex behaviour. Gay people have responded to persecution and homophobia by creating our own mythology about homosexuality (Califia 2002:196).

Califia articulates positions that will later become staples for queer theory in his adoption of the social construction of sexuality. It may be possible to suggest that his argument here is similar to that of Foucault in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1990),<sup>30</sup> in that he argues that sexual labels are sociohistorical constructs, dependent upon time and space, and evolving. Califia also critiques gay and lesbian studies for creating a ‘mythology’ around homosexuality. This mythology can be understood as the binary for understanding homosexuality that Sedgwick (2008) posits when asserting that homosexuality is often viewed from either a minoritising or universalising standpoint and that both of these positions are problematic. Sedgwick’s minoritising position is that which focuses on a distinct gay and lesbian population that is ‘different’ and distinguishable. As discussed in Section 2.2.4.2, this notion of difference can be found in coming out narratives (Gray 2009).<sup>31</sup> This is a common theme in lesbian feminist analyses of women’s ‘different’ ways of loving (e.g., Jeffreys 1996, 2003; Rich 1980). The universalising position could also be referred to as *gay assimilationist* in that it promotes the notion of the ‘good homosexual’. I use the term *gay assimilationist* to refer to the notion supported by some, such as Sullivan (1996), which asserts that there are gay and lesbian people who are the same as heterosexuals and thus have identical relationships with the exception of the gender of their sexual partners. I would suggest that the universalising or gay assimilationist position features prominently in contemporary public debates on the extension of civil

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<sup>29</sup> *Urning* is a German word, a precursor to the term homosexual, which was used in the nineteenth century in reference to a man sexually attracted to men (Sullivan 2003).

<sup>30</sup> Morrow (1995) offers an account of why Foucault’s argument in this text may be problematic.

<sup>31</sup> This sexual difference could also be read as a base of suffering or pathos in coming out narratives (e.g., Plummer 1995).

rights to LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) identifying people.

Valocchi describes of the vested interests of queer theory as “the deviant cases, or anatomies, genders, sexual practices, and identities that do not neatly fit into either category of the binaries or that violate the normative alignment of sex, gender, and sexuality” (Valocchi 2005:753). Valocchi argues that queer positions have emphasised the examination of the fringes and outside - those invisible points. Thus, the advantage of a queer theory perspective is that it demonstrates that sex and gender categories are constructed and that the privileging of the dualities and binaries does not capture lived experience adequately.

### **2.3.1 QUEER THEORY AND THE POLITICS OF SEX**

The politics of queer theory emerged from the sex or pornography debates of the 1980s (see Califia 2000, 2002; Duggan and Hunter 2006; MacKinnon and Dworkin 1997; McElroy 1995; Rubin 1984; Segal and McIntosh 1993). The sex debates have been one of the most contested issues within the feminist and lesbian and gay movements. Some radical feminists, including many lesbian feminists, argued in support of pornography censorship (e.g., Dworkin 1981; MacKinnon 1982; MacKinnon and Dworkin 1997). Morgan (1980:128) asserts that “pornography is the theory, and rape is the practice”, implying that pornography is necessarily male-dominated, exploitative, harmful to women, and can lead to sexual violence.

The sex debates fostered unlikely allegiances; for example, in their anti-pornography efforts, radical feminists such as MacKinnon and Dworkin found themselves on the same side of the debate as, and working with, American conservatives who opposed women’s rights (Duggan et al. 2006). In opposition to the censorship of pornography were other radicals arguing in support of it (e.g., McElroy 1995; Vance 1984). Those in support of pornography argued in favour of sexual libertarianism and challenged the assertion that power should be removed from sex (if it were possible) (Califia 2000; Rubin 1984; Vance 1984). A position in support of pornography asserts that although a great deal of

contemporary pornography is exploitative and misogynistic, the opposition to pornography focuses exclusively on the negative aspects, neglecting the potential benefits of women's explorations of their sexual desires, and taking away women's choice to view or produce pornography (McElroy 1995). Instead of censoring pornography, and driving the business underground, an alternative argued by some feminists in favour of pornography was supporting the sex industry, sex worker rights, and increasing the recognition of women's sexual desires – particularly those desires that anti-pornography feminists and conservatives deemed, respectively, misogynistic and unnatural/perverse. Interestingly, both the anti- and pro-pornography positions had in common the notion that sexuality and heteronormativity were critical in understanding social organisation.

Framing these debates in the early 1980s was the rise of social and political conservatism in the West that was espoused by the governments led by Ronald Reagan in the United States and the Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom. The AIDS epidemic is credited by both queer theorists and its critics as bringing together factions of the gay and lesbian movements (e.g., Califia 2002; Jeffreys 2003; Walters 1996) who were concerned with the large numbers of gay (and MSM) men dying and the lack of government support and intervention in finding out what was killing them. AIDS and the social conservatism of the 1980s brought forth criticism of gay male subcultures (Cohen 1996). Two examples of these are the raids of bathhouses in both Canada and the United States (Warner 2002), and the Spanner case in the UK where men were prosecuted for engaging in consensual homosexual BDSM activities (Bell and Binnie 2001; White 2006). Coinciding with the preoccupation with policing sex were international debates regarding the censorship of pornography (Califia 2000; MacKinnon and Dworkin 1997).

Issues and debates discussed in feminist and postmodern thought, and the socio-political climate of the 1980s, introduced the ideas of sexuality and sexual freedom and liberties that are central to queer theory. Reagan's neglect of the AIDS crisis, not mentioning it publicly until 1987 (Cole and Denny 1994), was important to queer theory in that it offered a substantial piece of evidence of the importance of sexuality, not only in terms of social rights but in determining which lives the government values. Who people have sex with and the types of

sex that they engage in holds a great deal of social significance. These issues are engendered in sociocultural narratives about sexuality, relationships, livelihoods, kinship, and citizenship. Sexuality is private only in those instances when it is heteronormative and, thus, not contestable (Califia 2000; Seidman 2005; Warner 1999b).

A queer theory position asserts that social inequality is the result of cultural meanings that privilege some performances and subjectivities over others. One of the central arguments of queer theory is that difference is neither essential, nor is it the root of social inequality (Butler 1999). Butler (1993a) argues that the cultural meanings associated with gender and sexuality produce inequality. O’Driscoll (1996) points out that queer theory would not have been possible without work on identity in gay and lesbian studies, but that at the same time, queer theory critiques the identity positions that are articulated in lesbian and gay studies. Schlichter (2004:554) makes the position more explicit in stating that “the queer project could not exist without the identity politics of sexual minorities inside and outside the academy”. One could assert that queer theory is the product of gay and lesbian studies as well as feminist and poststructuralist theories. However, queer articulations also examine the identity politics that both gay and lesbian studies and feminism have used in their theory and activism and have taken for granted as fact.

### **2.3.2 PRACTICING QUEER THEORY**

The shift from homosexual, to gay, and more recently to queer cannot be reduced to language shift.<sup>32</sup> All three terms represent changes in the conceptualisations of sexual difference. Weeks (1977) argues that the change from homosexual to gay signified both a cultural shift from the stigmatisation of the homosexual and a change in the way that gays and lesbians viewed themselves. In addition to the changing attitude towards the stigma of sexual difference, this linguistic shift also represented a change in the conceptualisation

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<sup>32</sup> Just as I have argued that not all queers are gay or lesbian, allow me to state explicitly that not all those who identify as LGBT identify as queer.

of sexuality from the medicalisation of the ‘condition’ of homosexuality to the ‘social identity’ of gay and lesbian categories (see Sections 2.2.2 and 2.2.3). The more recent shift from ‘gay’ to ‘queer’ could be argued to mark another change in the sociocultural view on alternative sexualities. On the one hand, queer is an umbrella term encapsulating many types of sexual desires, preferences, and ways of identifying. However, it also challenges the focus on same-sex desire as a unified landscape for identification. In addition, the motive of the adoption of the term is part of its meaning.

As mentioned earlier in this section, one significant contribution of queer theory is the way in which it problematises concepts that are taken for granted, such as man, woman, male, female, straight, gay, bisexual, and so forth. Queer theory broaches the questions of which lives, as well as sexuality, experience, and identification, counts, and who decides this. By calling into question the naturalness and effectiveness of identity categories for social organisation, queer theorists have challenged the identity politics that have been central for feminist and gay and lesbian movements. The rejection of identity categories as the key to liberation-oriented politics switches the emphasis towards the actions and activities of individuals. While some (e.g., Jeffreys 2003; Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1994; Walters 1996) have been critical of the focus of queer theory and activism on individualistic politics and strategies for social change, an organised political struggle would be counter-intuitive to a paradigm that bases much of its argument on the problematics of identity based politics.<sup>33</sup>

Butler (1999) argues that identity categories are problematic and regulatory for two reasons. Firstly, these categories are either used to oppress members of certain categories or to privilege other categories. Secondly, they are used as the basis of liberation politics that are rooted in overcoming the normalising oppression produced by the categories. In other words, Butler’s argument here is that identity categories are *exclusionary*. Some identities are excluded from being considered ‘normal’ and oppression is based on that abnormality. Members of those shunned identity categories then base politics on their difference, thus developing their own exclusivity. As a result, it is possible to

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<sup>33</sup> In addition to the problematisation of identity, the main themes of queer theory also include heteronormativity and transgression. All three of these will be explored in depth in Chapter 3 using a queer sociological framework.

see that there are three effects of identity categories: they create hierarchies, promote normativity, and are exclusionary. On the other hand, it must be conceded that they also provide an effective platform for theory, politics, and activism. It may not be possible to completely eradicate identity categories and social labels. Furthermore, it may not be preferable given some of the enabling aspects of them. However, identities do not need to be treated as the basis for collective struggle. A strategy for overcoming the inequality produced by identity politics adopted by queer positions has been treating identities as complex, fleeting, and multiple (cf. Butler 1999). If there are multitudes of sexual identities, rather than binaries or triptychs, then it becomes more difficult to assign values to them and place them within a hierarchy. Furthermore, if the top of the hierarchy is rendered as problematic and constructed as the other categories, then there is no reason for it to be believed to be stagnant or dominant.

The normative assumptions surrounding sexuality are *heteronormative*. Warner (1999b:25-26) compiles a list of what is considered ‘good’ or heteronormative sexuality and what deviates from it. While heteronormativity idealises the married or committed dyadic, vanilla, monogamous heterosexual relationship with intergenerational participants, bad sexual citizens engage in practices that differ from that privileged set. While heterosexuality may be the lynchpin of heteronormativity, it can be observed that heterosexuality alone does not guarantee a heteronormative relationship. Heteronormativity equates heterosexuality with humanity (Warner 1993), and presumes heterosexuality unless a breach or transgression of sexual norms can be either observed or assumed. However, it not only places sexuality into compartments of ‘good’ or normal sexuality and ‘bad’ or abnormal sexuality, it also creates hierarchies within sexual identity categories and notions of the good and bad sexual citizen.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, heteronormative frameworks aid in the construction of the institution of heterosexuality (Ingraham 1996), which is promoted and advocated at both structural and individual levels of society. This is evident in the ways in which full civil or citizenship rights are accorded to those whose practices fall under the ‘good’ or heteronormative.

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<sup>34</sup> Sexual citizenship is discussed in detail in Section 3.3.1.



This counters gay assimilation perspectives that advocate for the ‘good’ LGBT sexual citizen (e.g., Sullivan 1996); the queer cannot be seen as such. Rather than supporting the position that sexual dissidents are ‘the same’, i.e., heteronormative in all respects excluding the subjects of their desire, queer theorists, such as Warner (1999a, 1999b), have argued that there is power in disrupting notions of the normal. This position suggests that it is through the presentation and acknowledgement of queerness, the rejection of the normal, and politics of parody and performance that it is possible to create social change (Butler 1999). This is not to suggest that all transgressive acts are subversive, nor that they are necessarily motivated by politics. However, by demonstrating how the norms are what queer theorists such as Butler might refer to as ‘discursive’, or what sociologists might refer to as ‘socially constituted’, it is possible to expose the myth of natural and normal heterosexuality. Transgression differs from resistance in that, in terms of sexuality, it is not merely resisting norms but is also constituted by crossing the boundaries of those norms and exposing the fallacy of the good sexual citizen. Therefore, it may be possible to see transgression as a countenance to sexual shame (Warner 1999a). As both queer theorists (Butler 1993) and their critics (Jeffreys 2003) make clear, it is not necessarily subversive to enact practices that counter hegemonic sex, gender, and heterosexuality. However, it could be suggested that those transgressions, and the acknowledgement of shame, without feeling the need to conform to the notion of the good sexual citizen, expose heteronormativity as socially constituted, thereby challenging the association of bad sexual citizenship which Munt (2007) argues clings to the sexually marked.

## **2.4 QUEER SOCIOLOGY**

The dialogue between queer theory and sociology can be traced to the mid-1990s (e.g., Epstein 1994, Gamson 1995, Seidman 1994). In 1994 Seidman edited a special issue of *Sociological Theory*, a journal of the American Sociological Association, on ‘sociologising queer theory’. This collection was one of the first to bring multiple works together on the topic. Many of those essays

were reprinted in a book collection edited by Seidman (1996), *Queer Theory/Sociology*, which explores the connections between queer theory and social theory. A common theme between the papers in the journal issue (Part II of *Queer Theory/Sociology*) is the rationalisation of queer theory to sociologists (e.g., Epstein 1994; Namaste 1994; Seidman 1994).<sup>35</sup>

Namaste (1994) contrasts sociological studies of sexuality that use the deviance model with the ways in which poststructuralism, particularly the work of Foucault and Derrida, informs queer theory and approaches to identity and categorisation. She then turns her attention towards envisioning a sociology of sexuality that employs the ideas of these poststructuralist thinkers to make the argument that poststructuralism requires analysing the relationship between heterosexuality and homosexuality (p. 228), and that this “transforms the organisation of contemporary sexual politics” (p. 229) by “deregulating heterosexual hegemony” (p. 230) and moving “beyond the confines of an inside/outside model” (p. 230). Namaste offers a convincing argument on the importance of queer theory and sociology to move beyond the universalising and minoritising or inside/outside ways of understanding sexuality that scholars such as Sedgwick (2008) and Fuss (1991) have critiqued. However, Namaste stops her analysis short with that sentence. As a result, it is not clear from her paper how she envisions such an undertaking, in part because, except in relation to research on deviant models of sexualities, sociology itself is absent from her discussion. Although the notion that poststructuralist theory may push sociology beyond sexual binaries has advantages, Namaste does not explore the unique contributions possible from sociologists. Drawing from Sedgwick who notes that the universalising and minoritising positions represent a contradiction “internal to all of the important twentieth century understandings of homo/hetero definition” (2008:01), it may be possible to overcome the inside/outside model if sexuality is

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<sup>35</sup> The rationalisation of queer theory to sociologists remains an incomplete and necessary task. In an otherwise comprehensive sociology dictionary, Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner neglect to mention queer theory in either its own entry or in the ‘sexualities’ entry (2006:346). They state, “Sociology continues to grow and expand as an academic discipline, and the fifth edition reflects new trends and developments in theory and research. The principle difficulty is what to exclude rather than include. Our selection attempts to express what we feel are genuine contributions to the vocabulary of sociology” (2006:ix). As I show in the coming pages, sociologists have made ‘genuine contributions’ to the discipline using queer perspectives.

conceived outside of the sexuality binary. In contrast to Namaste, I would argue that rather than a single direction of benefit, that is queer theory benefiting sociology, that sociology and sociological thinking can advance queer theory, and be a major contributor in the next generation of queer scholarship.

Epstein (1994) formulates an argument similar to Namaste's, although he goes further in that he makes a case detailing the importance of sociology to queer theory. He outlines sexual meanings and categorisations as an area for sociologists to consider (p. 198). Epstein suggests that sociologists attempt to understand both the micro and macro patterns of negotiations of sexuality, and that doing so would advance queer theory. Few would dispute the importance of studying both practices and institutions. However, he does not make clear how sociologists in particular are better able to study these issues than other queer theorists.

Green (2007:43) asserts that "the effort to synthesise sociology and queer theory is a perilous venture" because he sees queer theory as most effective at deconstructionism and that this is in opposition to a sociological approach. In an earlier paper, he posits that adopting a queer theory perspective necessitates sociologists disavow early sociological texts on sexuality (Green 2002). However, as Green (2007) suggests, seminal sociological work such as McIntosh's 1968 paper have been influential to queer theory, and some queer theory (cf. Warner 1993) have examined the social. His concerns about the efficacy of queer theory seem to rest in distinctions of how he envisions what they ought to be: sociology needs to consider the social, and queer theory specialises in the deconstruction of the self. It is not clear why the strengths of queer theory in deconstruction cannot be applied to the social, or the relevance of the social to sexuality.

Like Green, Stein and Plummer (1994) argue that queer theory has focused too much on literary analysis and,

What can the rereading of a nineteenth century novel really tell us about the pains of gay Chicanos or West Indian lesbians now, for example? Indeed, such postmodern readings may well tell us more about the lives of middle-class radical intellectuals than anything else! (Stein and Plummer 1994:184).

Stein and Plummer assert that sociologists, and social scientists more generally, are well equipped to study how sexuality is experienced in individual lives and enacted in the social world. However, it is essential that sociologists attempt to

forge an alliance with queer theorists, rather than challenge the importance or validity of areas of inquiry different from our own. There remains little to be won by revisiting the debates between the social and the cultural. Studies of sexuality, queer or not, are marginalised within the academy, and sexuality continues to be an area of human experience where nonnormative sexual expressions and behaviours are policed, sanctioned, and penalised (Stein and Plummer 1994). As a result of this, it is imperative to interact with queer theorists in order to strengthen queer theory and social approaches to sexuality. It is necessary for sociologists and social scientists to recognise the contributions both of early sociologists of sexuality, including Plummer's early work, and to also appreciate the textual analyses of queer theorists that have led to the formulation of a queer sociology, and also to recognise that this is a 'genuine contribution' to sociology.<sup>36</sup> If these bodies of work are overlooked or neglected, it is possible that the resulting arguments will lack the strength they may be able to achieve. There is no doubt that sociologists are uniquely able to tackle current issues of sexuality in society in ways that place primacy on the social world.

## 2.5 CONCLUSION

I began this chapter by defining gender and sexuality as operational concepts. Once I had established how they are distinct but entwined terms, I reviewed the sociological contributions in the areas of gender and sexuality. I underscored sociological research from various theoretical frameworks, noting that much of the early relevant research focused on sexual deviance using the techniques of micro-sociology, especially ethnomethodology. Feminist sociology also contributed greatly to the sociology of sexuality and in establishing the connections between gender inequality and sexuality. Material feminist analyses of heterosexuality are not only concerned with images and representations of institutionalised heterosexuality throughout the lifecourse, but also in other implications of this. Jackson (1996, 2006) and Richardson (1996) assert that the

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<sup>36</sup> This is in reference to Footnote 34 where I mention that Abercrombie et al. exclude any mention of queer theory from *The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology (Fifth Edition)*, by stating that they have only included "genuine contributions" to sociology (2006:ix).

importance of a sociological feminist inquiry into heterosexuality is important for understanding the social world, including sexuality and gender. Both argue that the study of heterosexuality needs to take into account and be grounded in the material realities of women's lives. The way in which these recent feminist sociological discussions have drawn from queer theory – but in distinctively sociological ways – provides a fertile ground for further research and intellectual exploration. Following the discussion of the contributions made by sociology, I outlined the contributions of queer theory, including the intellectual and sociopolitical context that gave way to its development. I also discussed some of the major contributions of queer theory and its focus on agency in terms of identity, transgression, and heteronormativity. I ended the chapter with a discussion of literature made from sociologists actively engaged in queer theory.

A salient point to draw from this chapter is that although sociology and queer theory may differ in their approaches to sexuality and their methods of analysis, they can be seen as similar in the ways in which sexuality is conceptualised. The three texts I reviewed as seminal queer theory texts can be read in sociological positions. Issues of 'fluidity' and 'multiplicity' that feature extensively in queer theory and particularly in Butler (1999) are also evident in symbolic interaction research (e.g., Goffman 1959). Sedgwick's (2008) work on the universalising and minoritising treatment of homosexuality appears to be linked to that of McIntosh (1968) on the social categories of homosexuality. Warner's (1993) collection on queer theory considers explicitly social and socio-political issues, whilst introducing the concept of heteronormativity. Thus, *identity*, *transgression*, *heteronormativity*, and *sexual citizenship* using a combination of queer theory and feminist sociology will be discussed in the following chapter. In addition, in the next chapter and throughout this thesis, I demonstrate how the theoretical contributions detailed in this chapter can be used alongside a non-sexually based sociological analysis attentive to the enabling and constraining aspects of social structure and individuals to offer an alternative way to theorise and conduct empirical research on sex and society. Additionally, as will become evident in Part 2 of this thesis, it is possible to apply the theoretical and sociological positioning of queer theory to the results of empirical social science, in this case, discourse analysis of conversations, and to use those results to support many of the claims that queer theory makes.

## THEORISING SEXUALITY

### 3.0 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I discuss social norms and develop a queer sociology position which answers some of the theoretical issues that both sociologists and queer theorists have had difficulty tackling. Thus, I offer a version of queer theory that takes into account the literature discussed in Chapter 2, the ‘duality of structure’ that Giddens (1984) proposes in reference to ‘agents’ and ‘structures’ in the ‘constitution of society’, as well as additional constitutive elements of society: social meaning, discourse, and everyday experience or interaction. These other constitutive structural dimensions draw from materialist feminism and operate at the levels of individuals and social institutions. I tie this position to social norms and the three major themes of queer theory identified in Chapter 2: heteronormativity, identity, and transgression. I propose a new way of thinking sociologically about sexuality: moving past theoretical purism, in which a perspective becomes a new form of identity politics for its advocates, to find that there are views from diverse sources which together can provide a useful framework for analysing the social world. As a result, my approach incorporates sociology and queer theory.

There are a variety of theoretical and empirical approaches useful to sociological analyses of sexuality. In Chapter 2, I referred to diverse sociological

frameworks, including labelling theory, symbolic interaction, feminism (of which there are many types, as noted in Section 2.2.4.1), and Marxism. From the variety of respected sociological frameworks it is possible to make two assertions: firstly, there is no single unified sociological theory and the adoption of creative tensions in theories (and methods) is not only welcome but central to the discipline; secondly, there is a lack of integration between micro and macro approaches.

The debate concerning the efficacy of either *micro* or *macro* sociology in explaining the social world is longstanding (see Section 3.1), and I argue, drawing from feminist insights, misguided. Although it is possible to point to and focus on either the interactional or institutional level when conducting research, in the material realities of life neither occurs independently from the other, as sociolinguists from Schiffrin to Cameron have made clear. The second-wave feminist mantra of “the personal is political” may not be the most elegant articulation of the equal importance of both levels of analysis, but it is succinct. Human interaction is tied to social infrastructure, and is augmented by it. At the same time, social representations and institutions evolve as a result of how people live; individual experiences need to be contextualised.

Microsociological approaches (e.g., Garfinkel 1967; Goffman 1959, 1963, 1969, 1981; Sacks 1992) have examined the *lived experiences* of people in certain settings. However, those experiences must be contextualised within the larger socio-political context. For example, laws and norms may be instituted at the structural level as a way for states to exercise social control without physical violence or coercion (Hubbard 2001). However, this is made possible through the informal policing enacted by individuals (Habermas 1996), and cultural and media representations (Attwood 2006, 2009c; Seidman 2005). There are also instances when individuals (i.e., a majority of voters) shape the law. For example, various ballot measures in America concerning the extension of sexuality-based civil rights give voters the option to extend, deny, or in some cases repeal rights to those who are gay or lesbian or engaged in same-sex relationships. Everyday policing, and the ways in which individuals live with laws and norms, illustrate why it is problematic to focus solely on the structural level. Furthermore, the social mediation of sexuality at the dimensions of both individuals and structures is evidence that sexuality is not outside the realm of the social.

### 3.1 QUEERING THE SOCIAL WORLD

While the debate between micro and macro types of analysis is problematic, some attempts to resolve this by focussing solely on their convergence of agents and structures, such as Giddens' (1984) structuration theory, are potentially limiting in their scope of analysis. This is evident when sexuality is explicitly analysed. Giddens' theory of structuration is based on the idea that society is constituted on the enabling and constraining aspects of human agency and social structures in a specific time and space. He successfully synthesises social theories that focus on either the individual or structures, and extends the argument further to illustrate the ways in which these are interconnected. However, using individual agency and structure (mainly of institutions) as the basis for all other social forces synthesising these constitutive features, neglects other aspects of social organisation.<sup>37</sup>

Jackson (2006) provides a fix to this problem. She asserts that there are four dimensions to the study of sexuality instead of two levels: the macro, meaning, everyday experience, and social agents. In other words, she demonstrates the ways in which social life is based on the intersection of various salient lived social dimensions. My concern is that she uses the term 'meaning' to include "the language and discourses constituting our broad cultural understandings of gender and sexuality and the more context bound meanings negotiated in everyday social interaction" (Jackson 2006:108). Taking that further, I claim that one should give "discourse" its own designation separate from "meaning". Social meaning is often ascribed to circulating discourses. However, discourses link the everyday lived experiences of individuals and the social infrastructure in their space. While discourses can be seen as cultural productions, they also take the form of individual narratives. The intersection of these two elements creates meaning at both individual and structural levels.

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<sup>37</sup> Although Giddens does refer to the ways in which these are enacted, he places primacy on agents and structures. As will be evident in the empirical chapters, I view this primacy as misguided.



## 3.2 MAKING SENSE OF SEXUALITY

Imagine, for a moment, a heterosexual couple in London alighting at various stations along the London Underground's Central Line, which stops at 49 stations running east-west. They can engage in relatively stable behaviour and interaction with each other in any neighbourhood as long as they do not violate the hegemonic social code (i.e., are not being a nuisance to other pedestrians, are not engaging in full body contact, are clothed, and so forth). Their sexuality remains unmarked (i.e., 'theirs' or private) if their behaviour and appearance fits within the heteronormative ideals. They would find themselves able to freely share romantically coded affection (e.g., hand holding, linked arms, hugs, kisses) as they travel down a street, and be able to do so unaware to their immediate environment. If, on the other hand, the woman from that heterosexual couple were in a same-sex relationship, she and her partner would have a heightened awareness of time and space, and they would experience different treatment from others for engaging in the same behaviour as a heterosexual couple.

A great deal more attention to the local environment is necessary for managing and maintaining a visibly queer or homosexual relationship in public space. While the only difference is her partner's gender, the same-sex couple's awareness of time-space is crucial in a way that varies from that of a heterosexual couple, and lack of attention to their surroundings and the immediate area may lead to any number of negative outcomes. Stops along the Central Line now no longer represent stops alone, but each one brings new interactants or leads to different responses to their relationship and, in turn, modifications to the ways the couple interacts in time-space: she or her partner might signal to separate their hands or increase the space between their bodies if either one of them becomes wary of the others inhabiting their surroundings.

While people in some areas may be accepting or even welcoming, the experience in other areas might not be positive or neutral. The same-sex couple may find that, whilst in some areas, they receive much more direct attention from men, particularly if she and her girlfriend fit within conventional, or

heteronormative, standards of attractiveness.<sup>38</sup> Although this attention might be ‘positive’ in the sense that it is not disparaging, it can be regarded as unsettling, threatening, and harassing. This unwanted and unwarranted attention also signifies the entitlement the caller feels to comment upon the relationship, the women, or to their sexual practices. In doing so the caller objectifies the women and makes it evident that their relationship is one that warrants public comment; once a romantic or sexual relationship is speculated, they no longer have access to an unmarked sexual status. Meanwhile, further east along the same tube line, the dynamic changes. Teenage boys and men might stop and turn to offer either catcalls or approval. Finally, near the end of the line, particularly in the politically conservative and traditionally working class council estate suburbs, unassuming teenagers walking down the high street might suggest that the couple ‘join the missing list’ and offer their assistance in ‘disappearing’ them. These are experiences that might be routine for the same-sex couple, but foreign to heterosexual couples as they walk down the local high road from the station.

This constructed example demonstrates the ways in which discourses of sexuality are shaped by and vary across time-space. There are subtle but significant differences, not only between the binaries of urban/rural, west/east, today/yesterday, and so forth, but also within what is often considered the same physical space. For example, managing a homosexual or queer sexuality in a large urban environment requires constant behavioural adjustments dependent upon the fine details of time and space. This is not true only in cities, but can be observed in rural spaces as well (Gray 2009). This is not to suggest that victims are responsible for others’ comments or behaviours enacted towards them, but, rather, that queer interaction can be more variable depending on the local environment and participants reassess the environment more readily. Being queer necessitates social reflection at the interactional level (Warner 1993). Relationships that appear to be heteronormative fall under the radar whilst same-sex or other visibly nonnormative relationships do not.

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<sup>38</sup> See also Pascoe (2003, 2005), who argues that men approve of lesbian and bisexual women (but not gay and bisexual men) not from a position of enlightenment but because they can encode their own desires for women in it, and see the relationship between two women as for their gaze.

Within the London context, and throughout the West, the heterosexual couple rarely needs to worry about how others might interpret and react to their interaction.<sup>39</sup> Members of the unmarked or default social categories can survive without a bifurcated consciousness, or an understanding of the social positions of both the marked and unmarked. Therefore, it is difficult to explain how heterosexuality is implicit in social organisation to members of that dominant and social category. However, the micromanagement necessary for the queer couple is unnecessary for the heterosexual couple, because their relationship is held to be the norm in both practice and ideal (for example, both formally in law and informally in media representations and language) and is not scrutinised in the same way. The heterosexual couple, heteronormative or not, does not need to separate from each other and act as friends instead of lovers, or find their relationship is viewed as a public commodity to be at turns commented upon, judged, celebrated, objectified, and vilified. This contrasts greatly with the homosexual couple, particularly the lesbian relationship, which can be seen as a commodity or a public issue in a way that heterosexual relationships are rarely seen (Jackson and Gilbertson 2009).

Thus, the following assertions can be made when applying a sociologically informed queer theory to this example. First, issues of time and space are necessary in understanding sexuality. When people routinely critically assess their environment and behaviours based on the reactions and policing from other actors, sexuality can be seen as vital to the social landscape. Second, the couple's interaction with both each other and others demonstrates the ways in which social order is created, maintained, and policed at the interactional level between individual agents. The laws and facts regarding their relationship are unchanged as they move throughout the city, and, despite this, other individuals respond to them in such a way that their behaviour modifies depending on them. Third, it also demonstrates that those interactions rely on shared social meaning at the interactional level. The participants may communicate nonverbally with each other when assessing their environment and, additionally, they also attempt to understand the social meanings that others might be assigning to their interaction.

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<sup>39</sup> This is more true for some heterosexual couples than others. For example, heterosexuals who disrupt some norms may, in some circumstances, receive unwarranted attention (e.g., interfaith, interracial, and intergenerational couples).

Fourth, it demonstrates social inequality, based in both gender and sexuality, evident at the dimensions of individuals and social infrastructure. Fifth, discourses of sexuality and gender are apparent, particularly in the objectification of women and notion that it is acceptable to comment on nonnormative sexuality. In other words, this example illustrates how it is possible to develop a sociological theory that draws from queer theory utilising the five dimensions of social life attached to sexuality listed in Section 3.1.

It can be argued that in order to understand sexuality sociologically, individual practices and interaction, social infrastructure, and the socio-political-cultural climate are relevant. It is not possible to contextualise sexuality without observing the ways in which these areas of social life are influenced by each other. Queer theory offers sociology a viable framework for understanding sexuality. It then follows that a queer sociology could offer an analysis that is attentive to interaction, practices, and context.

### **3.2.1 THE SOCIAL COMPREHENSIVE**

Warner lists some of the ways in which being queer leads to social reflection or bifurcated consciousness.

Every person who comes to a queer self-understanding knows in one way or another that her stigmatisation is connected with gender, the family, notions of individual freedom, the state, public speech, consumption and desire, nature and culture, maturation, reproductive politics, racial and national fantasy, class identity, truth and trust, censorship, intimate life and social display, terror and violence, health care, and deep cultural norms about the bearing of the body (Warner 1993:xiii).

His examples include many of the central issues of sociological analysis and cut across distinctions between the micro and macro, socio-cultural and socio-political. His list, along with the example I used in Section 3.2, demonstrates how sexuality alters one's social landscape, and the ways in which one interacts in that environment as well as with others. Sexuality is profoundly social, but, as the discussion in Section 2.2 illustrates, it has been overlooked and taken for granted.

Giddens posits that the central feature of social analysis must be those social practices which are dependent upon time and space, or what he refers to as *time-space* (1984:2). Therefore, if the intention is to understand some part of the social world, it is misguided to place the emphasis on either the micro or macro social levels. It is possible to make the argument that focusing primarily on either individuals or social structures means that a great deal of what comprises what I refer to as the *social comprehensive* is overlooked: everyday experiences and interaction exist simultaneous to social infrastructure. Social practices are considered recursive, or repeated continually, although not in exactly the same way every time, and in such a way that they can be seen to both represent and help constitute the social infrastructure in which they are embedded. It is not possible to contextualise either the agents or the structures if we neglect the importance of time and space.

As I have suggested, the queer sociology that I present in this thesis is focused on understanding the role of sexuality in the social world and the ways in which sexuality is a fundamental part of social organisation at the levels of both the agents, or individual actors, and that of structures, or institutions and organisations. It is possible to see how sexuality is managed and maintained at the level of agents from the example of a queer couple provided in Section 3.2. In addition, the institutional influence of the heterosexual imaginary is evident in examples such as partnership laws. Arguments that sexuality is a ‘private’ topic imply that it is dealt with *only* at the level of individual agents and actors. However, this is not the case given the large number of formal laws and rules governing sexual behaviour and relationships. Additionally, individuals manage their sexualities in relation to their localised environment, an arrangement that also disputes the notion that sexuality is private. The case of sexuality demonstrates that both the structural and interactional levels are important in understanding the social world and that individuals and structures (including such social infrastructures as the state and media) together create, maintain, and govern norms, boundaries, identities, and rights.

As essential as both individuals and structures are in explaining the social world, Loyal (2003) suggests that it would be problematic to take the position that these two levels alone can offer a complete explanation of social life. In addition to these dimensions, as mentioned in Section 3.0, there are other social contexts

that are relevant, particularly to the study of sexuality in society that fall under the umbrella of emergent discourse (Schiffrin 1994). Social meanings, discourses, and the co-construction of everyday experiences work along with individuals and social structures in creating, maintaining, and transforming society. Queer theorists based in the humanities thus offer a great deal to a queer sociology through their discipline's studies of meaning and discourse. It is a point that Jackson makes:

Certainly,

Where queer theorists have tended to concentrate on texts, discourses, and cultural practices, there is clearly a need for approaches that pay attention to social structures, to the socially situated contexts of everyday sexual practice and experience, and to the material conditions under which our sexualities are lived (Jackson 2005:22).

She articulates the areas where sociologists can contribute to the field of queer theory: the analysis and study of everyday experience, practice, interaction, and issues of the temporal-cultural context. However, Jackson separates textual and discourse analyses from sociological positions, whereas I argue that discourses from everyday or naturally occurring interaction have the potential to illuminate the social contexts of lived experience.

Examining the interactional and structural levels in conjunction with the discourses and meanings of everyday experience could be an effective method for understanding social phenomena. The interplay of individuals, structures, meaning, discourse, and experience are evident in examples such as Garfinkel's case study of Agnes and the construction of gender. But Garfinkel treats larger questions concerning social organisation as if they are abstract and removed from the interactional levels (see 1967:viii, for example). However, as I have already articulated in Section 2.2.3, his case study of Agnes would have been strengthened had he considered why Agnes needed to present herself as intersex rather than transgendered. That Agnes desired surgery at a time when it was illegal for medical professionals to perform such surgeries on transgendered people is significant. It could be argued that the temporal-cultural context of both Agnes and Garfinkel inform their interaction. Without question, understanding the larger socio-political issues makes it possible to contextualise the interaction. Although an ethnomethodologist would argue that the interactional level informs

the social structures, it cannot explain adequately the case study of Agnes as a transgendered woman. An approach that is attentive to multiple dimensions of social life allows us to better understand it.

### **3.2.2 QUEER SOCIOLOGY AND THE UN/MARKED**

In Chapter 2 I discussed issues of power and politics as tied to gender and sexuality. Implicit in those discussions of power is the *marking* of relevant social categories (c.f. Tannen 1995). Marking distinguishes between groupings, and in particular is used to distinguish breaks from the norm, but, more than that, it positions some categories as normal, and others as different, abnormal, or marginalised. Referring to examples from the previous chapter, femmes can be misunderstood as unmarked or rendered invisible because they appear to fit within conventional or aspirational heterosexual gender (Munt 1998); alternatively, masculinity can be mistaken as androgynous or gender-free (Bright in Faderman 1992; Smith 1987).

In theorising a sociology of the unmarked, Brekhus (1999:36) is critical of social research that studies the marginalised stating that marginal groups such as women, African Americans, and queers receive “disproportionate attention relative to [their] size or frequency”. It is possible to posit that the unmarked do not receive a disproportionate amount of scholarly interest. Rather, the marked is only examined through the lens of their difference, while the experiences of the unmarked are generalised and ‘normal’. In order to further articulate this point, again I return to the work of Smith (1987) and the argument that the unmarked is the hegemonic position. Smith argues that attempts to see the world as gender-free adopt a masculine view. This position is also evident in Ingraham’s critique of feminist sociology: it examines the experiences of heterosexual women as if they represent all women whilst neglecting the problematics of that underlying ‘heterosexual imaginary’. Without the marking of some categories, other categories would not be unmarked, thus a sociological inquiry into the generalised categories of marking necessitates that the marked and unmarked need to be contextualised in relation to each other.

As demonstrated in Chapter 2, sociological studies of sexuality have focused on the experiences of the sexually marginal, but this attention is not problematic in the ways that Brekhus suggests. It is instead a response to the sociological focus on the sexually unmarked whereby the experiences of the marginal are neglected from the discourses of the norm and the study of both normative and nonnormative experience can contribute to sociological understanding. In Chapter 2, I explained how heterosexuality is often implied and taken for granted in mainstream (and some feminist) sociology. As Halberstam (2005) has argued, queer time and space can be different. Brekhus appears to be making the argument that marginality has been over-emphasised, but perhaps a more nuanced reading is appropriate. It could be argued that the unmarked is presumed to tell the experiences of everyone, and that studies of the marginal remain outside of mainstream humanities and social science discourses (this would then explain why gender studies, gay and lesbian studies, queer studies, and disability studies have emerged within the last thirty years).

It is equally problematic to assume that the study of the marked offers little for understanding the unmarked. Brekhus is dismissive of queer theory when stating, “queer theory’s own celebration and accentuation of ‘radical extremes’ actually reproduces its status as a segregated theory of the ‘exotic’ and the ‘marginal’” (1999:43). Queer and feminist theories offer much more than a segregated theory. Throughout this thesis I posit that queer theory provides a framework through which it is possible to understand the importance of sexuality in society and social organisation, and that this is crucial to understanding both marked and unmarked sexual statuses.

Theories of the marked, whether feminist or queer, address issues of social organisation and inequality using bifurcated consciousness. In other words, marginal positions require an understanding of both the marked position that is occupied and the unmarked position that is dominant. It is possible to see the importance people assign to identities, whether normative or nonnormative, when a normative alignment is idealised; to observe the effects of transgression on social norms; and to understand the mechanisation of underlying assumptions governing social organisation, such as heteronormativity. Although Walford (described in Chapter 5) exists as a space that is unmarked, in that it is both a nonsexual online space and a space where participants proclaim heterosexual



desires, my research suggests that social constraint may be enabling the marked/unmarked dichotomy. Unmarked territory is created and maintained both through promoting what that normalcy is and also in refusing queerness as well. The potentially enabling aspects of social constraint are not unproblematic; it is only enabling for those individuals who can both place themselves and be placed by others into the category of the unmarked. A queer sociological approach attentive to identity, transgression, and heteronormativity fosters an understanding of the ways in which sexuality is a crucial component in the online community I base my empirical research upon, and the ways in which community members demonstrate their involvement and membership (see Chapters 6-8).

### **3.2.3 SOCIAL NORMS**

Throughout Chapter 2, I referred to *social norms* of sexuality. Although social norms are contextualised throughout this thesis in relation to sexuality, building on those earlier discussions, I consider social norms, or those behaviours or attitudes expected of people and what are often expected from others, as an integral part of prescriptive and proscriptive social organisation and interaction (Lapinski and Rimal 2004). This includes the management of issues such as sexuality (Warner 2002). Social norms and the ways in which they are informally policed are an intrinsic part of human societies. Fehr and Fischbacher state that “no human societies exist without social norms. [...] In fact, the ability to develop and enforce social norms is probably one of the distinguishing characteristics of the human species” (2004b:63). Drawing from Fehr and Fischbacher and the importance of norms to humanity, it can be argued that although defining a “social norm” can be theoretically contentious, for purposes here it will be understood as those behaviours or beliefs that people are expected to do or hold, and that they in turn expect of others. In particular, discussions of social norms will be primarily tied to sexuality.

The literature of social norms is broad, including cognitive science and game theoretical experiments (e.g., Fehr and Fischbacher 2004a; Kreps et al., 2001), the philosophy of norms (e.g., Bicchieri 2006), the biological and

evolutionary basis of social norms (e.g., Ostrom 2000), the importance of social norms in relation to ‘social problems’ such as obesity and adolescent rebellions such as sexual activity and drug use (e.g., Croker et al. 2009; Lewis and Neighbors 2006; Wu et al. 2007), the social psychology of norms (e.g., Cialdini and Trost 1998; Nolan et al. 2008), and the relation between social norms and economics (e.g., Dowling and Pfeffer 1975; Elster 1989; Ostrom 2000). In some of these instances, the emphasis is placed upon situational problems which are relatively easy to experiment upon: for example, how normative information affects household energy consumption (Schultz et al. 2007) and the prisoners’ dilemma, a classic public-good experiment in which participants can choose to cooperate or defect from the game (Fehr and Fischbacher 2004b; Kreps et al 2001). Rather than concentrating on situational dilemmas, or testing the emergence of social norms, my interest lies in the social norms of sexuality.

Social norms can be understood as cooperative (Posner 2000). However, there are challenges to this focus on evolutionary human cooperation (Fehr et al. 2002). Instead, it might be more useful to view them as reciprocal (Bicchieri 2006), and as a shared belief by members of a group or community (Gibbs 1981). Bicchieri (2006) argues that social norms are powerful when people feel expected to follow them, and expect that others adopt them as well. People adopt social norms for many reasons. They may agree with the norm, fear the consequences associated with norm transgression, or follow it because they expect others to do so, too. Regardless of the rationale behind norm adoption, which may be internalised, it is noteworthy that social norms are not followed only as a result of an internal regulation but as a result of a combination of external and internalised pressure. As Gibbs (1981) notes, social norms can be seen as covert social phenomena, which are most visible when violated. While the benefits of norm conformity are typically group membership and belonging, there are negative consequences for rebellion and transgression (Cialdini and Trost 1998).

### 3.2.4 LAWS AND NORMS

Laws and social norms, *de jure* and *de facto*, can be seen in virtually all societies, and lawless states could be seen as more stringently policed than those with formalised legal systems. The strong social policing that occurs in the absence of legal order may be due to the usefulness of norms in creating social order and orderliness (cf. Sacks 1992). Social norms are often implicit, rarely formalised in writing outside of travel guides and etiquette books, and they are typically governed by social pressure and social consequences, such as exclusion for norm violation. However, social norms can be represented in laws and in media depictions.

Habermas (1996) distinguishes between *facts* and *norms*. He argues that *facts* are norms which have been formalised into law. As a result, they do not rely upon shared or regular communication, but institutional hegemony. In his explanation of social norms he builds upon his theory of communicative action (1986, 1989) to state that communication and communicative action are based upon the adoption of norms.

As long as language is used only as a medium for transmitting information, action coordination proceeds through the mutual influence that actors exert on each other in a purposive-rational manner. On the other hand, as soon as the illocutionary forces of speech acts take on an action-coordinating role, language itself supplies the primary source of social integration (Habermas 1996:18).

One of the main points that Habermas makes here that I wish to expand upon is the link between norms and communicative action. It is possible to argue that one of the most crucial, if not the key, feature of norms is the relationship to communication and what he refers to as “social integration.” The importance of this, I would suggest, is the assertion that the adoption of norms is not necessarily about what people believe to be right or best. Instead, norms are both followed and enforced in order to fit in or belong to a certain group. It is here then that it is possible to examine the connection between social norms and the construction of the unmarked. The unmarked or ‘normal’ can be seen as the relatively straightforward adoption, articulation, and enactment of social norms. Thus, when people adopt norms, they are more readily accepted into a group and can feel as

though they belong. As a result of both, they can be viewed as ‘normal’ within that particular social grouping.

Sacks (1992) asserts that the adoption of norms allows people to demonstrate their position (or sometimes to ‘pass’) in membership categories. This normalcy has a blending in effect: people have the opportunity to move and situate themselves without generating attention towards themselves or their practices. A limitation of Habermas’s argument in *Between Facts and Norms* (1996) is that he posits that norms emerge from laws. Although this is the case at times, the law can also be rewritten on the basis of changing norms and/or individual or collective pressure. In addition, the presence of norms in spaces without formal laws or *facts* also seems to suggest other factors. However, it is possible from Habermas’ extensive work on the subject to understand that the norms and the *de jure* of the Habermasian approach entrench notions of social cohesion and, as an extension of that, are tools of social control. The benefits of social norms extend beyond the state level (if and when there is a state): they help to develop a schema by which people can interpret and navigate their everyday interactions.

The ability to read social codes and the adoption of social norms are key to socialisation (Giddens 1991). Human interaction can be seen as based upon patterns and anticipated routines (Goffman 1959). Norms and mores foster the emergence of social scripts. Although these scripts can be read as constraining, the social integration elements enable a reassurance of stability in the social environment (Goffman 1969). Norms are learned through practice, and they exist as norms precisely because they are not inherent. For example, some online communities recommend lurking, or non-participatory presence, to new users before they begin to contribute, and suggest doing so is good ‘netiquette’ because new users learn some of the group-specific norms before entering the dialogue. Although norms vary depending upon location, topic, community, and group, Giddens (1991) posits that the strongest norms are often those regarding contentious moral issues such as sexuality, illness, and criminality. Norms surrounding sexuality, and recent debates on same-sex marriage and other LGBTQ issues support this. Goffman’s analysis also ties sexuality, mental illness, and criminal behaviours to stigma. These areas can be seen as guarded precisely because they have the potential to disrupt the social order of communities, as well

as personal and institutional equilibrium. Thus, social norms can be understood as tied to both informal and formal policing when those norms are enacted in law.

### 3.3 HETERONORMATIVITY

Contemporary sexual social norms can be understood as primarily centred upon straight subjects and an exclusive heterosexual experience (Warner 1999b). The heteronormative language of sexuality supports this (Kitzinger 2005a, 2005b). There is perhaps no concept more intrinsic to queer theory and this thesis than *heteronormativity*. It underlies the succeeding discussions in this chapter on identity (Section 3.5) and transgression (Section 3.6). Furthermore, heteronormativity is one of the major ways in which sexuality is constituted in society (Ingraham 1996, 2005). The concept, first used by Warner (1993), challenges the notion that heterosexuality is either natural or chosen, and instead views heterosexuality as an *institution* (Butler 1993a; Ingraham 1999; Warner 1993). Ingraham (1995:169) describes heteronormativity as “the view that institutionalised heterosexuality constitutes the standard for legitimate and prescriptive socio-sexual arrangements”. In addition to its status as an institution, as Seidman (2005) points out, heterosexuality is also sociohistorically variable. In other words, the norms surrounding heterosexuality, i.e., heteronormativity, are variable. For example, as discussed in Section 2.2.4.2, Walsh (2005) asserts that marriage has become a middle class ideal, and Cokely (2005) associates it with whiteness. However, as Kitzinger (2005a:478) explains, “all around us a heteronormative social fabric is unobtrusively rewoven, thread by thread, persistently, without fuss or fanfare, without oppressive intent or conscious design”. Although heteronormativity is malleable in its ideals in relation to other social signifiers (e.g., gender, race, social class), it is tied to the ways in which heterosexuality is unproblematised and taken-for-granted.

Heteronormativity involves what Ingraham (2005) refers to as ‘thinking straight’ which means treating heterosexuality as the standard for all other kinds of sexuality. It implies a sexual hierarchy between heterosexuality, bisexuality, and homosexuality and further divisions within that set-up. A specific kind of

heterosexuality reigns as normal and ideal within a heteronormative framework. Heteronormativity expects a cisgender, or that people are comfortable in the gender that they were assigned at birth, but then further develops a notion of the good and normal *sexual citizen*. The ideal sexual relationship in institutionalised heterosexuality can be understood as a dyadic and monogamous romantic marriage between a man and a woman, who are similar on various axes including age and social class, and who demonstrate their unmarked sexual desire in private (Rubin 1984; Warner 1999b).<sup>40</sup>

Insofar as sexuality can be seen as underpinning a great deal of social organisation, it is heteronormativity which shapes the discourses, meanings, and experiences of sexuality in society. Heteronormativity is the aspirational sexuality represented in a great deal of cultural phenomena. Best (2000, 2005), whose research was examined in Section 2.2.4.2, describes the importance of the high school prom in American culture as a site of institutional heterosexuality. In addition, it can be argued that her research demonstrates aspirational heterosexuality. The symbolism of the prom as a rite of passage is tied to the display of ideal heterosexuality. Best notes the association of the prom with romantic heterosexual love, and as an event associated with either the plan to or the act of having sex (often for the first time). Heterosexuality is assumed in the cultural production of the prom but it is also guided and enforced. Best notes that at the school she studied students were required to bring dates of the ‘opposite’ gender. Heterosexuality in this context may be assumed to be transparent, but it is also idealised, and actively encouraged.

Warner (2002) observes that the assumption of heterosexuality means that it rarely needs to be said:

Being publicly known as a homosexual is never the same thing as being publicly known as a heterosexual; the latter always goes without saying and troubles nothing, whereas the former carries echoes of pathologised visibility. It is perfectly meaningless to ‘come out’ as a heterosexual (Warner 2002:52).

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<sup>40</sup> Cokely (2005:173), whose work was examined in Section 2.2.4.2, argues that animated Disney films inform their views of “who is really ‘allowed’ to be together in marriage” and that they have three commonalities: shared socio-economic status, specifically that of the ruling class, shared racial and ethnic background, and that they are ‘the beautiful people’.

‘Normal’ heterosexuality serves as the assumed sexuality unless it is lost, refuted, or its norms transgressed. As Warner states, people ‘come out’ with sexual interests, practices, or identifications that differ from the heteronormative, but they do not come out as hegemonic heterosexuals. Although Warner does not make this argument, heterosexuality needs to be stated *explicitly* only when an individual is at risk of having a marked sexual social label attributed to them, or anticipates that their membership in the category is contentious.

Those who engage in sexual practices that differ from heteronormative ideals place themselves at risk for being exposed. Consider the fascination in media and gossip for discussing, reporting, and outing people who have violated sexual norms in some way.<sup>41</sup> Despite prescriptiveness and limited ideals of heteronormativity, there continues to be a discourse which suggests that heteronormative sexuality is ‘natural’ when in fact it is variable over time-space and socially desirable; policed in such a way that those who transgress sexual norms are exposed as norm transgressors or as ‘bad’ sexual citizens; and, additionally, used as the benchmark for sexual citizenship.

### **3.3.1 THE GOOD SEXUAL CITIZEN (AND MARRIAGE)**

Hegemonic sexual norms feature in social organisation as well as issues tied to identity. To state that sexuality is a category used for *social citizenship*, or social belonging, requires treating it as a *master status* and asserting that it underpins social narratives and expectations, normalcy, and institutional rights and privileges. Sexual social citizenship rights are tied explicitly to heteronormativity or ‘good’ heterosexuality. Therefore, it is possible to see that while sexuality is a master status, its ideal and unmarked version is heteronormative.

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<sup>41</sup> Actors Neil Patrick Harris and Meredith Baxter, and musician Lance Bass are three recent examples of celebrities who have been outed by media outlets as queer. Others in the public eye have faced a great deal of media scrutiny following allegations of marital infidelity (e.g., former President Bill Clinton, the Prince of Wales, and athletes Tiger Woods and John Terry).

There are multiple significances of the heteronormativity implicit in marriage, gender systems, sexuality, and the ways in which these concepts are embedded in kinship, social organisation, and social infrastructure. These systems are based upon an underlying notion of heterosexuality and, in particular, the heterosexual dyad. Heteronormative sexuality, and the heterosexual couple, is the privileged relationship in our social world (Ingraham 2005; Jackson 1996, 2005). Carabine (1996) argues that legislation and social policy often works to penalise those, particularly women, who fail to adopt heterosexual norms. However, when viewed in comparison to other identifiers such as gender, socioeconomic class, race, and ethnicity, the ties between sexuality to notions of social citizenship have only recently been discussed (e.g., Barth and Parry 2009; Bell and Binnie 2000; Castle 2008; Evans 1993; Richardson 2000, 2005; Stychin 2000).

A common thread between the sociological theories of sexuality discussed in Chapter 2, along with other theories of sexuality that are only mentioned in this thesis (including Foucauldian and psychodynamic theories) is their focus on the social construction of sexuality. However, the analysis of sexual citizenship and the link between sexuality and larger social organisation has often been overlooked. Bell and Binnie (2000) assert that full citizenship rights (social and political) are accorded only to those who adopt the heteronormative position. Evans (1993:6) argues that sexual minorities are “located within the marginal matrix of citizenship”. As Seidman (2005) articulates, the binary of good and bad sexual citizenship means that while homosexuality is generally regarded as a precursor to bad sexual citizenship, some homosexuals can be seen as good sexual citizens and some heterosexuals can be bad sexual citizens. It could be suggested that the LGBT person who is regarded as a good sexual citizen has been able to prove his or her righteousness, typically by rejecting the ‘queer timelines’ and ‘queer spatialities’ that Halberstam (2005) writes about.<sup>42</sup>

Citizenship rights are relevant because they construct some individuals and their choices as legitimate in micro social organisation such as communities and as lawful under the state or nation. However, it is not simply that sexual others are left as marginal citizens; they are made into ‘bad’ citizens. I discussed ideas of the good and bad sexual citizen in Chapter 2 and, returning to that briefly,

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<sup>42</sup> The lack of ‘Q’ at the end of ‘LGBT’ in this sentence is deliberate, for the queer person adopts timelines and spatialities that differ from the heteronormative.



it is possible to see that the good citizen is required to also be a good sexual citizen. Given the laws and norms surrounding sexual practices and behaviours, good sexual citizenship requires three things: first, living in accordance with those social and legal regulations; second, distancing oneself from those who transgress them (in order to avoid the stigma by contagion); third, actively repudiating changes to the social code that places sexualities in a hierarchy. This can be supported by Rosenfeld's (2009) research with lesbian and gay older people. She found that many of her participants used all three strategies in managing their stigmatised sexual identification.

Evans (1993) asserts that social membership is relevant to the degree that in instances where the state has policies in place that make some people marginal citizens, people seek out other types of social belonging. He asserts that gay men have developed a sense of social citizenship that is predicated upon consumerism: "individual consenting adult freedoms including, indeed particularly, those of a consuming market" (Evans 1993:100). Evans posits that the lack of access to full political citizenship rights has led some gay men to exploit their rights as consumers. Furthermore, this social libertarianism further isolates the sexually marginal. The consumer culture oriented towards the LGBTQ community is interesting and the links that Evans makes to citizenship are intriguing, but, perhaps, not closely tied to the arguments that I wish to make here. Rather than focusing on alternative ways and types of citizenship that people who identify as sexually nonnormative adopt, I focus on how sexual citizenship is tied to notions of social belonging and to membership in the culture, particularly marriage.

The issue of marital and civil partnership rights in the West demonstrates the ways in which sexuality underpins social order, state rights, and social belonging; marriage is as much a social and cultural artefact as it is a legal recognition of one's relationship. In addition, it is timely in the current socio-political environment and demonstrates the pervasiveness of heteronormativity in individual lives, communities, the state, and in representations of ideals and aspirations. As an example, it allows me to make the argument that sexuality is not a private issue determined by individual actors and enacted in the privacy of homes. Rather, marriage is a social and cultural issue that affects all aspects of social life, including the legitimacy of one's life as a member of society.

The issue of same-sex marriage has gained momentum in the last five years with some states extending marriage in name and rights, and others conceding to the provision of civil partnerships. The majority of voters in the state of California chose to repeal same-sex marital rights in November 2008.<sup>43</sup> The California courts decided that while those same-sex marriages which occurred before the vote remain valid, those in same-sex relationships wishing to marry afterward no longer had the right. Although same-sex couples no longer have the right to marry in California, heterosexuals under the age of 18 are able to marry if they have a parent or legal guardian present. In other words, a 15-year-old heterosexual has, with parental approval, a right of citizenship in that state that a homosexual or queer adult of any age does not hold. When marriage is restricted to heterosexual couples only, there is a distinction made between the legitimacy of different kinds of sexual practices, relationships, and sexualities.

As with other civil issues, marriage is not simply the expression of love or commitment but relates to a number of other state-organised rights. For example, someone in a same-sex relationship in the United States who has lost their partner will need to pay federal estate tax on any assets bequeathed to him or her if the total value of the estate is worth more than one million dollars (Cahill and Tobias 2006:50-51). Estate tax can be up to 50% of the value of the inheritance. Cahill and Tobias (2006) state that this is one of the factors which can contribute to financial troubles that individuals in same-sex relationships face: it can be financially crippling when a loved one dies and the surviving partner needs to pay up to half the value of assets, including properties, in order to keep them. Denying those in same-sex relationships the right to inherit, without financial burden, the estate of their partner, on the basis that they do not have the *right* to make their relationship legitimate, is the denial of full citizenship. To contrast this, there is no estate tax due if the asset is bequeathed to either a legal spouse or charitable foundation. There are numerous other examples that illustrate the ties between marriage and citizenship.<sup>44</sup> However, it is imperative to look beyond the legal issues and towards the cultural symbolism of marriage.

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<sup>43</sup> This outcome was repeated in Maine in 2009.

<sup>44</sup> These include the legal entitlement to visit a partner in hospital, and to automatically assume power of attorney when they are incapacitated, to visit a partner in the hospital;

Perhaps more salient than the varying degrees of legal and state sanctioned prestige accorded to the marital union, is its pronounced influence as *the* aspirational relationship. It is commonly held to be a rite of passage that is often referred to as ‘the best day’ of one’s life or ‘the moment when two hearts become one’. The symbolism of the wedding ceremony, the amount of money that is spent on weddings themselves, and the gifts purchased for the couple demonstrate the cultural significance placed on marriage. Ingraham (2005:4) points out that ‘thinking straight’ involves the belief that ‘white weddings and diamond rings’ are a heterosexual tradition. It is possible to observe these items as part of the successful marketing strategy of heteronormative lifestyles. There is an entire industry dedicated to weddings: “honeymoon suites” in hotels, “honeymoon package” holidays, the notion of the “honeymoon” itself, wedding cakes, bridal boutiques, wedding planners, gift registries in every major department store, bands and DJs that specialise in performing at weddings, etc.<sup>45</sup> To *choose* not to get married or to be *unable* to marry because of discriminatory laws means missing or opting out of what is considered a normal and expected part of life. When marriage is used as the basis for other rights, and same-sex relationships cannot be recognised as legal marriages, there is a discrepancy in the rights of citizenship with some citizens denied rights that others have and a disparity in the ‘normalcy’ of one’s life with those who are married.<sup>46</sup> To suggest that civil rights are a ‘moral’ issue is problematic and discriminatory. The state’s involvement in marriage, and the privileges accorded to that particular union, mean that marriage is not merely a choice, and access to it is about the cultural productions, and social or religious sanctions. It is an issue of heteronormativity, equality, and rights.

The issue of same-sex marriage is further complicated by arguments regarding the entity of marriage and its importance within civil society. As I have discussed, the marital union is privileged as the aspirational relationship. Perhaps

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being covered by a partner’s health insurance; and entitlement to leave to remain in the country on a spousal visa.

<sup>45</sup> There is also a sub-genre of reality television dedicated to weddings. Some of these programmes include: *A Wedding Story*, *For Better or For Worse*, *Four Weddings*, *Say Yes to the Dress*, and *The Real Wedding Crashers*.

<sup>46</sup> Those who do not have children can also experience this. However, there is a discourse surrounding children that presents them as “gifts” (often “from God”) that “complete life”. When those without children articulate a defence of a full life, a common response may be that they cannot comment upon having a full, satisfying, or complete life unless a parent because parenthood alone exposes one to this self-actualisation.

the most glaring way in which this is evident is in legislation like that in Britain which extends the rights of ‘civil unions’ (a copy) to same-sex couples whilst preserving ‘marriage’ (the original) for heterosexual couples (cf. Butler 1999). In response to the debate of the extension of either civil partnerships or marriage to same-sex couples in Canada,<sup>47</sup> then Prime Minister Paul Martin stated: “We must always remember that ‘separate but equal’ is not equal”.<sup>48</sup> Martin makes explicit that in the area of civil rights there is no equivalent for which it is possible to withhold the original. In other words, if marriage is a civil rights issue, then there is no basis for offering civil partnerships whilst reserving marriage for heterosexuals. Equality rules out the possibility for an original and a copy; a copy is not equal to the original, and is usually worth far less in obvious, tacit, and symbolic ways. Within the dominant heteronormative framework of society, heterosexuality and heterosexual marriage serve as an original whilst other relationships are seen as lesser copies.

However, the discussion of state involvement in marriage and civil partnerships is not simply a debate between partisan politicians (with liberals in support of same sex marriage, or their less equal counterpart of civil partnerships, and conservatives against the extension of these rights on the basis that same sex marriage is ‘unnatural’, contrary to various religious doctrines, and non-procreative). Queer theorists and activists have been a voice of dissent in these debates, arguing that while the civil right is not negotiable a radical reorganisation of the state’s privilege of marriage must be considered (Brandzel 2005). The argument from this perspective is that marital and civil partnerships assimilate a certain gay and lesbian lifestyle and relationship into the larger society, whilst supporting the state’s preference of one type of relationship for various rights and privileges (Bell and Binnie 2000; Warner 1999a, 1999b). Clarkson (2008) argues that although same-sex marriage may lead to the rethinking of marriage, it can also lead to the abandonment of radical positions and ideologies. While questions

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<sup>47</sup> Canada is one of a small number of nations that both recognises and performs same-sex marriages. The others are the Argentina, Belgium, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, and Sweden.

<sup>48</sup> Although this address was previously on the Government of Canada’s website, there has since been a change in government which may be the reason why it is no longer there. However, a full transcript of Martin’s 16 February 2005 speech to the House of Commons is available here: [www.smartsextalk.com/PDF/0503\\_Paul\\_martin\\_speech.pdf](http://www.smartsextalk.com/PDF/0503_Paul_martin_speech.pdf) (accessed 05 October 2009).

of who should be able to marry or why people might not choose to marry are relatively common, the use of marriage as the basis for partnership rights is rarely questioned. In other words, same-sex marriage allows people in homosexual relationships to become good sexual citizens, but it does not disrupt the notion of the good sexual citizen. Furthermore, it means that some LGBTQ-identifying people wish to present the 'normalcy' of their relationships and practices in order to assuage fears that same-sex marriage will lead to society's moral decay.

Mainstream gay and lesbian rights movements are currently directing much of their resources towards obtaining marital rights within a larger system that is modelled upon the heterosexual couple and family unit. Focusing upon marital rights overshadows the larger issues of why the heterosexual couple should serve as the basis for citizenship and entitlement rights. Furthermore, it fails to question the reasons why marriage is often the only relationship recognised and legitimised by the government. Same-sex marital rights can be understood as essential within this system but, as queer theorists in particular have been adept in acknowledging, the assimilation of nonnormative sexualities into a social hierarchy that privileges a single type of heteronormative relationship is not advantageous to a project that embraces diversity or multiplicity of experience (e.g., Warner 1999a, 1999b).

The issue of marital rights plays into contemporary debates of sexual citizenship perhaps more so than any other issue in the West. The debates are visceral, and demonstrate how intrinsic sex is to social organisation on both an informal and state legislated level. Although people in various countries have national or federal laws protecting them from discrimination on the basis of gender, ethnicity, religion, race, and disability, we continue to recognise that discrimination is often carried out on these planes. However, there are few instances when sexual identity/practice/orientation is formally included in those declarations. It is possible to argue that the lack of inclusion is evidence of how sexuality continues to be overlooked as a master status for social organisation. In addition, these kinds of institutional discriminations illustrate the extent of the institution of heterosexuality. The issue of gay marriage and gay normalisation does not mean that bad sexual citizens are now socially accepted. Rather, it means that some LGBTQ identifying people who adopt heteronormative positions can be seen as good sexual citizens despite their same-sex desires. Seidman (2005:50-51)

states this directly: “the gay citizen it seems can be tolerated only if a norm and ideal of America is defended that asserts the good, right, normal, or pure status of dichotomous gender roles, heterosexual love, marriage, and the family”.

Johnson (2002) suggests that heteronormative citizenship can require the politics of passing; that is, appearing heterosexual. However, I think it is possible to take this further to state that even when not attempting to pass as heterosexual, heteronormative citizenship demands that LGBTQ-identified people pass their desires and practices as heteronormative in all terms but the subject of that which they desire. Another critical point is that the good or normal LGBTQ person needs to blend into the heteronormative social fabric, and to be, perhaps, more straight than heterosexuals in order to be considered as a respectable and good citizen.

Issues of sexual citizenship and marriage tie directly to heteronormativity. Kitzinger (2005a) argues that heteronormativity is the *embodiment of actions* rather than a collection of beliefs. Kitzinger makes an important point: that heteronormativity is not necessarily accompanied by an intention to discriminate. However, the sometimes insidious ways in which heteronormativity is reproduced and supported means that there are tangible effects of taken-for-granted assumptions regarding sexuality which include discriminatory laws and facts, as well as informal social consequences of group membership and categorisation tied to good sexual citizenship.

## **3.4 IDENTITY**

### **3.4.1 ENABLING AND CONSTRAINING**

Giddens (1984) emphasises the enabling and constraining aspects of social organisation. He posits that social organisation or the ‘constitution of society’ is dependent upon two dimensions: ‘agents’, or individuals, and ‘structures’, or social infrastructure and their ‘modality’, or how they are communicated. In his framework, simultaneous to the benefits to social organisation, it is possible to also observe stifling aspects of norms and codes. An emphasis on *both* enabling

and constraining elements of social norms counters the tendency, at least in terms of sexuality, to view sexual categories such as heterosexuality and homosexuality, as essentially constraining (Butler 1993a, 1999). On closer examination, while sexual categories may be constraining in some ways, they may also be beneficial in other ways.

Returning to the examination of gender roles discussed in Section 2.1, it is possible, depending upon the perspective one adopts, to observe butch and femme as enabling and constraining. O'Sullivan (1999) and Jeffreys (1996) both assert how these gender positions can be seen as copies of unequal heterosexual gender. Faderman (1991:164) asserts: "the tyranny of butch and femme dress in working-class bars can be explained in part by patrons' fears [of police raids]". Faderman argues that undercover police officers were unlikely to perform either butch and femme identity well enough to 'pass' in a lesbian bar during the 1950s and 1960s. She takes her argument further when stating, "only those who understood the roles and the rules attendant upon them really belonged" (Faderman 1991:167). In other words, along with their 'tyranny', butch and femme genders were a way to signify membership and belonging to the working-class bar lesbian subculture of that time. Drawing from the work of Halberstam, Munt, Nestle, and others, it is possible to view butch and femme as subversions of traditional gender. Rather than being copies of heterosexual gender, they can be seen as expressions of distinct ways of being common within a particular social grouping.

Butler (1993a, 1993b, 1999) has suggested that it is possible to move beyond the standard dichotomy of heterosexual/homosexual and the triptych of heterosexual/homosexual/bisexual. The adoption of 'queer' as a new and less restrictive sexual identification, as an alternative to an identity or orientation, is one way to avoid being limited by an identity marker. It is more difficult to ensure that queer does not merely step in as the new nomenclature used to encompass all nonnormative sexual identities. Although there is a move from problematised categories, it appears that those identities and categories still exist as new ones are added to the lexicon of sexual categories. One of my arguments is that these categories serve to constrain people but also to signify a shared commonality among them. Thus, social categories can be useful when seen as discursive categorisations. The key, according to Butler is to ensure that,

as much as it is necessary to assert political demands through recourse to identity categories, and to lay claim to the power to name oneself and determine the conditions under which the name is used, it is also impossible to sustain that kind of mastery over those categories within discourse... if the term 'queer' is to be the site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes, and perhaps also yielded in favour of terms that do that political work more effectively" (Butler 1993b:19).

Butler articulates the importance of a shared social signifier, or identity, as the basis for organisation, but also urges against interpreting these categories as pre-discursive or essential. Others can ascribe social labels to people, which become seen by the self as identities. According to Butler, it is important to lay claim to these as shifting or problematic; to do so would mean that the term or label is less constraining. Thus, if the terms 'queer' or 'woman' are revised recursively, and treated as transient place-holders to be dispelled by whatever future categories they will be seen to exclude, they can be effectively used within a specific time-space for socio-political mobilisation. The position advocated by some, including Butler, is that if there are numerous sexual categories, and if these categories can be seen as shifting or transient, it is difficult to place them in a hierarchy. Sexual inequality and the dominance of heteronormativity depends upon a stable sexual hierarchy that privileges hegemonic heterosexuality above all other sexual categories and once that hierarchy is threatened through the destabilising of sexual identities the norms change.

Queer approaches to identity have focused on destabilising gender and sex categories. Despite this, gay- and lesbian-identified people can be understood as having created what Gamson (1995:391) refers to as a 'quasi-ethnicity'. Howe (2001) writes about the development of San Francisco as a queer 'territorial homeland' and 'nationhood'. Although there is no formal territory for the 'quasi-ethnic' group, it is possible to observe amongst the LGBTQ 'community' many of the other symbols of that comprise a diasporic ethnic group (e.g., Patton and Sanchez-Eppler 2000). *Polari*, a dialect used by gay men and lesbians in the UK gay subculture during the mid-twentieth century, could be seen as its lost language (Baker 2002). The infrastructure of this community includes: queer



neighbourhoods or ‘villages’ in large urban centres (e.g., Soho and Stoke Newington in London, the Castro in San Francisco, the city of West Hollywood in Los Angeles County, Dupont Circle in Washington, DC, and Boys Town in Chicago), festivals (e.g., Gay Pride), bars, bookshops, cafes, and the internationally recognised rainbow flag.

However, this type of politics is based on notions of a shared identity and the politics of difference, i.e., that the people who share membership in the category are distinct. The notion of a ‘distinct’ category fosters the articulation of a collective category, which serves the ideological purpose of representing the marginal. The visibility garnered from embracing the ‘marked’ status position could also be seen as a way of delineating its existence. It is worth noting that, insofar as queer activists have promoted the fragility of identities, the activist group *Queer Nation* was an active, confrontational, and non-fragile queer organisation throughout the 1990s (Berlant and Freeman 1992). The efficacy of identity, even when notions of identity are contested, for social organising demonstrates that identity is not exclusively an individual choice. Labels and identities are social categories (Butler 1993a). Queered identities demonstrate a bifurcated consciousness: when they are a way to demonstrate membership and belonging, they depend upon an understanding of the larger social and cultural norms that they are seen to deviate from. Therefore, it could be seen that identities can be valuable organising tools when they are left open to the possibility of change, reorganisation, and reclassification.

### **3.4.2 SIGNIFICATION**

Instead of positing that identities are fixed, concepts of fluidity, multiplicity, and conflict are central to queer frameworks. Rather than seeking to create stability where it is not seen to exist, queer articulations focus on the divergence and discord of postmodernity (Butler 1993b). For example, categories of gay, lesbian, heterosexual, and bisexual appear fixed; suppose that people fit neatly into these categories; and also presume that the categories themselves are natural and neutral. As discussed in Section 3.5.1, queer theorists challenge the

naturalness of the social categories that feminist and gay and lesbian theories and politics have been built upon: ‘man’, ‘woman’, ‘gay’, and ‘lesbian’ are seen as instable and queer theory attempts to use the deconstruction of these categories as the basis for theory and activism that is not based in identity politics (Gamson 1995). It is possible for identity categories and politics to lead to the designation of marked and unmarked identities, where one set of identities is taken as ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ and another set which is understood to be a minority. As I mention earlier, Sedgwick (2008) has argued that this has left gay and lesbian theorists to adopt one of two positions: either the *minoritising* position, which observes there to be a distinct minority of the population that are LGBTQ and that this minority is ‘different’ from the heterosexual majority; or the *universalising* position, which argues that although there are sexual minorities they are ‘just the same’ as everyone else (the argument often used in regards to LGBTQ civil rights). Queer theorists such as Butler (1993a, 1993b) assert that this is possible by deconstructing identity politics, and by demonstrating that these categories, although serving social purposes (as McIntosh argued), work in the maintenance of the hegemonic categories of marked and unmarked identities.

Feminist and gay and lesbian theories have focused respectively upon notions of gender and sexual identities: the categories of men, women, gay, and lesbian, and heterosexual in particular, but with bisexual, transgender, and intersex making occasional appearances as other categories which further flesh out an analysis. In contrast, queer theorists have argued against these types of categories as more harmful than helpful because of the ways in which they presuppose a level of stability and rigidity of categorisation; and that people belong to many categories simultaneously, some of which are in conflict with each other. For example, one could be designated female at birth, identify as lesbian in her teens, transition into a man in adulthood, identify as heterosexual, and later transition into a queer woman. Furthermore, there are a growing number of people eschewing the feminine and masculine pronouns of ‘she’ and ‘he’, instead adopting gender neutral terms such as ‘xi’, ‘ze’ and ‘hir’ (cf. Feinberg 1998 and Livia 2001). The binary gender system is not universal. Examples of non-binary gender systems include: the *berdache* or two-spirited people recognised in some North American First Nations (Callender and Koshems 1983) and the *hijras* of India (Hall 1997; Hall and O’Donovan 1996; Nanda 1998). In

addition, Kulick (1998) found that in Brazil the role men play in sexual acts (i.e., either penetrator or receiver) can be more important than the gender of the parties involved. Queer theory offers a framework that makes these ways of being visible and provides an alternative form of politics that does not rely on identity politics and ‘sameness’.<sup>49</sup> Butler asserts:

The feminist “we” is always and only a phantasmatic construction, one that has its purposes, but denies the internal complexity and indeterminacy of the term and constitutes itself only through the exclusion of some part of the constituency that it simultaneously seeks to represent. The tenuous or phantasmatic status of the “we”, however, is not cause for despair or, at least it is not *only* cause for despair. The radical instability of the category sets into question the *foundational* restrictions on feminist political theorising and opens up other configurations, not only of genders and bodies, but of politics itself (Butler 1999:181).

Butler critiques the idea that a pre-existing identity needs to be the constitutive basis of theory and politics. Her view that gender is constructed from the illusion of easily determined gender (and biological sex) has been one of the most important contributions to queer theory arguments of identity. An alternative stance for understanding gender (and sexuality) is to view them as *discursive constructions*. This allows for the possibility to advance theory and politics in new directions by challenging the minoritising and universalising positions of nonnormative sexuality. In the context of theorising sexuality, the former posits that gay and lesbian sexual identities are ‘special’ in that they represent the identities of a distinct group.<sup>50</sup> This contrasts with the universalising position which argues in support of a gay and lesbian normalcy position: that gay and lesbian identities are “normal”; that is, the same as heterosexual identities and relationships. When both the minoritising and universalising positions of sexual and gender identity are disputed, the space for a queer theory rooted in new theories and forms of political organisation are possible. This fosters the emergence of alternative dissidence and activism.

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<sup>49</sup> This is an important contribution of queer theory, as some feminists (e.g., Young 1990) have written about some of the problems that can arise out of a politics of sameness.

<sup>50</sup> As both gay and lesbian theorists have pointed out gay men and lesbians are distinct from each other and it is impossible to conflate the two groups (e.g., Faderman 1991; Jeffreys 2003; Weeks 1985). However, these two groups are the basis of gay and lesbian studies and theory.

Here Smith's 'bifurcated consciousness'<sup>51</sup> may be helpful. She asserts that women have a bifurcated consciousness because women need to understand both their own position and the social structure that renders them subordinate. The example of the importance of the temporal-cultural context on queer relationships demonstrates that bifurcated consciousness is also in possession by those managing sexualities outside of the dominant heterosexual framework. Smith describes bifurcated consciousness as an overarching subtext, invisible to those centring it:

It was a male world in its assumptions, its language, its patterns of relating. The intellectual world spread out before me appeared, indeed I experienced it, as genderless. But its apparent lack of centre was indeed centred. It was structured by its gender subtext. Interests, perspectives, relevances leaked from communities of male experience into the externalised and objectified forms of discourse. Within the discourses embedded in the relations of ruling, women were the Other (Smith 1987:7).

Smith views male dominance as entrenched in the 'intellectual world' to such a point that it seemed 'genderless', or as if it were not based in male dominance. The same can be said about the world in terms of sexuality: that the 'assumptions, language, and patterns of relating' are all based in heteronormativity. Her use of the 'relations of ruling' refers to more than Foucault's 'discourses of power' to include the organisations of law, business, government, economics, professions, education, and textual discourses. Smith articulates that these together create a *mode* of ruling and create texts and documents of worlds and ruling in ways such that consciousness is in discourse (Smith 1987:2). By suggesting that consciousness can be found in discourses, she claims that individuals are affected by the discourses of power surrounding them in their everyday lives.

One could posit that in relation to sexuality, it is an indirect relation of ruling only insofar as a person's relationship fits within the heteronormative ideal. As with the same-sex couple who must be constantly aware of the changes in their environment, noticing even the smallest differences between neighbourhoods in London (as described in Section 3.2), this relation of ruling is most evident to those who are positioned as marked against the default status in the relations of

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<sup>51</sup> This notion can also be read in Hegel's writing on the master and slave dynamic.

ruling. In other words, those who are marked require a bifurcated consciousness to navigate a social world, which is framed from and formulated upon the position of the unmarked. The sexual and relationship subtexts in a heteronormative world presuppose a normative heterosexuality. That is, a particular type of heterosexuality is used as a ‘primary way of relating’. Although Smith bases this in gender rather than heterosexuality, the experience in the discourses that she writes about are heterosexual. In those instances when a relationship is seen as countering or transgressing those norms, it is seen as open to public comment, policing, gossip, and sanctions because it is not part of the ‘externalised discourse’. Just as women are placed outside of the dominant discourse, that dominant discourse presupposes a type of heterosexuality that women can make claim to if they practice heterosexuality in the sanctioned way.

### **3.5 TRANSGRESSION**

Transgressive acts can be viewed as those practices which disrupt and challenge deeply embedded social norms, moral principles, and the social status quo. When examining transgression within queer theory, sexual acts and practices that may be classified as ‘sexually dissident’ are considered transgressive in that they challenge hegemonic sexuality. Therefore, ‘genderfuck’ or playing with gender, drag, and butch/femme, and nonnormative sexual practices are all considered disruptive to existing social norms (Brewis et al. 1997; Butler 1993a, 1993b, 1999; Vance 1984). All of these examples challenge the naturalisation and idealisation of heteronormative assumptions about sexuality and gender.

For queer theorists, transgression, or the act of infringing on social norms, can be seen as *potentially* subversive. However, transgression does not necessarily mean or lead to the subversion, or change, of hegemonic sexual norms (Butler 1993a). The focus on parody and individual gender and/or sexual practices as transgressive centralises an emphasis on human agency as opposed to political activity and struggle, something that others have been swift to critique (e.g., Glick 2000; Jeffreys 2003; Walters 1996; Weeks 1995, 2007; Wilson 1993).

Although Wilson is sympathetic to transgression, she argues instead for subversion or ‘transformation’ when stating:

We transgress in order to insist that we are, that we exist, and to place a distance between ourselves and the dominant culture. But we have to go further – we have to have an idea of how things could be different, otherwise transgression is mere posturing. In other words, transgression on its own leads eventually to entropy, unless we carry within us some idea of transformation. It is therefore not transgression that should be our watchword, but transformation (Wilson 1993:116).

As Wilson articulates here, transgression is a way for the sexually marginal to ‘exist’. She also points out that it can be seen as a ‘posturing’ pseudo-political activity. However, it is unclear if the ‘idea of transformation’ is necessary to transgressive acts; ‘entropy’, at least in relation to sexual norms, may not be negative. Challenges and disruptions to norms demonstrate the significance of norms, and also that there are alternatives to them, even when not necessarily subversive or transformative.

Mindful of the notion that transgression challenges the dominant social ideology (which is *potentially* subversive), I suggest that transgression can be efficacious as a postmodern political activity, even if variable from collective and organisation-bound political activism. Critics might view transgression as an excuse for acting out, meaningless, an attempt to make activities people are already engaged in appear as if they serve more than an individualistic purpose, and as a rejection of the organised political activism of the 1960s. Jeffreys makes one of the more impassioned critiques of the value of transgression:

Transgression is a comfortable kind of nightclubbing activism. It consists of carrying out sexual practices seen to be outlawed under conventional mores, such as sadomasochism and public sex, or wearing the clothing conventionally attributed to one sex class whilst being a member of the other. Transgression does not require changing laws, going on demonstrations, or writing letters. It can be achieved by doing something that some gay men and lesbians have always enjoyed, whilst relabelling it politically transformative in and of itself. Thus, nightclubbing, if in rubber or gender-inappropriate clothing, can come to be seen as a political action (Jeffreys 2003:42).

Jeffreys sees transgression as an individualistic and immature strategy to legitimise behaviour that queer-identifying people already engage in. Problematically, she substitutes the term “transformative” for transgressive to

make her case, when the two terms are distinct. In addition, Jeffreys' statement that "[t]ransgression does not require changing laws" is suspect because political activism in and of itself does not 'require' changing laws. Political activism, whether in the form of large-scale organised endeavours or the actions of individuals, involves the process of working towards social change, which can be reflected in changes in laws. Weeks (1995), who is sympathetic to queer theory, also has reservations concerning the effectiveness of transgression as a political strategy. However, if we contextualise this within contemporary socio-political activism, queer theory is not unique in its support of individuals engaging in transgressive acts which challenge social norms.

Instead, it is possible to argue that queer theory is not particularly 'queer' in this instance, but rather that it holds a commonality with other socio-political campaigns. At the beginning of this chapter in Section 3.0 I referred to the phrase "the personal is political". Accompanying this sentiment is the philosophy that in addition to rallying for social change on an organised and large-scale effort, it is important for individuals to enact changes in their everyday lives. In addition, much of the mainstream contemporary environmental or green movement focuses on individuals rather than on corporate sanctions. Suggestions from the media and government encourage people to take personal and individualistic steps, including consumer choices, towards reducing carbon footprints with the belief that these 'acts of everyday rebellion'<sup>52</sup> make a difference (e.g., laundering clothes at 30 degrees centigrade, minimising household waste, unplugging electronics when not in use, etc.) (cf. Giddens 2009). At the same time as people are encouraged to enact changes at the individual level, there has been a steady decline in governmental regulations on industry (Giddens 2009). In this way, an argument against the 'queer' use of transgression that Jeffreys could make but does not, is that queer politics of individualistic acts support, rather than challenge, the status quo.

Although, the 'queerness' or counterculture elements of individualistic acts as political 'activism' could be questioned, if one were to examine transgression without equating it with an activist strategy it is possible to see its

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<sup>52</sup> As some readers may notice, my use of the phrase 'everyday acts of rebellion' refers to second wave feminist Steinem's (1995) book *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellion*, which is a collection of essays detailing Steinem's rebellions and transgressions.

potential benefits. By choosing to disregard social norms, or to live and act in defiance to them, the dominance of the norms is diminished over time. Sunden (2009:6) makes the argument that transgression in queer gaming may prove that there are norms (that most gamers are male, and that most gamers are not queer) but also that “you are the exception that proves the rule, but in embodying that exception you simultaneously prove the rule wrong”. In other words, by demonstrating that there is a norm but that one exists regardless, the norm loses some of its potency. Thus, transgression of sexual norms can take many forms, but all are disruptive challenges to notions of normativity.

### **3.6 CONCLUSION**

Sexuality is socially managed and mitigated; it is neither private, nor individually regulated. In this and the previous chapter, which together compose Part 1 of this thesis, I discussed the importance of the social dimensions of sexuality (individuals, social structures, social meaning, discourse, and everyday experiences) as tied to heteronormativity, identity, and transgression. Who people have sex with, the kinds of sex that they have, and the ways in which they identify their sexuality and sexual practices are socially managed, negotiated, and controlled. This occurs informally in norms (including media representations) and social policing, and formally in laws and regulations. For example, the use of homophobic language and phrases, such as the utterance of ‘no homo’ immediately following any statement that could be read as gay, is one example of sexuality that is socially policed.<sup>53</sup> Examples of the formal regulation of sexuality include the recognition of same-sex marriage, as well as legal bills such as the Anti-Homosexuality Act (2009) under consideration in Uganda.<sup>54</sup> If passed, the

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<sup>53</sup> ‘No homo’ can be traced to the early 1990s hip-hop/rap music scene in New York.

<sup>54</sup> Under the bill, people would face life imprisonment for one homosexual act and death by hanging for engaging in any activities that could be classified as ‘aggravated homosexuality’, which includes multiple homosexual acts, gay sex if HIV positive, and the use of drugs or alcohol in the procurement of gay sex. In addition, the bill outlaws the promotion of homosexuality: anyone failing to report to the authorities someone suspected to be gay within 24 hours of acquiring that knowledge would face a 3-year prison term.



Anti-Homosexuality Act (2009) would legislate social policing, and make it dangerous for anyone to discuss homosexual desires, let alone engage in them. Sexual identities and practices, such as homosexuality, can also be denied and rendered invisible by states, because laws against them acknowledge their existence.<sup>55</sup>

The interplay of norms and laws confirms the social sanctioning of sexuality. From high school proms (Best 2005) and white weddings (Ingraham 1999) to the raiding of bathhouses (Califia 2000) and the Spanner trials (Warner 1999b; White 2006), it is evident that both heterosexuality and alternative sexualities are policed. Sexuality remains private only when its heteronormativity is uncontested. Once adherence to heteronormative expectations is rendered contentious, such as in the constructed example I provided about a same-sex couple in London, sexuality is marked. In those instances when sexual dissidence is evident, it appears that people lose any claims to a private or unmarked sexual status. As a result, they can be subjected to attention, comment, and judgment from other individuals, law enforcement, the media, and other institutions, in addition to ‘queer shame’ (cf. Munt 2007) for deviating from aspirational sexuality.

To suggest that sexuality is intrinsically social means little unless it is contextualised as embedded within various aspects of the social system. It is possible to articulate a position that supports the claims that sexuality serves as a social phenomenon and that it has multiple purposes within social systems and organisation. More specifically, I have offered an approach that could be considered as ‘queer sociology’. I have suggested that there are explicit connections between sexuality to social agents, structures, discourses, meaning, and everyday interaction. I have used the concepts heteronormativity, identity, and transgression to demonstrate the ways in which dimensions shape sexuality in

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<sup>55</sup> For example, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad announced at a lecture at Columbia University in New York City on 24 September 2007 that “in Iran we don’t have homosexuals, like in your country.” Without contextualising the quote, it could be argued that he is referring to the absence of a Westernised homosexual identity. However, his comment was made in response to a question posed by Lee Bollinger, president of the university, about the persecution of women, homosexuals, and members of the Ba’hai faith in Iran. Placed in this context, it appears as though Ahmadinejad believes that homosexuality is such a problem that its existence in Iran needs to be denied; if there are no homosexuals in Iran, then it is not possible to persecute them.

society. *Identity, transgression, and heteronormativity transpire on multiple and simultaneous social dimensions, where they are negotiated, confirmed, challenged, and lived.* When linked to the aforementioned dimensions of the social (and cultural), it is evident that sociology, especially feminist sociology, and queer theory can be used together in understanding the social aspects of sexuality on theoretical grounds.

Building upon the literature discussed in Chapter 2, in this chapter I have put forth a position about the importance of the social to sexuality, and the importance of sexuality to the social. I have done this by referencing the arguments made in the previous chapter, but also through highlighting an elaborated version of queer sociology. As I have made clear, there has been valuable, insightful, and energetic research in the area of queer sociology (Section 2.4). My contribution to those discussions has been articulating how a queer-enabled feminist sociology might be able to approach sexuality in a way that takes into account the importance of sexuality on various social dimensions, and how this may also be strengthened through the adoption of some of the themes of queer theory. In particular, the importance of heteronormativity, the instability of identity, and transgression can better illuminate understandings of the social.

## **PART 2**

### **EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE**

## SPEAKING AND TYPING DESIRE

### 4.0 INTRODUCTION

This chapter situates my study within the larger bodies of research on sex, sexuality, and language in both on- and offline settings and the understanding of sex in online spaces, including communities, that is not specific to language or conversation. First, I examine research on sexuality in language and conversation, both on- and offline, by sociolinguists and other social scientists (Sections 4.1). I argue that this literature can be divided into four broad categories of inquiry: sexual identity (particularly nonnormative sexualities), sexed bodies, heterosexuality in non-sex-specific contexts, and desire. All four perspectives emphasise varying aspects of sexuality in language, but a common theme underlying them is heteronormativity and how it is tied to communication about sex and sexuality. I also argue that research on sex in online conversations has tended to adopt what could be referred to as a *sexual community of practice* approach, in which Eckert's and McConnell-Ginet's (1992) community of practice approach is used specifically for the examination of sexually-based communities, or communities oriented around a shared sexual interest or desire.

I then discuss research that examines sex and sexuality in web-based environments (Section 4.2) in contexts which emphasise elements other than

communication,<sup>56</sup> and I locate this research within the socio-historical context of sex and technology. There is an extensive body of research examining sex in web-based environments, particularly the internet, which is situated within a wide range of disciplines (e.g., media studies, psychology, linguistics, psychiatry, sociology), methodologies (e.g., qualitative, quantitative), and concerns (e.g., psychological, social, epidemiological). Because this work encompasses many intellectual directions, it is difficult to systematically categorise it based on empirical evidence. The focus of the studies and the methods used are often distinctive in such a meaningful way that the only common element is “sex” and “web”, “internet”, or “cyberspace”. As a result, I have distinguished 10 strands of research in this area, which are discussed in Section 4.2.

For example, Cooper (2004) uses the term *online sexual activities* (OSA) to refer to activities undertaken online intended for purposes of sexual arousal. Examples of OSA from this perspective could include cybersex and the consumption of online pornography. I discuss research that surveys the extent to which the general population engages in these activities (e.g., Albright 2008; Cronin and Davenport 2001; Traeen et al. 2006). The consensus among these researchers is that a significant number of people *disclose* that they have engaged in some kind of online sexual activity. Although these researchers have shown that accessing sexual content via the web is a common practice for many people, there has also been a disproportionate amount of research discussing the potential for compulsive engagement of or addiction to various online sexual activities including cybersex and pornography (e.g., Cooper et al. 2000; Cooper et al. 2002; Cooper et al. 2004; Ferree 2003; Griffiths 2000; Griffiths 2001; Schneider 2000). The emphasis on reports of people’s OSA means that to date we know a great deal of how people’s OSA can be described and interpreted but very little of what they actually do when they engage in these activities.

In addition to this work, there has also been research focused on examining other potential consequences of participation in online sexual activities. In particular, there has been research on the effect of web sex content

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<sup>56</sup> Although there have been numerous studies of cybersex, I argue that they have tended not to examine the communicative elements of the act itself, and instead examine the users’ reports of their engagement with the hope to better understand it from a therapeutic perspective (cf. Cooper’s work).

on youth in regards to their sex choices (e.g., Adebayo et al. 2006; Boies et al. 2004; Quayle and Taylor 2001). While some researchers (e.g., Adebayo et al. 2006; Delmonico and Griffin 2008) have emphasised the potential harm or risk to youth, others (e.g., Gray 2009) have found that web-based sex content may be helpful or positive for youth who are sexually marginalised in their offline communities.

As well as studies on users of online sex content, there is research on how queers or sexual nonnormatives use the web. Whilst some of this research has examined how online engagement may shape the offline sex practices of MSM (e.g., Bolding et al. 2005; Elford et al. 2001; Ross et al. 2006; Ross et al. 2007), other research has examined specific online communities or websites which are organised around a shared sexual identity, label, or practice (e.g., Bryson 2004; Mowlabocus 2007, 2008; Nip 2004a; Nip 2004b). The last areas of research I examine are feminist/queer textual and cultural artefact analyses of specific genres of online sex activities: cyberporn and sex blogging.

Although the approaches discussed and their emphases are wide-ranging, all contribute to a field of inquiry that examines sexuality and web technologies. The different approaches, methodologies, and central concerns have led to a wide range of findings which makes it possible to better contextualise sex and sexuality in everyday, naturally-occurring settings, including in conversation and on the web. Thus, my purposes here are to tie the existing empirical findings on “sex and the web” to ground the empirical work in Chapters 6-8, and to provide the empirical context within which my research is situated.

## **4.1 LANGUAGE AND SEXUALITY**

In this section I focus on sociolinguistic and social scientific (e.g., feminist conversation analysis) research on language and sexuality. The social sequestration of sexuality (Giddens 1991), the designation of sex as a personal and/or moral issue (Giddens 1991, 1992; Warner 2002), and the shame that can be associated with sexual expression (Munt 2007) are major obstacles for researchers wishing to study sex and desire in communication. Web-based technologies can

be seen as providing new ways to overcome some of the difficulty in gathering data related to sensitive topics, including sexuality (discussed separately in Section 4.1.5).<sup>57</sup>

Research on sexuality in language can be separated into four major directions. The first direction of research examined here emphasises sexual identity and language use amongst sexual minorities and the ways in which gays and lesbians talk and are talked about (e.g., Baker 2002; Bucholtz and Hall 2004; Leap 1996; Livia and Hall 1997); the second considers sexed bodies and how they are discussed in relation to sexuality and gender (e.g., Braun 1999; Braun and Kitzinger 2001a, 2001b; Gavey et al. 2001; Sanders and Reinisch 1999); the third concentrates on heterosexuality in language (e.g., Kitzinger 2005a, 2005b) and the fourth examines desire and language (e.g., Cameron 1997; Cameron and Kulick 2003, 2006; Channell 1997; Harvey and Shalom 1997).

A commonality among these approaches is that although their emphasis varies, all four examine heteronormativity in language either implicitly or explicitly. The first perspective focuses on sexual minorities and their use of language as a counter to or outside of heteronormative discourse; the second focuses on the discursive construction of bodies, the semantic categories of sexualised talk about the body, and how these groupings intersect with heteronormative assumptions about sex; the third directly critiques heteronormativity by focusing on the ways in which heterosexuality is constructed in language; and the fourth emphasises desire in language, and how heteronormativity is constructed within it. Studies of sex in online settings can be understood as placed within online communities while still adopting one of these major directions in their emphasis. Thus, the research on language and sexuality is broad and covers many facets of sex and sexuality in language and interaction.

#### **4.1.1 NONNORMATIVE SEXUAL IDENTITY**

Of the four strands of research in the area of language and sexuality listed in Section 4.1, sexual identity and language is the most established in the field of

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<sup>57</sup> Methodological and ethical issues are discussed in Chapter 5.

sociolinguistics (Cameron 2005; Kulick 2000). The focus to date has been on sexual nonnormatives' use of language and how their sexual identities are formulated through language,<sup>58</sup> or about the social discourses that emerge about certain sexual communities (e.g., Baker 2005). Cameron (1998, 2005) describes this collection of research as organised around 'cultural difference'.<sup>59</sup> Using the terminology discussed in Section 3.4.2 it could also be described as Sedgwick's (2008) *minoritising approach*, which posits that there is a minority of people who share an identity that is distinct. For example, Podesva, Roberts, and Campbell-Kibler (2002) examine the phonetic patterns of gay speakers to see the circumstances under which speakers adopt high pitches, significant changes in pitch, or elongate certain sounds (e.g., /l/). In contrast, Leap has written extensively in the area of gay linguistics, including "Gay English" (1996, 1997) and how gay teenagers learn it (2007). Leap understands "Gay English" not as an inherent part of a gay sexuality, but as a way of talking that some gay-identified people develop both as a secret code and as a way of creating a sense of belonging and group membership.

Meanwhile, in their edited book *Queerly Phrased*, Livia and Hall (1997) frame their discussion as a sociolinguistic examination of queer identity and 'communities of practice' (cf. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992). Other examples of communities of practice in the study of the language use of sexual nonnormatives include Abe's (2004) study of the lesbian bar scene in Tokyo. Abe describes the relationship between linguistic practices and the construction of queer identities. Meanwhile, Baker (2002) and Droschel (2007) have examined Polari, an English dialect used by gays and lesbians in London in the mid-twentieth century when the social reprisals for homosexuality were more severe. Droschel notes that there is a difference in the cross-Atlantic adoption of regional gay slang. For example, while many American gay slang terms are known to the British gay speakers in her sample (the exceptions being *bear* and *hustler*), the American gay speakers were less likely to know British gay slang terms (i.e.,

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<sup>58</sup> For excellent and detailed reviews of linguistic studies of gay and lesbian language see Kulick (2000) and Leap (2002).

<sup>59</sup> The cultural difference model used in feminist thought is often associated with the work of Gilligan (1982). Gilligan argues that men and women are different as a result of childhood socialisation, with men more concerned with justice and regulation whilst women are oriented towards interpersonal relationships. She concludes that these differences should not be a precursor to gender inequality.



terms made popular by Polari) such as *swish*, *bevvy*, and *naff*. In contrast, Harvey (2002) takes the position that ‘camp talk’ consists of ‘citational signs’<sup>60</sup> deployed by gay speakers to index their sexuality and make it known to other gay speakers. Rather than using the communities of practice approach, Moonwomon-Baird (1997) uses Labov’s (1972) ‘speech community’ framework for her examination of lesbian speech arriving at similar conclusions.

Although much of the research mentioned here is based in English and American contexts, some linguistic anthropologists have also examined sexual nonnormatives and their use of language in a global context (e.g., Hall 1997; Hall and O’Donovan 1996; Leap and Boellstorff 2004; Kulick 1998; Wong and Zhang 2000). For example, Hall (1997) finds that *hijras*<sup>61</sup> in India deploy sexual insults towards each other in ways that reappropriate their sexual ambiguity. Meanwhile, Wong and Zhang’s (2000) research the *tongzhi* community of Hong Kong which they frame as a community of practice. They discuss how a gay and lesbian magazine published in Taiwan uses the term *tongzhi* to describe Hong Kong Chinese men and women who are gay and lesbian and how this helps to create a community of practice. They argue that the deployment of terms used in English-speaking gay and lesbian cultures (e.g., *lover* which they suggest goes untranslated) works towards creating a distinct linguistic community. The literature on marked or nonnormative sexual identity has contributed a great deal to understanding linguistic variation among different sexual communities, and has made visible those communities of practice.

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<sup>60</sup> Citational signs are the deployment of norms in discourse (cf. Butler 1993; see also Salih 2007).

<sup>61</sup> *Hijra* is a sex/gender category in South Asia that is outside of the dominant male/female and man/woman binaries. Most are assigned a male sex at birth (although some many be intersexed), and later in life some undergo castration and/or penectomies. Although they adopt a feminine dress and modality of speaking, at least in conversations with other hijras, as Hall and O’Donovan (1996) state, they do not consider themselves as ‘women’. Hijras are recognised as a distinct, although low-status, group in South Asian cultures.

### 4.1.2 SEXED BODIES

An alternative to the focus on how members of specific sexual categories use language has been research on the discursive and semantic use of sexual language in relation to bodies (e.g., Braun 1999; Braun and Kitzinger 2001a, 2001b; Lees 1986; Sanders and Reinisch 1999; Stokoe 2003; Weijts et al. 1993). Gilbert and Gubar (1985) combine feminist psychoanalysis and feminist linguistics in their examination of linguistic fantasies in literature. Gilbert and Gubar are interested primarily in semiotics of sexual language and examine sex and sexual metaphor by both male and female writers. To contrast this approach, more recently there has been research on the social construction and representation of sexuality through conversations about sex organs.

Braun and Kitzinger (2001b) argue that dictionary definitions of male and female sex organs (e.g., *clitoris*, *vagina*, *penis*) confirm both sexist and heteronormative assumptions. They also describe how binaries of activity/passivity and absence/presence frame discussions of the ‘complementary’ aspects of male and female anatomy. In another paper, Braun and Kitzinger (2001a) discuss the semantic categories of sexual slang for male and female genitals, finding that while male genital slang refers to specific parts of male genitalia (e.g., *rod*, *shaft*, *berries*), female genital slang is non-specific. Thus, they find that although slang terms for female genitals can be divided into multiple semantic categories (e.g., *animal*, *euphemism*, *receptacle*) the terms within these categories refer to women’s genitals opaquely, rather than focusing on specific physical parts (e.g., *beaver*, *pussy*, *bits*, *down below*, *box*, *honey pot*, *spunk bin*). Their conclusion that female genital slang lacks precision can be seen in relation to Braun’s (1999) earlier work where she argues that discussions of the vagina can be understood as taboo and impolite.

A corresponding direction in research has been on the use of sexualised membership categories. In the context of sexualised language and gender, Lees (1986) discusses youth culture and sexuality. She finds that the use of sexual slang is one way for male and female teenagers to police girls’ sexuality. More recently, Stokoe (2003) asserts that within disputes among neighbours, the gendering of women and placing them within sexual membership categories (as

mothers, unattached women, or ‘promiscuous’) is common. Stokoe argues that men’s sexuality is neither categorised nor placed on an axis of morality in neighbour disputes. Thus, she argues, similar to Lees, that sexualised language can be a way to socially police and control women’s behaviour in general.

In addition to research on sexual slang and how the sexed body is either described or evoked, Sanders and Reinisch (1999) have examined how American undergraduate students define having *had sex*. They describe the range of sexual activities that people may classify as *sex*. Whilst there was agreement among most participants that penile penetration of either the vagina or anus constituted sex, with almost all of their participants (99.5%) including the former and 81% including the latter, there was less agreement with other types of sexual activities. For example, approximately 40% of respondents included oral contact with genitals as sex and approximately 14.5% included manual stimulation/touching/fondling of genitals as sex.<sup>62</sup> Most striking about their findings is the implicit heteronormativity in how sex is conceptualised. The two categories where there was overwhelming agreement of the definition of sex both involved penile penetration, and other forms of contact did not constitute sex. It would also be interesting to compare responses to other (i.e., non-penile) penetration to see if those were classified as having *had sex* or not, but the authors have not done that. Research on the discursive and semantic use of sexual language has provided insights to how speakers construct the sexed body linguistically.

### 4.1.3 HETEROSEXUALITY IN CONVERSATION

This section links directly to the discussion of critical heterosexuality and materialist feminism from Section 2.2.4.2 whilst focusing explicitly on language and communication. As I argued in Chapter 2, an underlying assumption in unmarked social discourse and academic study has been heterosexuality. Thus, unless sexuality – which has typically meant queer sexuality – is the focus of

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<sup>62</sup> In the case of both oral and manual contact, respondents were more likely to include it as sex if it were their genitals receiving contact than they were when they were contacting someone else’s genitals.

analysis, heterosexuality is implied (see also Livia and Hall 1997 and Kitzinger 2005b). The research discussed in Section 4.1.1 directly counters that emphasis by focusing on marked sexual status positions, and making sexuality a central feature of the analysis.

Kitzinger (2005a), a sociologist who has written extensively in the area of feminist conversation analysis, notes that the focus on nonnormative sexualities has meant that the construction and maintenance of heterosexuality, and heterosexuality itself, have been taken for granted as normal and as a result have not been adequately critiqued. Cameron and Kulick (2003) assert that further research is necessary on heterosexuality in conversation, particularly in relation to desire (discussed in Section 4.1.4) The unexamined nature of heterosexuality in language, even in discussions about men and women's communication with each other, can be seen in Tannen's (1991) book *You Just Don't Understand*. Here Tannen focuses on how men and women communicate differently within the context of heterosexual relationships. While her findings in relation to gender are impressive, particularly in relation to the variation between men and women's communication styles, she under-emphasises sexuality and heteronormativity when stressing gender differences.

In contrast, Kitzinger argues that:

a distinctive feature of these 'displays' of heterosexuality is that they are not usually oriented to as such by either speaker or recipient. Rather heterosexuality is taken for granted as an unquestioned and unnoticed part of their lifeworlds... They are simply allowing their heterosexuality to be inferred in the course of some activity in which they are otherwise engaged. (Kitzinger 2005a:223).

Kitzinger's argument here is that heterosexuality is implied and taken for granted. Thus, it can be read as analogous to one I made in Sections 3.2.2 and 3.3 in which I describe heterosexuality as anticipated unless lost or contested. Moreover, the presumption of heterosexuality and the ways in which it is talked about, without the speakers seen as talking about it, reflects heteronormative assumptions. Kitzinger also states that the participants in her sample speak in such a way that their co-participants are able to infer their heterosexuality and, critically, that this occurs in conversations that are not about relationships or sex. In other words, she argues that heterosexuality is constructed as an identity or social marker but that

within heteronormative culture this can be overlooked because it is the assumed sexual status position. Kitzinger (2009:95) also states that, “heterosexuals very commonly make their heterosexuality apparent to total strangers in the first few seconds of a new interaction”. In an analysis of out-of-hours medical calls, Kitzinger (2005a) found that those calling on behalf of a heterosexual partner typically reference their heterosexuality (through their relationship ties to the patient) in the first few moments of the interaction (e.g., *my husband is having a heart attack*). Here, Kitzinger’s work builds on Sacks (1992), where he discusses membership categories and how the deployment of person reference terms (e.g., *wife, sister-in-law*) demonstrate how relationship ties are not merely presumed in conversation but are actively contributed.

While Sacks argues that these ties are indexed in conversation, he does not make broader arguments about this, particularly that *heterosexual* membership ties are indexed. In contrast, Kitzinger (2005a) emphasises the meaning associated with speaking as a heterosexual when analysing the implicit heterosexuality in data sets collected and analysed by other conversation analysts including Sacks. Here Kitzinger uses the original data sets when possible to re-examine the importance of heterosexuality in some well-cited research in conversation analysis which did not consider sexuality in the original analyses. She finds that the most pronounced way people display their heterosexuality in conversation is through the use of person reference terms, particularly *nonrecognitional terms* and that they do so in contexts where sexuality is not pertinent. Nonrecognitional terms are references to people that do not involve the use of their name. In contrast, recognitional terms are person references that involve referring to an individual by name (see Sacks and Schegloff 1979). Examples of the types of nonrecognitional person reference forms Kitzinger discusses include those tied to the speaker’s heterosexuality (e.g., the use of terms such as *my: husband, girlfriend, mother-in-law*) and those terms which refer to others’ heterosexuality (e.g., *Ada’s husband, the Smiths*). Moreover, Kitzinger finds that explicit references to heterosexuality are made in sexual banter, report, and joking, and that the discussion of heterosexual relationships and their related events (e.g., engagement, marriage, and divorce) are ways to casually index heterosexuality in conversation. Kitzinger (2005a) notes that *civilly partnered* LGBTQ couples are less likely to adopt the same surname than *married* heterosexuals.

In addition to expressions of heterosexuality in conversation, Land and Kitzinger (2005) have studied ‘the heterosexual presumption’, or how heterosexuality is presumed, for lesbian speakers in an examination of 150 telephone calls from five out lesbian households to see what differences if any can be noted from Kitzinger (2005a; 2005b). Their findings demonstrate that in interpersonal phone calls (i.e., those between the speakers and their family and friends), their lesbian speakers reference their relationship using the same nonrecognitional person reference forms (e.g., *my girlfriend*, *she*) and collective pronouns (e.g., *we*) as is evident in research on heterosexual couples. However, there are pronounced differences in institutional calls when their co-participant is not already aware of their sexuality (e.g., when calling utility companies, car insurance providers, doctors’ surgeries, and employment agencies). Whilst, as previously noted, heterosexual speakers typically reference their heterosexuality in the first few moments of a call to an out-of-hours medical line (Kitzinger 2005a), the lesbian speakers in Land and Kitzinger’s sample did not index their lesbianism in correspondingly institutional or formal telephone calls. When the lesbian speakers in their corpus use collective pronouns (e.g., *we*, *us*), which is common practice for heterosexual callers in Kitzinger (2005a), their co-participants in the institutional or formal calls typically presume that they are heterosexual and use a different gender pronoun (i.e., a masculine pronoun) in reference to the lesbian caller’s partner. In addition, they also find that the lesbian speakers in their corpus do not correct the co-participant’s heterosexual presumption unless necessary.<sup>63</sup>

Cameron (1997) and Coates (2007) have examined the importance of heterosexuality and masculinity in homosocial conversations amongst young men, as has Pascoe (2003, 2005, 2007) in her ethnography of masculinity and sexuality in an American high school. Cameron (1997:61) states explicitly that in her sample of all-male groups, the speakers “must unambiguously display their heterosexual orientation”. Pascoe’s work supports this finding, as she asserts that for the young men in her study masculinity is nearly always centred on

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<sup>63</sup> Examples of this can be found in Land and Kitzinger (2005) Fragment 22a (p. 396-397) and Fragment 24 (p. 403-405). In both cases the speakers needed to use recognitional terms for their partners, and these recognitional terms were culturally attributed as feminine names.

heterosexuality. Meanwhile, Coates (2007) and Pascoe (2005, 2007) both find that in addition to referencing their heterosexuality, some speakers engage in homophobic and/or misogynistic talk as further tools to support their displays of heterosexuality. For example, Pascoe describes how the young men in her study use the term *fag* as the definitive insult in their homosocial interaction because they understand it as signifying both homosexuality and effeminateness. The research in the area of heterosexuality in conversation demonstrates that even in conversations in which the content is nonsexual, sex and sexuality can be articulated by speakers or presumed by their co-participants.

#### **4.1.4 DESIRE AND LANGUAGE**

Cameron and Kulick (2003) note that the topic of ‘language and sexuality’ seems to be more readily tied to the study of *sexual identity* (discussed in Section 4.1.1) than to *desire and sex*. However, in addition to the examination of sexual identity in language, how people discuss sex and desire and how they do not discuss them are essential components of understanding sexuality and the social comprehensive. Therefore, it is not surprising that in addition to studying normative and nonnormative sexual identities and language, there has been increased attention towards examining the language of sex and desire (e.g., Ahearn 2003; Cameron and Kulick 2003; del-Teso-Craviotto 2006; Harvey and Shalom 1997; Sauntson and Kyratzis 2007; Valentine 2001).

The centring of desire in the examination of sexuality in language is contentious within the field of sociolinguistics. For example, Bucholtz and Hall (2004) and Morrish and Leap (2007) are critical of Cameron and Kulick’s (2003) suggestion that studies of the sexuality of language need to account for desire. However, Morrish and Leap’s criticism does not contextualise the argument in support of the examination of desire in language.

They take issue with what they perceive as the lack of a central sexualised subject in the emphasis on desire in research. More specifically, Morrish and Leap (2007:19) argue that the focus on desire without prioritising sexuality would mean that there is “no reason to pay attention to” the social, historical, cultural, or

individual contexts of that desire. However, Cameron and Kulick (2003) and Kulick (2003) are attentive to differently sexualised subjects and how they communicate about desire, as any analysis of sexuality (whether desire or identity) must. I suggest that there is room and necessity for both research on sexual identity and research that examines the intersection of sexualities and desire within social, socio-cultural, and socio-political contexts. For example, Part 1 of this thesis offers such a contextualisation for the examination of sex and desire in language that follows in Chapters 6-8.

Keeping this in mind, for reasons outlined in Section 4.1.0, conversations about sex and desire are more difficult to access than general conversations by people identifying as members of a particular sexual status category. Some researchers have found creative ways to overcome difficulties in acquiring data with sexual content. For example, Hoey (1997) examines first-person erotic fantasies from Friday's (1980, 1993) collections of men and women's sexual fantasies. Knowles (1997) studies the construction of desire in young adult novels, while Ahearn (2003) analyses desire in Nepalese love letters and how literacy has led to a reconceptualisation of romantic love in rural Nepal. Alternatively, Channell (1997) conducts an analysis of a naturally occurring sexual conversation by focusing on the published transcripts of what was claimed to be a private telephone call between two participants who were reported to be the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall. Meanwhile, Pichler (2007) obtained the data in her analysis of adolescent girls' sex talk and their construction of identity by having her participants record their conversations in her absence. Research on language and desire adds an additional component to the study of language and sex. Furthermore, it contributes an understanding of how the erotic is conceptualised in conversation and between speakers.



#### 4.1.5 SEXUAL COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE IN ONLINE RESEARCH

The emergence of the web has opened up new opportunities for many researchers, but it may be particularly useful for researchers of stigmatised topics including sexuality (Mustanski 2001). To date, most studies of online sexual conversations have used data from sexually based and themed forums (e.g., Campbell 2004; del-Teso-Craviotto 2006; King in press; Subrahmanyam et al. 2004),<sup>64</sup> bulletin boards (e.g., Adams 1996; Suzuki and Calzo 2004) and list-servs (typically Usenet groups such as *alt.sex*) (e.g., McKenna and Bargh 1998; McKenna et al. 2001; Mehta and Plaza 1997; Witmer 1997). However, it is important to note that not all of the studies mentioned here are sociolinguistic in nature, some examine online conversations or posts using alternative methods of analysis (e.g., McKenna and Bargh 1998; Mehta and Plaza 1997; Subrahmanyam et al. 2004). The emphasis in these studies that can be classified as sociolinguistic may be located within any of the four directions for studying sex and sexuality in language as discussed in the preceding sections (Sections 4.1.1-4.1.4).

Discussions about sex and sexuality are likely to occur in places, on- or offline, that focus on a shared sexual interest, practice, or desire. Thus, I argue that research has focused on *sexual communities of practice*. Because of the emphasis on the sexual at the community or group level, sites centralising sexuality have the potential for rich data on sexual conversations: sex and sexuality can be an expected part of communication in a community based around a shared sexual interest, practice, or identity. However, a limitation of this approach is that these settings do not offer insight into discussions of sex outside of thematically sexual spaces.

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<sup>64</sup> In their paper, Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, and Tynes (2004) state that, “the chatroom was not identified with any topical focus, but simply as a chatroom for teens” (p. 656). However, in the section of their paper focused on sexuality they assert that there is a “sex thread” (p. 658), which is a place for teens to discuss sexuality. They then use this “sex thread” for the basis of their discussion about sexuality. Therefore, it may be possible to conclude that their use of “chatroom” in the first instance actually refers to a chat *site* (i.e., a site where there are numerous chat *rooms* or “threads”), but that their analysis of sexuality is focused on a sexually themed area.

Campbell's (2004) *virtual ethnography* of gay male sexuality discusses three online communities of practice. Campbell's study was based on his participation in synchronous, or real-time, chat forums dedicated to *bear* (big, strong, hairy), *chub* (slang for 'chubby', or overweight), and *muscle* (muscular) gay subcultures. He asserts that participants either identified themselves as members of these groups or as sexually attracted to them (i.e., *chasers*). Although some participants were members of all three of the communities, he argues that these are distinct groups and that the conversations within each forum tend to focus on topics relevant to the common sexual identity or interest in bear, chub, or muscle men and culture.<sup>65</sup> Campbell argues in his conclusion that these spaces are safe for the exploration of nonnormative desires and that membership and participation in these communities is one way for interactants to rearticulate relationships to the body outside of dominant heteronormative discourses.

King (in press) adopts a position similar to Campbell's when arguing that the web provides an opportunity for gay men to construct queer spaces instead of heteronormative ones. As with Campbell, he was a member of the site used for his analysis and was logged on in order to screen capture and copy and paste the conversations which formed his data set (unlike Campbell, he disengaged from participation during the data collection process). King centralises space in his analysis of conversations from various location-specific synchronous chat rooms on a gay chat forum over the period of one month.<sup>66</sup> In particular, he describes the use of 'camp names' or how participants make other participants' usernames camp, metaphors of space, and how masculinity is indexed through the concepts of the penetrator and penetrated (cf. McKinnon 1982).

Similar to both Campbell and King, del-Teso-Craviotto (2006) also participated in the nine synchronous chatrooms that formed the basis of her study on conversations about sexual desire in online dating forums. Del-Teso-Craviotto's analysis is based in English (n=5) and Spanish (n=4) gay, lesbian, and heterosexual dating chatrooms. Her findings demonstrate that within the erotic

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<sup>65</sup> See also Hennen's (2008) case study of bear culture and what makes it a distinct community. Hennen discusses how it emerged from chub culture.

<sup>66</sup> The rooms that King collected data from were named after specific locations in the United States and Australia; presumably these location-based rooms make it easier for participants to talk to men living in or visiting those locations.

atmosphere of dating chats, participants actively flirt with each other and rely on humour to create a playful or flirtatious environment.

These sexualised spaces can be seen as already legitimated or “framed” for talk about sex and, because these are sexual spaces, discussions of sex and sexuality are anticipated (see Goffman 1974 for a discussion of framing). In addition, because sex is a stigmatised topic, those who discuss it in a sexualised space may not experience further stigma in these settings (see Goffman 1963; Munt 2007). Thus, it is not surprising that people discuss sex in spaces dedicated to a shared sexual interest. Subrahmanyam et al. (2004) assert that chatrooms about sex are a relatively safe place for teens to explore their sexuality and develop their flirting rapport. However, an implication of the focus on sexual spaces for sexual conversations is that sex and sexuality have been examined in sexual contexts, not in “everyday” ones. Sexuality and sex are complex and, whilst sexual settings are nonnormative (although an option both on- and offline), sexuality is not exclusive to these spaces. People also flirt, discuss their sexual desires, and express their sexual desires in spaces that have not been designated ‘sexual’ and are outside of sexual communities of practice. Thus, to focus exclusively on sexual communities of practice or sexual settings can provide a limited understanding of sexuality in society and the nature of sexual conversations.

## **4.2 ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES OF ‘ONLINE SEXUAL ACTIVITIES’**

In addition to research about sex in language and online sexual communities of practice, there have been significant contributions on the examination of sex and sexuality in web-based settings. As mentioned in Section 4.0, this research varies in the questions addressed, methodology, discipline, and theoretical orientation. As I discuss in this section, sex and sexuality in web-based settings can be studied using methodologies as divergent as: surveys (online and paper), interviews, case studies, ethnography, virtual ethnography, participant observation, and methods typically associated with non-human subject research

such as textual analysis. There are also a number of activities that constitute “sex on the web”. These include: sexual information (sexual health information, including information about sexually transmitted infections, contraceptives, and sexual dysfunctions; information tied to sex practices and proclivities; information about sexual identities, such as sexual orientations); purchasing sex-related goods (educational or informational materials), sex aids (medications, contraceptives, clothes, toys, and supplements/medications), and entertainment (online or other forms of pornography, dvds, tickets to sex events); cybersex; seeking offline sex partners (including time limited encounters such as ‘one night stands’, sex clubs, swinging, and sex involving financial transaction); sex discussions (such as self-help and self-disclosure); and sex exhibitionism (webcamming, sex blogging, sex vlogging, uploading sex content such as stories, photos, and videos).

Although, to date, there has not been research on all of these areas, the existing research covers a wide range of areas respective to sex and the web. I have divided them into 10 groupings, each of which is discussed separately: (1) the history of sex and technology (Section 4.2.1); (2) sexual e-commerce (Section 4.2.2); (3) factors of the web that make sex content flourish (Section 4.2.3); (4) OSA among the general public (Section 4.2.4); (5) addiction/compulsion (Section 4.2.5); (6) seeking sex online and high risk sex practices offline (Section 4.2.6); (7) online sex content and youth (Section 4.2.7); (8) demarginalisation of queers through the web (Section 4.2.8); (9) content analysis of cyberporn (Section 4.2.9); and textual analysis of women’s sex blogging (Section 4.2.10).

## **4.2.1 THE HISTORY OF SEX AND TECHNOLOGY**

The link between sexuality and technology is longstanding. Technological advancements have provided people greater access to a larger quantity of sexual content and materials within a complex social scenario, which has seen sexuality sequestered further into the home simultaneous to the emergence of new laws to further regulate the sexual expression and content.<sup>67</sup> Coopersmith (2006) and Lane (2001) both claim that the pornography industry has been influential in

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<sup>67</sup> Some recent regulations to sexuality were discussed throughout Chapter 3.

technological innovation, whereas Griffiths (2000) suggests that pornographers have been quick to exploit new technologies. Meanwhile, Lehman (2007) states that technological advancements throughout history have made pornography more readily available to a wide audience. For example, Lehman cites the invention of photography as essential to the notion of modern pornography because before this time it was limited to the literate upper and middle classes.<sup>68</sup> In addition to the ties between pornography and technology, Maines' (2001) places the electric vibrator in fifth place in a chronological timeline of household electronic devices. She argues that vibrators were made electric before the washing machine and vacuum cleaner.

More recently, the mainstreaming of VCR technology coincided with the pornography/feminist sex debates of the late 1970s and early 1980s, which were discussed in Section 2.3.1. Williams (2004) discusses how the proliferation of home VCRs moved pornographic films from adult theatres into dens and living rooms. Paasonen et al. (2007) argue that a contributing factor of VHS's dominance over Betamax was that Betamax did not license pornography.<sup>69</sup>

The history of sex and technology provides a framework for understanding the proliferation of online sex materials. The longstanding relationship between sex-related content and the use of emergent technologies demonstrates that there is a market for sex. In addition, it also shows that sex and pornography have been cultural artefacts for which people have desired information and content over time.

## 4.2.2 THE ONLINE SEX ECONOMY

Although one of the most obvious links between sexuality and technology has been vis a vis pornography (Paasonen et al. 2007, Williams 2004), the new opportunities for *sharing* sexual content made possible by web connections are also notable. While one of the most striking examples of internet file sharing has

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<sup>68</sup> While there are examples of ancient erotic depictions, Lehman argues that 'pornography', as it is understood today, is a product of the Victorian era.

<sup>69</sup> There were also other limitations of Betamax, including tapes with shorter run time and a more expensive, although superior, product.

been music and mp3 files, pornography collectors have also benefited from trading and sharing image and video files (Lillie 2004). Sharing pornographic files has occurred throughout the history of Usenet (Mehta and Plaza 1997), and Slater (1998) has written about photo swapping in internet relay chat (IRC). In addition to file sharing and exchanging photos, web technology has led to a wealth of pornographic content that is accessible from any web-enabled device and relatively anonymously. This content includes free images and videos, premium pay sites, live sex shows (and naked webcamming), writing and sharing literotica (literary sexual fiction), and sex blogging. The emphasis on ‘user-generated content’ that is a benchmark for ‘Web 2.0’ discussions has also led to the emergence of user-generated sex content (Lehman 2007). User-generated online sex content has been a neglected area of academic inquiry but could include literotica, sex blogging/vlogging, amateur porn, and sex-focused equivalents of Youtube (e.g., *Yuvutu*, *Redtube*, *Pornhub*, *Pornotube*, etc).<sup>70</sup>

Although online pornography is a major area of study within the rubric of ‘sex and the internet’, it is not salient to this thesis on web-based sex conversations. However, the proliferation of sex materials and content online is noteworthy and relevant. The number of pornographic websites grew rapidly in the late 1990s: in 1997 there were 900 and in 1998 20,000-30,000, with revenues reaching between \$700 million (USD) and \$1 billion (USD) per annum by the close of the decade (Brewer et al. 2006; Hardy 2008; Stack et al. 2004). By the late 1990s it was estimated that the sex industry, in various facets, composed more than two-thirds of all e-commerce (Libbon 2001). Lane (2001) claims that pornography was one of the few sectors of the online economy that survived the dot.com collapse in 2000. The success of the online sex economy, even in times of economic recession, can be seen as tied to both the history of sex and technology as well as to the popularity of both free and for-pay online sex materials.

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<sup>70</sup> Many of these ‘user-generated’ sites include free content added by pay-porn websites as a way to advertise their products and increase their subscribers.

### 4.2.3 CENTRALISING THE WEB

The continual evolution of new technologies, which are routinely applied to sex (Attwood 2009b), may be part of the reason why online sex content, including cyberporn, has become “one of the great moral panics of our age” (Johnson and Rogers 2009:61; see also Waskul 2006). Although researchers have debated whether or not the proliferation of online sexual content may be beneficial or harmful to people (see Sections 4.2.5-4.2.8 and 7.1.1), one area that researchers agree on is the variety of sex-related activities available on the web. Some, such as Cooper (2004), have been interested in the particularities of the web that make it a popular medium for sexual activities (see also, Cooper et al. 2000; Cooper et al. 2002; Cooper et al. 2003; Cooper et al. 2004; Daneback et al. 2005; Ross 2005).

Cooper argues that much of the popularity of online sex activities is tied to anonymity, affordability, and accessibility of the web, or what he refers to collectively as *The Triple A Engine* (Cooper 2004). The web has transformed the ways in which people access information. In the case of sexual-related content, including both communication and information, the internet has made it possible to discuss sex and acquire sex-related materials without many of the social repercussions people face for doing so offline (Brown et al. 2005). In relation to *The Triple A Engine*, the internet provides greater anonymity because sex materials can be accessed both privately and remotely; there is a great deal of free pornography available on the web, opportunities to find better value sex products, and chat forums contact people before meeting offline; and in terms of accessibility, the internet is widely accessible but providing an unprecedented amount of sexual possibilities (Durkin and Bryant 1995). *The Triple A Engine* provides a framework for understanding why people use the web for sex-related activities, and also contributes to an explanation of why OSA may be popular among both those with normative and nonnormative sexualities.

#### 4.2.4 PARTICIPATION

It has been argued that the use of web technologies for sexual purposes is not a behaviour relegated to a small minority of the population (e.g., Albright 2008; Cronin and Davenport 2001; Daneback et al. 2007; Traeen et al. 2006). Cronin and Davenport (2001:43) link the popularity of the internet for accessing sexual materials to the “sanitised and controlled environment [of the internet] in which the consumer (paying by the minute on his or her credit card) is unlikely to feel physically or socially threatened”. They make an important point: surfing for sex on the web is in many ways a safer environment than doing so offline, in part because users do not have to engage with others (e.g., in a shop or on a street).

Although individual reasons for accessing internet sex content will vary, Daneback, Mansson, and Ross (2007) found that 79.4% of respondents to their online survey about internet use in Sweden had accessed the internet for sexual purposes, and of those 35% of men and 40% of women had met offline sex partners online. In an earlier study using the same data, Daneback, Cooper, and Mansson (2005) found that 30% of men and 34% of women who had used the internet for sexual purposes also reported having engaged in cybersex. Meanwhile Albright’s (2008) survey of more than 15,000 respondents in America found that 75% of men and 41% of women reported having intentionally viewed or downloaded online pornography. Her findings also indicate that men (both heterosexual- and gay-identified) and lesbians were more likely to disclose having accessed online pornography than heterosexual women, a finding which is confirmed by Traeen, Nilson, and Stigum (2006). Traeen et al. (2006) also found that likelihood of disclosing having used the web for accessing pornography increased with both level of education and number of sex partners. Although these researchers have examined different populations, their results show a similar pattern of disclosure of online sexual activities.

Meanwhile, Wysocki’s (1998) research can be seen as complementary to Traeen et al.’s (2006) findings. Wysocki surveyed participants in a sexually-based bulletin board to study why they used it to discuss their sexual fantasies. She argues that there were many reasons why people used the setting, but that the salient reason was dissatisfaction with their offline romantic relationships. Other



users reported that the relative anonymity of the medium provided greater safety to explore their desires without having to feel as accountable to their desires as they may need to be if sharing them with a partner or in a face-to-face setting.

The research that explores who participates in OSA demonstrates that a significant number of web users disclose having used the web for these purposes. In this sense, it may be possible to argue, reflecting upon these statistics, that using the web for sex is not an activity relegated to a peripheral segment of the web-using population. Rather, accessing the web for sex appears to be as normal as not accessing it for sexual activities.

#### **4.2.5 ADDICTION AND COMPULSIVE USE**

The debates discussed in Chapter 3 provide examples of the ways in which a nonnormative sexuality can be problematised. In addition, “homosexuality” and “ego-dystonic homosexuality”, which referred to homosexuality that was in contrast to an ideal self-image, were removed from the DSM (Diagnostic Statistical Manual) relatively recently (in 1973 and 1987), and discussions are underway to consider removing other sexual paraphilias from clinical classifications (Drescher 2010; Moser and Kleinplatz 2005). Moser (2009) notes that there is a difference between nonnormative and/or illegal sexual practices and mental illness. As a result of the problematisation of some sexual practices and identities, it must be made clear that socio-cultural influences are inherent in the definitions of some sexual expressions as problematic and others as “healthy”, or are that to which people should aspire.

Psychologists have made considerable effort in detailing the potential of online sex activities to develop into sexual pathologies, including compulsions and addictions (e.g., Boies et al. 2004; Cooper et al. 2000; Cooper et al. 2002, Cooper et al. 2004; Delmonico and Carnes 1999; Dryer and Lijtmaer 2007; Ferree 2003; Griffiths 2000, 2001; Philaretou et al. 2005; Putnam 2000; Schneider 2000; Schwartz and Southern 2000; Stack et al. 2004).<sup>71</sup> As a psychiatrist, Cooper

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<sup>71</sup> See also, Hiller, Wood, and Bolton (2006) who provide a comprehensive review of this literature in relation to psychology.

frames online sexual activities through the lens of psychological disorder and deviance, stating that accessing online sex content may lead to “negative financial, legal, occupational, relationship, as well as personal repercussions” (Cooper et al. 2003:278). However, in a paper with Daneback and others he states that cybersex in particular may positively contribute to one’s sexuality: “Cybersex can either be part of a problematic behaviour or of a strategy to enhance one’s sexuality and it is within the purview of clinicians to guide it away from the former and towards the latter” (Daneback et al. 2005:322). In addition, he argues that the web provides greater access to sexual *information* which has the potential to be “life-enhancing and life-saving” (Cooper et al. 2000b:530). Thus, it is not possible to argue that this research makes generalisations regarding the potential effects of OSA on people’s lives.

The emphasis placed on the importance of clinicians in aiding a healthy sexuality fits within the clinical setting in which they work. However, in Section 3.3, I described the problems of aspirational sexuality, and from my previous argument, it is not clear how Cooper and colleagues may differently define an “enhanced” sexuality and what I refer to as *aspirational sexuality*. For example, the definition of healthy and unhealthy sexualities is variable, heteronormative sexuality is elevated as ideal in cultural, social, legal, and health contexts, and queer sexualities, including homosexuality, continue to be seen as dangerous or pathological in certain contexts.

To make this concern more evident, the work of Ferree (2003) is relevant. Ferree, a clinical psychologist working within a ‘Christian’ context,<sup>72</sup> claims that: “for some people, web connections prompt almost instant addiction, much like the highly addictive nature of cocaine” (2003:390). The use of the terms “addiction” and “highly addictive” signify a danger, even when modified with “some people”. These points contribute to debates concerning “sexual addiction”, in general, and “cybersex addiction”, more specifically (Voros 2009). It is possible to view Ferree’s use of addiction terminology, and her likening of online sex content to a “gateway drug” (p. 390), as leading to the argument that some sexual practices are

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<sup>72</sup> I have used inverted quotation marks here to suggest that not all Christian orthodoxies hold similar views. For example, Christian perspectives on homosexuality can be radically different, not only between Catholic and Protestant belief systems, but also between Protestant denominations and churches.

pathological to some people. The definitions of sexual pathologies are situated in time and space, and what is defined as pathological, problematic, or healthy sexuality varies both culturally and over time (Foucault 1990). Thus, what is defined as problematic in one temporal period may not be defined the same way at a later time (e.g., homosexuality). In addition, it may be useful to frame online sexual activities outside of a dichotomy of healthy/unhealthy or normative/nonnormative. To avoid doing so may mean that the universalising and minoritising approaches that Sedgwick (2008) describes in relation to understanding homosexuality may also be applied to understanding online sexual engagement.

Becker (1963) refers to labelling practices in relation to social deviancy, and this labelling can be evident in some of the psychological research focused on the problematics of cybersex. For example, Schneider (2000) uses the term “cybersex participants” to refer to her sample, more than 90% of whom self-identify as current or former “sex addicts”. Meanwhile, Delmonico (1997) estimates that there are between one-half to two million sex addicts with internet access and, in a paper written with Carnes (1999), stresses that many of these do not engage in online sex. Cooper, Delmonico, and Burg (2000) found that only 1% of their research participants could be classified as *cybersex compulsive*. Therefore, I would suggest a discourse of problematising and pathologising *cybersex participants* can develop when empirical samples focus specifically on those who have been labelled or self-identify as engaging in problematic sexual activities. Furthermore, if the number of those with a cybersex compulsion is fractional, then there is an overemphasis on this marked category of cybersex participants. Regardless of whether or not cybersex addiction exists<sup>73</sup>, research on cybersex specifically has been skewed towards understanding and exposing its potential to become problematic.

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<sup>73</sup> For example, Voros (2009) argues that *compulsive* behaviour is not necessarily *addictive* behaviour.

#### **4.2.6 SEX ONLINE AND HIGH-RISK SEX OFFLINE**

The use of the internet and web technologies by gay men and MSM has been examined by a number of researchers primarily interested in the implications of this in offline sexual practices (e.g., Bolding et al. 2005; Bowen 2005; Brown et al. 2005; Campbell 2004; Daneback et al. 2007; Davis et al. 2006; Elford et al. 2001; Lau et al. 2003; Ross et al. 2004; Ross et al. 2006; Ross et al. 2007; Tikkanen and Ross 2000; Toomey and Rothenberg 2000; Williams et al. 2005; Valleroy 2000). Elford, Bolding, and Sherr (2001) surveyed more than 700 men at six London gyms about their internet use, and if they had used the internet to find offline sex partners, access to sexual health information including HIV testing, prevention, and treatment, and if they used recreational drugs. Their findings indicated that men who seek sexual partners online were more likely to report having had a sexually transmitted infection in the previous year and were also more likely to engage in more high-risk sexual behaviours (i.e., defined as unprotected anal sex in this study) than those who did not use the web for sex seeking. In contrast, Ross, Rosser, and Stanton (2004) conducted an online survey with more than 1,000 Latino men in the United States and found that those men who believed that the internet provided opportunities for cybersex, and who appreciated the anonymity and safety of the internet for exploring same sex desire, were less likely to report that they engaged in high-risk sex practices (i.e., defined by the authors as sex while under the influence of drugs or alcohol, and unprotected anal intercourse). The link between seeking sex online and engagement in high-risk sexual practices offline has not been made consistently across in the research. One reason for the disparate findings could be due to variation in the communities of MSM that the researchers examined, or due to a difficulty in gauging the effect that seeking online sex has on offline sexual practices.

## 4.2.7 YOUTH

In addition to the work on the potential for online sexual activities to become compulsive, there has also been interest in exploring the possible ramifications of the availability and prevalence of online sex materials on children and youth (e.g., Adebayo et al. 2006; Boies et al. 2004; Cate 1996; Delmonico and Griffin 2008; Dombrowski et al. 2007; Gray 2009; Mitchell et al. 2003; Quayle and Taylor 2001; Sabina et al. 2008; Subrahmanyam et al. 2004). Sabina, Wolak, and Finkelhor (2008) found that 93% of boys and 62% of girls in their sample reported having been exposed to online pornography before they were 18 years old, with the vast majority reporting that their first exposure took place between the ages of 14-17. Girls were almost three times more likely to report feeling embarrassed by online pornography (73% to 25%), whilst boys were almost four times more likely to report feeling aroused by it (80% to 27%). Meanwhile, Delmonico and Griffin (2008) detail two areas of consideration in terms of youth and online sex materials, both of which can be seen as centralising danger. The first is the exploitation or victimisation of youth (e.g., grooming by paedophiles), and the second is teenagers' risk for developing "unhealthy sexual behaviour patterns", such as compulsive use of online pornography (Delmonico and Griffin 2008:431). Similarly, Adebayo, Udegbe, and Sunmola (2006) express concerns about unfiltered internet access and the implications of this on the sex choices of teens in Nigeria. It is worth noting that teenagers' use of the internet to find information or community in dealing with sexual issues is not mentioned in these discussions of youth and online sex content. However, as with other types of research related to sex on the web, it is difficult to generalise the findings. Whilst some researchers emphasise the potential risks to youth who are exposed to online sex content (e.g., Adebayo et al. 2006; Delmonico and Griffin 2008), others note that the web may be a relatively safe place for youth to explore their sexuality (e.g., Gray 2009; Subrahmanyam et al. 2004).

## 4.2.8 DEMARGINALISATION

In addition to research that investigates some of the possible negative effects of accessing online sex content, there has been research on the use of sex content to demarginalise those with nonnormative sexual interests, connect people to others with a shared sexual interest, and to provide a medium for people to safely explore sexual desires and interests (e.g., Gray 2009; McKenna and Bargh 1998; Wysocki 1998). For example, Gray's (2009) study is in direct contrast to research more focused on the potential harm to youth presented by online sex content, as described in Section 4.2.7 (e.g., Adebayo et al. 2006; Delmonico and Griffin 2008). In her book *Out in the Country*, Gray discusses how queer teenagers in rural America use the web to connect with others, overcome isolation and shame associated with being queer, and to find representations of queer being. In other words, for some youth (and adults) accessing the internet for sex materials can have a positive psychological effect.

Carnes (2003) notes that the internet provides people, irrespective of sexuality, with new opportunities to overcome sexual shame by becoming in contact with others who share a sexual interest. In addition, it has been effectively argued that the cyberspace and the web are useful for accessing sexual materials, and that, in particular, sexual minorities and the sexually disenfranchised may benefit from it (e.g., Brown et al. 2005; Burke 2000; Campbell 2004; Gray 2009; Jacobs et al. 2007; McKenna and Bargh 1998; McKenna et al. 2001; Mehra et al. 2004; Ross 2005; Tikkanen and Ross 2000). Fisher and Barak (2001) discuss how accessing online pornography may potentially lead users to mirroring the practices viewed in participants' own sexual activities.<sup>74</sup> Traeen, Spitznogle, and Beverford (2004) report that exposure to pornography, on- or offline, may encourage users to become more liberal towards sex practices and customs. Meanwhile, Burke (2000) notes that the internet may allow some lesbians to overcome social marginalisation, develop a sense of community, and to find relationships and love.

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<sup>74</sup> See also Barak, Fisher, Belfry, and Lashambe (1999) for possible implications on accessing online pornography in regards to men's attitudes towards women.

Mehra, Merkel and Bishop (2004) find that for some LGBTQ people, the web and online communication can be seen as positive influence on their sexual identities, and further that it can enhance their offline queer networks.

The internet provides this space, previously unavailable, where a person can *type* without *doing*, or *do* without *being*. It can be both a fantasy, taken to the point of acting through it with another person, or a behaviour that, through being virtual, is not actually done, and thus the person does not have to face the dissonance or stigma of actually being, or having a spoiled identity (Ross 2005:344, emphasis in original).

Ross articulates a critical aspect of the potential of the internet: it offers an environment to seek, discover, and explore without many of the consequences and implications. Goffman's (1963) research on stigma demonstrates that one does not necessarily need to possess a spoiled identity in order to be stigmatised, but, rather, often an association with it is enough, and the internet permits that. For those who are questioning their sexuality or wish to consider certain sexual fantasies, *The Triple A Engine* of the internet can be an invaluable resource. As Ross, Rosser, McCurdy, and Feldman (2007) assert, the internet provides the potential for growth in social and sexual environments – both in the range and niche of partners – and without some of the constraints currently experienced by holding a marked sexual status position. However, as Mehra et al.'s (2004) research demonstrates, the web can also be used to counter stigma and social marking. This can be done in creating sexual communities of practice online and also in using web technologies to organise offline sexual communities.

Attwood's (2007) analysis of the content on the *Suicide Girls* website focuses on the ways in which the web can be used as a tool for incorporating sex into other cultural discussions and artefacts, but also on the potential of the web to include marginalised sexualities. The influence – either potential or enacted – of the web in the demarginalisation of sexually and socially marginal groups or subcultures is a common theme in this body of literature (e.g., Bryson 2004; McKenna and Bargh 1998; McKenna et al. 2001; Wilkinson 2009). In a discussion of BDSM representations in visual culture, Wilkinson (2009) examines the potential of the web to include the stories or images of both marginalised practices and of those marginalised within those subcultures. She argues that the range of sexual practices that can be represented on the web demonstrate its

'queerness'. While Wilkinson's research is speculative, McKenna and Bargh (1998) conducted a quantitative analysis of the importance of internet group participation to people with marginal sexual identities. They found that those who actively participate in internet discussion groups devoted to homosexuality and BDSM feel more integrated in society than those who lurk in those same groups. Their findings also show that virtual group participation lead to greater confidence in disclosing their nonnormative sexuality to others in their lives.

In addition to research that focuses on the potential of the web to enfranchise the sexually marginal, there has also been significant examination on the potential of new technologies to build and support queer communities (e.g., Aragon 2008; Burke 2000; Mehra et al. 2004; Mowlabocus 2007, 2008; Nip 2004a, 2004b; O'Riordan 2005). For example, Nip (2004a, 2004b) studied the online and offline presence of a queer women's group in Hong Kong. She finds that participants describe sharing with others and self-expression as important features of the online bulletin board, and that although the online and offline groups were not homogenous, 61% of respondents believed that their participation in the web forums accentuated their participation in the offline community (Nip 2004a). She also found that 96% of members of the online community extended the relationships that they formed there into other mediums, including face-to-face communication (Nip 2004b). Nip's findings in regards to the navigation between online and offline communities for queer women are supported by Aragon's (2008) study of the use of the internet for contemporary feminist activism in which participants may move seamlessly between on- and offline settings, and that there is the expectation that there is some fluidity of activity.

Bryson's (2004) study on the uses of the web for queer women produced a number of findings consistent with the literature discussed in Section 4.2.0. For example, similar to Cronin's and Davenport's (2001) findings, her respondents indicated that the web was a 'safe' place to interact; that the web provides opportunities to experiment sexually, as suggested by Fisher and Barak (2001) in relation to cyberporn; and representations of queer life are a springboard to 'learn how to be queer' (Bryson 2004:249), which Gray (2009) also found in her study of queer rural youth. Thus, similar to how accessing sexual content can become a pathological practice for some people, other researchers have noted that it can also be used to demarginalise members of marked sexual categories (e.g., Campbell



2004; McKenna et al. 2001) and to improve their ties to their offline sexual communities of practice (e.g., Gray 2009; Nip 2004b).

#### **4.2.9 CYBERPORN**

The role of pornography is relevant to the discussion of cyber- or online porn. Warner explains that pornography is one way for queers to recognise their sexual practices, and to see queer desires enacted: “What is traded in pornographic commerce is not just speech, privately consumed; it is publicly certifiable recognition” (Warner 1999b:185). He argues that in sexual cultures which are inhibited by normative sexual ideals and mainstream pornography, queer porn can validate desires that may not be represented in other media. The emphasis on a proposed schism between queer, nonnormative, or ‘alternative’ porn from the sexually normative has been discussed in feminist and queer analyses of cyberporn (e.g., Attwood 2007; Attwood 2009b; DeGenevieve 2007; DeVoss 2002; Jacobs et al. 2007; Magnet 2007; Noonan 2007; Paasonen 2007; Podlas 2000; Ray 2007; Russo 2007; Schauer 2005; Snyder 2002; Zook 2007). Rather than focusing on the ‘sex debates’ that framed feminist discussions of pornography in the 1970s and 1980s (see Section 2.3.1), the positions articulated in this literature are not motivated by censorship and they do not question the right to make or access porn. Instead, the arguments made by these authors compare feminist and queer porn with mainstream porn, and also discuss agency and commodification of actors and entrepreneurs.

For example, both Magnet (2007) and Attwood (2007) use queer feminist theoretical positions in their examinations of representations of women on the *Suicide Girls* website. *Suicide Girls* is a website which consists of online journals, interviews, and nude photographs of ‘alternative’ models (e.g., models are typically tattooed and could be considered ‘punk’). There is also a community with asynchronous bulletin boards and an ‘army’ which fans can join to publicise the site. Attwood could be seen as taking a feminist ‘cybertopian’, or excessively positive, position in regards to the site, particularly in regards to the emphasis she places on the ways in which sex content is combined with music, art, and culture

on the site. She argues that the combination of pornography with other topics can be used for alternative community and culture building. However, it seems unclear how she distinguishes *Suicide Girls* from *Playboy* magazine, which although mainstream is also known for combining softcore porn with articles and stories that are not sexually based.

Meanwhile, Magnet notes how the representations of women on *Suicide Girls* commodify queerness, ethnicity and ‘difference’, which she ties to the primary focus on profit rather than feminist goals of inclusiveness and representation. Magnet asserts that *Suicide Girls* conforms to hegemonic sexual and ethnic ideals, and ‘difference’ is mainly expressed through tattoos rather than significant variations in representation. She also notes that for the ‘privilege’ of being a Suicide Girl, there are significant expectations placed on the models, who are paid very little, whilst the owners earn significant capital, and that this could be classified as an exploitative relationship.<sup>75</sup>

While Magnet argues that *Suicide Girls* may not be alternative porn in some regards, Paasonen (2007) focuses on how alternative porn can be seen as feeding into emerging mainstream porn genres. For example, Paasonen discusses the mainstreaming of male-to-female transgender porn, which is advertised on mainstream porn portals as ‘she-males’ or ‘chicks with dicks’. She argues that this genre has moved from being a speciality to one that is routinely listed on mainstream porn portals. Cramer (2007:174) argues that with the mainstreaming of alternative porn, some ‘gonzo porn’<sup>76</sup> can be read as more subversive than queer porn because of the ways in which it incorporates gay porn desires from the 1970s and 1980s (e.g., unprotected anal sex and “women stylised like drag queens”). In contrast to Cramer’s conditional support of gonzo porn, DeVoss (2002) argues that women’s independent porn typically possesses an intimacy that mainstream porn does not because its entrepreneurs present themselves as ‘real’

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<sup>75</sup> Magnet states that a Suicide Girls model receives between \$100-200USD per photo shoot on average. Given the amount of additional work that goes into being a Suicide Girl (e.g., writing blogs, participating in the forums, and maintaining a presence on the website), they are not paid very well.

<sup>76</sup> The term *gonzo porn* is derived from ‘gonzo journalism’ in which the journalist is part of the scene they are reporting. In the case of pornography, gonzo porn usually refers to professional pornography in which one or more participants are involved in both performing and filming. As a result, gonzo porn typically involves close or tight shots and minimal storyline or narrative.

people, or in other words, they represent themselves as more than porn entrepreneurs. For example, she quotes the biography from one independent porn site,

Hello, I am a 39-year-old wife and mother, a marathon runner – camping, playing tennis, riding my mountain bike, and riding our horses in the mountains, modelling for pictures. I love showing off... I love being a nudist ('Rachel's website', quoted in DeVoss 2002:87).

Here DeVoss quotes Rachel, whose website DeVoss studied and who works independently in cyberporn managing her own website. DeVoss argues that Rachel and other independent women cyberporn entrepreneurs own the commodification of their bodies and sexualities and also encourage viewers to see them as fully subjective. Thus, DeVoss argues that independent women working in cyberporn establish narratives on their websites in which participation in pornography represents one facet of their lives. The literature on feminist and queer cyberporn offers an analysis of alternative uses of sex content on the web. Rather, the emphasis is placed on the potential demarginalisation of nonnormative sexual interests, and providing an alternative to pornography that has emphasised a narrow range of desires in such a way that leaves little room for the actors' and models' subjectivity to be visible to the viewer.

#### **4.2.10 WOMEN'S SEX BLOGGING**

In the last three years, coinciding with the mainstream success of women's sex blogs such as *Diary of a London Call Girl* and *Girl With a One Track Mind*,<sup>77</sup> there have been feminist and/or queer textual analyses of women's sex blogging (Attwood 2009b; Hamilton 2009; Ray 2007; Wood 2008). Although this research area is emergent, it represents a new direction in studies of sexuality and the web.

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<sup>77</sup> The anonymous authors of both of these blogs published books or 'blooks' based from their blog entries. Belle de Jour's blog is also the basis for the television programme *Secret Diary of a Call Girl*, which is in its third series on ITV in the UK. Although both authors used pseudonyms, their identities have been made known. Zoe Margolis was involuntarily revealed as the writer behind *Girl with a One Track Mind* and Brooke Magnanti went public as Belle de Jour in 2009 amid fears that a British newspaper was about to expose her.

The analysis of blogs is well-suited for a queer theoretical approach because, as discussed in Section 2.3, queer theory has historically been primarily interested in a humanities-based textual analysis, and journal-style blogging can be seen as a new literary (McNeill 2003) or speech (Doostdar 2004) genre. As Herring and Paolillo (2006) note, journal-style blogging, like diary writing, is associated with women. Women write at least half of all journal-style blogs (Herring et al. 2005), and Attwood (2009b) has suggested that women dominate the sub-genre of sex blogging. Wood (2008) asserts that this may be because historically women have controlled the dissemination of sex-related information through oral traditions and advice columns.

Analyses of women's sex blogs vary. Attwood (2009b) focuses on the 'postfeminist' narratives of women's sexuality. In addition, she argues that sex bloggers possess agency and self-determination (Attwood 2009b). In contrast to Attwood's focus on sex blogging as a narrative style based in adventure and spiritedness, Hamilton (2009) compares feminist sex blogging with feminist filter blogs which are positioned as against sex work. Whilst journal-style blogs focus their content on self-reflection, the material discussed in filter blogs is external to the self, and typically includes world events or online news (Herring et al. 2004). Hamilton (2009) argues that in contrast to feminist sex blogs, like those examined by Attwood, which are testimonies focused on women's sexual agency, 'abolitionist sex blogs', her term for those filter-blogs against sex work, are witness accounts which only present women as sexual victims. In other words, Attwood can be positioned as focusing on the 'enabling' aspects of sex blogging and women's sexual narratives, whilst Hamilton's analysis of sex work abolitionist blogs focus on the constraining and oppressive aspects of sexuality for women. Sex blogs discuss the erotic aspects of their lives, including their desires and practices, giving a new voice to these topics. Although sex blogging occurs within the context of the social comprehensive, those who write them and make them visible on the web detail their sexuality and explore discourses of sexuality, making their intimate lives into cultural artefacts.

## 4.3 CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have reviewed empirical studies of sexuality that are relevant to this thesis. I have noted that there are four major directions in research on sexuality in language: sexual identity and how sexual nonnormatives talk, sexual bodies, heterosexuality in nonsexual-based conversations, and desire or erotic talk. Although the body of research on sex and desire in language is relatively small, I have argued that web technologies, and corpora from online conversations may help to further develop the field. To date the studies of sex and desire in language in online settings have tended to use forums, such as chatrooms or bulletin boards, that are based on a shared sexual interest or proclivity, and can be seen as adopting a *sexual communities of practice* approach. As a result, we know little about naturally occurring sexual conversations in either on- or offline settings.

Although the field of research on sex and desire in language is emergent, I have shown in this chapter that there has been extensive research on sex on the web. This body of literature is diverse and can be divided into relevant categories (I have organised them in 10). For example, there has been research on normal and abnormal sexual uses of the internet, as well as the potential for online sexual behaviours to lead to either pathologies or high-risk sexual behaviours. Unfortunately, there has been a bias in some of the research on the potential of the web for pathological sexual behaviour, with samples generated from people who identify or have been labelled in therapeutic settings as having problematic sexual behaviours vis a vis the web (e.g., Ferree 2003; Schneider 2000). Alternatively, there is also research that has, at times, overlooked the potential negative aspects of the web and sexuality: including high-risk sexual practices and negative representations of gender, sex, and desire. With the exception of studies on Latino MSM and online sex seeking (Ross et al. 2006) and an examination of the effects of accessible sex content for youth in Nigeria (Adebayo et al. 2006), race and ethnicity have been overlooked. Discussions of cyberporn have neglected to consider the intersection of race/ethnicity and social class in an examination of mainstream and queer genres.

Although the research conducted on sex and sexuality on the web has covered a range of settings and methodologies, currently we know little about what people do online. When people's online activities have been studied they have been examined in the context of how participants report their engagement in online sexual activities (e.g., Cooper et al. 2004; Daneback et al. 2004; Ross et al. 2004; Ross et al. 2006) or by the researcher's participation in the site (e.g., Campbell 2004; del-Teso-Craviotto 2006; McKenna and Bargh 1998). The latter is especially relevant for the examination of language and community because not only has the data reflected the researchers' involvement in the site. However, the research to date has focused exclusively on sexual spaces, or websites and forums organised around a shared sexual interest, practice, or proclivity. The result is that we know very little about how people discuss sex in settings (on- or offline) that are not organised around sexuality.

## WALFORD

### 5.0 INTRODUCTION

The empirical part of this thesis (Chapters 5-8) consists of an analysis of online conversational logs, or *chatlogs*, of synchronous communication from a multi-room chat site. In this chapter I introduce Walford, the online community used in this research, and describe my research methodology. I situate Walford within the literature of online communities and describe it as a multi-user-domain (MUD).<sup>78</sup> Walford is a *talker* or *talking MUD*, which means that participants primarily use the infrastructure for real-time communicative purposes. The infrastructure of MUDs is such that users have a great deal of creative control over their screen-involved environment – including the space (e.g., buildings and rooms) and their communication options (e.g., communication types, settings, and commands). I explain some of the conversational and privacy options available to the participants in Section 5.1.2.

In this chapter I also discuss the ethical concerns particular to this research. I argue that the ethical concerns regarding both sensitive and internet/web research are relevant to this study and I detail how I have taken into account the concerns that this combination research raises. In particular, I discuss

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<sup>78</sup> Although the terms *MUD* and *mud* are both used in the literature, I use the upper case.

the steps taken in this research to gain ongoing informed consent, protect participants' anonymity, and minimise any risks they may face as a result of their participation.

## 5.1 SITUATING WALFORD

The term *MUD* originates in gaming culture and is used to refer to multi-user dungeons or domains (Curtis and Nichols 1993; Kendall 2002; Turkle 1994). In this context *dungeon* refers to the multi-player role playing game *Dungeons and Dragons*, which in its original form was a non-digital game.<sup>79</sup> Curtis and Nichols describe MUDs as:

programs that accept network connections from multiple simultaneous users and provide access to a shared database of 'rooms', 'exits', and other objects. Users browse and manipulate the database from 'inside' the rooms, seeing only those objects that are in the same room and moving between rooms mostly via the exits that connect them (1993:1).

From Curtis's and Nichols' assessment, it is evident that the use of space is an important feature of MUDs and other massively multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPGs). However, an important distinction between MUDs and other online gaming environments, such as more recent MMORPGs, is that MUDs have tended to be text-based. Thus, unformatted text is the sole way of communicating in the environment and it must be used in 'manipulating the database' (e.g., moving around in the MUD and creating new objects) and when communicating with other users (see also Cherny 1999; Kendall 2002). MUDs typically have many players connected and simultaneously interacting with the infrastructure, and it has been argued that a consequence of this is that "the focus is on larger social and cultural themes as well [as personal and interpersonal issues]" (Turtle 1994:160). As Turtle notes, MUDs can be seen as "virtual societies". Both traditional MUDs or role-playing games and online MUDs can

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<sup>79</sup> *Dungeons and Dragons* was created by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, and was first released as a boxed set board game in 1974.



have any type of virtual geography and can be situated within any socio-historical temporal period, whether in the past or a dys/utopian future.

Walford was developed in 1993 as a small, present-day village in the English countryside. A quantitative analysis conducted on the corpus by other members of the Interaction, Media and Communication (IMC) research group at Queen Mary, University of London (QMUL), of which I am a member, found that in 2003-2004 there were approximately 1,000 regular monthly users (Healey et al. 2008). Participants are given their own 'room' when joining Walford, which is theirs to customise. For example, a user might add descriptions of windows, fresh flowers, and artwork. There are also common or public buildings along the high street, including a post office, bus depot, town hall, bank, refuse dump, and a pub. On Walford's website there is a map of the village which gives users a graphical representation of the community, although personal rooms are not included. Walford's pub, The Crown Vic, is the central location for dialogue and debate, and the social significance of the pub is made evident to new users who are prompted to visit the pub, which is explained as a popular location.

Walford is a *talking MUD* similar to the early MUDs TinyMUD and UglyMUD, meaning that it is used primarily for communication (i.e., synchronous or real-time chat) rather than game play activities such as collecting points, character development, or advancing levels. Both TinyMUD and UglyMUD were developed in the late 1980s and early 1990s and interaction takes place through the use of basic communication commands. In fact, Walford's initial set of commands (i.e., those commands instituted in the system prior to user-generated commands) was derived from those used in these MUDs. In addition to the real-time chat facility, which is the primary communication and interactional method in Walford, participants have additional methods of communication available to them on the Walford website such as photo galleries, private messages (asynchronous, and a variation of an internal email message), and bulletin boards (asynchronous, publicly accessible messages organised by topic). Participants also organise annual offline conferences and meet-ups in various locations in Europe and North America. Together these media and interactional forms make Walford a complex environment with multiple interactional facilities for numerous participants. In this thesis, I focus on the MUD and its real-time communication.

Although Walford and other MUDs, such as ElseMOO (Cherny 1999), and BlueSky (Kendall 2000, 2002), are text-based environments, the communication commands make a highly differentiated communication possible. Walford participants are not limited to ‘speaking’ to each other but can choose to *emote*, *think*, and *whisper* (these three commands were in the original set of Walford commands). In addition, Walford users can choose the settings in which they wish to communicate. Coupled with their user profiles, the descriptions of their rooms, and their ability to build and augment the MUD, Walford and other MUDs are rich environments, even without the additional non-chat related aspects available to users to further enrich their experience.

### **5.1.1 JOINING WALFORD**

There are three options available for connecting to Walford: telnet (the preferred option), java interface, and web interface (which runs an applet). The telnet option opens a terminal window on the user’s computer with the following prompt:

*Step 1:* “If you already have an existing character, please enter their name at the prompt below. If you are a new user, and do not have a character yet, you will need to create one. To do this, simply type NEW at the prompt below.

“Please enter your name (Or NEW):”

Entering “new” creates a second prompt:

*Step 2:* “You need to think up a suitable name for your new character. This does not need to be your real life name, and can be up to 20 letters in length and may contain spaces.

“Please enter your preferred character name:”

Once a name has been entered, the user is prompted again:

*Step 3:* “Would you like to create a new character with the name '[NAME]' (Y/N)?”

If the user enters “n”, they are taken to Step 1. If the user replies affirmatively, they then must read through a disclaimer about Walford before agreeing that they

understand that Walford's conversations may be used for research purposes.<sup>80</sup> After agreeing the user is prompted to enter a password; a gender from a closed list of categories: male, female, or neuter; a race which is open-ended but examples such as "human" and "alien" are provided; a valid email address; and answer some questions about the user's screen configuration.<sup>81</sup>

Once these steps have been completed, a new user is welcomed to the community and encouraged to visit the pub to talk to others:

*Step 4:* "When you're ready, type PUB to go to the Crown Vic, where most people hang out"

Although the pub is a busy public centre in Walford, users are given private rooms that they can visit by entering the command "home". All rooms in Walford have text descriptions that appear whenever someone enters. Thus, users are asked to describe their private rooms. In addition to a description of the room's appearance, a user may want to list the *contents* of their room (e.g., furniture) and any *obvious exits* (e.g., doors and windows). In order to travel to a different room or location in Walford, a user may exit using an 'obvious exit' or they may choose to type a location at the command prompt (e.g., *pub*).

Although users need to describe and customise their personal rooms when they arrive there for the first time, they are unable to build new artefacts in Walford until they have accumulated enough time inside the MUD. Once a user has accrued 24-hours of connected time, they are awarded a *builder permit* or *flag*. These special permits allow users to design new geographical, physical, and communicative infrastructure within the community. Users with administrator status, that is those users who are at the top of the Walford formal hierarchy, have the authority to remove, either temporarily or permanently, users' builder permits as a formal sanction for breaking Walford's rules. In Chapter 6 (Example 1) I discuss a conversational excerpt in which a user has their builder flags removed.

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<sup>80</sup> This form is described more fully in Section 5.2.2.1. It is also included in the Appendix.

<sup>81</sup> The site uses the terms *gender* for a choice between *sex* categories, and *race* when providing examples of *species* categories.

## 5.1.2 CONVERSING AND THE COMMAND SYSTEM

As explained in Section 5.1 Walford is a talker MUD which emphasises synchronous communication. The structure of MUDs gives participants a great deal more flexibility than contemporary instant messaging (IM) systems (e.g., GoogleTalk, AIM, MSN Messenger), in which users can converse with their contacts either in dyadic or small scale multi-party settings. These types of IM clients tend to have a set series of functions that users can employ by clicking on various links on the user-interface, and by typing text in a textbox in order to send an IM. There would be a lengthy process to institute changes to this system, to be done by professional developers, and would likely involve minimal user input.

Although both standard chat environments (chatsites and chatrooms that are not MUDs; e.g., Yahoo Chat, ICQ) and MUDs are similar in that they involve more participants, multiple rooms or locations within the chatsite, there are dissimilarities. In addition to the difference noted above in relation to IM services, it is typical for both standard online synchronous chatting multi-party environments (non-MUDs) and chatrooms run by communities,<sup>82</sup> to run a software package either leased to the site or developed by the site's development team, and participants' communication is dictated by the program. In contrast, Walford users interact with each other using the interface but at the command line. Thus, *commands* must be entered before the text they wish to communicate (e.g., entering "say hi" appears to others as "[username] says 'hi'"). In Walford and other MUDs the users are able to alter and customise their environment. These differences between MUDs and typical chat environments mean that MUD users are not obliged to make do within the limitations of the existing functionality of the system. Instead, they are able to add, change, and develop their community.

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<sup>82</sup> In the late 1990s and first few years of this century, many websites with online communities had both bulletin board services (asynchronous and publicly accessible) and live chat (only those signed in could access the synchronous chat; these often used a java applet) options available to their members. For example, *Bust*, a third-wave feminist magazine, offered both to its community members in addition to email addresses. However, the live chat was removed years ago, and although the bulletin boards still operate the frequency of posts is significantly less than it was 10 years ago.

There are obvious advantages for those who are able to conceptualise new features and have the skills to program them into the existing framework. Those with ideas and the ability to design/implement them may find that the MUD environment gives them influence and control that far surpasses that typically accorded to ‘users’. The user influence in MUDs means that there is great potential for the evolution of the environment in tune with technological advancements and participants’ interests and/or interactional styles.

### 5.1.3 SETTINGS

There are three main conversational settings in Walford that users can employ to target their utterances to specific recipients. The use of *global*, *direct*, and *local* settings give users flexibility and control over their communication, as explained in Section 5.1.1. While the *direct* and *local* settings can be used by all participants, and are widely used in Walford, access to the *global* setting is restricted to users with *current administrator* status. The *global* command makes a message visible to all those currently connected to Walford. Only a few participants have the ability to use it, and those who are able to use it rarely do. As a result, in the conversations I coded (i.e., those about sex) I coded no conversations which used the *global* command: it was not used at all in my sample of logs for any type of sexual communication.

In contrast, the *direct* and *local* settings are regularly used. These two settings give users options to control how they talk to people, or the *conversational commands* they use, and to whom they talk. Some of the conversational commands in Walford have been programmed (by the users) for use in either direct or local chat settings.

**TABLE 5.1 BASIC COMMUNICATION COMMANDS**

Command	Setting	Usage (example username Saltshaker)	Appears as
Say <message> (shortcut: “)	<i>Local</i>	says Hello	Saltshaker says Hello.
Asks <message> (shortcut: ?)	<i>Local</i>	asks How are you	Saltshaker asks How are you?
Thought <message> (shortcut: +)	<i>Local</i>	thought it’s a nice day	Saltshaker . o O (It’s a nice day)
Emote <message> (shortcut: :)	<i>Local</i>	emote dances around the room	Saltshaker dances around the room
whisper <user> <message>	<i>Local</i>	whisper Eze Hi	2 possible outcomes: (to all users other than Eze currently in the room) Saltshaker whispers to Eze; (to Eze) Saltshaker whispers Hi to you
Gripe <message>	<i>Direct (only to Admin)</i>	gripe bad lagtime	Saltshaker gripes Bad lagtime
Page <user> <message>	<i>Direct to one or more users</i>	pages Eze Hi	Saltshaker <Saltshaker’s location> Hi to you.
Tell <user> <message>	If <i>Local</i>	tell Eze Hi	Saltshaker says Hi to Eze
Tell <user> <message>	If not <i>Local</i> then is <i>Direct to one or more users</i>	tell Eze Hi	Saltshaker says Hi to you
Fp	<i>Direct to members of friends list</i>	fp Hi	(appears to all friends on Saltshaker’s friend list regardless of Saltshaker’s status on their friend list) Saltshaker Hi to you (no “says”)

Table 5.1 lists many of the basic conversational commands in Walford and the settings in which they are used. In addition to these commands, users can activate and deactivate *converse* mode (<CONVERSE>). This is a shortcut which makes everything a user communicates appear as “says” with the exception of thoughts and emotions which can be deployed by using the shortcuts (as listed in Table 5.1).

### 5.1.3.1 DIRECT COMMUNICATION

#### 5.1.3.1.1 FRIEND LISTS

The MUD's infrastructure allows users to create buddies or friend lists.<sup>83</sup> In the *Tutorials* section on the Walford website, which can also be accessed within the MUD, users are encouraged to use friend lists, since "every user has one" (even if they do not add any friends to it).<sup>84</sup> Users are able to add and remove people from their friend list by entering a command, and friends on Walford do not need to be reciprocally added.<sup>85</sup> Thus, it is possible to add a friend to one's list without being added to theirs. In addition, friends can be added and removed at will and there is no time limit on the frequency that users can add or remove friends.

As indicated in Table 5.1, users are able to send chat messages specifically to their friend lists. The friend list option provides users with additional control over their interaction because they are able to target certain recipients regardless of their location in the MUD. Although communicating via friend list is not as private as one-to-one communication or manually adding multiple names (but not an entire friend list), it is more private and controlled than the same room command, which is particularly true when participants are in public and high-traffic rooms (e.g., the *pub*).

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<sup>83</sup> In addition to friend lists, users are also able to create enemy lists. Enemy lists inform users of the status of their enemies including when they connect/disconnect (if the user has enabled the command that tracks this) and if a user checks the contents of the room they are in the names of the other users are included. If an enemy is in that room `<user>/(Enemy)` would be displayed.

<sup>84</sup> Although there is significant usefulness to the adoption of friend lists, this is the reason that Walford users are given in the *Tutorials* to make use of their friend list.

<sup>85</sup> This distinguishes it from contemporary online social networking websites (e.g., Facebook, MySpace, and Bebo) in which friends can only be added reciprocally, whereby both participants approve of the connection.

**TABLE 5.2 FRIEND LISTS**

Command (as used by Saltshaker)	Purpose
Fadd <user>	Adds that user to Saltshaker's friends list
Fremove <user>	Removes that user from Saltshaker's friends list
Fset <user> = enemy	Adds that user to Saltshaker's enemy list
Fwho	Lists all of Saltshaker's friends currently connected
Fwhere	Lists the locations of all of Saltshaker's currently connected friends
@set me = listen	Lists each time a friend or enemy connects or disconnects
Flist	Lists all of the users on Saltshaker's friend list irrespective of connection status
Fothers	Lists all of those users who have Saltshaker listed as a friend irrespective of connection status
Fp <message>	Sends a chat message to all of Saltshaker's friends currently logged on

As mentioned, it is possible for users to have non-reciprocal friends. In the case of a non-reciprocal friendship, the user who is added to a friend list would receive the synchronous communication sent (unless the user who has been added to the list adds a command to block messages from their non-reciprocal friend). However, the user not added to the other's list would have their messages communicated to the person who friend added them. Friend lists work well for core friendship circles in which all members of the friendship ring receive the *fp* messages (see Tables 5.1 and 5.2) and are reciprocal friends. However, peripheral members of these circles may miss large amounts of the conversation. For instance, if four people who are friends with each other are communicating using the *fp* command and there is an additional user who is only friends with one of those users, that peripheral user will only receive the messages from their friend, thus making it impossible for the peripheral user to follow the conversation.



### 5.1.3.1.2 (NON-FRIEND LISTS)

*Direct* chat communication in Walford allows two or more users in separate rooms to chat to each other privately through the *page* and *tell* commands (see Table 5.1). Some users have large friend lists and this option allows users to specify the particular individuals to whom they wish to talk. It also allows users who are not on each other's friend lists to communicate directly. However, if the *tell* command is used between people in the same room it is no longer a *direct* communication setting. In this instance, all those currently occupying a room will see the message but it will be addressed to the user who is specified (see Table 5.1).

### 5.1.3.2 LOCAL COMMUNICATION

The *local* setting allows users to communicate with other users currently in the same room of Walford. The town pub is the most popular location or room in Walford and users are encouraged to visit it both when they initially create an account and when they subsequently connect. It is also possible for users to set the pub as *home*, or their default location.<sup>86</sup> Occupying these public or shared rooms has particular advantages to those participating in the MUD. For instance, hanging out in one of the busy public rooms, such as the pub, fosters communication between users who might not be on each others' friend list, and is one way for new users to introduce themselves to the community and meet others. A final point is that users are able to play games together when in the town pub.<sup>87</sup>

When users are *local*, or in the same room, they can choose their interactional style from a richer assortment of communication commands than are available when using the *direct* communication setting (see Table 5.1). Because Walford is a virtual environment based on an English village, the public spaces

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<sup>86</sup> The default *home* location for users is their personal room.

<sup>87</sup> Users in the pub can choose to play a variety of text-based versions of traditional (offline) board games such as *Scrabble* and *Boggle*. As with the other functions and commands in Walford, users are able to add other games as well. Turns in these games were not included in the chatlogs because they are not *conversational turns*, and thus we have no record of them.

(or rooms) draw from those in traditional villages. Users are also able to visit each other's personal rooms (if the owner of the room has set it to be unlocked) and when in those spaces they have private conversations utilising the full range of communication commands available to users in *local* communication settings.

#### **5.1.4 AUTOMATED COMMANDS**

In addition to the richer assortment of communication commands available to users in the same location, participants are able to use *automated commands* to communicate locally or to their friend list. Automated commands are communication commands programmed to appear when a user specifies an action. Users can set a *flag*, or specific automated command, to announce when they enter or leave a room or they can choose to send a message to their friends list when they connect or disconnect from Walford. The way in which this movement is announced (i.e., the statement itself) must be set by the user and can be changed at any time. For example, at least one player uses sexualised Confucius-style quotes to signify their connection and disconnection, whilst another uses a reference to adult theme parks, sex workers, and poker. The use of these automated commands can be read as individualist style devices (cf. Crystal 2001) used to help create a sense of identity.

Another set of automated commands, which are discussed in Section 6.2.1, are the automated sexual commands available to users in the same room. Whilst arrival and departure commands can be set using either the friend list or *local* option, the sexual commands can only be used locally. These commands produce lines of chat and randomly generated sex acts between two users (the user activating the command and someone they have specified).

### 5.1.5 PRIVACY

Walford participants can have a reasonable expectation of privacy in regards to their conversations in the MUD. As a MUD, the only people who can receive real-time chat messages at any given time are those who have created accounts, and are currently connected to the site. Additional measures attentive to individual privacy exist in the communication settings described in Section 5.1. Participants can use *local* settings which make their statements visible to others currently in the same room, and they can also use *direct* settings, including manually including other users and/or sending chats to their *friend list*. Thus, not all chats are available to everyone currently logged on the site, and no chats are available to either members currently disconnected or non-members; only those participants who are signed in and listed as recipients receive the chats. Thus, unlike bulletin boards or other asynchronous digital communication platforms, communication in Walford is *not* accessible via web searches, nor is it possible for members to search for conversations which occurred when they were not signed in. Furthermore, once a participant logs out of the system, unless they have copied and pasted their conversations elsewhere, they have no way of accessing their conversations again at a later date.

The only way to interact in the MUD, and thus have access to conversations, is to be a participant or *lurker*. All users logged on and present in the same room are able to see any communication in that room which is sent using the *local* setting. As a result, it is possible for people to lurk in these spaces and to observe the communication in that room without actively contributing themselves.<sup>88</sup> For example, lurkers, including those doing so for academic or research purposes, could situate themselves in busy rooms (e.g., the pub in Walford) in order to overhear the conversations taking place in that locale (e.g., Campbell 2004; del-Teso-Craviotto 2006; King in press), but would then need to save those chats in order to use them as data.<sup>89</sup> However, this practice was

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<sup>88</sup> In the instance that a lurker has been added to other users' friend lists, the lurker would then be able to see the friends list posts made the by the user who added their to their friend list.

<sup>89</sup> I discuss the ethical concerns of this technique in Section 5.2.1.

unnecessary for my research as the chatlogs provided me with access to all conversations in all rooms of the MUD.

## 5.2 METHODOLOGY

Walford was created in 1993 and, during the late-1990s when it expanded to such a degree that the founders needed more support, an agreement was made between Walford and the Department of Computer Science at QMUL.<sup>90</sup> In this arrangement, the Department assumed the responsibilities associated with hosting the large and active MUD without being involved with it.<sup>91</sup> Over time members of the Department contemplated using some of the chat data for research purposes and participants had the opportunity to consent to this or reject it each time they connected (see Section 5.2.2.1 for a discussion of ongoing informed consent). Members of the IMC research group have conducted research using the data collected during the time when the Department hosted Walford.

There were a number of reasons that made Walford an ideal site for this analysis, and the IMC group's access to the chatlogs and the ongoing examination of the corpus (although researching different features in the logs and using alternative methods) made me first consider using this data. However, these reasons were not the deciding factors. I wanted to develop a project which explored how people communicate about sex using the web, preferably in real-time conversations. My background is in sociology and gender studies, including sensitive topics such as sexuality and vulnerable populations, and the social importance of sexuality seemed pertinent to me. However, there was little research about how people discussed sex in their everyday lives outside of either settings that emphasised sex, what I refer to throughout this thesis as *sexual communities of practice*, or interview and survey based research in which participants are asked to disclose information about how they communicate about

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<sup>90</sup> Because this occurred before I joined the Department, I am grateful to personal communication with Graham White, Pat Healey, and Simon Boggis for these details.

<sup>91</sup> The relationship between Walford and the Department of Computer Science was not at random. Rather, Walford's founders and some members of the Department were in the same social network.

sex. One of the critical factors that led me to use the Walford corpus was that it is a non-sexually based community that has been in existence for many years. Thus, I would be able to analyse conversations taking place among members of a community who were drawn to Walford for whatever personal reasons, but not out of a shared sexual interest or practice. Therefore, any conversations about sex would not be central to why or how people came to the site and could be seen as both naturally occurring and spontaneous.

Another reason why Walford was an ideal site was that other studies on sex in communication have used small samples of dialogue often relying on the researcher's presence either as a participant or a lurker, as I demonstrated in Section 4.1.5. Thus, analyses have been limited to specific *chatrooms* that the researcher has visited, and to the times in which the researcher has been able to connect. In contrast, with Walford I had access to all of the conversations taking place on the *chatsite* or *forum*. Thus, the analysis was not limited to specific rooms, and I was also able to analyse dyadic conversations of an intimate nature. To date, there have been no studies where the researcher has analysed a range of sexual conversations, including flirting and sexual disclosure but also cybersex, or textual representations of sexual acts with multiple participants that emphasise erotics, over an extended period of time or conversations. While access does not validate a study, it demonstrated to me an area where my findings might make a substantial contribution to the field. With the Walford corpus, I had access to a complete corpus of conversations from 2003-2004 from a synchronous chat community and I was able to study conversations from the Walford corpus alongside other researchers in the IMC group.<sup>92</sup>

In Chapter 4 I discussed linguistic and conversation analytic approaches to sexuality in both on- and offline contexts, and online ethnographies of sex and sexuality in cyberspace that base much of their data in conversations and communication. The research to date has involved either publicly available and freely accessible asynchronous communication (e.g., McKenna and Bargh 1998; Wysocki 1998) gathered by researchers at any time, or participant observation (including lurking) in chatrooms (synchronous communication) in which the researchers record the conversations taking place in their presence (e.g., Campbell

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<sup>92</sup> In Section 5.2.1 I discuss the ethical considerations faced in this research and in Section 5.2.2 I describe the protective and ethical measures I adopted in this study.

2004; del-Teso-Craviotto 2006). In the case of studies of online communication about sexuality, researchers using synchronous or asynchronous data have examined *sexual communities of practice*.

My research is distinctive from this literature in two central ways, both of which have sub-points. First, Walford is not a sexual community of practice. It is a general MUD and although sexual conversations take place, the community is not driven by or organised around a shared sexual identity or social label. Second, my data is not sourced from personal involvement in Walford. It is not limited to the days and times I could connect, nor is it restricted to my social network, friend list, or the room where I might have frequented on the MUD. My analysis is based from an extensive corpus of *chatlogs* or conversational logs. Although the chatlogs span a larger time frame, my analysis focuses on chatlogs from 2003-2004. I examined 75 logs from this 18-month period and conducted a micro qualitative analysis.<sup>93</sup>

The complete chatlogs are held on a server in the School of Electronic Engineering and Computer Science (formerly the Department of Computer Science) with restricted access only to those currently conducting research using the logs and who access them with their individual log-in details. I wished to examine files throughout this time period and, although changes over time in the ways users discuss sex is outside the realm of this thesis, I selected logs from top, middle, and bottom locations in the folder. Thus, I examined logs throughout the 2003-2004 period.

Each log consists of 24-hours of chat and is in XML code. Each morning between 08:00-09:00 the system automatically uploaded to the server a new chatlog with all of the chat taking place in the immediately ending 24-hour period. A single chatlog averages between 800-1000 pages when printed on standard A4-sized paper. The chatlogs are shorter on days when either fewer users were connected or when conversations were less robust. In addition, the logs are set to separately display each recipient of a communication sent using the *direct* setting. Because of this, when users send a communication to their entire friend list, the message appears in the logs as many times as there are people who have received

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<sup>93</sup> There are no logs after August 2004. At this time the Department's servers experienced some severe problems and Walford users decided to host their community themselves.

the communication. Therefore, the logs are longer when there are large numbers of users connected who use their friend lists to communicate.

I read through each of the 75 files I analysed manually and using a java program I added XML annotations or codes when I considered conversations to be sexual. In this way, the annotation tags I added worked in a similar way to coding using the qualitative data software package Atlas.ti. I kept a notebook to write down observations and themes as they emerged in the data, and often found myself revisiting files I had already examined to either confirm these observations as findings or to dispute them. I also recorded the timestamp and user-id number of conversations that I coded so that it would be easier for me to revisit these in the logs.

Once I had coded an initial number of files (n=30), I began to develop a series of sub-categories to answer the question: how do Walford users talk about sex? It was evident by that time in the coding process that ‘sex talk’ was not a monolithic and static category. Rather, the conversations were fluid and varied. The themes that emerged are discussed in Chapters 6-8 and include sexual joking, sexual self-disclosure, and cybersex. Because I read through entire chatlogs in order to code them, often material that was not coded (i.e., non-sexual content) provided a context for the coded (i.e., sexual) conversations that either preceded or succeeded it. Thus, I read of a couple’s yearning for each other whilst spending Christmas with their separate families of origin before they engaged in cybersex. I have referred to these types of contextualising information when analysing particular conversations in the chatlogs.

The logs were made anonymous at the level of the initial XML program. Thus, I did not see the unprocessed data (to do so would have meant that I was present at the time of the conversations). Participants’ usernames were automatically removed from the logs using XML programming which substituted numerical sequences that were four and five places in length, and I discuss this more fully in Section 5.2.2.3. I provide an example of *local* and *direct* conversational turns from a log file here and in Table 5.3 I explain the commands using the example of a *direct* setting conversational turn. I use the example of the *direct* setting use because it includes all of the commands in a *local* turn as well as additional lines of code.

## FIGURE 5.1 A LOCAL CONVERSATIONAL TURN

```
<LOCAL>
  <COMMUNICATION_TYPE> EMOTE </COMMUNICATION_TYPE>
  <Invoc_serial> 101 </Invoc_serial>
  <Serial> 17664195 </Serial>
  <CHARACTER_ID> 23212 </CHARACTER_ID>
  <CHARACTER_STATUS> 2 </CHARACTER_STATUS>
  <LOCATION_ID> 293 </LOCATION_ID>
  <MESSAGE> says You should sic the cats on him. </MESSAGE>
  <TIME> Sun, 29 Feb 2004 08:02:16 +0000 </TIME>
</LOCAL>
```

## FIGURE 5.2 A DIRECT CONVERSATIONAL TURN

```
<DIRECT>
  <COMMUNICATION_TYPE> PAGETELL </COMMUNICATION_TYPE>
  <Invoc_serial> 101 </Invoc_serial>
  <Serial> 17668588 </Serial>
  <USAGE> TELL </USAGE>
  <MESSAGE_TYPE> EMOTE </MESSAGE_TYPE>
  <CHARACTER_ID> 23212 </CHARACTER_ID>
  <CHARACTER_STATUS> 2 </CHARACTER_STATUS>
  <LOCATION_ID> 293 </LOCATION_ID>
  <TARGET_CHARACTER_ID> 23639 </TARGET_CHARACTER_ID>
  <TARGET_CHARACTER_STATUS> 6 </TARGET_CHARACTER_STATUS>
  <TARGET_CHARACTER_LOCATION> 293
  </TARGET_CHARACTER_LOCATION>
  <MESSAGE> giggles like a schoolgirl </MESSAGE>
  <TIME> Sun, 29 Feb 2004 08:14:06 + 0000 </TIME>
</DIRECT>
```

Although the basic structures of the conversational turns made using the *local* and *direct* settings appear similar in the chatlogs, there are also some differences. Whilst the *local* conversational turn is presented over 10 lines, the *direct* turn comprises 15 lines. For example, the target or recipient's room is only needed when using the *direct* setting because the speaker and recipient/s are in the same room when using the *local* setting. Also, the only message types <MESSAGE\_TYPE> for *direct* communication are *std*, which refers to standard and is used for statements and questions, and *emote*, which is used for non-verbal communicative actions. Using the *direct* example shown in Figure 5.2, Table 5.3 explains the information listed in the chatlogs for each communication.



**TABLE 5.3 DECODING A CHATLOG TURN**

Command	Content	Explanation
<DIRECT>	The rest of the communication is within this command	The <i>direct</i> setting is used
<COMMUNICATION_TYPE>	PAGETELL	The conversational command uses <i>pagetell</i>
<Invoc_Serial>	101	The number of times <i>serial</i> (below) has went around between 1 and 99999999
<Serial>	17668588	The serial number given to the activity
<USAGE>	TELL	Within the <i>pagetell</i> command the user has activated <i>tell</i>
<MESSAGE_TYPE>	EMOTE	The user is performing an activity
<CHARACTER_ID>	23212	The user/speaker who is communicating
<CHARACTER_STATUS>	2	The user's status in the MUD (level 1 is the lowest)
<LOCATION_ID>	293	The speaker's current location
<TARGET_CHARACTER_ID>	23639	The communication is directed to this user
<TARGET_CHARACTER_LOCATION>	293	The current location of the target user
<MESSAGE>	giggles like a schoolgirl	The communication
<TIME>	Sun, 29 Feb 2004 08:14:06 + 0000	The timestamp

The <DIRECT> command (described in Section 5.1.4) refers to the setting used for the communication. In this instance, it means that the message was sent from one user directly to another using either a friend list or by manually entering the intended target's username.<sup>94</sup>

<COMMUNICATION\_TYPE> refers to the command issued. All communication types using the *direct* setting use *pagetell*. However, the communication type command contains the information present in <MESSAGE\_TYPE> when participants use the *local* setting. Thus, the communication type for a local communication could be *say*, *emote*, or *ask*.

<sup>94</sup> To be clear: the user would need to manually enter the target's *username* not the numerical sequence that appears in the logs. The users do not know the numerical sequences that the XML program has attributed to either themselves or other users.

The <MESSAGE\_TYPE> command is not used for *local* communication. Because there are not enough numbers for unique serials, this signifies how many times serial has reached 100 million serials. All activities in Walford (including those not related to communication) are given serial numbers. The example of a *local* communication that I referred to above has a serial of 17664195 and a timestamp of 08:02:16 and the *direct* example has a serial of 17668588 with a timestamp of 08:14:06. Thus, in the approximate 12 minutes between the two examples there were 4393 actions in Walford. Some of this was ‘communication’, and because there are unique serials given for each user who receives a communication, the numbers quickly add up. However, the vast majority of these 4393 actions are not included in the chatlogs because they are not directly tied to the utterances between users. For example, activities including adding or changing descriptions (on profiles, personal rooms, or public spaces), modifying or checking their friend lists, de/activating the *converse* command, dis/connecting, reading a page in the *Tutorials*, and turn taking in a game are all activities with serial numbers that are not included in the corpus.

<USAGE> is only used in *direct* communication and there are two possibilities for its use: if the user and recipient are in the same room then the content is *sameroom*, meanwhile if they are in different locations then the *tell* statement is applied.

<CHARACTER\_ID>, <CHARACTER\_STATUS>, and <CHARACTER\_LOCATION> all refer to the user who is issuing the communication. <CHARACTER\_ID> is the numerical sequence, which replaces the username in the chatlogs. <CHARACTER\_STATUS> refers to the position or level of the user in Walford’s ecosystem. There are seven statuses or levels, with one being the first or lowest position and seven being the level of “deity” (or current administrator). <CHARACTER\_LOCATION> refers to the user’s location when issuing the communication.

<TARGET\_CHARACTER\_ID>, <TARGET\_CHARACTER\_STATUS>, and <TARGET\_CHARACTER\_LOCATION> all refer to the recipient’s details and as such refer to the recipient’s user identification number, status within Walford, and location.

The final two lines of code directly tie to the communication itself. <MESSAGE> is the actual communication. <TIME> is the timestamp of the message, which is displayed in the chatlogs as Greenwich Mean Time.

The relevance of each of these lines of code and the data is context-dependent upon the research questions and methods used. Given that this research is a sociolinguistic qualitative analysis which emphasises discourses, I focus on the communication setting, the speaker and their location (relative to that of their recipients), the recipient/s and their location, the message itself and, when relevant, the timestamp.<sup>95</sup>

## 5.2.1 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In conducting this research I was particularly aware of the ethical issues relevant both for online research and sensitive topics such as sexuality, and I situate my ethical considerations within both. Barnard (2005:2), in her research on the experiences of children whose parents use drugs, applies the term *sensitive* to research on human activities that can be described as “socially charged and contentious”. Liamputtong distils *sensitive research* further when building on Renzetti and Lee (1993) by asserting that there are four categories of sensitive research:

studies which are concerned with deviance and social control; inquiries which exercise coercion or domination; research that intrudes on the private lives or deeply personal experiences of the research participants; [and] research that deals with sacred things (Liamputtong 2007:6).

Although Liamputtong’s list covers topics that appear divergent, it is possible to argue that a commonality between them is that they all refer to topics that are *sequestered*. Giddens (1991) argues that sequestered topics are those that are removed from public life and raise moral issues for people: sexuality and sexual practices, mental illness, crime, dissenting or radical activities, substance use, and meaningful rites of passage could all be included as both sensitive and

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<sup>95</sup> For example, the timestamp may be relevant when there are delays or elapses between turns, such as in Example 7.2.

sequestered topics. Because these issues are *sensitive* and have the potential to disrupt the lives of research participants, it is imperative that researchers protect the confidentiality and anonymity of their research participants and ensure that the research does not bring any damage or negative consequences to the research participants. I consider my research on the social dynamics of sexual conversations to be sensitive and it was with these issues in mind, and my prior experience with researching vulnerable populations,<sup>96</sup> that I approached this project.

While the issue of minimising potential harm to participants is of particular concern to sensitive researchers, online researchers have debated the importance of informed consent and, to a lesser degree, pseudonyms. Bassett and O’Riordan (2002) argue that the debates about the ethics of internet research can be seen as tied to viewing the web as either a *space* where human subjects interact or as a *text-based* medium. They argue that whilst the former position argues that the research is on people, the latter views dialogue on the internet as texts in the public domain. Similarly, Eynon, Fry, and Schroeder (2008) detail some of the ethical issues that internet researchers face, whether or not their research is also defined as sensitive. An important point that they make is that internet research is context dependent and that the ethical considerations are variable depending upon these contexts. In the case of research conducted on and in chatrooms they ask:

though a chatroom space may be public, the participants may feel that they are part of a trusted community and use the space to communicate intimate details of their lives. Should consideration be given to reproducing the content verbatim in research communications and to what extent should social structures be protected from being disclosed or ‘invaded’ by others?” (Eynon et al. 2008:26).

Although they pose an excellent question, I think that first it is important to discuss a pre-condition in the existing research and one which ties to their question. In Section 4.1.5 I discussed studies of sexuality and sex talk in online settings, including those that have used chatrooms (e.g., Campbell 2004; del-Teso-Craviotto 2006; King in press). These researchers, and others examining sexuality in offline contexts (e.g., Dean 2008; Hennen 2008) have, like other

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<sup>96</sup> In 2003-2004 I worked as a Research Assistant for Professor Lois Jackson at Dalhousie University where we conducted qualitative research on the lifestyles and healthy/unhealthy practices of intravenous drug users and sex trade workers.

researchers of chatrooms and MUDs (e.g., Cherny 1999; Kendall 2000, 2002; Rheingold 2000; Schaap 2002), either been existing members of the communities that they study or join the communities with the explicit purpose of gathering data. Whilst those who are already members of the community (e.g., Campbell 2004; Cherny 1999; Kendall 2000, 2002) informed their co-participants at some point that they were planning to or already conducting research on the community, some of those who joined chatrooms specifically to mine conversations as data have remained covert (e.g., del-Teso-Craviotto 2006) and have argued that to present oneself as a researcher would have changed the dynamic in the chatroom (see also Mowlabocus 2007, 2008).

Eynon et al. (2008) take the starting point that this information is in the 'public domain' when stating that 'though a chatroom space may be public' which then makes their question all the more pertinent. I would argue that claims that chatroom conversations are in the public domain are tenuous. Like Rodham and Gavin (2006), I argue that if the researcher must sign up for an account (i.e., become a *member*) and manually copy and paste data from the site whilst connected in order to obtain data, because the data is not stored either on the web or by the host, it is difficult to argue that the content is freely available or that the participants are aware that their conversations could be recorded and used for research (or other) purposes.

Hudson and Bruckman (2004) avoid discussing whether or not chatroom conversations are public and focus instead on the effectiveness of obtaining informed consent for research in ICQ chatrooms. They measure this by testing the responses to three different messages they post on ICQ channels informing participants that they are recording their chat for research purposes when in fact they were measuring chatroom participants' responses to the different informed consent messages.<sup>97</sup> Hudson and Bruckman conclude by saying:

it is probably infeasible to study pre-existing chatrooms as an outsider while also obtaining informed consent from the participants. This [paper] offers evidence that waivers of consent may be appropriate for this type of research, provided (1) that other criteria for waivers of consent are met and (2) that the researcher decides that research without consent is ethically defensible (Hudson and Bruckman 2004:138).

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<sup>97</sup> They also have a 'control' in which they examine the effect when there is no message posted.

Thus, they do not take the position that it is unnecessary to gain consent, only that it may be difficult for researchers to do so. This was the rationale used by del-Teso-Craviotto who argues that her work is ethically defensible despite the covert research method she uses. Similarly, Mowlabocus (2008:424) defends his covert research in a chat channel on *Gaydar* by suggesting that he used other strategies to “heavily disguise” his research on men who use a chat channel to seek casual sex with other men at a university. Interestingly, Haggerty (2004:406) describes how a proposal for a study similar to Hudson’s and Bruckman’s was rejected by the Research Ethics Board at his Canadian university on the grounds that the research could be considered ‘deceptive’ and thus unethical because the researchers could not inform participants about the true aims of the study (i.e., measuring the effectiveness of different consent forms in online research).

In addition to the issues regarding informed consent, web researchers have also discussed how to approach other ethical questions, including anonymity and harm minimalisation. Munt, Bassett, and Riordan (2002) examined postings about ‘coming out’ as queer from a lesbian website which operated a bulletin board service. Although the bulletin board posts were publicly accessible, they chose to use pseudonyms for both the website and the participants. Bassett and O’Riordan (2002) also argue that because the website they use for their analysis is positioned as political it may have been unethical to use pseudonyms for the usernames in their research with Munt (2002). They assert that doing so may reinforce (homophobic) ideas regarding queerness including that it is pathological and shameful. Although the ethical issues that researchers studying sensitive topics online face are substantial and widely debated within the field, it is possible to minimise the potential risks to the participants whilst upholding the rigor of academic research. In the next section I detail the strategies I adopted in order to maximise the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants and the chatsite.

## 5.2.2 PROTECTIONS TAKEN

Mindful of the ethical considerations of both sensitive and web research, it has been vital for me to minimise any potential harm that the users might face as a result of this research, and to ensure that their anonymity and privacy is respected. As a result, I adopted a series of protections to minimise the harm that participants might encounter. These protective measures are based from the ethical debates discussed in Section 5.2.1 and can be divided into four main categories: ongoing informed consent (Section 5.2.2.1), site pseudonym (Section 5.2.2.2), substitution of usernames and use of one-way hashing algorithms (Section 5.2.2.3), and removal of identifiable information (Section 5.2.2.4).

### 5.2.2.1 INFORMED CONSENT

As described in Section 5.2, there is discussion among researchers as to the feasibility of and need to gain informed consent (e.g., Ashford 2009; Brownlow and O'Dell 2002; del-Teso-Craviotto 2006; Denzin 1999; Eynon et al. 2008; Haggerty 2004; Hudson and Bruckman 2004; Rodham and Gavin 2006). My research on Walford differs from the existing research in the field in that users provided ongoing informed consent each time they connected to have their conversations recorded and used for research purposes.<sup>98</sup> Luckily, obtaining consent was not 'infeasible' in this case as Hudson and Bruckman (2004) feared, and I did not use a scraping or 'copy and paste' process to collect my data.

My research received ethics approval for an analysis of chatlogs gathered between 2003-2004. The consent form, approved by the Queen Mary, University of London Ethics Committee, is supplied as an Appendix. There is no way of knowing whether or not gaining ongoing informed consent affected participants' conversations. However, there is evidence suggesting that if there was an effect, it

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<sup>98</sup> In a recent paper Murthy (2008) argues that covert research methods are over-represented in the field of 'digital ethnography' and especially those examining sex and sexuality. His interpretation of 'ethnography' here is not grounded as he considers Magnet's (2007) analysis of the *Suicide Girls* website and Slater's (1998) analysis of photo swapping in ICQ both to be ethnographies.

was minimal. Firstly, Walford was an established community by the time that QMUL assumed hosting responsibilities, and there was a longstanding connection between Walford's founders and the Department of Computer Science. Thus, participants had already developed and formed relationships both with other users and with the site more generally. Secondly, the intimate nature of many conversations, including those about non-sexual topics and that the presence of both sexual and non-sexual intimate conversations were present in all of the logs I examined (n=75) indicates that participants felt comfortable in Walford, even with the knowledge that their conversations might be used for research purposes. Thirdly, in the examples of participants' references to the research uses of the logs that I analysed, they do not detail concerns; rather users indicate an interest in the research conducted (e.g., one user wondered what we, the researchers, were finding). Although the issue of obtaining informed consent for online research, including sociolinguistic studies, has been difficult in the past and for other researchers, it was possible to gain ongoing informed consent from Walford's participants and doing so does not appear to have negatively affected the research.

### **5.2.2.2 SITE PSEUDONYM**

The use of pseudonyms is an established practice for web researchers, including MUD researchers (e.g., Cherny 1999; Kendall 2002), as well as those using other types of online communities (e.g., Munt et al. 2002; Wysocki 1998). However, there are recent debates about the usefulness of pseudonyms and some researchers, such as Mowlabocus (2007, 2008), have elected not to use them for the sites of their analysis. It is worth noting that while Mowlabocus does not use a pseudonym for *Gaydar*, a popular dating website for gay men in the UK, he does use one for the 'cybercottage' or specific virtual space on *Gaydar* which he used for his case study.

Drawing from those MUD researchers who have adopted pseudonyms for their sites, Walford is a pseudonym used by all researchers working with the Walford corpus, and the adoption of this pseudonym was listed in our application for ethics approval. The pseudonym serves as an additional layer of protection for



the participants and it is used in all of my study notes, personal, and professional communication (even that between other members of IMC), and publications.

While Bassett and O’Riordan (2002) make a compelling argument about the ways in which the use of pseudonyms may further disenfranchise those already marginalised, I would argue that Walford is not a political site and because the conversations were not publicly accessible, it would be unethical for me to refer the participants by their usernames. In addition to the intimate nature of some of the conversations, especially those sent directly between small groups of users, I argue that it would be inappropriate *not* to use pseudonyms as a way to further protect the users. While there is some debate among online researchers about the use of site pseudonyms, we have used Walford rather than the chatsite’s actual name as a strategy to protect our participants’ anonymity and confidentiality.

### **5.2.2.3      USERNAMES**

As I mentioned in Section 5.2, usernames were automatically changed and are not present in the logs. XML code was written to change the usernames into four and five digit numerical sequences, and like the other IMC researchers I did not have access to the unprocessed files. The use of numerical sequences generated by algorithms is advocated by Binik, Mah, and Kiesler (1999:86) who argue that, “special encryption techniques are probably the most effective means for protecting anonymity”. As they point out, the use of one-way hashing algorithms is particularly effective because they cannot be decoded. However, these researchers could be seen as underestimating the effect of users themselves. Whilst algorithms can be used to automatically convert who speaks and to whom, it is more difficult to program a system to automatically change each time a user refers to another user by their username: there are some instances when a word may be a username or when it may refer to something (or someone) else.

Thus, the only time when there are usernames in the Walford corpus is when one user refers to another by a username. In these instances, and when it is possible to distinguish to whom the speaker refers (e.g., a dyadic conversation or

when posing a question that is subsequently answered), I have changed the username to the numerical sequence associated with them. Although this is not a perfect system, I kept no record linking usernames to numerical sequences and performed these substitutions on a conversation-by-conversation basis. Furthermore, Healey, White, Eshghi, Reeves, and Light (2008) note that it is *possible* that numerical sequences in Walford have been used for more than one user;<sup>99</sup> this possibility adds an additional layer of protection.

Bassett and Riordan (2002:243) state that protections may be necessary for usernames as well: “we particularly didn’t want to disclose usernames because they are often not anonymous but pseudonymous. They are traceable to users and cannot be separated from offline names”. This is especially relevant considering the significant expansion of social networking sites and the implementation of user profiles for many of the main consumer websites. Users are often required to create accounts for multiple sites each with a different function. For example, it is not unlikely for someone to have accounts for *Amazon, Blogspot, Dreamwidth, eBay, Facebook, Flickr, Goodreads, the Guardian, Last.fm, MySpace, the New York Times, Ravelry, Spotify, Tumblr, Twitter, Wordpress*, and *Youtube* as well as email addresses from multiple providers (e.g., work email addresses, *Gmail, Hotmail, Yahoo*, etc.) to associate with these accounts as an ad hoc management system. Anecdotally, using my own experience and that of my peer-set, some of these usernames and email addresses overlap making it relatively easy for anyone (i.e., us) to find a link between usernames (even multiple ones) and an offline name, or vice versa – to use an offline name to find usernames.

There are conversations in the chatlogs that I have extracted for analysis in subsequent chapters in which there were large numbers of participants in a *direct* (friend list) conversation and I was unable to distinguish the user to whom the speaker was directing a comment, and other instances when users refer to other users and non-users by person recognitional terms, possibly an offline name or a username. I used pseudonyms for all names that appear in the communication sent by other users in the logs when I was unable to determine with certainty to whom the user referred. Because conversations about sex have the potential to expose individuals to more risk than many other conversational topics, I argue that it was

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<sup>99</sup> It is not possible for me to confirm or dispute this authoritatively.

ethical for me to use pseudonyms for these names, even if the names themselves had been pseudonyms. At the very least this offers participants an additional level of anonymity from being exposed to other users, who may be able to link a person recognitional term to the speaker even when the speaker's username has been removed and substituted with a numerical sequence. However, it was also important for me not to lose any context that may be conveyed with the use of a person recognitional term. Thus, if a username could be read as a traditionally feminine first name I substituted it with a name gendered in the same direction, and if a name was gender neutral I chose a similarly gender neutral pseudonym. The adoption of pseudonyms for participants' names is accepted practice in the field. However, some, such as Campbell (2004) have only done so at the bequest of participants. In addition to the one-way hashing algorithm which removed usernames, I removed or substituted all names (user or otherwise) that are in the conversation excerpts analysed in this thesis.

#### **5.2.2.4 IDENTIFYING INFORMATION**

In addition to the ethical considerations of pseudonyms for Walford and person recognitional terms, and the use of numerical sequences for usernames adopted at the level of code, I was attentive to other issues that could raise ethical concerns. First, some sexual conversations involve self-disclosure that could be identifying or is of an intimate nature such that a user may or may not wish for this to be discussed in my study, even if they have given informed consent that their conversations could be analysed for research purposes. In these instances I have answered Eynon et al.'s (2008) question about verbatim quotes by arguing that it would be unethical to use them. However, some participants intimated details of their lives or told stories that even if not quoted directly may have been identifiable. Thus, not only did I avoid using direct quotes from conversational turns that were identifiable or had the potential to expose users to risk, I also did not reveal the particularities of the conversation or create false details.

Second, some participants have adopted *netspeak*. Crystal (2001) argues that *netspeak* is a new linguistic medium in which people adopt signifiers

including signatures, greetings, and spelling variations. He refers to these as “collective points for stylistic significance” (Crystal 2001:122). I would argue that netspeak and possibly *netspeaks* can also be adopted as individual style markers and as part of an identity. Thus, in the possibility that these style markers could be used to identify a user I have removed them and adopted a single style. I have standardised the spelling of slang terms (e.g., *cos* and *cus* become *cuz*). I have also adopted standardised capitalisation in all cases except those when participants use variation for emphasis. In addition, I note that few users use *textspeak*, or shorthand typically associated with text messages, and as a result I have substituted textspeak with the formal equivalent (e.g., *u* becomes *you*). I found it appropriate to standardise netspeak and textspeak as well as to avoid discussing the intimate details of identifying sexual self-disclosure because of the extra anonymity and confidentiality it afforded the participants.

### 5.3 CONCLUSION

In this chapter I introduced Walford and discussed the methodological and ethical concerns I faced in conducting this research, as well as my strategies and methods in approaching the data. Walford is a talker-style MUD and one that has existed for nearly 20 years. The synchronous chat option is the main part of Walford. However, as I mentioned in Section 5.1 participants can also send private asynchronous messages (an internal email system), establish photo galleries, and post on an asynchronous bulletin board. None of this information was included in the agreement between Walford and the Department of Computer Science, and therefore is not considered in this project.

As I have argued, the MUD comprises most of the communication in Walford and as a result the data is rich and contextualised, even without these additional features. To base my research on chatlogs from a MUD is accepted practice among those researching MUDs (e.g., Cherny 1999; Kendall 2000, 2002). However, the chatlogs used in this research are not restricted to specific *chatrooms* where I was present, nor are they dependent upon my log-in times. Rather, the data used in this study is chatlogs from 2003-2004 and consists of all

synchronous communication in every room/location in the MUD. The Department of Computer Science at QMUL hosted their server at this time and access to the chatlogs is restricted to members of the IMC research group who use the chatlogs for research. The chatlogs are not stored on the web, indexed by internet search engines, or publicly available.

In this chapter I also explained the format of the chatlogs and the process by which I examined them. I described how participants are able to communicate in MUDs as well as the freedom they have for developing the MUD. I provided examples of conversational turns in the logs (Figures 5.1 and 5.2). In Table 5.1 I explained basic commands in Walford and how their usage appears in Walford. In Table 5.2 I described commands specific to friend lists and how users might employ them. In Table 5.3 I explained the information gathered for each conversational turn in the chatlogs.

There are unique ethical concerns raised by both sensitive (cf. Lee 1993) and online research. In this chapter I described the steps taken to ensure the anonymity of the participants and how this lowers any risks they might experience as a result of having their chat examined for research purposes. In addition, I also explained the process of obtaining ongoing informed consent from Walford users, the use of site and username pseudonyms, and the removal of identifying information (e.g., non-standard capitalisation and spelling, and personal details that could make that user identifiable to other Walford users).

## THE NORMS OF SEX TALK

### 6.0 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I begin the analysis of sexual conversations which comprises the remainder of this thesis. I discuss the norms of sex talk in Walford and I base my arguments in my analysis of 75 chatlogs. At the beginning of this chapter I focus on the norms themselves and how Walford participants police them (Section 6.1). The material here provides a framework for Section 6.2 where I turn my focus to the uses of sex talk in this online community. I discuss the automated kissing and sex commands and argue that rather than being erotic conversations the interactants treat these as games (Section 6.2.1). I then discuss sexual joking arguing that the use of humour allows participants to test the boundaries of the group and then when these boundaries are pressed, rather than transgressed, participants demonstrate their membership in the group (Section 6.2.2). My discussion of sexual link sharing refers to feminist and queer sociolinguistic literature of homosocial conversations in which participants index heterosexuality (Section 6.2.3). Like Cameron (1997) and Allison (1994) I argue that this is less about the heterosexuality of the participants than a way for the same-gender participants to bond with each other by using heterosexual discourses. In Section 6.2.4 I focus on the participants' discussions of video-chat

or ‘camming’ and exposure of sexualised body parts (e.g., breasts) in webcam conversations external to Walford, and in my analysis draw from the feminist sociology and queer literature I discussed in Chapter 2 and my own positioning which I elaborated on in Chapter 3. The fifth kind of sexual conversation I discuss in this chapter is sexual self-disclosure in which participants disclose information about their desires, experiences, or practices to their co-participants (Section 6.2.5). Throughout this chapter I refer to the theoretical concepts that I outlined in Chapter 3 as framing this work: heteronormativity, transgression, and identity and sexual citizenship.

Although the MUD does not centralise sex, and sex talk is discouraged in the formal rules, sex conversations occur in Walford. In this chapter I show that these conversations are varied, persistent, and prevalent in Walford’s communication spaces. Although there are different types of sex talk, it is notable that within these distinct categories, there are striking consistencies in the sexual discourses Walford participants create and propel. These regularities include the settings used for certain kinds of sexual conversations but also how sex is framed between speakers.

I argue that the conventions of sex talk in Walford are not always grounded in offline social norms of sex and I provide examples of norm transgression and sexualised greetings that support this finding (Section 6.1.2). Through the use of examples from the chatlogs I argue that the norms surrounding sexual conversations in Walford are group specific and are ways to convey membership in *this* community. This finding is supported by Pankoke-Babatz and Jeffrey (2002:221) who argue that group norms can be used for four purposes: forming shared attitudes, achieving similar reactions, developing mutual understanding, and creating a social reality. However, the primacy of group norms also ties to the themes that I explored in Chapter 3: heteronormativity, identity, transgression, and sexual citizenship. These themes are relevant in Walford because they often represent a base for developing mutual understanding, belonging, membership, and a shared social reality. Drawing from this, the patterns that emerge in Walford’s sex talk might diverge from culturally acceptable sexuality in some ways. However, Walford is not separate from the social world and my analysis of the chatlogs shows that in Walford’s spaces

sexuality is vital for social meanings, discourse, and shared realities of everyday experience as a member of a community.

## **6.1 SEXUAL NORMS IN CONVERSATION**

### **6.1.1 CONCRETE SEXUAL NORMS**

Using the terminology from Part I of this thesis, it can be argued that the sexual norms in Walford are heterosexual and in some ways heteronormative. From my analysis of 75 chatlogs there is data suggesting that there are a number of users who are in romantic relationships (sometimes to other users), have children, do not engage in cybersex (at least on Walford), and who present themselves as sexual ‘normals’, or as engaging in practices and desires that they regard as fitting within society’s definition of heteronormative sexuality.

Yet, simultaneous to the presence of socially hegemonic sexuality, there are Walford users who discuss practices and lifestyles which are divergent from heteronormative experience. As Berlant and Warner (2002) argue, one of the significant aspects of heteronormativity is the presumed privacy of sexuality which is accompanied by formalised attempts to regulate it in public and civic life. My analysis of the Walford chatlogs demonstrates that there is also an informal policing that occurs between members of a community and I would argue that this is the case for other non-sexual communities of practice as well as sexual communities. By discussing sexuality and sexual issues in the public areas of Walford (e.g., the *pub*), Walford users challenge the norm of silence in regards to personalised discussions of sexuality (see Warner 2002). Walford participants engage in sexual conversations which include topics such as: sexual practices/livelihoods, pornography collections/preferences, sexual problems, jokes, dating habits, and cybersex. In addition to same-sex, or homosocial, conversations about sexual experiences and desires which have been observed in offline spaces (e.g., Kiesling 1997, 1998; Pichler 2007), these conversations also occur among mixed-sex, or heterosocial, participants (e.g., Examples 6.12 and 6.15).



## 6.1.2 POLICING NORMS

Patterns of sexual conversations can be observed from a discourse-level analysis of chatlogs from the Walford corpus. However, it can be difficult to position these patterns as norms until or unless participants transgress social expectations. The web has been seen as a setting where users have the potential to disrupt norms and boundaries as well as to present alternative identities (e.g., Stone 1995; Turkle 1995). Despite the potential for the web to create new norms due to the difficulty of social policing online spaces, Stoate (2007) asserts that the web can also be a space where norms and boundaries are reinscribed. In his analysis of drama on the blogging site *Livejournal*, he argues that users are resourceful in proving the authenticity of stories, and in exposing lies, fallacies, and inaccuracies in the stories participants tell. While *Livejournal* has a number of communities dedicated to investigating possible cases of inauthentic stories (e.g., the community *fake\_lj\_deaths* where members post information about the suspicious ‘deaths’ of *Livejournal* users which are then investigated by others in the community), this type of overt social policing of authenticity does not occur in the Walford chatlogs I analysed.

Social policing often takes indirect forms in the Walford chatlogs. Thus, it is difficult to use direct evidence to demonstrate that social policing has occurred. For example, some informal methods of social policing that may occur in Walford are not included in the chatlogs (e.g., removing a user from a friend list, exiting the room) because they do not actually involve ‘chatting’. The use of space is centralised by the participants in some instances of indirect social policing and sanctioning. In Example 6.1 I discuss an instance of direct social policing in which a participant directly counters the behaviour of another user and places that user’s behaviour as outside the norms of the community.

### EXAMPLE 6.1 SOCIAL NORMS 1

Line	Speaker	Setting	Communication
1	3565	Local (pub)	Hi hun.
2	3565	Local (pub)	PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE give me my flags back?
3	9459	Direct (to 3565)	says “No... you’re psychotic”.
4	3565	Local (pub)	Nah
5	3565	Local (pub)	I’m not.
6	3565	Local (pub)	I’m just a little spicy, that’s all.
7	3565	Local (pub)	I won’t eat your liver if you set me pagetell.
8	3565	Local (pub)	Please?
9	9459	Direct (to 3565)	says “You won’t carry a normal conversation... Always wanting love and being annoying and not listening when I end a conversation”.
10	3565	Direct (to 9459)	Well, I can just want sex instead of love... would that be ok?
11	9459	Local (pub)	says “No... Cuz you wouldn’t be normal about that either... You’d probably drag it on and on and not listen when I tell you no and get ****ed off when I tell you no”.
12	3565	Local (pub)	You don’t want sex with me?
13	9459	Local (pub)	No.
			[a few lines later]
14	3565	Local (pub)	Please give me another chance, Liz.
15	9459	Local (pub)	says “And you freak me out when you use my real name James”.
16	3565	Local (pub)	Sorry, I won’t then.
17	3565	Local (pub)	I don’t mind you using mine though.
			[a few more lines of 3565 asking 9459 to reconsider]
18	9459	Local (pub)	says “If you get weird I will leave the room any time you enter”.
19	9459	Local (pub)	says “And set you to enemy again and all that”.
20	9459	Local (pub)	asks “Understand?”
21	3565	Local (pub)	“Weird” is a pretty vague term.
22	3565	Local (pub)	I can’t stop being myself but I’ll try to be accommodating to your preferences.
23	9459	Local (pub)	says “I already explained it”.

24	3565	Local (pub)	I guess so.
25	9459	Local (pub)	says “No talk of love, sex, or attractiveness”.
26	3565	Local (pub)	Oh, that’s no deal.
27	3565	Local (pub)	I do find you attractive.
28	9459	Local (pub)	says “Well Don’t say it”.
29	3565	Local (pub)	I can’t not say it.
30	9459	Local (pub)	says “You were doing fine until two seconds ago”.
31	3565	Local (pub)	Well, there is no point in doing fine if my reward is not being able to be myself.
32	3565	Local (pub)	I’m not a crazed monster 9459.
33	3565	Local (pub)	But if I can’t be myself with you, it’s not worth talking to you.

In this conversation, 9459 attempts to set limits on the behaviour of 3565,<sup>100</sup> her conversational co-participant. Initially, 3565 begs 9459 to return his builder flags (Line 2).<sup>101</sup> From the dialogue between these two users in the above excerpt, it is evident that 3565 does not understand how his behaviour might be read as unacceptable, nor the ways in which it can be seen as countering group conventions in Walford, until 9459 explains both the precise ways that 3565 has acted inappropriately (Lines 9, 11, and 15, for example). In addition, she details how she will punish him for transgressing the norms of acceptable behaviour: keeping his builder flags (Line 2), leaving the room when he enters (Line 18), and setting him to enemy (Line 19).

The use of the terms “normal” (Line 11) and “weird” (Line 18) further mark 3565’s behaviour as transgressing 9459’s understanding of acceptable behaviour in the MUD. Furthermore, 9459 lists some characteristics of normal interaction in Walford, including the examples: listening to what the other participant says and showing respect when another participant attempts to end a

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<sup>100</sup> In Section 5.2.2.3 I explained the process of anonymising the logs. Again, usernames are converted to these numerical sequences automatically by XML code, and the numerical sequences replaced the usernames in the chatlogs when the logs were created. The names ‘Liz’ and ‘James’ are pseudonyms I have used in place of names used by the participants in their text. These names could be the participants’ offline names and the participants do refer to them as such. I changed these names to offer further protection to the participants. I have chosen pseudonyms and used pronouns gendered in the same direction as the names in the chatlogs.

<sup>101</sup> Builder flags are defined in Section 5.1.1 and in the Glossary.

conversation (Line 11). When she substitutes the term “weird” for “normal” (Line 18), 3565 claims not to understand how “weird” behaviour is constituted, saying: “‘Weird’ is a pretty vague term” (Line 21). 9459 then offers specific boundaries, stating, “no talk of love, sex, or attractiveness” (Line 25). 9459 does not suggest that all conversations about sex, romance, and desire are inappropriate. Rather than the problem existing in these topics themselves, it is in 3565’s insistence upon refusing to end these conversations when other participants, such as 9459, attempt to stop the exchange.

In addition to the topic of sex, 9459 discusses norms surrounding the use of offline names (Line 15). She comments that she “freaks out” when 3565 refers to her by her “real” name and then attempts to demonstrate the transgression by referring to 3565 by his offline name. His response to this illustrates how he chooses to see the use (or lack) of offline or real names not as a group-defined norm but as a personal preference (Lines 16 and 17).

The conversation ends a short time after Line 33 when 3565 says, “hug?” and 9459 responds by leaving the room.<sup>102</sup> Seconds after her last communication with 3565 and his offer of a hug she sends two single word comments using the *direct* setting to her entire friend list: “Fricken” followed by “Bah”. On his end, immediately succeeding the exchange with 9459, 3565 sends a *direct* chat, “Hey babe”, to another user, and although he does not receive a reply he follows with a flirtatious statement: “I’ve been waiting so long for a chance to deal to you ;)”. The response he gets from this user supports my reading of his behaviour from the conversation with 9459 as transgressing norms. The target user for these two utterances replies once with the utterance “um... ok...”, which ends the conversation. In this conversation, a 3565 was reprimanded and socially policed for engaging in behaviour that transgressed the group-specific norms in Walford. This example shows that group-specific norms can be found in online interaction and that failure to adopt interactional norms can result in negative consequences for users (e.g., removal from a friend list, suspension of builder flags).

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<sup>102</sup> Although I noted at the beginning of this section that the logs do not include information about users’ entrances and exits (unless the user has set up an automated command to communicate this to other participants present in the room), I was able to note 9459’s exit when seconds later she sent a communication, which showed that she was in a different room from seconds earlier when she last communicated with 3565. In Figures 5.1 and 5.2, and my discussion following them, I described how the speaker’s location is given in the chatlogs for each utterance.

## EXAMPLE 6.2 SOCIAL NORMS 2

Line	Speaker	Setting	Communication
			[35153 logs on and greets his friend list]
1	20586	Direct (flist)	Rapes [to 35153]. <sup>103</sup>
2	35153	Direct (flist)	asks “?????”
3	20586	Direct (flist)	says “Ask Michael [to 35153]”.
4	35153	Direct (flist)	asks “Is it naughty?”
5	35153	Direct (flist)	Grins.

In Example 6.2, instead of greeting 35153 in a normative or anticipated fashion through the use of a standard English language salutation (e.g., *hello*, *hi*, *hey*, *good day*), 20586 “rapes” 35153. In response, 35153 communicates shock as evidenced by his wordless reply of “?????” (Line 2).<sup>104</sup> However, once 35153 is told to ask a mutual friend to explain why he is “raped” as a greeting, he accepts the action and makes a joke (Line 4), wondering only if the origins behind the use of “rape” in this context is naughty. The term “naughty” used in reference to rape could be argued to be evidence in support of a misogynistic culture that fails to take rape seriously (cf. Dworkin on rape 1985). While this could be the case, it might be difficult to find enough evidence of this in the conversation. Rather, I emphasise the shock 35153 initially responds with as evidence that the greeting is not originally accepted, and how in one-turn he then changes from issuing an objection to joking with the user who just raped him.

This excerpt from the logs, and swift change in position, demonstrates the presence of group-specific interactional norms among Walford friend groups and how these may be distinguished from larger norms. Whilst the act of “raping” another user is not customary or anticipated, as 35153’s reaction signifies, it can

<sup>103</sup> The information in square brackets (“[to 35153]”) appears to all those who receive the message; see also Table 5.1.

<sup>104</sup> When I use gendered pronouns in relation to specific users, I base these from the use of pronouns in the lines preceding or succeeding the excerpts (if no gendered pronouns are evident in the excerpts themselves). In those cases when gendered pronouns have not been used, I refer to the user with the generic “they”.

be accepted rather quickly in a context of in-group behaviour. In addition, the example indicates the importance of contextualisation to transgression. Had this “rape” occurred between the participants of Example 6.1, the response generated could have differed from that here. In this case, the deferment of explaining the “rape” to a third-party participant, who is also a mutual friend of the interactants, offers a contextualisation of 20586’s action and situates it within a friend group and as in-group behaviour. I am able to ascertain that the user referred to in Line 3 is a mutual friend of both 20586 and 35153 because that user received the *direct* to friend list utterances sent by both of these users. As a result, although the greeting is nonnormative, potentially offensive, and transgresses larger social norms, it is permitted in these circumstances and with these interactants.

When participants, such as those in Examples 6.1 and 6.2, convey an understanding of the unwritten but complex norms surrounding sexual expression, I argue that they demonstrate their membership and belonging within the group. In Example 6.1 when 3565 fails to adopt the group social code, he faces consequences for transgressing the norms of sexual interaction in Walford (e.g., his builder flags are removed, his co-participant threatens to leave the room when he enters and set him to enemy, and he is called “psychotic” and “weird”). As a result of his transgression, he had both his personality and mental health judged, not unlike those who demonstrate nonnormative sexual practices or desires as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

## **6.2 THE USES OF SEX TALK**

In the remainder of this Chapter I refer to the chatlogs to discuss the uses of sex talk in Walford. In order to explore its uses (cybersex is discussed in Chapter 7 and I explore the connections between heteronormativity and geek identity in Chapter 8), I demonstrate the variety of sexual conversational topics, as well as the settings in which these conversations occur and how they are contextualised by the interactants and their use of Walford’s virtual geography. I have organised the discussion by type of sexual conversation and gradually transition from automated sexual commands towards more intimate discussions.

## 6.2.1 AUTOMATED SEXUAL COMMANDS

In Section 5.1.6 I discussed the presence of automated commands in Walford. Users are able to create new communication types and settings within Walford, and they are also able to implement new automated commands which, when activated, automatically enact an action or dialogue. There are a variety of automated commands: for example, some users have activated automated commands to announce when they enter a room or log out of Walford. A specific example of this described in Section 5.1.6 is a user who, upon entering or leaving a room, has one of a series of Confucius-style quotes appear. Discussions of sex are discouraged in Walford, and in the rules participants are warned that exchanging pornography in the MUD will result in expulsion. Despite this, two of the more popular automated commands are *shag* and *snog*. Although it could be argued that Walford's administrators have overlooked these commands, I suggest that these commands, whilst simulating erotic practices, are seen as neither sexual nor erotic by Walford participants and as a result are not viewed as problematic behaviour in the community.

The automated kiss and sex commands are *local* commands that generate erotic scenarios between two participants currently located in the same room. The *snog* command generates a kiss and the length of time it leaves the participants breathless and the *shag* command produces a sexual position and its duration. Before I discuss these commands separately, there are five points I wish to make. First, these commands cannot be used for more than two participants, and in this regard are replications or, using the terminology of Section 3.3.1, *copies* of normative and aspirational dyadic sexual scenarios. Second, these commands rely upon an active participant, who initiates the command, and a passive recipient, who must not have blocked the command (examples of both the *snog* and *shag* commands follow in the next two subsections). Third, although these commands describe a type of kiss or a sexual position, they are generally used as competitive gaming gestures rather than flirtatious or erotic enactments. Fourth, users have developed particular patterns when using these commands, which are

contextualised in the lines both preceding and succeeding the automated command lines. One of these is a pattern of reciprocal use of these commands, meaning that if a user is listed as the passive recipient of the exchange, the custom of the community dictates that this user enables the command with the previously active user as the passive interactant. Finally, use of the *snog* and *shag* commands led to no erotic or cybersex conversations in the chatlogs that formed this study, and was used as a conduit to flirtatious dialogue in one instance in the chatlogs I analysed (examined in Example 6.5).

### 6.2.1.1 KISSING BANDITS

The *snog* or *kissing bandit* command enables an automated string of two lines surrounding a kiss between two Walford participants who are in the same room at the time that the command is issued. In order to execute the command the user types the word “kiss” followed by the name of the user they wish to target. In Example 6.3, I refer to the content generated by this command (two lines), and note which content is variable.

#### EXAMPLE 6.3 AUTOMATED SNOGGING 1

Line	Speaker	Setting	Communication
1	20703	Local	pulls 17212 close for a <i>sweet sexy</i> kiss.
2	20703	Local	kisses 17212 until they are breathless for <i>12</i> seconds.
3	17212	Local	pulls 20703 close for a <i>passionate</i> kiss.
4	17212	Local	kisses 20703 until they are breathless for <i>19</i> seconds.
5	17212	Local	says I beat you.

Here, 20703 directs the *snog* command towards 17212. The command randomly generates a type of kiss from a short list of possibilities; “sweet sexy” in this case (Line 1). The line that immediately succeeds it indicates the length of time that the participants are left breathless following the kiss; “12 seconds” here



(Line 2). Although it is clear to see which participant initiated the command, the kiss implies a mutual engagement through the amount of time that the participants, “they” (Lines 2 and 4), are left breathless. In addition, one participant is left breathless no longer than the other, and although there are a number of different varieties of kisses that can be generated, neither refusal nor rebuttal of the kiss have been programmed as possible outcomes.

The use of this command could be read as ludic, in that it is playful or fun. Drawing from Caillois (2001), who argues that there are four types of games, the automated *snog* command can be seen as *mimesis* or mimicry/role playing, such as that associated with the game *Charades* (a game in which players act out words whilst other players attempt to guess the term that is enacted). However, it is not only a *mimesis* which involves participants simulating or enacting kissing. The kisses are also treated as an *alea*, or as a game of chance, because the type of kiss and the length of time for which the participants are left breathless is randomly generated.

The *kissing bandit* is also a competitive game (cf. Huizinga 1992). Participants sometimes initiate the command reciprocally after they have been targeted, and they may note a winner of this game. 17212 states in Line 5: “I beat you” in response to the kiss they initiated which left both participants breathless for a longer amount of time (19 seconds; Line 4) than the one previously initiated by 20703 (12 seconds; Line 2). Thus, the *aleatoric* feature of the command fosters a competition among the users. In this sense, the reciprocity of this command is also related to the competitive value the participants associate with it. The comments that result from comparing the duration of the breathlessness of the kiss are a way to respond to the action without needing to treat the kiss as if it were either a kiss or a copy of one. This point becomes more evident in my discussion of Example 6.4.

#### EXAMPLE 6.4 AUTOMATED SNOGGING 2

Line	Speaker	Setting	Communication
1	3293	Local	pulls 14863 close for a lingering kiss.
2	3293	Local	kisses 14863 until they are both breathless for 10 seconds.
3	3293	Local	says That's pants.
4	3293	Local	pulls 14863 close for a whisper like kiss.
5	3293	Local	kisses 14863 until they are both breathless for 17 seconds.
6	14863	Local	pulls 3293 close for a lingering kiss.
7	14863	Local	kisses 3293 until they are both breathless for 17 seconds.
8	3293	Local	says Well I am out of touch today then.
9	3293	Local	says I can't even snog.
10	3293	Local	Pouts

In this excerpt the competitiveness or *alea* aspect of the command becomes more apparent. 3293 rejects their first attempt at snogging as “pants” (Line 3) because of the minimal amount of time for which the participants are breathless. 3293 then enables the command again as if it were a game and they are taking another turn, and this user is more successful with a “whisper like kiss” (Line 4), which leaves the participants breathless for a longer amount of time (Line 5). The target of 3293’s commands then reciprocates by targeting 3293. However, 3293 remains concerned with their self-perceived poor performance time (Lines 8, 9, and 10).

In Examples 6.3 and 6.4 the users comment about winning, or “beating” others who enable the same command, and about not faring well at generating a snog which leaves the participants breathless for an amount of time that they associate as tantamount to kissing well (see Example 6.4, Lines 8 and 9 where 3293 states, “Well I am out of touch today” followed with “I can’t even snog”). The participants who use these commands, and particularly when enabling them rather than being targeted, treat the kisses as if they are quantifiable and assume that the game is won by achieving a result, purely by chance, of a length of time

of breathlessness rendered. In Examples 6.3 and 6.4 the lengths of 10 and 12 seconds were both deemed to be poor and in Example 6.4 3263 also defines 17 seconds as a poor showing. The users do not comment on the *type* of kiss (e.g., *sweet sexy, deep passionate, lingering, teasing, whisper like*). Furthermore, they do not use the kiss command as a part of or as a precursor to other types of non-automated sexual conversations (including flirtation, sexual joking, or cybersex). However, as I show in Section 6.2.1.3, Walford participants may use the *snog* command before enabling the *shag* command. Together, these factors indicate that the use of the automated *snog* command, and the *kissing bandits*, are a playful and competitive game in Walford rather than an erotic interaction.

#### EXAMPLE 6.5 AUTOMATED SNOGGING

Line	Speaker	Setting	Communication
1	44639	Local	pulls 1986 close for a sweet sexy kiss.
2	44639	Local	kisses 1986 until they are both breathless for 24 seconds.
3	44639	Local	says Cuz you make me want to do that.
			[a short playful conversation follows]
4	1986	Local	pulls 44639 close for a teasing kiss.
5	1986	Local	kisses 44639 until they are both breathless for 13 seconds.
6	44639	Local	pulls 1986 close for a deep passionate kiss.
7	44639	Local	kisses 1986 until they are both breathless for 2 seconds.
8	1986	Local	says “2?”
9	1986	Local	prods 44639.

In addition to the playful competition which is evident in Examples 6.3 and 6.4, Examples 6.4 and 6.5 also demonstrate an emotive element in their use of the *kissing bandit*. In Example 6.4, 3263 sulked in response to a self-perceived poor turn (Line 10), whilst in Example 6.5 the target of the kiss suspiciously jests about the duration of breathlessness (Line 8) and prods 44639 (Line 9) in regards to their failure. The comment in Line 3 is distinctive from the comments

succeeding the use of the command in the other examples presented here. When 44639 states “cuz you make me want to do that” (Line 3) immediately following having enabled the *snog* command it is possible to see that while the command is not used for erotic or sexualised purposes within Walford it can be used as a precursor to a flirtatious comment. In this example, the *kissing bandit* is a tool that 44639 uses in order to set up a comment that conveys desire because the automated command alone does not communicate this.

### 6.2.1.2 AUTOMATED SHAGGING

The automated *shag* command, similar to the *snog* command, conveys little if any sexual or erotic meaning between the participants in the chatlogs examined in this thesis. I discuss the fluidity of use of the *snog* and *shag* commands in the next section (Section 6.1.3) and how participants may use the *snog* command as a precursor to the use of the *shag* command. In Example 6.6 I discuss the results of enabling the *shag* command. In this way, this example serves as a parallel to Example 6.3, in which I explained the communication lines that result from enabling the *snog* command.

#### EXAMPLE 6.6 AUTOMATED SHAGGING 1

Line	Speaker	Setting	Communication
1	32282	Local	undresses 7781 slowly and seductively, caressing all the sensitive areas.
2	32282	Local	plays with 7781 until they both get more and more aroused.
3	32282	Local	shags 7781 senseless <i>in the 32282 position</i> for 26 minutes.
4	32282	Local	and 7781 both collapse in a completely satisfied state.

In contrast to the *kissing bandit* automated command, which produces two lines of communication, the *shag* command results in four lines. Thus, it could be argued that the *shag* command tells a more detailed narrative. In addition, an equivalent of the two lines of the *snog* command are compressed into a single line

here (Line 3). Similar to the *snog* command, there are two pieces of information in the *shag* command that are randomly generated from a short list of possibilities: the position or setting in which the participants “shag senseless” and the length of time. The possible positions include: a position dedicated to the user initiating the command (e.g., *the 32282 position*), *missionary*, *doggy style*, and *like Chapter 4 from the Kama Sutra*. Most of these outcomes include the information “in the” followed by the randomly generated adjective and the word “position”. As an alternative to the position type, sometimes a location is given. Examples of these are: *in the front seats of the Mustang*, *in the backseats of the Mustang*, *in the backyard*, *in the shower*, *on the edge of the bed*, and *against the wall*. Most of the options generated use articles in their description. The use of articles and, in particular, the article “the” may be an attempt to make the experience more centred and tied to the participants (e.g., the use of the definite article in *the Mustang* rather than the indefinite article in *a Mustang*).

Similar to the use of the *kissing bandit*, Walford users favour a norm of reciprocity when using the *shag* command, as shown below in Example 6.7.

#### EXAMPLE 6.7 AUTOMATED SHAGGING 2

Line	Speaker	Setting	Communication
1	11116	Local	undresses 5486 slowly and seductively, caressing all the sensitive areas.
2	11116	Local	plays with 5486 until they both get more and more aroused.
3	11116	Local	shags 5486 senseless like no one has ever seen for 275 minutes.
4	11116	Local	and 5486 both collapse in a completely satisfied state.
5	11116	Local	asks “Is that all you wanted ;)”
6	5486	Local	says “Pretty much, but my ass is far more sore than it should be”.
7	11116	Local	says “Sorry”.
8	5486	Local	undresses 11116 slowly and seductively, caressing all the sensitive areas.
9	5486	Local	plays with 11116 until they both get more and more aroused.
10	5486	Local	shags 11116 senseless in the missionary position for 61 minutes.
11	5486	Local	and 11116 both collapse in a completely satisfied state.

12	11116	Local	says “You should have been gentler”.
13	5486	Local	exclaims “Your turn!”
14	11116	Local	says “Oh that would be difficult!”
15	11116	Local	asks “Two guys missionary?”
16	11116	Local	thinks “Ball banging? ;)”
17	11116	Local	undresses 5486 slowly and seductively, caressing all the sensitive areas.
18	11116	Local	plays with 5486 until they both get more and more aroused.
19	11116	Local	shags 5486 acrobatically for 174 minutes.
20	11116	Local	and 5486 both collapse in a completely satisfied state.
21	5486	Local	undresses 11116 slowly and seductively, caressing all the sensitive areas.
22	5486	Local	plays with 11116 until they both get more and more aroused.
23	5486	Local	shags 11116 senseless upside down for 23 minutes.
24	5486	Local	and 11116 both collapse in a completely satisfied state.
25	5486	Local	asks “Any harder than that?”
26	11116	Local	thinks . o O (Headrush).

There is evidence of turn-taking between 11116 and 5486 in the above interaction. The participants enable the command four times in total and in the order of 11116, 5486, 11116, 5486.

In addition to the reciprocal use of the commands, a joking tone between the participants is established in Line 5 after 11116 shags 5486 and then asks 5486 “is that all you wanted ;)”. The participants also make comments about the possibility of certain positions (Lines 13-15) that demonstrate a lack of knowledge regarding the possibilities of sex between men. This joking, alongside a lack of familiarity of the possibilities of gay sex, illustrates that the participants do not see themselves as having engaged in cybersex. The use of the commands and the resulting comments of “my ass is far more sore than it should be” (Line 6), “you should have been gentler” (Line 12), and “any harder than that?” (Line 25) may be erotic. However, it is possible to argue that these are jokes rather than sensual expression stemming from sexual arousal on the basis of their comments.

The use of the *shag* command here, particularly in the way that the participants use it repeatedly and engage in reciprocal turn-taking without much dialogue, is evidence that this command is not necessarily used in a way that promotes cybersex between participants. This is further supported by a lack of evidence in the chatlogs I examined that the *shag* command is used as a precursor for cybersex, flirting, erotic webcamming, or other sexualised activities. I found it used for these purposes very rarely (see Example 6.5 as an exception). Both the *shag* and *snog* commands appear on the decontextualised lexical level as erotic but the participants use of them is more recognisable as playful. At times, this playful use of the commands is competitive (Huizinga 1992), yet at other times the competitive element is suppressed for a more jovial discussion of the possibilities produced by these automated commands.

### 6.2.1.3 FROM KISSING TO SEX

Some Walford participants use the *snog* command as a precursor to enabling the *shag* command. Although the use of these seemingly erotic simulations of sexual activities is not understood as ‘sexual’ in Walford, when participants adopt a fluid use of these commands they place them within the larger social sexual discourses that regard them as erotic practices, as evidenced in Example 6.8.

#### EXAMPLE 6.8 KISSING TO SEX

Line	Speaker	Setting	Communication
1	23639	Local	pulls 5486 close for a sweet sexy kiss.
2	23639	Local	kisses 5486 until they are both breathless for 579124448 millenniums.
3	23639	Local	undresses 5486 slowly and seductively, caressing all the sensitive areas.
4	23639	Local	plays with 5486 as they both get more and more aroused.
5	23639	Local	shags 5486 senseless on the front seats of the Mustang for 78 minutes.
6	23639	Local	and 5486 both collapse in a completely satisfied state.

7	23639	Local	says damn idling ;)
8	23639	Local	pulls 5486 close for a deep passionate kiss.
9	23639	Local	kisses 5486 until they are both breathless for 496425511 millenniums.
10	5486	Local	pulls 23639 close for a whisper like kiss.
11	5486	Local	kisses 23639 until they are both breathless for 25 seconds.
12	5486	Local	undresses 23639 slowly and seductively, caressing all the sensitive areas.
13	5486	Local	shags 23639 acrobatically for 27 minutes.
14	5486	Local	and 23639 both collapse in a completely satisfied state.

In this example the participants deploy the commands in such a way that a normative pattern of desire is evoked: kissing and sex are distinct and kissing can be seen as preceding sex. The participants here could be seen as enacting results similar to that from Sanders' and Reinisch's (1999) survey of how university students define sex: kissing is not defined *as* sex but it can be included in a range of sexual behaviours.

Before using the *shag* command in Line 3, 23639 uses the *snog* command (Line 1). Similar to what was shown in Examples 6.3-6.5, the use of the commands is reciprocal and the target of 23639's commands, 5486, responds by enabling the *snog* and *shag* commands (Lines 10 and 12). After Line 14 23639 continues to use the *shag* command, targeting 5486 which results in 23639 "shagging 5486 senseless" *in the backseat of the Mustang* (43 minutes and 46 minutes), *like Chapter 4 from the Kama Sutra* (73 minutes and 29 minutes), *in the backyard* (63 minutes and 72 minutes), and *in the shower* (7 minutes). At that point 5286 uses the *direct* setting to exclaim to their 12 friends currently connected, "get to the bath" which is directed towards 23639 and refers to her using a feminised name (possibly an offline name). 23629 responds, also to her friend list, by stating "well, I had to get some shags in there ;)".

The use of the *snog* and *shag* commands requires that the user initiating the command and the targeted recipient are in the same room, and only users in that room can see the resulting automated communication. 23639 and 5486 are in the same room when using these commands, and during the use of these commands 23639 comments directly to 5486 using the *local* command (Line 7).



However, as the use of the commands progresses, 5486 switches to the *direct* setting and sends messages to their entire friend list (not shown in the excerpt). The participants continue to privately enable the shag command whilst discussing it to their friend lists despite knowing that their friends do not know that they are using the automated command privately and would thus be unable to fully understand the communication that 23639 and 5486 direct towards them.

## 6.2.2 SEXUAL JOKING

In addition to the joking that occurs with the use of the automated kissing and sex commands, sexual joking is a popular type of sex talk in Walford. Shifman (2007) examines online sexual joking in the context of email message forwarding and asserts that sexual jokes are the most popular type of online joke in her sample of humour online. She argues that the popularity of sex jokes is due to the universality of sex: “sex... is global in nature” (Shifman 2007:201). However, it is possible to argue that the universality of sex offers an incomplete explanation of the popularity of sex jokes. For instance, if the universality or accessibility of a topic were the feature that makes it humorous, jokes about other common aspects of life would prominently appear in her findings. However, she reports no jokes about sickness and death, which are also experienced globally. In addition, more than 12 percent of the jokes in her sample were about specific products or companies, which may or may not be universally known.

In contrast to Shifman, Freud (1976) argues that sexual jokes are popular because they provide a socially acceptable outlet for repressed sexuality. I would not take the position that a joke about a particular sexual practice is necessarily evoking a repressed interest in or desire for that practice. For example, in one chatlog a number of participants engaged in a prolonged *direct* friend list conversation about bestiality with horses, but there is little evidence to suggest that this is because of a repressed desire towards or interest in this practice. Instead, I argue with support from the material in the chatlogs, that sexual joking is not necessarily about interest in and repression towards particular sex acts but that, within the Walford context, sex conversations are a way for participants to

transcend the sequestration, shame, and depersonalisation of sexuality superficially whilst fostering group camaraderie.

Learning the norms and conventions of sex talk, and talk more generally, is group and context dependent. Some sociolinguists have found conventions in other types of communication: Johnstone (1990) details norms in Midwestern American narrative styles, Adamson's and Regan's (1991) research the adoption of group-specific sociolinguistic norms among Asian immigrants learning English as an additional language, McElhinny (2009) observes what makes the discourse style of police officers more complex for female trainees. As a result, it takes time and involvement within the group to know what might be acceptable, in what context, with which members present, and what could be considered off-limits or outside the bounds of the group (see also Heath 1983). The ability to make jokes that push the boundaries of acceptability enough to be humorous but not enough to transcend boundaries completely is a skill attributed to those who understand the social norms of the group with which they are interacting. Thus, they can be understood as *communicatively competent* (cf. Hymes 1971).

Sexual joking within Walford can involve adding sex content to conversations that are not about sex. For example, the conversation cited earlier in this section of bestiality began with one participant discussing a non-sexual dream she had about horses. However, in a short amount of time other members of her friend list began to make sexualised jokes, which continued over some time. Additional members of their friend lists, and not necessarily friends of the user who reported the dream, connected and requested context when hearing jokes on this topic. Once they were given the contextualising information that the jokes stemmed from a participant's non-sexual dream about horses their friends accepted the conversation and, in at least one instance, added their own jokes to the conversation.

The use of sexual banter or innuendo is one way for participants to demonstrate their closeness and familiarity with each other. To take the risk of making a sexual joke requires that the speaker believes that this is acceptable within the context. Thus, when sexual banter is added to banal or trivial conversations, it demonstrates a connection between the participants that extends beyond a casual conversation.

### EXAMPLE 6.9 SEXUAL JOKING 1

Line	Speaker	Setting	Communication
1	28887	Local (pub)	Needs to find a phone charger.
2	28887	Local (pub)	Is expecting a call.
3	10699	Local (pub)	From a gigolo?
4	28887	Local (pub)	Chuckles.
5	10699	Local (pub)	Or is it from a bloke who wants to give you the shaft?
6	28887	Local (pub)	I doubt that.
7	10699	Local (pub)	Who is it then?

When 28887 chortles at 10699's suggestion that the phone call 28887 is expecting is from a sex worker (Line 2), 10699 considers the positive response as approval and as an indicator to continue to make sexualised jokes towards 28887. This boundary is further pressed on upon in 10699's next comment which states that if the call 28887 is waiting for is not from a sex worker then perhaps it is from a man wishing to give 28887 "the shaft" (Line 5). The use of genital-specific sexual slang (cf. Braun and Kitzinger 2001a) implies a level of familiarity and informality between the participants. In addition, it could be suggested that the adoption of sexual banter provides 10699 a bridge to ask the question they are most interested in, which is who is 28887 is waiting to receive a call from (Line 7)?

Although Example 6.9 is conversational rather than action-based, sometimes sexual banter, and the ways in which it is used to demonstrate closeness, takes the form of physical humour, as in Example 6.10.

### EXAMPLE 6.10 SEXUAL JOKING 2

Line	Speaker	Setting	Communication
1	17014	Direct (flist)	Grabs your crotch!... eh up!
2	35153	Direct (flist)	exclaims "17014!"

3	35153	Direct (flist)	Puts his pants on his head! Allo luv!
4	17014	Direct (flist)	Woot.
5	35153	Direct (flist)	asks "Did you have a good Christmas?"

The participants in Example 6.10 use sexual humour to be absurd. Their conversation cannot be read as erotic or desirous in the sense that they do not share sexual stories, create sexual narratives, or engage in cybersex. Although grabbing someone's genitals (Line 1) might be seen as erotic, sexually forward, or abusive, putting one's underwear on one's head (Line 3) is not stereotypically observed as an erotic gesture. The subsequent greeting highlights the absurdity of these actions (Line 3), and these comments can be seen demonstrating an intimacy between the participants. 35153 does not communicate shock or displeasure at the comment that 17014 is grabbing their crotch, but continues the humour in Line 3. The light banter here, as in Example 6.9, works as a segue to link to a more serious discussion about the holidays.

The use of sexual joking to promote camaraderie and in-group status is further evidenced through the *group* rather than dyadic settings of sexual jokes. In the examples here, and through out the chatlogs, sexual joking featured prominently when participants were engaging with multiple people through the *direct* to friend list communication setting. In addition, participants were found to engage in sexual joking and banter using the *local* setting when in the *pub* or other high-traffic rooms with multiple participants. While Measor (1996) found that teenagers in sex education classes often tell jokes to hide their discomfort, the participants here seem to be engaging in sexual joking and tomfoolery because they are comfortable in the setting and with each other. When participants joke about sex in Walford's group settings, of either *direct* to friend list or *local* in a busy room (e.g., the *pub*), but do not engage in other types of sex conversations in these settings, they treat these spaces and contexts as ones where sex is not a topic of serious personal discussion or disclosure. Rather, sexual joking can be seen as a strategy speakers can adopt to test the communicative boundaries of the group or to demonstrate their communicative competence.

### 6.2.3 SHARING SEX LINKS

In this section I argue that sharing links to sex websites or dating profiles among single-gender participants with a shared sexuality can be a way of fostering homosociality. Homosociality in sex talk was also evident in Example 6.7 when the co-participants talk about “ball banging” (Line 16). Allison (1994) argues that when men in Japanese hostess clubs discuss the bodies of the hostesses, the conversations are often not about the women and their bodies. Rather, the conversational topic allows the men to relate to each other. Cameron and Kulick (2003) assert that heterosexual (and heteronormative) talk in these circumstances is better described as homosocial talk. It is possible to argue that conversations about hostesses’ bodies in Allison’s study often require taking up a heterosexual position (whether or not one defines oneself heterosexual) in such a way that the bonds of the group are made more central than the topic that the speakers are discussing, while at the same time the participants reinforce heteronormative ideologies.

Participants in Walford share links to other webpages with each other in conversations. Among the types of links they share are those to online dating profiles from external (dating) websites. Within the sample of chatlogs I analysed, the only instances of sharing links to online dating profiles I found involved men sharing links to women’s profiles.<sup>105</sup> In the examples of link-sharing that were in the logs, the interactants discussed both the photos and text of the ads.

#### EXAMPLE 6.11 SEX LINKS

Line	Speaker	Setting	Communication
1	32633	Local (pub)	I’m talking to this girl who seems cool, but she’s fugly... hmmm... what a dilemma.
2	40654	Local (pub)	goes “No ****ing way”
3	40654	Local (pub)	[shares link]

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<sup>105</sup> I refer to these users as men because their use of pronouns in these conversations, and others whilst they were connected to Walford in that particular log were masculine. I determined that the profiles that they were sharing were of women, again based on the pronouns used when the participants were discussing the links.

4	40654	Local (pub)	[shares link]
5	40654	Local (pub)	goes "Man where are all of these *****es coming from?"
6	32633	Local (pub)	Um London?
7	40654	Local (pub)	goes "She needs to dump the jean skirt though"
8	40654	Local (pub)	goes "Jean skirts are so nasty"
9	40654	Local (pub)	goes "Where is one for you Miles?"
10	40654	Local (pub)	[shares link]
11	40654	Local (pub)	[shares link]
12	40654	Local (pub)	goes "No they just look 12"
13	40654	Local (pub)	goes "Now this girl is 12"
14	32633	Local (pub)	Would rather have an older woman than a younger one.
15	40654	Local (pub)	goes "Ok someone shoot this girl now"
16	40654	Local (pub)	[shares link]
17	6007	Local (pub)	Didn't you already try that?
18	32633	Local (pub)	Yeah, but I like an older woman with a big ass, I can't help it.
19	32633	Local (pub)	Although it's not like I would deny a hot 20 year old.
20	32633	Local (pub)	Or 19.
21	32633	Local (pub)	Or 21.
22	32633	Local (pub)	22.
23	32633	Local (pub)	Etc.
24	40654	Local (pub)	Hi, my name is Julie, I'm a 21 y/o Christian college student majoring in Photography.
25	40654	Local (pub)	goes "LOSER"
26	40654	Local (pub)	goes "My god"
27	40654	Local (pub)	goes "dude"
28	40654	Local (pub)	[shares link]
29	13803	Local (pub)	Cartman
30	40654	Local (pub)	goes "Goddess"
31	40654	Local (pub)	Doesn't look at any 40654 links
32	40654	Local (pub)	goes "You gotta look at that one"

33	6007	Local (pub)	Whoa
34	6007	Local (pub)	Good one
35	40654	Local (pub)	goes “you didn’t even look you Canadian”
36	6007	Local (pub)	****ing stupid though.
37	40654	Local (pub)	goes “You’re biased against skinny girls”
38	32633	Local (pub)	Skinny girls are boring.
39	40543	Local (pub)	goes “you think just cuz a girl isn’t fat and is big nosed they are 12”.
40	40654	Local (pub)	Just doing this for fun. I’m 21 and from [a large town in the southern part of the United States]”.
41	32633	Local (pub)	Although you can pick them up and **** them against a wall, that’s always cool.
42	40654	Local (pub)	goes “LOSER”
43	32633	Local (pub)	You need to not be so picky if you ever plan on getting laid.
44	41682	Local (pub)	asks “Is that what you did to Marie?”
45	32633	Local (pub)	Snorts
46	40654	Local (pub)	goes “I’ve been laid”
47	40654	Local (pub)	goes “And by hot chicks”
48	40654	Local (pub)	goes “Over 18”
49	32633	Local (pub)	I mean ones you don’t pay for.

In Example 6.11 the participants discuss the online dating profiles of several women that 40654 posts in the pub. Although the participants’ conversation could be understood as heterosexual, it is also homosocial in that the men use the topic in order to foster their camaraderie with each other. The participants’ familiarity with each other is evident from the personalised sexual teasing that is interspersed in the discussion. Examples of this include: “didn’t you try that” (Line 17), “you’re biased against skinny girls” (Line 37), and “is that what you did with Marie” (Line 44). The participants’ dating and romantic histories and preferences for certain attributes in partners are areas that they use as fodder for teasing each other. These jokes require that the participants are knowledgeable about each other’s pasts and have reached levels of comfort with each other where it is acceptable to make jokes such as the body types they prefer,

such as “you’re biased against skinny girls” (Line 37), or the sexual positions adopted with a former girlfriend (Line 44).

Cameron (1997) discusses conversations among heterosexual, male university students and argues that their conversations can be read as homosocial rather than heterosexual. She argues that the men in these conversations diverge at times from gendered expectations placed on heterosexual men. For example, she cites the interactants’ knowledge of specific clothing styles as divergent from the expectations for heterosexual men. This ‘queerness’ in male homosocial and heterosexual conversation is evident early on in this conversation excerpt when the participants discuss denim skirts. Here, as with Cameron’s excerpt, the topic is used as a way for the male speakers to bond with each other in a conversation about women and women’s appearances. The women themselves become what Ahmed (2006) describes as furniture, or part of the background, and the conversation is more about the men who are talking to each other than it is about the women they are discussing. Their discussion of women, which is objectifying, places them in the background whilst the central element is how the topic can be seen as facilitating the men’s interaction and their heteronormative attitudes.

A parallel could be made about the ways in which the interactants objectify the women they talk about and the discussion in Section 3.2 when I argued that women involved in same-sex couples may experience a particular kind of unwanted attention. In both cases the women become furniture or background content to those who are commenting about them. In addition to the overt sexism these conversations also contain a sharing element. For instance, the conversation begins when 40654 states that he has been talking to someone online who seems quite interesting but who is “fugly”, i.e., slang for “fucking ugly” (Line 1). The participants also express criticism of women who they think seem “\*\*\*\*\*ing stupid” in their dating profiles (Line 36). Thus, this could support the findings of Cameron (1997) and Coates (2007), in that, although it is done single-mindedly, the men are communicating to each other some of the characteristics that they value in a potential partner. Thus, while their conversation is objectifying, this ‘furniture’ serves as a backdrop to the co-participants’ homosociality and heteronormativity.



## **6.2.4 IMAGES AND WEBCAMS IN ONLINE SEX CONVERSATIONS**

### **6.2.4.1 GENDER ON DISPLAY**

Although there are user profiles (without the option of uploading photos) on Walford, opportunities to post links to one's personal website, and photo album space on the server, the synchronous chat site that Walford operates is entirely text-based, as described in Chapter 5. Thus, it is possible that textual and visual representations of users are dissimilar. Avatars are not necessarily representative of an online (or offline) identity. More interesting is that the lack of visual and aural cues may make it difficult for other users to develop visual representations of other participants, however similar or dissimilar to those participants' offline appearances. I explored the importance of gender as a master status in Chapter 2 and, using feminist sociology and queer theory, I discussed what it means to be gendered. Gauthier and Chaudoir (2004) argue that the positioning of gender as a master status means that among members of the female-to-male transgender community there are concerns of 'gender status production' including 'passing' as male, legal issues, and surgical worries. The concerns that they highlight are based in the nearly automatic assessment people make regarding the gender of others. The immediate evaluation of gender is subconscious: it may go unrealised until or unless there is an instance whether face-to-face or on the telephone when it is difficult to assign someone to a position in the gender binary.

It has been suggested that in text environments, such as Walford, there is increased potential and opportunity for users to manipulate gender (e.g., Schmieder 2009; Stone 1995; Turkle 1995). However, participants discuss each other routinely, including offline meet-ups and relationships that they or others have had with Walford participants; some participants communicate with each other using webcams; and, as mentioned earlier in this section, participants also have the opportunity to post photo albums to the Walford server (although not the chat section). In the chatlogs I analysed some participants made disparaging comments about the physical appearances of other users, as well as transphobic

comments in regards to members of the community. In her ethnography of a MUD, Kendall (2002:153) found that there was persistent gossip in that community that a popular member was presenting her gender differently on Walford and was “really” a man. Kendall asserts that those who gossiped about the gender of this member cited the participant’s refusal to participate in offline meet-ups as evidence of online gender-switching. However, I did not find any conversations that discussed a discrepancy in how regular participants presented their gender in Walford and how they may present it offline. There is the possibility that gender on Walford may be presented differently than it is offline and that the participants are either passing or have not participated in offline meet-ups while also falling under the radar of other users.

Goffman’s (1959, 1969) work on the presentation of self and strategic interaction demonstrates the importance of consistent self-presentation over time. He argues that performances must be relatively stable in order to be read as natural. Within the Walford context, participants regularly discuss their offline meet-ups with Walford users, as well as personal details about themselves and other users (e.g., which users live with their families of origin, have the best/least attractive physical attributes, and which have the loudest sex at their meet-ups), and use various media to link their Walford presence to their offline self. I would argue that it is unlikely that a regular and longstanding member of the community could effectively traverse gender lines because, as Stone (1995) notes, over time as online relationships grow there is increased pressure and expectation that users meet offline. In addition, it has been argued (e.g., Kendall 2002; Kramarae 1995; Stone 1995) that crossing gender lines, while disrupting the notions of who belongs to which gender categories, does little to challenge the gender binary. Thus, although there may be greater flexibility online in who might be men or women, the meanings attached to *being* a man or a woman remain consistent. In other words, the transgression of gender categories online does not necessarily mean that there is a subversion of the meanings attributed to the categories.

#### 6.2.4.2 SEXUAL DISPLAY IN CAMMING

Although Walford does not have webcam capacities, some Walford users augment their chat by simultaneously participating in video-chat or webcam conversations. In those instances when participants discuss communicating by webcam in my sample, they log onto an external website, and have a conversation using that platform, sometimes whilst simultaneously communicating on Walford. The websites named when participants refer to a video-chat or webcam site are *Yahoo Chat* and *AIM*. Because my analysis is based from the Walford chatlogs, as described in Chapter 5, I do not have access to any webcam conversations from external sites, including those from Yahoo Chat.

*Camming*, or communicating by webcam or video-chat, is not inherently sexual. For example, White (2003) makes a distinction between ‘women’s webcams’ and cams designed for pornographic purposes. In the literature ‘camgirls’ are defined as women who run their own websites which feature a live webcam component that anyone online can watch, either for free or for a subscription charge (Senft 2008; White 2003). Camming on Walford is differentiated from these definitions because when the participants discuss cams, they do not refer to personal websites of women with webcam components, nor do they refer to publicly accessible webcam sites. In the Walford chatlogs it is apparent that, in this environment, ‘camming’ typically refers to sexualised practices and to exposing parts of the body in a non-commercial atmosphere and in a dyadic setting using a third-party external site with video-chat capacities.

Although Walford participants discuss camming among their friend lists, when they suggest camming it usually occurs in one-on-one conversations using the *direct* setting or in a personal/private room using the *local* setting. In the chatlogs examined in this research, the speakers emphasise women’s bodies. In homosocial heteronormative camming conversations among men, there is a focus on which women Walford members use webcams and whether or not they expose their breasts to the male co-participants. In the logs I examined it is rare for participants to discuss fully naked camming and I read no instances of camming and masturbation. This may occur, but if so participants do not discuss it in the chatlogs. The discussions of camming focus almost exclusively on the act of

exposing breasts without a pretext of stripping or dancing. In addition, I read of no instances in the chatlogs where same-sex camming (sexual or non-sexual) was mentioned in homosocial conversations involving either men or women.

The following excerpt from a one-on-one conversation, which occurs in a private room, counters an idea of intimacy of exposure on webcams.

**EXAMPLE 6.12 CAMMING 1**

Line	Speaker	Setting	Communication
1	37239	Local	I always asked to just see your tits but you never comply.
2	32884	Local	says “You were trying to get me to open it further? Or were you trying to use the force to pull the zipper down”.
3	37239	Local	I dunno, which would get me further?
4	32884	Local	says “I could have sworn you’ve seen my tits”.
5	37239	Local	Well in those old photos you took.
6	37239	Local	Otherwise, I’d remember.
7	32884	Local	Are you sure?
8	37239	Local	I’d remember.
9	37239	Local	However, you can always make good on that.
10	32884	Local	says “I still haven’t unearthed my webcam”.
11	37239	Local	Uh huh.
12	32884	Local	says “But I’ll give you a showing when I do”.

In Example 6.12, 37239 and 32884 are engaged in a casual conversation that does not involve flirtatious banter either preceding or succeeding this fragment. The conversation can be read as social rather than as erotic. 32884 appears to take in stride 37239’s statement that she has never “complied” to his requests that she expose her breasts to him (Line 1). From this conversation, it could be argued that she expresses a casual attitude regarding exposure, which is particularly evident when stating, “I could have sworn you’ve seen my tits” (Line 4) and “are you sure” (Line 7). In addition, she has posted photos of her breasts previously, which 37239 dismisses with the utterance, “well in those old photos you took” (Line 5),

which is followed by “otherwise, I’d remember”. The discussion of exposure is not reciprocal, and at no time does 32884 express an interest in seeing 37239 on webcam, either to expose himself or otherwise. Perhaps most striking about this conversation is the mundane undertone, even in Line 12, which could be seen as flirtatious.

This conversation seems to fit within the Walford conventions towards webcams and how they are used among Walford users. Example 6.13 also involves a discussion of camming that appears disconnected to the conversations preceding and following it.

**EXAMPLE 6.13 CAMMING 2**

Line	Speaker	Setting	Communication
1	23639	Local	asks “Next to what?”
2	5486	Local	says “Next to the house sits another at a higher level”.
3	23639	Local	says “Oh yeah your mom said”.
4	23639	Local	says “But they can’t really see down. The side of their house faces us and there are trees”.
5	5486	Local	says “Damn it woman, where’s your webcam?”
6	23689	Local	says “Erm on the floor”.
7	5486	Local	says “That’s a damn place for it”.
8	23689	Local	says “Yes it is ;) But you will have to wait ;)”
9	5486	Local	says “Dang”.

The introduction of a new conversational topic in Line 5 appears disconnected from Lines 1-4, and after Line 9 there are no new conversational turns between these speakers. From other conversations in the same log, it appears that 23689 and 5486 are an offline couple and, although this excerpt is short, there is evidence that the couple know each other offline (Line 3). While the co-participants do not mention exposure or body parts (unlike Example 6.12), here 5486 adopts hypermasculine language when stating “damn it woman” (Line 5) whilst establishing flirtatious banter with 23689.

Although men often encourage women participants on Walford to expose their breasts on their webcams, some women initiate this dialogue. In the logs I examined, whether stated with affected shyness or directly, this can elicit positive feedback and encouragement from some male participants.

**EXAMPLE 6.14 CAMMING 3**

Line	Speaker	Setting	Communication
1	44396	Local (pub)	Maybe I'll show you all my boobs if I get drunk enough.
2	44396	Local (pub)	I'm horny.
3	20098	Local (pub)	Is welcome anytime.
4	41170	Local (pub)	exclaims "I came in at the right time. Yikes!"
5	20098	Local (pub)	Sorry Sarah is welcome anytime.
6	44396	Local (pub)	Smirks.

In this example, the use of sexual language does not create intimacy but serves the purpose of drawing attention to initial speaker, 44396. It is effective in that she receives attention from others currently in the *pub* (Line 3). 44396 also exhibits sexual agency in Lines 1 and 2. She approaches the topic of camming and offers it to her co-participants as a possibility. She then rationalises her interest in partially exposing herself on her webcam (Line 2). 44396's turns can be read as offering herself as an object to be gazed upon. As discussed in Section 2.2.4, the expectations on camming are much like the double bind concerning sexuality, and especially women's sexuality, offline: it is acceptable to have sex but not to exhibit interest and agency in a personalised and public setting.

An analysis of camming in Walford could refer to film critic Mulvey's (1975) argument about the male gaze: there is consistency in camming conversations in Walford that the men gaze and the objects to which they orient are women. However, there are two additional factors that could contribute to this discussion. First, men who have been chosen as women members' (semi-)naked camming participants have a somewhat elevated status as a result of informal competition among the men regarding who should be permitted to view the

women’s webcams. Second, women themselves have been found in the logs to broach the topic of camming and, perhaps unsurprisingly given the first point, this attracts men’s attention. Therefore, while camming in Walford could be seen as reinscribing patriarchal positions, that some women use their sexual agency to be gazed upon destabilises Mulvey’s original conception of the male gaze and its impact.

### 6.2.4.3 CAMWHORES

Using Walford terminology, it is likely that 44396 in Example 6.14 could be referred to derogatorily as a *camwhore*. Here the competitive feature of camming first described in Section 6.2.4.2 is evident when participants appear more concerned with whether or not they or other participants have been exposed to another user’s breasts than with the breasts themselves. In this section I introduce Ahmed’s (2000) concept of *sticky statuses*. She argues that although sticky labels are not fixed, once an affective value has been ascribed to describe someone or something it has the potential to follow them or to stay affixed. I argue that based on the way participants use the term ‘camwhore’ it can be referred to as a sticky status in this community, as evidenced in Example 6.15.

#### EXAMPLE 6.15 CAMWHORES

Line	Speaker	Setting	Communication
1	9980	Direct (flist)	says “None really. Nothing’s happened here in years [to Mercury]”.
2	11768	Direct (flist)	says “I’m an angel, I don’t strip [to Spock]”.
3	40993	Direct (flist)	thinks . o O (Exactly).
4	9980	Direct (flist)	says “No problem. Take off all your clothes then turn on the webcam. That is NOT stripping [to Nikki]”.
5	9980	Direct (flist)	says “I guess next you’ll be telling me that you don’t do the naked thing on webcam either”.
6	11768	Direct (flist)	says “I actually have never been naked on webcam [to Spock]”.
7	11457	Direct (flist)	says “I can confirm... she has alas stopped doing the topless thing”.

8	9980	Direct (flist)	says “Ok, no problem. Invite over your best female friend. Get her drunk and make her strip in front of the webcam [to Nikki]”.
9	9980	Direct (flist)	thinks . o O (while it’s on)
10	9980	Direct (flist)	asks “What do you mean she stopped [of Fredo]?”
11	11116	Direct (flist)	says “I know... it’s disgusting by true... I haven’t seen her jahoovies in what seems like ages [to Spock]”.
12	9980	Direct (flist)	says “You exposed yourself to that pervert and not to me. That’s it, I’m hurt [to Nikki]”.
13	40993	Direct (flist)	I didn’t know she’d started.
14	11457	Direct (flist)	You have to be special.
15	9980	Direct (flist)	says “So it seems [to Fredo]”.
16	9980	Direct (flist)	wonders . o O (wrong accent) [to Fredo].
17	11768	Direct (flist)	says “I haven’t shown my jahoovies in a long time... and I’ve never been completely naked on cam... I do have rules [to Spock]”.
18	9980	Direct (flist)	says “Would settle for jahoovies [to Nikki]”.
19	9980	Direct (flist)	thinks . o O (nice new word too).
20	11457	Direct (flist)	Alas... she has rules... now doesn’t suck... a camwhore with morals.
21	9980	Direct (flist)	Fails at emoting [to Nikki].
22	11768	Direct (flist)	Smack you [to Spock].
23	11768	Direct (flist)	says “I am not a camwhore you ass [to Fredo]”.
24	9980	Direct (flist)	Cres [to Nikki].
25	9980	Direct (flist)	Cries, too [to Nikki].
26	11457	Direct (flist)	Snuggles [to Nikki].
27	11116	Direct (flist)	asks “Anything ever come from last night’s experiment?”
28	9980	Direct (flist)	says “That simply isn’t fair, I ask for the impossible and I get smacked. He calls you a camwhore and gets away with it [to Nikki]”.
29	6148	Direct (flist)	Got accused of being a camwhore.
30	9980	Direct (flist)	says “But you ARE a camwhore [to Chump]”.
31	11457	Direct (flist)	says “I wouldn’t say I got away with it [to Spock]”.
32	9980	Direct (flist)	says “You didn’t get publicly smacked either [to Fredo]”.
33	9980	Direct (flist)	says “Now I’ve got this big red mark on my face [to Fredo]”.
34	11457	Direct (flist)	says “True, true... but she has other ways of making me suffer [to Spock]”.
35	9980	Direct (flist)	thinks . o O (no wait, I’m totally red... fuck it)



36	9980	Direct (flist)	says “Ok you hate me... I can tell [to Nikki]”.
37	9980	Direct (flist)	Pouts.
38	9980	Direct (flist)	says “Hmm... no new BBS messages. That’s fucked”.
39	11768	Direct (flist)	Smirks [to Spock].

In addition to Spock’s outrage that Fredo has seen Nikki’s breasts while he has not (Line 12), he also refers to Fredo as a “pervert” (Line 12).<sup>106</sup> Meanwhile, Fredo does not counter the “pervert” allegation, nor does he assert an interest in Nikki’s breasts or claim to be happy that she has exposed them to him in the past. Instead, he refers to her as a “camwhore” when stating, “alas... she has rules[...] a camwhore with morals” (Line 20). Thus, while the participants privilege the act of viewing Nikki’s breasts, Nikki herself is dismissed as a “camwhore”. The modifier of “with morals” appears to be further condemnation because it is in reference to Line 17 when Nikki states that she has not exposed her breasts in “a long time” and that she has “never been completely naked on cam”. It is possible to argue that like with others who have stickiness applied to them, Nikki’s past use of webcams and the display of her body on them has made the term ‘camwhore’ become affixed to her.

The objectification of Nikki’s breasts through the privileging of *viewing* them can be read in Line 8 when Spock suggests that if Nikki is unwilling to expose her breasts that she could manipulate her “best looking female friend” into doing so by “get[ting] her drunk” and then having her expose herself (Line 8). The goal here is not sharing or creating a sense of intimacy or belonging. Rather the emphasis on camming here is on the possession an object, and the object is the visual image of bare breasts. It could be argued that these lines offer an alternative to the idea that women use sexual agency when exposing themselves on their webcams. When Spock suggests that Nikki bring over an attractive (female) friend, ply her with alcohol in order to lower her inhibitions, and have her expose her breasts to them, the imaginary friend’s sexual agency is overturned. Instead, we are left with the assumption that women need to be manipulated into this

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<sup>106</sup> Because this example involves multiple speakers who refer to each other in their utterances, in order to make it easier to follow my analysis here, I have chosen to refer to participants by their pseudonym rather than their numerical sequence.

behaviour. However, while the sexual agency is taken from the imaginary friend, it is important not to overlook Nikki's sexual agency when choosing to expose her breasts or not. Nikki makes these choices for herself and manages to retain her agency and subjectivity in this situation.

Fredo reacts disdainfully to both Nikki's statement that she has never been fully naked on her webcam (Line 17) and his own assertion that "you have to be special" (Line 14) for Nikki to expose her breasts to a user. Thus, she remains a camwhore but, again, one "with morals" (Line 20). The policing here and the construction of the good sexual citizen, as discussed in Section 3.3.1, is evident. Nikki is a bad sexual citizen because she exposes her breasts, which is what these male participants ask her to expose. She attempts to change her position into that of a good sexual citizen when she both refuses to get completely naked on her webcam and notes that she has not exposed her breasts for some time. However, this is not possible within the sexual normativity that is privileged both in Walford and offline. As a result of having had exposed her breasts in the past, she is unable to escape the stickiness of the label 'camwhore'. This label positions her as a bad sexual citizen, attributed to her because she is a woman who transgresses the expectations and aspirations of heteronormative sexuality. Chump's peripheral attempt to deflect the gender-loaded term (Line 30) does not diminish the policing of her sexuality. Nikki's bind is clear: men may want to see her breasts, and she may want to expose them, but when she does, she is a camwhore and this is a label that stays afixed even after some time has elapsed.

## **6.2.5 SEXUAL SELF-DISCLOSURE**

Sexual self-disclosure, or the communication of personal or intimate details of one's sexual history, desires, experiences, or preferences, is a common kind of sexual talk in Walford. Because these conversations are personal, and could identify participants, I do not use direct examples from the logs in order to explore this type of conversation. By analysing the chatlogs attentive to the participants' use of pronouns, I found that these conversations are unlikely to occur in either homosocial or heterosocial *group* communication. There is

evidence from the chatlogs, that as well as typically occurring in dyadic, direct (different room) settings, these conversations tend to occur in heterosocial or mixed-gender settings. I did not find that participants have these conversations in one-on-one settings when located in the same private room. The use of the *direct* setting here is striking; there is no functional difference in the ways that these commands work for dyadic conversations, if the participants are in a private/personal room. Despite this, there is some consistency in participants' engagement in these conversations from remote or different locations in Walford. That participants choose to be in different rooms in Walford when discussing intimate details of their sexuality is the inverse of how participants engage in cybersex, as will be discussed in Chapter 7. Sexual self-disclosure is an intimate and personal topic of conversation that makes participants vulnerable to their co-participants. The use of space in sexual self-disclosure conversations in the examples of this conversational genre that I read in the Walford corpus indicate a desire between the participants to maintain space when sharing details of their sexual lives. Although the participants are already separated by offline geographical location, they use space in the MUD to further create safety through the use of different rooms. At the same time as they are in separate virtual rooms for these conversations, their interaction also demonstrates that participants want to share sensitive and personal information about themselves to their co-participants.

### **6.3 CONCLUSION**

In this chapter I considered the social norms of specific kinds of sexual conversations. Through the use of examples from the Walford chatlog corpus, I described how sexual talk in Walford has specific norms and patterns. I have linked sex talk in Walford to both group-specific norms and to prominent patterns of heteronormativity which can be tied to my discussion in Chapter 3. The examples illustrate that this is the case for much of the Walford repertoire of sex talk, from automated commands to sexual self-disclosure.

The adoption of the community's patterns for sex talk, and the playful pushing of boundaries without overstepping them (e.g., Examples 6.2 and 6.7) shows how participants strengthen their connection to the group not only by talking about sex but by doing so in such a way that the norms of sexuality are further tethered within the community. There is also a link between homosocial and heteronormative conversations and sex talk (Examples 6.7 and 6.11), and in Walford this link serves to strengthen membership in the community and shared gender and sexuality. Throughout some of these examples (e.g., Examples 6.7, 6.13, and 6.15), women's bodies are used as both "furniture" (cf. Ahmed 2006) and objects for men's subjectivity. This finding can be seen as similar to other sociolinguistic studies of homosocial conversations in offline settings (e.g., Allison 1994, Cameron 1997, Coates 2005).

The ways that participants adopt variations of the privacy and communication settings, and that they do this in regular ways, are strong indicators that their interactional patterns in regards to sex talk are based on shared norms and social conventions that are strongly linked to the social comprehensive. While participants do make individual choices, their patterns of interaction are both internally-policed and socially-policed by other members. In addition, the use of privacy settings also demonstrates that the web, or at least this non-sexual community of practice, is not a place of normlessness where people are free to discuss nonnormative sexual interests or proclivities. The prominence of heteronormative discussions and how users position themselves as heterosexuals also shows that in non-sexual settings such as this that heterosexuality is anticipated and expected by the other participants. It is the unmarked expectation.

## CYBERSEX

### 7.0 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 7 I refer to literature discussed in Chapter 4 to analyse *cybersex* conversations. I argue that cybersex is a distinct type of sex talk that involves multi-party real-time interaction in the construction of an erotic and shared textual representation of sexual activities. This chapter adds to the contributions of Chapter 6 where I discussed sex talk in Walford, including greetings, automated commands, self-disclosure, jokes, and webcamming, and the norms which situate conversational topics. In Chapter 7 I follow a similar structure to Chapter 6, and explain the uses and meanings of cybersex interactive narratives and story-telling. In order to accomplish this I employ examples of naturally occurring cybersex conversations from the Walford corpus and analyse these using the combined approach of queer theory and feminist sociology that I articulated in Part 1. In addition, I use examples from the Walford corpus to argue that there are normative patterns of cybersex interaction in this community, and that these reflect the contributions of queer theory to discussions of identity, transgression, heteronormativity, and sexual citizenship.

I begin this chapter with an overview of cybersex literature (Section 7.1; see also Section 4.2). I argue that this study is distinctive from the existing research in two ways: firstly, the analysis here is based on actual cybersex

conversations; and secondly, I focus my study on the *interaction* that comprises cybersex rather than the potential effects of participation in cybersex. My findings differ from that of other cybersex researchers (e.g., Ferree 2003; Philaretou et al. 2005; Schneider 2000; Schwartz and Southern 2000) who argue that this practice is an individualistic, disconnected, and/or antisocial act which has the potential to become compulsive. For example, Schwartz and Southern (2000:127) argue that “the fantasy world of cybersex is a dissociative experience in which a person escapes the demands of daily life, as well as the pain and shame of past trauma”. Rather than discussing the potentially problematic aspects that may arise as a result of cybersex engagement, in Chapter 7 I discuss what occurs when people have cybersex conversations and the discourses that can be read in these conversations. My empirical analysis shows that cybersex in the Walford corpus involves reciprocal interaction, attentiveness to the contributions of co-participants, and the use of back-channels, and these cybersex narratives can be located within discourses of heteronormativity.

In order to accomplish this I argue that there are six elements present in cybersex interaction (Section 7.2). In Section 7.2.1 I delineate how cybersex can be understood as narratives. I cite sociolinguistic research on narratives, and place my discussion of Walford’s cybersex narratives within that tradition. In Section 7.2.2 I discuss the dyadic and heteronormative aspects salient to all instances of cybersex I found in the corpus. Although the importance of space has been overlooked in sociolinguistic analyses of narratives (but see LeVine and Scollon 2004; Norris 2004), space can provide contextualising information that is essential to the story and its tellers (Section 7.2.3). In Section 7.2.4 I point to participants’ shifts in narrative form. In particular, I examine their convention of using the third-person form for self-referencing during cybersex, but the first-person form before, after, and during any breaks in the scene. I view these style shifts as linked to narrative construction. Cybersex is largely based on mutuality and in Section 7.2.5 I explain the importance of a mutually constructed cybersex narrative. In Section 7.2.6 I describe intimacy and closeness in cybersex. I argue that participants can use a range of communication devices to perform and demonstrate closeness when constructing cybersex narratives. Ultimately, I argue in this chapter that by understanding cybersex as narratives with discourses shaped by several components in the online environment and in tandem with

larger social norms it is possible to transcend debates which focus on the paradigms based on an opposition between on- and offline behaviour.

## 7.1 CYBERSEX AS A COMMUNICATIVE ACT

In the introduction to this chapter (Section 7.0) I defined cybersex as an erotic textual representation of sexual activities transpiring in real-time between two or more participants. This definition is similar to one contributed by Daneback et al. (2005:321) who argue that cybersex “is defined as when two or more people are engaging in sexual talk while online for the purposes of sexual pleasure and may or may not include masturbation”. This demonstrates both a shift and narrowing in definition from Cooper et al. (2000a:6) who define cybersex as “the pursuit of sexual interests on the internet”. However, unlike these authors and others such as Dryer and Lijtmaer (2007), who also explore links between cybersex and masturbation, I do not mention the possibility of masturbation in my definition. Although this link could be of special interest to clinicians such as psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, and sex and relationship therapists, it is outside the realm of this thesis to consider whether or not the co-participants use their cybersex dialogue or narrative as material in the context of what can be viewed as a non-interactional act.<sup>107</sup>

This argument may be contentious given that some researchers define cybersex *as* cyberporn (e.g., Adams et al. 2003; Coopersmith 2006; Philaretou et al. 2005). The most explicit of these is Coopersmith (2006:1) who writes: “Cybersex – electronic pornography –” and continues throughout his paper to use the term “cybersex” to reference “cyberporn”. To view cybersex as a tool for masturbation or specifically as pornography neglects the communicative aspects inherent in creating a shared narrative with others, which I emphasise in my definition. Furthermore, it is more interesting given the data from the conversational logs to examine cybersex as a practice in and of itself rather than in conjunction with either masturbation or pornography. I argue that only

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<sup>107</sup> Nonetheless, the participants in Example 7.4 discuss masturbation following their cybersex encounter but the discussion is co-constructed.

emphasising the potential for cybersex conversations to lead to masturbation reinforces the online/offline debate and views cybersex as either a potential *tool* or *consumable*, similar to pornography, which is used to heighten sexual arousal.

### 7.1.1 POTENTIALS OF CYBERSEX

A commonality between much of the research on cybersex is that although there are different disciplinary, theoretical, and methodological frameworks used, there has tended to be an emphasis placed on its *potential*. Researchers have adopted different positions on the potential effects of cybersex, including both positive and negative outcomes on the individuals who engage in this practice. One potential effect ascribed to engagement in cybersex has been the potential benefits to participants' sexuality and identity. Inherent to these proposed implications is the association of the web as a 'safe' place to sexually experiment with practices, language, or positioning (e.g., Albright and Conran 2003; Attwood 2009a; Doring 2000; Griffiths 2001; Wysocki 1998). Attwood (2009a) discusses her interviews with male cybersex participants in chatrooms on the website *Literotica* and argues that men experiment with projecting different aspects of their identities to find different ways to be themselves. Attwood's findings could be seen as complementary to those of Doring (2000) who argues that cybersex has the potential to be empowering for women. Meanwhile, Wysocki (1998) describes how online sex conversations can be a way for participants to share sexual fantasies and desires in a less threatening environment. Ross (2005) explores how the web might be a testing ground for sexual exploration, and asserts that men could have same-sex cybersex without or before doing the same offline. Similarly, Waskul (2003, 2006) argues that cybersex offers a playful environment for sexual exploration, including learning new sex techniques and positions, as well as a broadening of their sexual preferences, and Daneback et al. (2005:322) assert that cybersex can be used to "enhance one's sexuality".

Meanwhile, other researchers have noted the potential for cybersex to de-marginalise sexual others. Similar to Ross (2005), Campbell (2004) argues that cybersex is a way for gay men to freely explore their sexual desires and form



communities. Carnes (2003) notes that the web provides people of different sexual orientations and identities a space for overcoming sexual shame and hang-ups by allowing them to contact each other. McKenna and Bargh (1998) assert that the sexually marginal might use the web in order form new sexual communities. Similarly, Burke (2000), Mehra et al. (2004), and Nip (2004a, 2004b) find that the web might be useful for some people who identify as LGBTQ to enhance their offline queer networks.

A third potential effect of cybersex described by researchers is the potential for cybersex to become a compulsive sexual behaviour which may produce negative consequences in the lives of participants (e.g., Carnes 2003; Cooper et al. 2000b; Cooper et al. 2003; Daneback et al. 2005; Philaretou 2005; Putnam 2000; Schwartz and Southern 2000). Philaretou et al. (2005:163-164) describe how some men who engage in cybersex become obsessed with finding the “perfect pick”, or the cybersex scene that excites them the most, and that this “desperation [has] to do with the accompanying feelings of powerlessness, emptiness, hopelessness, depression, shame, and guilt”. While Philaretou et al. emphasise the potential negative emotions that cybersex participants may feel after having engaged in the practice, other researchers stress that while some participants may potentially benefit from cybersex, others may not (Daneback et al. 2005). Cooper et al. (2003) argue that compulsive engagement in cybersex can potentially affect all aspects of participants’ lives and may lead to legal, financial, personal, interpersonal, and work related difficulties.

Understanding the potential effects of cybersex engagement provides a framework of understanding the activity. However, it does not mean that the behaviour itself is better understood, and an analysis of cybersex conversations may be helpful in advancing the field of research. This would contribute such as I do here to the field of research on cybersex and provide an additional model for approaching it. In addition, it may provide insights into how people communicate sexual desire to others in real-time using text. This then differentiates the communication of desire in cybersex from other methods in which desire is communicated, including: face-to-face interaction in which desire may be communicated verbally, but also through non-verbal acts such as body movements, gestures, and gazes; or texts, such as novels and literotica, in which *an author* creates a sexual narrative between characters that perhaps involves both

dialogue and gesture. In addition to the existing research on cybersex, which has used methods such as case studies, surveys, participant observation, and interviews conducted with individuals who participate in cybersex, who are then asked to describe and reflect upon their practices and engagement, the analysis here contributes to the discussion by emphasising the interaction in cybersex through the analysis of cybersex conversations. If cybersex were to be viewed as a communicative act, as I have suggested, it may have a profound effect on the way it is researched. Doing so would privilege the communicative discourses and interaction, rather than its potential positive and negative implications which are often emphasised in the current research. Building upon this, in Section 7.2 I argue that cybersex is interaction consisting of *narratives*, or actions based in a temporal sequence.

## 7.2 CYBERSEX NARRATIVES IN INTERACTION

Cybersex narratives can be rich stories jointly created and told by the participants. As well as placing cybersex within sociolinguistic debates of narratives (Section 7.2.1), I also suggest that there are specific patterns in cybersex interactions and narratives in Walford. I then discuss five aspects of cybersex narratives in the Walford corpus, and explore the discourses represented in the narratives that the participants develop. First, in all instances of cybersex I found in the chatlogs I examined, there is a pattern of heteronormative discourses that extend beyond the norm of dyadic interaction, which is also evident in all cybersex in the corpus (Section 7.2.2). A second element of cybersex that I discuss (Section 7.2.3) relates to that; the importance of space to some participants when creating a cybersex scene. Third, participants also use different narrative styles for cybersex, with a preference for third-person narrative styles for referring to themselves during the scene despite adopting first-person narrative styles both preceding and succeeding cybersex. In addition, they use the second-person form (e.g., *you*) for referring to their co-participant during cybersex, but use the third-person when repairing the scene (Section 7.2.4). A fourth element that can be found in cybersex narratives is mutuality. In Section 7.2.5 I analyse an

example of cybersex from the corpus that is distinctive from the other examples studied because of the lack of mutuality and shared narrative development. The fifth feature of cybersex that I discuss here is how participants can create intimacy in cybersex (Section 7.2.6).

### **7.2.1 NARRATIVES**

Cybersex requires that participants use language, and text specifically, to describe their proposed actions. I argue that mutual involvement and contributions are anticipated aspects of cybersex narratives. For cybersex to be effective, if this is measured by a scenario progressing to a symbol of completion, participants must engage in turn-taking practices, jointly contribute to the narrative, and respond to the contributions made by their co-participant either by building upon the narrative or by providing back-channel support to their co-participant's turns.

Although there have been recent efforts calling for sociologists to recognised the importance of narratives when analysing and understanding the social world (e.g., Franzosi 1998), sociolinguistics have been at the foreground of using narrative and discourse analyses for these purposes (e.g., Labov 1972; Labov and Waletzky 1967; Schiffrin 1987, 1996; Blum-Kulka 1993). Labov (1972:359-360) defines narratives as discourse units which involve "matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events". His definition, which has influenced the direction of sociolinguistic narrative and discourse analysis, emphasises a chronological sequence of events or actions. Labov also distinguishes six aspects found in narratives: abstract, orientation, complicating action, result/resolution, and coda. Of these, he views only complicating action as *essential* to narratives.

In addition to these aspects of narratives, Blum-Kulka (1993) encourages examining narratives from three vantage points: the tale, the teller, and the act of telling. It is possible that such a position can offer a thorough analysis of narratives, particularly if one is interested in the discourses that may emerge in narratives. Adding to this point, Schiffrin (1996) has described the importance of narratives in creating and expressing identity.

The telling of a mutually created narrative in this context occurs in temporal order but requires input and contributions from both speakers. Thus, it could be argued that in addition to situating their own identities or positions, participants also create a shared position. While almost all examples in the corpus involve participants effectively working together to develop a shared story, in Example 7.4 I analyse a conversation fragment where participants have difficulty constructing a coherent shared narrative.

My emphasis on the importance of narratives in cybersex is distinctive from that of researchers who, coming from backgrounds other than sociology and sociolinguistics, have emphasised the solitary, non-social anti-social, and potentially problematic aspects of engagement in cybersex (e.g., Ferree 2003, Schneider 2000, Schwartz and Southern 2000). Based on an analysis of naturally occurring synchronous cybersex conversations, I argue that cybersex requires high levels of mutual engagement in synchronous chat as evident from rapid exchanges in turn-taking, continuous narrative building, and attention to the sexual desires of the co-participant. Participants may expend less effort in engaging in a solo online sexual activity rather than in interactive cybersex. *Consuming sex* online, whether in literotica or in pornography, would perhaps be a less time intensive task than *contributing to and creating* multi-party cybersex. Yet, as Cooper et al. (2003) note, cybersex is a relatively common online activity. The Walford corpus demonstrates that cybersex conversations, and sex talk more generally, are not topics relegated to sexual communities of practice online, but are common in non-sexual spaces such as Walford as well.

In Example 7.1, participants began to engage in cybersex after one of the participants (27604) “waves her hand and a pole appears in the middle of the room”. In this conversation the “pole” was presumed to be a stripping/dancing pole. This example is an excerpt which occurs approximately 10 minutes after 27604 created the pole.

### EXAMPLE 7.1 CYBERSEX NARRATIVES

Line	Speaker	Setting	Communication
1	44417	Local	's hot shaft fills you completely...
2	44417	Local	Pulls on you tightly, as he suddenly comes inside you.
3	44417	Local	says "Yes!"
4	27604	Local	Screams with pleasure.
5	44417	Local	's hot seed fills every crevice of your womanhood...
6	44417	Local	Keeps fucking you hard, jolting your entire body with each thrust.
7	27604	Local	Grinds you by twisting and turning, faster and faster... she really wants it rough.
8	44417	Local	Gives it to you so hard your ancestors feel it.
9	27604	Local	Is pleased senseless, she has tears coming to her eyes.
10	44417	Local	Reaches around and rubs your hardened clit, violently.
11	27604	Local	Whispers know any other wild positions? Hehe...
12	44417	Local	Whatever comes to mind is good for me.
13	27604	Local	Same here... surprise me...

In Example 7.1 both participants contribute to developing the shared narrative. Their engagement can be seen as reciprocal but not as a standard dialogic narrative, as seen in other types of conversations. I argue here that the narrative structure is developed jointly, involves a mirroring process, and is temporally bound. Blum-Kulka (1993:385) argues that dialogic narratives are “constructed typically through a question/answer format”. A standard dialogic narrative does not usually involve two participants who *contribute* to the telling of the story, but rather a main story-teller and a co-participant who encourages the main story-teller to enrich the narrative with additional information. This contrasts with what I refer to as the reciprocity in shared cybersex narratives (e.g., Lines 11-13). Cybersex does not usually involve a question/answer format, nor does it typically assume a traditional polyphonic narrative style where listeners may frequently interject with comments or additional information.

Blum-Kulka’s research examines the dinnertime stories in Jewish-American and Israeli families, and the stories that her participants tell are often

from their everyday lives. For example, a parent might add comments to a child's story of their confrontation with a teacher. This is distinctive from cybersex narratives, which are not rooted in shared experiences of the participants: the narrative does not exist until the participants create it together (e.g., Lines 1 and 2). This is not to suggest that cybersex narratives are removed from the participants' experiences. In fact, some cybersex scenes might replicate sexual activities that at least one of the participants has engaged in (e.g., Lines 6 and 7). It is likely that even if this is not the case that cybersex narratives are constructed based from the participants' orientations and lifeworlds (sexual and other). Cybersex narratives are not bound to notions of authenticity and they are not *recollections* of past events.

The cybersex narratives are jointly constructed in that each statement contributed builds upon the last. More than that, participants sometimes mirror the actions of each other in cybersex (see also Example 7.6). This mirroring process can be seen in Lines 3 and 4 when the participants each appear to reach orgasm. Another instance when there is reciprocal communication is in Lines 6-8. 44417 states that he is "fucking you hard" (Line 6), 27604 responds by saying "she really wants it rough" (Line 7), and 44417 responds to his own use of the term "hard" and his partner's use of "rough" with the statement "gives it to you so hard your ancestors feel it" (Line 8).

Although the conversation is reciprocal and involves mutual engagement, it is not dialogue driven. In fact, Lines 3 and 11 are the only dialogue based turns in this example. The narrative can be seen as built upon depictions of and responses to actions. This confirms Labov's (1972) assertion that actions are of greater imperative to narratives than dialogue.

Although both participants are engaged in and contribute to the scene, the levels of activity and passivity differ. For example, in Line 11 when 27604 whispers "know any other wild positions" both the whispering and the prodding signal a passivity. While she is assertive in requesting a change, she poses it as a request to her co-participant rather than altering her position herself. 27604 can be seen as deflecting the position of sexual initiator (Line 13) even when 44417 encourages her to do so (Line 12). Although it is possible to argue that this is further complicated because she initiated cybersex by having a stripping/dancing pole appear in the room, it could also be argued that by creating a pole rather than

directly suggesting cybersex she adopted a position that, although active on a surface level, could be read as passive. For example, by creating the pole she does not need to take a direct risk: 44417 then had the opportunity to reject this advance or deflect it perhaps through the telling of a joke.

## **7.2.2 DYADIC AND HETERONORMATIVE**

Some research has positioned the web as a space where sexual and other norms are either absent (Fisher and Barak 2001) or can be transgressed without the repercussions often faced for doing so offline (Ross 2005). Although I have argued throughout this work that there are norms present in sexual conversations online (just as there are offline), there is evidence that the web can be seen as creating new spaces and platforms for the sexually marginalised (e.g., Dowsett et al. 2008; McKenna and Bargh 1998; Mehra et al. 2004; Noonan 2007) and for sexual communities of practice to mobilise both on- and offline (e.g., Gray 2009; Nip 2004a, 2004b; Ross 2005). Queer and gay and lesbian scholars such as Faderman (1991) have noted the difficulty in accessing queer communities and spaces before the web. The web has provided greater access to queer communities as well as information about offline queer spaces. For example, Bryson (2004), Driver (2007), and Gray (2009) have noted the importance of this for queer youth. While the web can be seen as a lifeline for those newly experiencing their queer identity, or who live in rural or isolated places where access to an offline queer community may be restricted (Ross 2005), I also explore the limitations of the web for a free exploration of sexuality outside of sexual communities of practice. In addition, I argue that there are social norms of sexuality, particularly in terms of positioning and discourses, in sexual communities of practice, as well as in communities that are not centred in a shared sexual practice, identity, or desire. It could be argued Walford participants who engage in cybersex enact cyber-versions of the good sexual citizen.

One of the ways in which cybersex conversations in Walford demonstrate heteronormativity is that these conversations can be read as both heterosexual and dyadic. The dyadic or two-party aspect of these conversations can be noted when

only two participants engage in the conversation and when only two parties are included in the narrative of the encounter. For example, in Example 7.1 two participants work together to mutually construct a cybersex story. I did not find any cases in the corpus of cybersex that involved more than two people, or cybersex between two people that also included a narrative involving other participants *in absentia*.

Similar to the dyadic aspect of cybersex in Walford, heterosexuality and heteronormativity are also present in these conversations in the corpus. Although there are discussions in the corpus of some users who identify as LGBTQ in their conversations, as well as discussions of users who might be a member of a queer community, I found no instances of same-sex cybersex. The cybersex data presented throughout this chapter are similar to all the instances of cybersex in the chatlogs I examined for this thesis in that they involve dyadic, heterosexual sex.

Evidence of the heterosexuality of these conversations includes references to a binary sex-gender system through the use of male and female genital slang such as “shaft” and “well” to refer to their and their co-participant’s genitals (see Braun and Kitzinger 2001a), and their use of gender-specific pronouns (e.g., *his*, *her*) (see Kitzinger 2009). In Example 7.1 there are references to both male and female genitalia. 44417 states that his “hot shaft fills you completely” (Line 1), and that his “hot seed fills every crevice of your womanhood” (Line 3) before he “rubs your hardened clit, violently” (Line 10). The use of genital-specific sexual slang and gender-specific pronouns involve references to males and females in the same scenario, with one partner referred to a member of one category and the other participant referred to as a member of the other category, such as in Example 7.1 and all other examples of cybersex in the corpus. As a result, it can be suggested that the participants produce heterosexual cybersex regardless of whether or not the offline bodies of these participants would generate heterosexual sex offline (see also Section 8.1).

Although the web can be a place for people to find others with whom to discuss their sexual interests and desires and explore their sexuality, Walford participants in sex talk, including cybersex, read the space as heterosexual and interact in ways that reinforce heteronormative ideals of sexuality and can be read gender. A link can be made between how this unmarked sexual setting is part of the dominant heterosexual and heteronormative sexual framework and the



discussion of marking in (Section 3.2.2) where I argue that the unmarked status positions promote (and reinforce) some people, identities, and practices as ‘normal’ while positioning other statuses as different and marked in comparison.

### **7.2.3 SPACE**

The importance of space or location has been underemphasised in sociolinguistic narrative and discourse analysis as well as in online research (but see LeVine and Scollon 2004; Norris 2004). It is implied in Labov’s (1972) orientations and in Toolan’s (1998) and Blum-Kulka’s (2000) conceptualisations of the story-teller. However, in these cases it is considered to be an aspect related to the speaker’s subjectivity rather than as a distinct element of the story. Depending upon the story-teller or speaker, it could be argued that space may provide a context for the story and the sequential telling of events. As Georgakopoulou (2006:252) argues, “the emphasis on the relationship with the local context and the conversational event needs to be expanded to capture relations of recontextualisation and intertextuality, more specifically, intermediality and inter-narrativity”. Here Georgakopoulou notes the importance of both space and time for narratives. In Section 3.2 I noted the importance of time and space for understanding the social world. While time is currently seen as central for narratives, the location of a story, both, where it takes place and where it is told, may hold significance and at the very least provide a contextualisation for the interaction, as was the case in the story I related in Section 3.2 about a same-sex couple in various London locations.

In online settings, particularly MUDs, rooms or locations might hold significance. A highly trafficked public space (e.g., Walford’s pub) is a different interactional space than a personal or private room even though the communication commands and settings may be consistent for both. Thus, despite arguments concerning the possibilities that the web might transform space or publics (e.g., Dean 1998) in MUDs such as Walford, offline spaces are replicated. Space provides both a context for the narrative but also is essential to the construction of the narrative in Example 7.2. This extract is from the same

conversation as Example 7.1, and takes place less than five minutes after 27604 requests “[an]other wild position” (Line 11, Example 7.1).

**EXAMPLE 7.2 SPACE 1**

Line	Speaker	Setting	Communication
1	44417	Local	Nearly cums, but it passes.
2	27604	Local	asks “Got anything fun we can use?”
3	27604	Local	Heh heh heh...
4	27604	Local	Or...
5	44417	Local	says “Not I, but if you brought some toys, it’s cool”
6	27604	Local	Wanna take a shower?
7	44417	Local	says “Sure” [40 seconds pass]
8	44417	Direct	asks “Are you coming with?” [6 seconds]
9	27604	Direct	says “It won’t let me” [4 seconds]
10	44417	Direct	says “odd” [20 seconds]
11	44417	Direct	says “Try now” [40 seconds]
12	27604	Direct	says “It won’t let me”
13	44417	Direct	says “hmm” [18 seconds]
14	44417	Direct	says “Ok try it now”
			[Participants switch rooms]
15	27604	Local	says “here we go”
16	44417	Local	Draws a hot shower
17	27604	Local	Wonders why it wouldn’t let me in
18	44417	Local	It was a lock issue
19	27604	Local	says “Oh”
20	44417	Local	says “For some reason, some of my exits have locks set one them”
21	27604	Local	approaches you
22	27604	Local	takes your hands and thrusts your fingers inside her

In this continuation from Example 7.1, 27604 becomes more assertive (Lines 6, 21, and 22) in communicating both her desire and specific activities for herself and her co-participant. However, I wish to concentrate on how the participants emphasise space and location in this excerpt. The participants' use of space counters assumptions that space and place hold little relevance in online settings and narratives. They spend more than two minutes attempting to move into the text-based shower room despite the difficulties that 27604 has in accessing the space (Lines 8-19) due to a door lock; and while they attempt to unlock the room they engage in back-channel communication.

As I have stressed elsewhere (see Section 5.1), Walford is a text-based environment, which means that there is no functional reason why the participants would spend this time attempting to enter a virtual text-based shower room. One can argue that the shower room has no tangible effect on the possibilities of their encounter. The shower room is an imagined space, and the participants could have envisioned that they were in it from inside 44417's private room, where they previously were located in Walford's geography. 44417's room, and Walford, are also imagined or virtual spaces. The participants' tenacity in moving into the shower room to continue their cybersex encounter illustrates that space could be more relevant to cybersex participants than previously considered in online environments. For example, Thomsen, Straubhaar, and Bolyard (1998) argue that online communities transcend both geography and physical presence making them irrelevant. However, one can assert that the ways in which Walford and other MUD participants design physical spaces in their communities and the importance it has to them serve as evidence which counters the assumption made by Thomsen et al. that space and place do not hold significant importance in online settings.

In Example 7.2 the chatroom becomes a set of specific spaces (first a private room and then a shower room, which was an annex to 44417's room) which could be used for sexual purposes. The participants were able to act as if they were in the shower room because they had entered it. Space can be read as key to the participants as they develop their shared narrative. The shower room allowed the scenario to become richer for the participants: they are able to "draw a hot shower" (Line 16), and then presumably as the water pulsates on them 27604 "takes your hands and thrusts your fingers inside her" (Line 22).

In Section 5.1 I discussed how relationships between Walford participants move between the artificial boundaries of on- and offline settings (see also Cherny 1999; Kendall 2002; Turkle 1995 for similar assertions about the participants in other MUDs and MMORPGs). Participants have conversations in the chatlogs in which they discuss offline meet-ups and conferences for Walford users. In addition to these formal events for Walford participants to meet each other in offline settings, the chatlogs indicate that some Walford participants are in offline relationships with each other. There are instances in which members of these couples are referenced to have met in the MUD, and others when they appear to have met offline first and were introduced to the MUD later. In Example 7.3, two participants engage in cybersex. Based on the other (nonsexual) conversations between these two participants in this chatlog, there is evidence that these individuals are in an offline intimate relationship with each other but separated for the Christmas holidays and spending time with their respective family of origin.

**EXAMPLE 7.3 SPACE 2**

Line	Speaker	Setting	Communication
1	15024	Local	says "Perhaps I should fuck you".
2	27087	Local	says "Perhaps you should!"
3	15024	Local	says "You like it nasty, don't you?"
4	15024	Local	says "You like it when I spank you, don't you?"
5	15024	Local	says "You like it when I eat out your clit, don't you?"
6	27087	Local	smiles at you and puts her fingers in her mouth and looks at you shyly
7	15024	Local	licks 27087's belly
8	27087	Local	says "That tickles!!"
9	15024	Local	Kisses her inner leg
10	27087	Local	says "Ooh"
11	27087	Local	says "You're so flexible"
12	15024	Local	Kisses her other inner leg

13	27087	Local	Wonders how she's sitting on your lap and you can kiss her legs!
14	15024	Local	Oops I forgot to push her off me
15	15024	Local	Pushes her off me
16	27087	Local	Falls to the floor with a thud
17	15024	Local	Is now on top of 27087
18	27087	Local	says "Oomph"
19	15024	Local	Kisses 27087's pussy lips, the left one first and then the right one
20	27087	Local	Gasps a littleslightly getting excited with anticipation
21	27087	Local	Darn spacebar
22	15024	Local	Dips his tung in your juices
23	27087	Local	Tongue!
24	27087	Local	Tung sounds like dung!
25	15024	Local	Slowly brings his Tongue to her clit
26	15024	Local	You know what I meant – you don't have to ruin it by correcting me
27	27087	Local	Puts her hand on your head, and strokes your hair gently, sighing softly
28	15024	Local	Strokes your clit with his tongue
29	27087	Local	Tung is just a particularly bad spelling!! Sounds like dung!
30	15024	Local	Reaches in and sticks a finger in your well
31	27087	Local	Moans softly, breathing more quickly
32	27087	Local	Mmmm honey
33	15024	Local	Gently massages your g-spot with his finger
34	15024	Local	Still is sucking your clit
35	15024	Local	Do you like it faster?
36	15024	Local	Slower
37	27087	Local	Grows more excited with each flick of your tongue
38	15024	Local	Goes a little faster
39	27087	Local	Mmmm Oh Pete
40	15024	Local	Continues until you cum
41	27087	Local	Presses her hips forward, moaning more loudly [45 seconds pass]

42	27087	Local	Sorry
43	15024	Local	says “Ok I hate to run now”.
44	27087	Local	says “Yeah Yeah see ya”.
45	15024	Local	says “But think of me when you go to bed”.
46	27087	Local	says “Have fun”.
47	27087	Local	says “I think I’m going to be”

Similar to Examples 7.1 and 7.2, as well as all other instances of cybersex I read in the Walford corpus, the participants in Example 7.3 are in the same private or personal room while they engage in cybersex. As I stressed in Section 5.1.4 and 5.1.5, there is no functional difference between participants engaging in a dyadic conversation using the *direct* communication setting and using the *local* setting if both participants are alone in the same local room in Walford. It could be argued that the importance of shared space for cybersex, but not for an activity such as sexual self-disclosure (Section 6.2.5) or sexual joking (Section 6.2.2), is related to the importance of material spaces. This would then be consistent with participants’ emphasis on the ‘real’ in cybersex encounters, orthography included (‘tung’ and ‘tongue’). Other aspects of their communication that focuses on the ‘real’, or what the participants render possible, involve heteronormative sexual narratives.

Both space and the positioning of bodies become important to the participants in Line 13 when 27087 wonders how her co-participant can kiss her thighs while she is positioned on her co-participant’s lap. If we adopt a perspective that argues that cybersex allows participants to express latent sexual desires or desires that they may be experimenting with (Fisher and Barak 2001), then the only limitations placed on the possibilities with which 15024 can answer are based in the depth of his sexual imagination, desires, or willingness to communicate to his partner about either. However, instead of exploring an answer that may involve an esoteric position, cloning, body implants or body part generation, reptilic (or other) zoomorphism, or any other possibility, he provides an answer that grounds their activity in the plausible: he repairs the discrepancy by pushing 27087 off of him (Line 15). 15024 centralises the plausible in this action by choosing to repair the scene rather than moving the narrative in such a

way that it would be possible for 27087 to be on his lap while he kisses her thigh. The peremptoriness involved in her tumble to the floor aside (Line 16), the participants create a narrative that is bound by normative ideas about sex and the material realities of their offline bodies and lives.

The shared sex narrative is also evident in other parts of the exchange. For example, in Lines 3-5, 15024 poses a series of questions to 27087 which all end with the clause “don’t you”. The use of this tag question encourages an affirmative answer. However 27087 does not reply to the first two activities 15024 poses, first that she desires “nasty” sex (Line 3) and second that she enjoys being spanked (Line 4). When she replies to Line 5, in which 15024 asks if she likes oral sex, she responds non-verbally with a gesture. By choosing to respond by illustrating her affirmative response with another conversational modality, her gesture confirms the statement in question, whilst simultaneously situating herself as shy or coquettish (Line 6). Salih (2007) draws on Butler’s (1993a) work on bodies to describe this form of communication as gender performativity involving a citational sign. 27087’s behaviour can be viewed as a citational sign in that she locates herself in a constructed gender position. From this point in their conversation both participants can be seen as adopting stable citational signs for the remainder of the interaction. 15024 adopts the position of the sexually assertive male who positions himself “on top” of 27087 (Line 17) and remains in that position. Meanwhile, from the ‘missionary’ position 27087 responds as the sexual receiver.

#### **7.2.4 STYLE SHIFTS**

Speech style can be regarded as revealing different components of the interaction, and Georgakopoulou (1997) argues that shifts in interactional style can be understood as a strategy for building rapport. Meanwhile, Tanaka (2008:136) argues that switching to an informal interactional style from a more formal variation in Japanese can be linked to social reasons that “enliven and develop a narrative”. The participants in Example 7.3 can be seen shifting between first- and third-person narrative forms. Land and Kitzinger (2007:518)

suggest that speakers' adoption of third-person narrative forms in self-reference are "means to be representing the views of someone else – usually either the recipient or a non-present person". However, using examples from the Walford corpus, this does not appear to be the case here. Instead, the participants here switch narrative styles as a method for developing and creating a narrative. The speakers are not attempting to adopt the position of another person, including their co-participant; rather, they are attempting to remove themselves enough out of the immediate scene to advance the narrative or story that they are developing with their co-participant.

In describing style- and code-shifts, Georgakopoulou (1997:148) notes that these shifts "are drawn upon by speakers as linguistic resources which enable them to communicate social meanings and accomplish various interactional goals". Her research is primarily focused on code-shifts as a tool for contextualisation, which allows speakers to foster symmetrical alignments and rapport. Although Georgakopoulou does not connect her argument to switches in narrative structure, I suggest that from evidence in the Walford corpus it is possible to extend it in this way.

In addition to the observation that participants' switches between first- and third-person narrative styles can be a means for them to develop rapport with each other, it also allows participants to position themselves in relation to each other (cf. Harré and van Lagenhove 1998). Roles can be fixed and formal, with a single role dominant at any given time or more flexible. Roles can be seen in unequal relationships such as those between doctors and patients, employees and managers, and parents and children or in more equal arrangements, which may include gender or sexual identities such as butch and femme. In contrast to static, named roles, 'positions' are more flexible and transient statuses with multiple positions co-existing simultaneously and without privileging one over the others. The theoretical emphasis in positioning is placed on the dynamic stances that can occur during an interaction. Thus, a person might adopt stances through language use that simultaneously position them as a femme parent doctor employer.

In the examples of cybersex analysed until this point in Chapter 7 it can be shown that participants largely avoid first-person pronouns (e.g., *I*, *my*) when describing their actions in story-telling cybersex mode. For instance, in Example 7.3 this remains the case until Line 43 when 15024 says, "I hate to run". This



rejection of the first-person style is also evident when participants refer to their co-interactants using the second-person narrative (e.g., *you*). Although they refer to their co-participant in statements such as “she’s sitting in your lap” (Line 13) and “dips his tung in your juices” (Line 22), they remove themselves through the adoption of the third-person. Land and Kitzinger (2007) suggest that speakers might switch between first- and third-person reference forms as a strategy for adopting the position of the person with whom they are speaking or a non-present person. Although this might be the case in Walford, and in examples such as Example 7.3, it underscores the importance of narrative building in the context of cybersex conversations. It could be argued that the use of third-person reference forms here is not an attempt to adopt the position of someone else, such as a co-participant, but is a strategy the participants use in order to build a *story*.

Further evidence from Example 7.3 that supports this are the instances during their cybersex engagement when the participants use the third-person to refer to their co-participant. This occurs twice, and in both instances it is immediately after 27087 attempts to correct or repair 15024’s actions in the scene. The first instance succeeds 27087’s claim in Line 13 that the authenticity of the plausibility of the scene is compromised when 15024 states that he is kissing her thighs while she is sitting on his lap. 15024 breaks from the scene in his response, “oops I forgot to push her off of me” (Line 14). 27087 repairs the break in the scene and they both return to the use of third-person pronouns. The next instance when this happens is during the tung/dung exchange (Lines 22-30). In Line 22 he “dips his tung in your juices” but when 27087 points out what she later refers to as “a particularly bad spelling” (Line 29) he is caught off guard again and breaks the scene in Line 25, “slowly brings his Tongue to her clit” capitalising the corrected word for emphasis. While he keeps the third-person pronoun for himself, he uses the same modality for referring to 27087. On this occasion, just as in the first, the participants then return to the scene and their use of second-person references for their co-interactant and third-person for themselves *during* cybersex.

Schiffin’s (1996) discussion of narrative structures proves helpful in an analysis of this excerpt. She argues that narrative structures provide a format for people to position and represent their subjectivity and social identities. Schiffin (1996:196, emphasis in original) states that “many of the actions and attitudes that

we represent through speech are interactional in nature: when we perform an action through speech, we are acting *toward* another person”. Drawing from this, it could be argued that the interactants’ third-person references may describe their actions while concurrently fostering their positioning within the narrative and interaction.

In addition to the interactional element of the third-person style, it could be argued that the adoption of the third-person style is a modality used by the participants to create or develop imagery pertaining to the narrative. The third-person style fosters the emergence of narrative imagery by the self-distancing that is implied in this style of narrative. Building upon that assertion, it could be suggested that once participants have completed their cybersex narrative self-distancing is no longer needed to help in the creation of the imagery. Thus, when they have finished developing their cybersex narrative or scene, the interactants feel comfortable returning to the first-person style.

### 7.2.5 MUTUALITY

Most instances of cybersex in the chatlogs used in this analysis involve the creation of a mutually shared narrative in which participants occupy the same virtual room. Evidence of mutually constructed narratives can be found in Examples 7.1-7.3. However, there are occasions when participants combine fictional or imagined elements along with the realities of their current experience, as is the case in Example 7.4.

#### EXAMPLE 7.4 MUTUALITY

Line	Speaker	Setting	Communication
1	44396	Local	Shivers
2	44396	Local	Is close... mmm
3	44396	Local	Wishes she could clamp onto your dick and cum all over that instead
4	20810	Local	Wants you to cum on his face

5	20810	Local	And I'd lick you clean and make you shiver
6	44396	Local	Pants and sighs
7	20810	Local	Nuzzles you
8	44396	Local	Sighs and shivers and leans against the wall
9	44396	Local	Made a mess
10	44396	Local	On a towel though, that wouldn't be a fun mess on a chair
11	44396	Local	Leans her head against the wall
12	44396	Local	Wipes her cum all over your dick and strokes you
13	20810	Local	Workmate is bothering me
14	44396	Local	Tell him I say go away
15	20810	Local	Purrs
16	44396	Local	Are you making a tent?
17	20810	Local	Have fun?
18	20810	Local	Nods
19	44396	Local	Tents are cute
20	20810	Local	I might go sort that out soon though
21	44396	Local	Yeah I had fun
22	44396	Local	You should play within your pocket
23	44396	Local	Is still light headed
24	20810	Local	I'd prefer to play in the bathroom properly though
25	44396	Local	But then we can't talk about your hottie dick
26	20810	Local	Will cum hard
27	44396	Local	Purrs
28	44396	Local	You're so yummy
29	44396	Local	Purrs and strokes you outside your pants
30	20810	Local	Licks your lips. You're so hot.
31	44396	Local	Nuzzles her face in your neck
32	44396	Local	I think I should play again
33	20810	Local	Well I'm going to disappear for a few. I might not be able to come back though with work and stuff

34	20810	Local	I hope you had a good time <b>kiss</b>
35	44396	Local	I'll see you in another six months then
36	20810	Local	Hopefully a bit less than that
37	44396	Local	Have a good one
38	20810	Local	I will

Although cybersex participants in the chatlogs I examined rarely discuss their behaviours outside of the narrative, including whether or not they are masturbating or the specifics of their offline location, the participants in Example 7.4 move easily between on- and offline descriptions, as well as imagined narratives and more traditional story-telling as explored by Blum-Kulka (1993) and Schiffrin (1996). In this example, the importance of the development of shared and mutual storytelling is noticeable primarily for the reasons that differentiate it from the other examples of cybersex in this chapter. While 44396 and 20810 engage in cybersex, they do not appear invested in creating a consistent narrative. Instead, their contributions focus on their own desires rather than building upon the contributions of their co-participant. For example, when 44396 states that she “wishes that she could clamp on your dick and cum all over that” (Line 3), 20810 responds by stating that he “wants you to cum on his face” (Line 4) so that he can “lick you clean” (Line 5). This logical discrepancy is unreconciled because later 44396 describes wiping “her cum all over your dick” (Line 12).

The participants can also be seen as moving between cybersex and describing their current offline statuses. 44396 offers the information that she was sitting on a towel while masturbating (Lines 9-10), and 20810 mentions that he is at work and has been interrupted by a colleague (Line 13). The participants' tenuous connection, while not disconnected in such a way as described by other cybersex researchers (e.g., Schwartz and Southern 2000), is in contrast with other examples of cybersex in the corpus. In addition to the breaks in the narrative, further evidence of this is when 44396 encourages her co-participant to masturbate at his desk (Lines 22 and 25) in order to prolong their conversation. There is little negotiation between the participants, and 20810 refuses definitively at Line 33. It is evident at this point in their conversation that while the

participants are acquaintances, they may not be close friends, as evidenced by 44396's initial leave-taking when she states lightly that she hopes to see him "in another six months then" to which she receives the noncommittal reply, "hopefully a bit less than that" (Line 36). The relative uninterrupted mutual narrative creation in Example 7.4 may relate to the participants' tendency to move between their developing a shared narrative and engaging in a personal oral history of their current material reality as well as the concurrent realities of the parallel online world.

### 7.2.6 INTIMACY

Throughout this chapter I have stressed the importance of mutuality in creating a shared cybersex narrative. In addition to mutuality, the actions of some participants demonstrate intimacy. Participants create intimacy in their cybersex narratives in a number of distinct ways. In the instances of cybersex I analysed, intimacy in narratives was most readily apparent in cybersex occurring between participants who were otherwise close (e.g., in what appeared to be an offline relationship with each other). Through referencing details particular to their co-participant or relationship, including using their co-participant's name, and markers of possessiveness towards both the space and their co-participant, they demonstrate their closeness. In Example 7.5, the participants create a narrative together, but one that is based in a shared and ideal future experience.

#### EXAMPLE 7.5 INTIMACY 1

Line	Speaker	Setting	Communication
1	38497	Local	says "Now you can keep ME busy".
2	11116	Local	asks "My sweet lover?"
3	11116	Local	Nuzzles 38497's neck softly
4	11116	Local	Kisses and licks your neck
5	38497	Local	Likes that

6	38497	Local	thinks . o O (a lot)
7	11116	Local	says "You'll get it"
8	11116	Local	asks "How about that in your favourite position?"
9	38497	Local	Nibbles your lower lip
10	38497	Local	thinks . o O (OMG)
11	38497	Local	says "Your back would be bleeding".
12	11116	Local	says "Good".
13	38497	Local	says "Just so you know."
14	11116	Local	says "Like I said. Good".
15	11116	Local	Is gonna do his best to drive you wild
16	38497	Local	says "You won't even have to try".
17	38497	Local	thinks . o O (You already do)
18	11116	Local	says "Second time, I'll do that".
19	11116	Local	Wonders how sloppy he can get you
20	38497	Local	says "If you can get me as wet as I was earlier just talking to me..."
21	38497	Local	Mmmmmms
22	11116	Local	asks "How about me whispering how much I love you while I'm actually going at it?"
23	38497	Local	thinks . o O (I have as strong feeling that you're going to be the best I ever had)
24	38497	Local	thinks . o O (You'll be the only other one I've ever had too)
25	11116	Local	says "I'm gonna make you cum like you've never cum before".
26	11116	Local	asks "How's that sound?"
27	38497	Local	says "Good".
28	38497	Local	says "Exercise is good for you".
29	38497	Local	says "So we'll have to get lots".
30	38497	Local	says "Will make up for me feeding you Southern cooking all the time".
31	11116	Local	says "Ok".

There is evidence that the participants in Example 7.5 are anxious to meet offline in preceding and succeeding nonsexual communication in this chatlog. Their interest in meeting offline is significant to their conversation here, which

emphasises the sexual acts they would like to engage in with each other. Examples of this are in Line 8 when 11116 alludes to certain sexual behaviours and in Line 18 when 11116 states that activity will be the second one on their sexual roster. The participants' knowledge of which behaviours 11116 refers to without his need to state them explicitly signifies intimacy.

In addition to the forward gaze which is evident in the description of sexual activities (Lines 7, 20, 25, and 29) and the ordering of their sexual roster (Line 18), it can also be noted in the participants' nonsexual turns about the food that they will eat (Lines 30 and 31). By describing these activities before they take place, the participants jointly create a shared narrative that is also a future-oriented oral history of their experience. Perhaps the most striking examples of this emphasis on a shared future are in Lines 23 and 24 when 38497 predicts that 11116 will be "the best" lover she's ever had (Line 23) and a permanency of their relationship when she states that he will be her last lover (Line 24).

It can be argued that there is evidence of romance connected to this sexual conversation that was not evident in Example 7.4. Although the participants are interested in sexually satisfying each other (Lines 15 and 19), they are also interested in communicating their romantic feelings and referring to shared offline realities (Line 30). In a similar way, Albright and Conran (2003:48) argue that participants in their study about online intimacy reported a romantic "meeting of the minds" which may involve rapid intimacy and an idealised version of love. 38497's predictions are examples of the romanticism that Albright and Conran suggest is possible in the text-driven context of some online relationships. Another example of this is when 11116 asks his co-participant if she would like it if he tells her he loves her "while I'm actually going at it" (Line 22). The 'it' here could refer to sex in a general way or it could be a reference to the shared knowledge referred to in Line 8. It is possible to read this cybersex narrative as an attempt to link the cybersex encounter with a shared romantic present reality and sexual future. In this way, their cybersex here can be read as it would be in heteronormative offline spaces, as social and meaningful.

In Example 7.5, as well as in the other examples discussed in this chapter, the participants do not refer to each other by name (but see Example 7.3, Line 39). This is a consistent pattern in many of the instances of cybersex found in my

corpus. However, the participants' use of names in Example 7.6 demonstrates some of the significance that names may take in a cybersex conversation.

**EXAMPLE 7.6 INTIMACY 2**

Line	Speaker	Setting	Communication
1	1864	Local	Sits down
2	13685	Local	Sits too
3	1864	Local	Smiles and kisses Tom's cheeks
4	13685	Local	Kisses her lips
5	1864	Local	Leans close and kisses his nose
6	1864	Local	Goes back to his lips and softly kisses him
7	13685	Local	Kisses her neck too
8	1864	Local	Smiles and likes that
9	13685	Local	Does the same thing to Anne's collarbone
10	1864	Local	I like it when you say my name
11	13685	Local	Anne
12	13685	Local	Hehe
13	1864	Local	Gets closer and brings Tom's lips back to hers
14	1864	Local	Giggles and slowly frenches him
15	13685	Local	Does the same to her
16	1864	Local	Holds Tom's hands as we kiss
17	13685	Local	Kisses her lips slowly
18	1864	Local	Leans back onto our couch and kisses Tom's back
19	13685	Local	Pulls her shirt off and sucks on her neck more
20	1864	Local	Takes Tom's shirt off too and tosses it to the floor

From other conversations between these participants in this chatlog, it is likely that 1864 and 13685 are an offline couple who are briefly separated while one of them is visiting their family of origin. In this excerpt from one of their *local* conversations, they begin to engage in cybersex. It can be argued that the



participants work together to create a shared narrative and that there is evidence of reciprocal engagement in the mirroring process they adopt. For example, in Line 1 1864 “sits” and 13685 performs the same action immediately. This happens again when 1864 french kisses her co-participant who then replies with “does the same to her” (Line 15). A third instance of this behaviour is in Lines 19 and 20 when 13685 takes off 1864’s shirt and 1864 responds by removing 13685’s shirt. When their actions do not mirror each other they can still be observed as constructing their narrative cooperatively and as building upon each statement that is contributed to the story. An example of this is when they take turns kissing each other’s body parts, including: cheeks (Line 3), lips (Line 4), nose (Line 5), lips (Line 6), neck (Line 7), collarbone (Line 9), lips (Line 13), lips (Line 17), back (Line 18), and neck (Line 19).

The participants’ consistent use of names throughout the exchange is distinct from other examples of cybersex examined here. In these 20 lines the participants refer to each other by their offline names seven times (Lines 3, 9, 11, 13, 16, 18, and 20). Although 1864 refers to 13685 by name in Line 3, he does not mirror this until Line 9, and when he does 1864 responds favourably in her next turn (Line 10). In Example 6.1, a user faces social sanctioning by another user for referring to her by her offline name. While the use of an offline name was read as inappropriate in that context because it symbolises an intimacy between co-participants, 13685 encourages the use of her name. For this couple in this scenario the use of their names is one way for them to replicate and reinforce intimacy and closeness.

In addition to the use of names to symbolise a closeness or connection, the participants also use the virtual space in a similar manner. When 1864 first moves the conversation towards a cybersexual direction (Line 1) the room becomes a space that they are familiar with. When the participants sit in Lines 1 and 2, they may know on what piece (or pieces) of furniture they are sitting, but this only becomes evident to outsiders when they mention “our couch” (Line 18). Similar to Section 6.2.1 when I discussed the use of articles in the automated *snog* and *shag* commands, here the use of a possessive pronoun rather than an article allows the participants to create a narrative around “their” space. This also distinguishes their use of space from the shower room scenario in Example 7.2. In that example the shower room was the room of one of the participants, and special locks needed

to be removed in order for the co-participant to enter it. The virtual room that 1864 and 13685 inhabit while they develop this cybersex narrative is not any space; rather it is a personal space that belongs to *them*, which similar to the use of offline names creates a sense of intimacy in the narrative.

Another way that the participants create intimacy is through the sharing of intimate details about each other and each other's bodies. The excerpt analysed in Example 7.6 is from a much longer sexual conversation (another excerpt from this conversation is discussed in Example 7.7). In parts of the conversation that I have not transcribed, the participants refer to how their partner has groomed their pubic hair, as well as the style or cut of underwear that they anticipate the other is wearing. The participants' attention to fine detail when describing each other may heighten the intimacy between the participants, and is indicative of engaging in a sexual practice that is not disconnected, anonymous, or antisocial. Such detail is evidence of familiarity and attentiveness. Thus, the engagement of these participants counters some of the assumptions made about cybersex in the existing literature. These interactants create an intimate narrative that requires time and investment, they perform actions that are consistent with the turns that their partner has contributed, they mirror each other's actions, and they appear immersed in the scenario and mutually engaged.

The participants adopt the use of citational signs in parts of this conversation that I have not transcribed. In particular, citational signs are used to invoke the woman participant's innocence and stereotypical passive femininity and in that way is similar to Example 7.2. In a part of their encounter that is not transcribed 1864 "smiles innocently as she slides her hands down to Tom's crotch". The reference to female sexual innocence in two of the examples extracted in this chapter play into the aspirational ideals of women's sexuality and it could also be argued that assuming the position of the sexual ingénue allows the women to express their sexual agency without necessarily falling into the trap of the camwhore. However, adopting the position of sexual innocence could also be seen as tempering their agency because if it is most acceptable for women to express sexual agency by adopting the coquettish position, then (returning to the discussion in Chapter 3), the sexual agency that is displayed is affected in large part by the *structures* (as well as meanings, discourses, and experiences) that individuals interact from within.

At the end of their narrative (Example 7.7), which spans multiple pages of text (part of which was discussed in Example 7.6), 1864 and 13685 bid each other farewell, but they do so differently from other couples examined thus far.

### EXAMPLE 7.7 INTIMACY 3

Line	Speaker	Setting	Communication
1	1864	Local	Squeezes Tom's ass as she climaxes
2	1864	Local	Uses her tongue to lick all of Tom's cum up and finishes him slowly
3	13685	Local	Wipes his face in her pubes
4	1864	Local	Pulls Tom's penis out of her mouth and turns back to face her Tom
5	13685	Local	Can Anne take pictures?
6	1864	Local	Clears her mouth before kissing Tom's lips
7	1864	Local	Oh yes she can
8	13685	Local	Whoo!
9	13685	Local	And some really dirty videos
10	1864	Local	Grr, now AIM won't work
11	1864	Local	Don't panic I have to restart
12	13685	Local	Ok
13	1864	Local	Kisses her Tom softly
14	1864	Local	Your lips must be sore after that
15	13685	Local	Hehe yeah
16	1864	Local	I'll be right back
17	13685	Local	Ok

Similar to the possessiveness that was indicated with the use of “our couch” in Example 7.6 (Line 18), in Example 7.7 1864 refers to her co-participant twice as “her Tom” (Lines 4 and 13). It could be argued that the use of the possessive near the end of the conversation is another strategy adopted to emphasise intimacy and eliminate the geographical distance between the participants. This is further indicated when 13685 requests that 1864 send him photographs and videos (Lines

5 and 9). The request for images and videos here can be read against the discussion of webcams and camming (Section 6.2.4). A significant difference is that the competitive element that some of the examples had in the discussion on camming is absent here. The user who requests additional media is in an intimate offline relationship with his co-participant, and this request immediately follows the couple's engagement in cybersex. One similarity that can be drawn from this example to the discussion of camming is that, similar to the camming conversations, a female participant is asked to contribute these images and she does not ask for reciprocal contact from her male participant. The incorporation of additional media, such as erotic images and videos, could be seen as a way for the couple to feel connected to each other while they are separated. In addition, if the content that 13685 requests is sexual in nature, which is indicated when 18685 modifies "videos" with "really dirty" (Line 9), it may add an additional layer to their shared online sexuality.

### 7.3 CONCLUSION

In this chapter I provided an overview of some of the debates about cybersex that I discussed in Chapter 4. I argued that in addition to the emphasis on the *potential implications* of cybersex engagement in the literature, it may be useful to also prioritise the *communicative* elements of cybersex particularly as they relate to the social comprehensive. In this chapter I also analysed cybersex conversations in Walford by referring to naturally occurring cybersex. In order to analyse this data I used the queer and feminist sociological framework that I introduced in Part 1 (Chapters 2 and 3) as well as to sociolinguistic narrative approaches (e.g., Blum-Kulka 1993; Georgakopoulou 1997, 2006; Labov 1972; Schiffrin 1996).

Throughout this chapter I argued that cybersex in Walford is grounded in co-constructed narratives and that there are patterns specific to this activity. I adopt this position throughout the thesis when I argue that sex talk in Walford is based in norms that link to shared meaning, discourses, and everyday experience at both the individual and social dimensions. I also argue that cybersex is a

*narrative*. The participants develop a text with each other and unlike most sociolinguistic narratives and story-telling data, cybersexual narratives are ‘imagined’ in the sense that they are not based on the relaying of a previous actual, literal experience (such as explaining what happened at lunch). Although these narratives are imagined, as I assert throughout the chapter, the participants make strong links to material realities or everyday experience as well as connections to social discourses of heteronormative sexuality.

In addition to the adoption of sexual social norms, it can be argued that the patterns of cybersex in Walford are indicative of heterosexual and heteronormative positions, and that participants actively create and reinforce heteronormative sexualities in many ways. For example, I have demonstrated that there is a dyadic and heterosexual element to all accounts of cybersex in my corpus. This can be seen in addition to the participants’ use of personal rooms for cybersex and the lack of cybersex in public rooms, across friend lists, and in dyadic conversations from different virtual spaces in the MUD.

Cybersex narratives are distinctive from both standard dialogic and polyphonic narratives as researched by other sociolinguists (e.g., Blum-Kulka 1993). As a narrative form, I have provided evidence that participants move between first- and third-person narrative styles, and that there is consistency with the adoption of the third-person style for cybersex, with participants shifting to the first-person style at the end of their conversation, after the cybersex narrative has finished, or during breaks in the scene (Examples 7.2-7.5, and 7.7). These shifts in narrative style allow the participants to place themselves inside the scene and to use language to create sexual imagery.

I have also stressed the importance of reciprocal engagement and mutuality in cybersex. Rather than being a solitary act that is depersonalised, cybersex participants in Walford demonstrate mutual engagement and attentiveness to each other. For the most part, the participants work together to create shared narratives. In some cases, such as in Example 7.6, the participants also engage in a textual mirroring process. Cybersex participants in my corpus respond to the statements contributed by their co-participants, offer back-channel encouragement, and work to develop a shared discourse.

The analysis of naturally occurring cybersex discourse provides evidence that in this context participants construct scenarios that, while explicit, do not

counter dominant sexual narratives and fit within the dominant social comprehensive as it pertains to sexuality, particularly with regard to heteronormativity, identity, and transgression. The participants' narratives are decidedly normative and expressions of sexual agency are enacted through that lens. It is not clear whether the heteronormativity in their cybersex is a reflection of offline heteronormativity or caution about exposing their queer or nonnormative desires to their co-participant and the participants' motivations for the construction and reinforcement of these discourses is outside the realm of this thesis. The heteronormative position or caution that the participants adopt is visible in the analysis of some of the turns that some of women participants take (Examples 7.1, 7.5, and 7.7). However, I argue that this potential online/offline discrepancy is not particularly meaningful because this chapter provides a strong case that Walford can be considered a space where cybersex participants display sexual agency, but one where that agency is tempered by norms, patterns of engagement, and conventions of good sexual citizenship.

## HETERONORMATIVITY AND GEEK CULTURE

### 8.0 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I build upon the earlier analytical chapters in Part 2, as well as the theoretical contributions in Part 1. I discuss the intersection of dominant heterosexual and heteronormative discourses and the social labels of *geeks* or *nerds* in real-time online interaction. Thus, the emphasis of Chapter 8 is more about discussions of sexuality and gender than it is about *sex* talk. In Chapter 2 I described the connection between the default gender system and heteronormativity, and I argued that what I refer to as *appropriate gender* is typically coded as heterosexual gender. I noted that the most visible gender transgressions (e.g., butch or masculine women, camp or effeminate men) may lead to assumptions regarding their homosexuality or queerness. The underlying assumption is that heterosexual women are stereotypically feminine and that heterosexual men are stereotypically masculine. It has been argued that this has led to the invisibility of femmes and bears (Sections 2.1.1 and 3.2.2; see also Halberstam 1998a on femme invisibility). In addition, throughout this work I have stressed that participants in Walford's sex talk privilege heterosexual and heteronormative positions as speakers. In this chapter I add an additional element to this discussion by emphasising how the social label of geek or nerd further

contributes to discussions of heteronormativity and aspirational gender as it pertains to men.

I begin this chapter by discussing how participants index their gender in their conversations (Sections 8.1). In Section 8.2 I build upon the discussion of Section 7.2.2 to discuss how participants index their heterosexuality. Here, I focus on how some participants stress their heterosexuality by renouncing homosexuality and/or denying that they are gay, while at some times paradoxically stressing that there is nothing wrong with queerness. In Section 8.3 I operationalise the terms *geek* and *nerd* based on how they are defined in the academic literature. In Section 8.4 I discuss how Walford participants position themselves and others as geeks or nerds, and the ways in which nerd or geek identity is associated with precarious masculinity. Then, before concluding the chapter, I build upon this to discuss how male participants frame women as objects to strengthen their heterosexual footing and to diminish their geekiness.

## **8.1 MALE/FEMALE/NEUTER: INDEXING GENDER**

Throughout Part 2 I have stressed that it is not possible to determine with certainty that participants who position themselves as men or as women in Walford (or other online settings) are members of those categories offline (see also Sunden 2002). However, it could be argued that in offline settings speakers rarely know, with *certainty*, the sex of their co-participant. Although it is not possible for me to determine that these presentations are in alignment with offline presentations, there is evidence from the chatlogs as well as the community structure of Walford that indicates that there is likely to be little transgression of gender categories in Walford. Although participants must select their gender from a closed list of sex category choices (male, female, and neuter) when signing up for an account in Walford, there may be little reason to assume that they choose one that reflects their offline gender. However, gender may be represented in other ways that directly link to communication and participation in the MUD, and participants may index gender through other channels.



In addition to the mandatory and closed-category question of their character's sex when they sign up for an account,<sup>108</sup> participants can communicate this information in various ways. For example, they might use social signifiers to communicate their gender. McConnell-Ginet (2003) argues that the use of labels or signifiers promotes gender categorisation. Drawing from her assertions in regards to labels and gender, it may be possible to suggest that gender in particular can be indexed through the choice of online usernames (Jaffe et al 1999; McCormick and Leonard 1997). Participants may adopt usernames that reflect aspirational gender or gendered stereotypes. For example, names that include terms such as "princess", "sweet", and "babe" are indicative of femininity and may be more readily associated with women, or those wishing to signify themselves as women, as Sunden (2002) has noted. Conversely, names that include "big", "strong", "hard", and "guy" use adjectives and terms that are typically associated with masculinity and men. Another way that participants can choose gendered usernames is through the selection of gendered given names such as Thomas, Jack, Maria, or Penelope. While gender-neutral given names are common, there are some names that are currently associated with a single gender.

The amount of time and personal investment that many users put into their participation in Walford and their relationships with other members may be a deterrent to gender switching in this forum. I have also shown that Walford participants discuss their offline meet-ups which are held in multiple locations in the world at regular intervals; as Stone (1995) and Kendall (2002) have argued, it is unlikely that regular users who live near meet-up locations could sustain participation in the community without attending at least one of these events. In addition, I have noted that users can communicate with each other using means other than the synchronous chat site or MUD. They have gallery space available to upload photographs on Walford's server, are able to communicate with each other via webcam (Section 6.2.4), and can also interact on external sites with each other (e.g., other MUDs, blogs, file sharing sites, etc). Any gender switching would need to be consistent across these sites as well as in photo galleries, and at offline meet-ups in order to allow for successful interaction. In other words, they would need to be consistent in their presentations of self (cf. Goffman 1959).

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<sup>108</sup> The way that this question is posed to Walford users implies cisgender.

Although there are numerous ways for Walford participants to disclose their gender, such as through their character’s sex, their choice of username, their photographs, or by attending offline meet-ups with other members, there are instances when they may discuss their gender and/or sexuality in Walford and inquire about that of others. In Example 8.1 a participant discloses their sexuality early in a conversation with a new user.

**EXAMPLE 8.1 INDEXING HETEROSEXUALITY 1**

Line	Speaker	Setting	Communication
1	29923	Local	says For someone with such an extensive profile, you don’t say much
2	18815	Local	says Nope
3	18815	Local	says Part of the intrigue
4	29923	Local	says I’d be intrigued if I weren’t heterosexual
5	29923	Local	says I’m just mildly disturbed instead

Example 8.1 is extracted from a conversation in the Walford pub. The schism between 18815’s profile content and their lurking, or non-participatory presence, leads to 29923’s comment (Line 1). 18815 deflects the comment and attempts to diffuse the situation by stating that their lack of turns is due to an attempt to maintain “intrigue” (Lines 2 and 3). O’Brien (1999) argues that attempts to be coy, such as 18815’s statement, often lead their co-participant to end the conversation. This deflection, and 29923’s association of “intrigue” with sexual attraction and mystery, leads to the indexing of heterosexuality in Line 4. 29923 accomplishes this in such a way that they also communicate their gender to 18815: when they position themselves as a member of the same gender category as 18815. This is indicated when 29923 states that they are heterosexual and when stating that they are not interested in 18815, only “mildly disturbed instead” (Line 5).

The indexing of gender and sexuality does not appear readily apparent to the initial subject of their conversation in Line 1. However, 29923 discloses their gender and sexuality in their next two turns (Lines 4 and 5). Although their indexing of heterosexuality is obvious in Line 4, one could argue that they also

index their gender by aligning it with that of 18815 when stating that they would be interested if they were not heterosexual (Line 4). The importance that the participants place on indexing gender and sexuality demonstrates that heterosexuality and gender are important markers in nonsexual as well as sexual conversations in Walford. Furthermore, this example confirms O'Brien's (1999) observation about the importance of gender in conversation, as the conversation breaks down shortly after 18815's ambivalent response, and 29923's explicit indexing heterosexuality and implicit indexing of gender.

## **8.2 'I'M NOT GAY': INDEXING HETEROSEXUALITY**

In this section I discuss three distinct strategies for communicating membership in the category of heterosexuality. While these could be applied to communicating membership in other sexual categories, the event of 'coming out' as heterosexual is not generally equivalent the same as coming out as queer (Section 3.3; also Warner 2002). In Section 3.3.1 I explored three components inherent in the contemporary good sexual citizen: first, living in accordance with social and legal regulations of sexuality; second, distancing oneself from those who transgress sexual norms and regulations, thus avoiding stigma by association; and third, actively supporting the current sexual hierarchy. In addition to these methods of ensuring a position as a good sexual citizen, in Section 4.1.3 I discussed some of the ways that heterosexuality is indexed in conversations. Here I add to the discussion by arguing that a typology can be adopted for classifying indexes of heterosexuality in conversation.

The first way that sexuality can be indexed is through *references to heterosexuality*. This can involve the use of labels or identities (Section 4.1.3). An additional way to reference sexuality in conversation is through the use of person non-recognitional forms, as argued by Kitzinger (2005a, 2005b). These non-recognitional forms include references to lovers which involve gendered positions (e.g., *my boyfriend, my wife*), or the use of gendered pronouns when discussing partners (e.g., *my partner... he*). Rendle-Short (2005) notes that telephone callers

to talk-back radio shows in Australia find ways to index their sexuality despite the short-lived and anonymous interaction that transpires between the caller and the talk-show host. In addition to using person reference forms, she notes a pattern of callers using a shared pronoun (e.g., *we, us*), which they then explicitly connect to a heterosexual relationship by adding a person reference form. Another way to refer to heterosexuality in conversation is through the deployment of direct statements such as that which was used by 29923 in Example 8.1 when they state “I’d be intrigued if I weren’t heterosexual” (Line 4).

While reference to heterosexuality is the type of indexing most often cited (e.g., Kitzinger 2005a, 2005b, 2009; Land and Kitzinger 2005; Rendle-Short 2005) I argue that, in addition to this method, there are two subsequent ways for people to communicate their heterosexuality in conversations. The second method of indexing heterosexuality is the *demonstration of heterosexual desires* and lusts. Heterosexual desires can be communicated through references to sexual or romantic interest in members of the gender category to which one orients their desire (e.g., *he’s sexy*). The demonstration of heterosexual desires in the Walford chatlogs can be seen in men’s requests to see the breasts of women users, women’s willingness to expose their breasts to men in Walford, online flirtations, and cybersex. It can also be accented in conversations that foster homosocial bonding, such as in Example 6.11 when the co-participants critiqued women’s online dating profiles.

The third way that speakers can index heterosexuality in conversation is through the *renunciation of homosexuality*. The renunciation of homosexuality can be communicated directly (e.g., *I’m not gay*), through the use of moral positions (e.g., *homosexuality is disgusting*), or catachresis applications of phrases (e.g., *that’s so gay*), in which the term *gay* is misapplied to refer to something as stupid or otherwise problematic. Similar to Rasmussen’s (2004) observation that “that’s so gay” is a common phrase uttered by high school students, I found that the deployment of “gay” as a negative slang term occurs in Walford as well: “pretty gay, isn’t it”, “vote Brom for gayest hair”, and “blue would look gay with my set up”. However, it is more revealing to emphasise the use and contexts in which speakers use the phrase “I’m not gay”. I have found no other research that has examined the use of this phrase to renounce homosexuality and confirm

heterosexuality despite its prevalence in conversation, including in the Walford corpus.

In a binary sexuality system where the only options are heterosexuality and homosexuality, the renunciation of homosexuality is read as a confirmation of heterosexuality. Connell (1995) and Segal (1990) argue that this is especially the case for men for whom the denunciation of homosexuality can also be seen as confirming hegemonic masculinity. It should be noted that both repudiating homosexuality by stating “I’m not gay” and demonstrating heterosexuality by describing a heterosexual attraction do not necessitate heterosexuality in a queer framework because the binary sexuality categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality are contested. In a queer framework “I’m not gay” cannot be read as heterosexual, or as a positive alignment with a particular sexual category. It has the potential to mean any number of sexualities, rather than limiting itself to a single alternative. However, Walford is not a queer space and as a result the participants use the renunciation of homosexuality to index their heterosexuality.

In the examples of the renunciation of homosexuality that I coded in the Walford corpus, this practice appeared to be associated with speakers to present themselves as men. In recent years, there has been increased interest in examining how men talk and masculinity in language with attention towards heterosexuality (e.g., Bucholtz 1999b; Coates 1997, 2007; Cameron 1997, 1998; Kiesling 1997, 1998; Pascoe 2003, 2005, 2007; Seidler 1989). A common theme in this literature is the examination of men’s homosocial conversations (e.g., Cameron 1997, 1998; Coates 2007; Kiesling 1997, 1998; Pascoe 2005, 2007). Kiesling (1997, 1998) examines conversations from inside a male fraternity to see how issues of gender identity, sexuality, and power develop in the men’s conversations. In particular, he finds that the men use their homosocial conversations in this context to build their in-group membership and solidarity, which they do in part through their expressions of heterosexuality and heterosexual desire. The link that Kiesling makes between masculinity and heterosexuality in men’s conversations has been echoed by others, including Cameron (1997, 1998), who argues that men’s conversations about women, although heterosexual in content, can be read as more about confirming their masculinity and in-group status. More recently, Pascoe (2005, 2007) notes the importance of what she refers to as ‘the fag discourse’ among male high school students in their homosocial conversations

and bonding. She argues that the deployment of phrases such as “you’re a fag” can be more about a man’s failed or precarious masculinity than about homosexual desire. In other words, ‘the fag discourse’ can be simultaneously about the renunciation of homosexuality and about young men’s failures to reach aspirational gender. Therefore, it is important to contextualise the use of “gay” or “fag” in conversation. While masculinity and heterosexuality appear linked, there are times when the use of one of these terms may be emphasising one meaning and discourse more than the other.

In Example 8.2 a participant discusses how he felt when his family forgot his birthday and why his friends think that he is gay despite his insistence that he is not.

### EXAMPLE 8.2 INDEXING HETEROSEXUALITY 2

Line	Speaker	Setting	Communication
1	15434	Local	It was like so totally uncool, oh my god
2	15434	Local	Maybe it’s stuff like that why my friends think I’m gay, hah
3	28887	Local	They think you’re gay?
4	15434	Local	From time to time they do
5	28887	Local	The way I act I suppose
6	15434	Local	Shrugs
7	28887	Local	Are you gay?
8	15434	Local	Absolutely not
9	28887	Local	Just asking
10	15434	Local	Some customer at work, I found out, thought I was gay... I was like... I gotta stop whatever I’m doing
11	28887	Local	Weird. What do you look like?
12	15434	Local	Not gay?
13	15434	Local	Lol
14	15434	Local	Meh, I’m just a friendly... yeah, really friendly I suppose
15	28887	Local	Well, that’s not gay
16	15434	Local	Thank you

17	15434	Local	Agreed
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In Line 2 15434 wonders if one of the reasons why his friends think he is gay is because he was upset when his parents forgot his last birthday.<sup>109</sup> 28887 accepts this shift in conversational topic and asks a back-channel question in Line 3. 15434 notes that in addition to his friends thinking that he is gay “from time to time” (Line 4), a customer at his workplace read his sexuality similarly. Yet, when pressed about his appearance, 15434 claims that he looks “not gay?” (Line 12) referring to his puzzlement about how about how he is interpreted in the offline world. Other than his caring about his family forgetting his birthday (Lines 1 and 2), the only reason that he is able to provide as to why some people misread his sexuality is that he’s “friendly... yeah, really friendly” (Line 14).

15434’s linking of friendly and gay could be read as a statement about heteronormative masculinity and how he positions friendliness as counter to the expectations of dominant heterosexual masculinity. In her analysis of homosocial conversations between male speakers, Coates (2007) found that men use the language of hegemonic masculinity to confirm their heterosexuality. 15434 notes that his behaviour can at times be read as gay, that his masculinity is questioned, and in turn his heterosexuality is as well. More specifically, 15434 perceives that others see his extroversion and his emotional response to a family dynamic as counter-hegemonic to the ideals of contemporary masculinity.

In addition to the linking of what I refer to as *precarious masculinity* to a presumption of homosexuality, 15434’s response (Line 8) when 18887 asks him explicitly “are you gay” (Line 7) demonstrates the repudiation of homosexuality in conversation. The response is in direct contrast with the ambivalence indicated by his “shrug” (Line 6). The unexpectedness of 28887’s question, and 15434’s subsequent tonal shift in his next turn are further demonstrations of precarious masculinity and 15434’s repudiation of homosexuality. Therefore, in addition to the linking of precarious masculinity with homosexuality, some Walford participants who position themselves as heterosexual find ways to index their

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<sup>109</sup> The part of the conversation is immediately prior to the excerpt extracted in Example 8.2.

heterosexuality when it is questioned. In addition, there are instances when this indexing is done to compensate for the perceived undermining of their sexuality.

In Example 8.3 a participant reacts strongly when his co-participant makes an incorrect assumption regarding his gender and sexuality.

**EXAMPLE 8.3 INDEXING HETEROSEXUALITY 3**

Line	Speaker	Setting	Communication
1	44396	Local	Do you have a boyfriend?
2	20098	Local	Does not
3	20098	Local	And never has
4	20098	Local	And never plans to have
5	44396	Local	Oops
6	44396	Local	How about a girlfriend?

In the turns leading up to this excerpt the participants discuss the relationship statuses of other Walford users 20098 had asked 44396 if she had a boyfriend and after she answered she mirrored the question to 20098 in Line 1. However, she assumed incorrectly that her co-participant was a heterosexual woman or a gay man. 20098 responds to the question in three lines, each stronger than the last. He states first that he “does not” have a boyfriend (Line 2), then that he “never has” (Line 3), and finally if it were not yet clear to his co-participant that he is not interested in men, he states that he “never plans to have” a boyfriend (Line 4). 44396 acknowledges her mistake in Line 5 and attempts to repair the conversation in Line 6. After his gender and his sexual orientation are mistaken 20098 spends a number of lines making references to his girlfriend and demonstrating his attraction towards 44396.<sup>110</sup> He offers to leave his current girlfriend for 20098. This appears more playful or flirtatious than genuine given that 44396 and his co-participant are not so intimate that she recalled his gender/sexuality. When his attempts to romance 44396 are unsuccessful, he attempts to engage in cybersex

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<sup>110</sup> I did not transcribe this part of the conversation to preserve the anonymity of the participants.



with her. Although he offers her an episode of “passionate lovemaking” she rejects his advances.

In Example 8.3, it can be argued that 20098 adopts measures to confirm both his masculinity and heterosexuality. In addition, 20098 adds textual emphasis in his responses. In order to substantiate his position in both hegemonic masculinity and heterosexuality categories he employs all three of the strategies that I have outlined are possible for indexing sexuality. First, he renounces homosexuality, as shown in the conversation excerpt; second, he references his girlfriend; and finally he demonstrates his attraction towards women and 44396 more specifically.

Example 8.3 involved a mixed-sex conversation which provided 20098 with the opportunity to demonstrate his heterosexuality with flirtatious banter and the offer of cybersex towards his co-participant. Meanwhile, Example 8.4 is a homosocial conversation between men and, similar to Examples 8.2 and 8.3, the questioning of sexuality and the indexing of heterosexuality are salient features of the interaction.

#### **EXAMPLE 8.4 INDEXING HETEROSEXUALITY 4**

Line	Speaker	Setting	Communication
1	38312	Local	He seems cool... I like his hair (in all of its states)
2	35153	Local	I'm not gay though
3	35153	Local	It's ok if you are
4	38312	Local	I was speaking of David Beckham not your punk ass.
5	35153	Local	But I'm straight
6	35153	Local	No, I know you meant me it's ok.

Example 8.4 is extracted from a conversation in the town pub. In this example 35153 teases 38312 about being gay. 35153 frames his turns to ridicule 38312 for liking David Beckham's hair by labelling him as “gay” (Lines 2 and 3). At the same time that he does this, he is quick to assert his own heterosexuality (Line 2). The way that 35153 frames his renunciation of his homosexuality and reassures 38312 about his potential sexuality provides evidence of tolerance of

homosexuality. However, underlying this pseudo-tolerance is the promotion of heterosexuality and the devaluing of homosexuality. Evidence of this can be found when 35153 states twice, in Line 2 and again in Line 5, that he is straight. He also states twice in these six lines that it is “ok” if 38312 is gay. 35153’s joking only works as a ‘joke’ because he assumes that his co-participant is heterosexual (see the discussion in Section 6.2.2. for more about sexual joking).

Example 8.5 involves at least one of the same participants as Example 8.4 and in some ways it mirrors that conversation.

**EXAMPLE 8.5 INDEXING HETEROSEXUALITY 5**

Line	Speaker	Setting	Communication
1	35153	Local	Is 30 on Sunday!!
2	35153	Local	I’m a sexy old fucker
3	44256	Local	Congratulations
4	35153	Local	exclaims You want me don’t you!
5	35153	Local	Sorry I’m not gay
6	44256	Local	Crap songs never leave one’s mind
7	34540	Local	Soon to fix that
8	44256	Local	Who’s gay?
9	35153	Local	Don’t worry mate, lots of people are
10	35153	Local	I understand
11	35153	Local	I’m not, but if you are that’s cool

Example 8.5, similar to Example 8.4, takes place in the town pub and 35153 asserts twice in a short amount of turns that he is “not gay” (Lines 5 and 11). Another similarity is that again 35153 states twice that being gay is acceptable when saying “don’t worry mate lots of people are [gay]” (Line 9) and “I’m not [gay], but if you are that’s cool” (Line 11). The repetitive insistence that he is not gay, that other people are, and that it is acceptable if others are gay is out of

context when 35153 introduces desire into the conversation (Line 4).<sup>111</sup> In Example 8.4, he introduces the topic when his co-participant expresses approval of David Beckham's hair and in Example 8.5 35153 inserts it in a conversation when 44256 congratulates him for turning 30 (Line 3).

Introducing sexuality into conversations that are nonsexual can be more complicated than the indexing of sexuality in the out-of-hours medical calls that Kitzinger (2005a) examined. In her corpus, heterosexuality was indexed in nonsexual conversations by using person reference forms, including references to the caller's relationship to the ill person. In Examples 8.4 and 8.5 35153 indexes his sexuality but he does so in such a way that he calls attention to it. While the use of person reference forms or discussions of whom or what one desires can be implicit or discreet, such as through the use of person reference forms (e.g., Kitzinger 2005a; Rendle-Short 2005), 35153 is overt in his deployment of multiple indexing strategies. In Lines 6 and 7, two other participants, 44256 and 34540, attempt to introduce a new topic. However, 35153 does not let the topic of homosexuality, and his own heterosexuality end. Rather, when 44256 asks "who's gay" in Line 8, 35153 continues the topic for three additional turns. Within the Walford context some male participants, such as 35153, go to great lengths to compensate for their precarious masculinity and the vulnerable heterosexuality that results from their insecure gender position, which is discussed more in the next section.

### 8.3 GEEKS AND NERDS

While geeks and nerds can be seen as distinct identities, such as in Coupland's (1996) novel *Microserfs*, the terms are often used interchangeably in academic discourse (e.g., Eglash 2002). Nugent (2008) claims that there are two kinds of nerds. The first category is over-represented by males and consists of nerds who resemble machines. He argues that this type of male nerd is passionate about one or more technical activities or applications, avoids confrontation,

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<sup>111</sup> Although Line 2 could be read as indicating desire, it is also possible to argue that it is jovial.

favours logic and rationalism, uses formal written language in verbal communication, and prefers interacting with machines to people. The second kind of nerd is a less male-dominated category than the first, and includes those who may not share many common attributes other than the experience of social exclusion from their peer groups in middle or high school. In contrast to Nugent's typology, Turkle (1984:196) does not distinguish between types of nerds when referring to nerds as present and future computer scientists, engineers, and hackers who celebrate their nerdiness in their collegiate environment. The connection between nerdiness and participation with technology is mirrored in other researchers' definitions of nerds and geeks (e.g., Eglash 2002; Kendall 1999, 2000; Nugent 2008; Turkle 1984; Wacjman 1999; Wakeford 1997).

Despite their presence in technology-related programmes and fields, nerds and geeks may not be a prevailing social category in most high schools or universities. For example, Eckert (1989) argues in her ethnographic account of a suburban American high school that there are two main categories of students: burnouts (underachieving students who are unlikely to attend university) and jocks (overachieving, university-bound students who are also involved in school activities such as sports and student council). However, she also notes that there is a small but distinctive third group of nerds that, while the jocks and burnouts can be seen as each other's opposites, can be seen as the opposite of both jocks and burnouts because while nerds are over-achievers academically, they may be unlikely to be socially involved in other school activities. Similarly, Bucholtz (1999) stresses that nerds (male and female) are not failed versions of jocks and burnouts but are a renunciation of these high school archetypes. In this way, Bucholtz views nerds as having agency to overcome the dominant high school classification system.

Bucholtz (2001) argues that in addition to the rejection of dominant high school membership categories, nerds can be further identified by their adoption of superstandard English and hyperwhiteness, both of which set them apart from hegemonic youth culture. Kendall (2002) also racialises nerds when she asserts that BlueSky is an overwhelmingly white space. Meanwhile, Eglash (2002) argues that African-American nerds transgress both the white stereotypes of the nerd as well as the stereotype of the "compulsory coolness" of African-American culture. He also notes that more recently there has been an association of

nerdiness with Asians, and he argues that the emergence of Asian hip-hop is a direct counter to the stereotype that Asians are nerdy or overly studious.

While both Bucholtz (2001) and Eglash (2002) describe the ways in which a geek identity can be understood as transgressive when viewed as an alternative position outside of the default and readily available stereotypes, nerd identity in the larger culture is generally positioned as negative. This is particularly the case when those who are not classified as nerds direct the label towards others as a pejorative label. Bishop et al. (2004:237) argue that among high school students “being a nerd is like having a communicable disease” because nerds are seen as infecting those around them with the stigmatised category. Thus, not only are nerds socially excluded when referred to as nerds by others, the category itself works to further exclude them as their status can be seen as having a viral quality (cf. Goffman 1963 on contagion).

Others have echoed the connections between notions of nerds, contagion, and exclusion. For example, Kinney (1993:21) reports that some of his participants make a distinction between nerds and being ‘normal’: “some adolescents who were labelled by their peers as unpopular nerds in middle school were able to embrace a more positive self-perception in high school that centred on defining themselves as ‘normal’”. Here Kinney notes that the label of nerd that was assigned to some of his participants became internalised as a negative self-perception or identity but that they were able to overcome this hurdle in high school, seeing themselves as ‘normal’ as they became more popular and less excluded.

Turkle’s (1984) research shows that many of her participants who identify as nerds ascribe negative values to nerdiness, such as a lack of awareness of social norms. However, she also articulates a reclaiming or celebration of geeks in the MIT student culture of the 1980s as evidenced through events like “the ugliest man on campus” contest. Similarly, Kendall (2000) notes that although ‘nerd’ is generally used as a pejorative term, when it is deployed by members of a nerd in-group to describe themselves and their peers it can be used both affectionately and as a way to show respect for technical expertise.

The technical expertise of nerds may be the most positive aspect of the identity in that it provides nerds with a skill set that is in high demand and is difficult for some people to learn or develop. For instance,

an obsession with technology may well be an attempt by men who are social failures to compensate for their lack of power. On the other hand, mastery over this technology does bestow some power on these men; in relation to other men and women who lack this expertise, in terms of material rewards this skill brings, and even in terms of their popular portrayal at the frontiers of technological progress” (Wajcman 1991:144).

Here, Wajcman argues that while there may be negative associations with the term nerd, that nerds have the potential to become “heroes” because of the power their technological skills provide. She explicitly positions the category as male when stating that nerds are “men who are social failures”. In addition, by introducing power to the scenario she asserts that nerds can be seen as dominant over other men who do not share the same skills and over women more generally.

Although others have not made the connection between geeks and power in such explicit terms, Wajcman is not alone in understanding the geek label as male or masculine. With the exceptions of Bucholtz (1999) and Wakeford (1997), the research emphasis has been on male nerds. For example, Kendall (1999) argues that the “liminal masculinity” of the nerd is one of its most enduring features. This is echoed by Eglash (2002) who argues that African American men can transgress the stereotype of African American male hypersexuality by adopting nerd identities, which he argues are seen as emasculating and lacking sexuality.

### **8.3.1 GEEKS AND NERDS IN WALFORD**

Although the theme of heteronormativity runs through this entire thesis, geek and nerd identities and social labels are specific to this chapter. Walford is a nonsexual MUD but it is also a place steeped in a geek or nerd mentality. The participants read Walford as a space for geeks and nerds, and it could also be argued that they see the space itself as what could be referred to as a ‘geeky space’. Furthermore, their descriptions of themselves and others as geeks could be understood as fitting within definitions of geekiness examined earlier in this chapter (Section 8.3). In Chapter 4 I described how participants in MUDs have additional control over their virtual environment. Although MUDs do not require

that users have programming skills, some knowledge of and comfort using basic programming commands would make MUD participation and interaction easier (as explained in Chapter 5). For these reasons, it might be possible to see that Walford participants may be more likely to refer to themselves and their co-participants as geeks than would participants in other online environments, and why they might view Walford as a geeky space. Geek identity and social labelling is both enabling and constraining in Walford. On the one hand, it is a shared identity among many participants, and as a result provides signification for members of the community. On the other hand, participants are cognizant of the negative values socially ascribed to geeks and attempt to be less geeky than both other Walford participants and other communities of geeks.

Some participants in Walford index geekiness in their conversations, just as other speakers might index sexuality. In this chapter I show that Walford participants link their conversations which index geekiness to discussions of sexuality and gender. To some extent, the participants use the label geek *as* a gender category. There is a gendered component to geeks in Walford that might be similar to how femme can also be deployed as a gender category (Sections 2.1.1 and 3.4.1). Male participants in particular refer to themselves and other men as geeks. This is done in both their homosocial and heterosocial conversations.

Links between women and geeks are discussed in Section 8.3.2. However, it is evident from those conversations that while men tend to be labelled as geeks, women are viewed as ways for men to counter their geekiness, particularly through the involvement of geeks in heterosexual relationships. Rather than evaluating women themselves on a spectrum of nerdiness, they are measured by standards of beauty and attractiveness. In that section it is clear that Walford users define geeks as a male category and view women as antithetical to men's geekiness. In other words, they tend to see geekiness as a negative category, and position having a girlfriend as one way to be seen as less geeky than other participants, who are without girlfriends. In this regard, some Walford users have adopted heteronormative ideas about hegemonic masculinity and heterosexuality.

Some Walford participants refer to geekiness using the dominant discourses of nerds represented in popular culture: nerds are seen as failures as "real men" because they lack hegemonic masculinity and sexualisation, particularly as heterosexual men (see Eglash 2002; Kendall 1999). However, geek

identity, similar to other marked positions (e.g., queer), can be observed as being both enabling and constraining. While geekiness is usually a negative category (see Section 8.3), indexing geekiness may also be advantageous to the participants and their communication. For example, the association of nerdiness with precarious masculinity, and in some cases failed masculinity, means that some participants in Walford are not necessarily held accountable for sexist or misogynistic statements that they make. Geek identity can be seen as emphasising precarious masculinity among Walford participants, and can be used as an excuse for social and romantic failures. Thus, geek identity in Walford is not desexualised, unlike the stereotype. Rather, the participants are consistent in explicitly relating Walford geekiness to masculinity, heterosexuality, and heteronormativity.

**EXAMPLE 8.6 GEEKS AND NERDS 1**

Line	Speaker	Setting	Communication
1	12599	Direct	says I guess I need to get back to my IVL [in virtual life] and not my IRL [in real life] one so much
2	23689	Direct	Grins
3	12599	Direct	says Oh well, guess that's what I get for being a computer geek
4	23689	Direct	says Hey aren't all Walforders computer geeks?
5	12599	Direct	says Apparently not as much as me as most of the ones on here have SOs [significant others]
6	12599	Direct	Wonders if there is a girl out there is messed up as much as him.
7	23639	Direct	exclaims Dude that doesn't change you being a nerd! [My boyfriend] is a HUGE nerd!
8	23689	Direct	says And look at [another Walford user] – how he got a girl I'll never know
9	12599	Direct	Nerd... geek... same breed.
			[12599 then discusses the ways in which he is a “better man” than some of the other men he knows (e.g., does not “use” women and has good hygiene) but remains single. 23689 suggests places or ways for him to meet women]
10	12599	Direct	says Maybe I need to find myself a Linux geek lady...
11	12599	Direct	says If there is such a thing.
12	12599	Direct	Sighs
13	23689	Direct	says I'm sure there is! Have you considered those online dating things? I know people who did that and had some



			good success.
14	12599	Direct	BTDT [been there done that]
15	23689	Direct	says Never hurts to try it again
16	12599	Direct	says The likelihood of a compatible female for me is very low.
17	23689	Direct	says I'm sure there is a woman out there saying the SAME thing right now ;)
18	23689	Direct	exclaims Go to a [Walford] meet! People always hook up at meets!

In Example 8.6 two participants engage in a conversation from remote rooms using the *direct* communication setting. In Line 3 12599 directly ties his lack of a girlfriend to his identity as a “computer geek”. When 23689 challenges his position by arguing that most Walford users are computer geeks (Line 4), 12599 states that there is an inverse relationship between geekiness and finding romantic partners. He positions himself as geekier than other Walford participants when stating, “apparently not as much as me as most of the ones on here have SOs” (Line 5). It is evident by the way that 12599 positions his geekiness that he perceives geekiness as a barrier to finding an intimate partner. In Line 6 12599 links being a computer geek to being “messed up”. In making this link, he treats nerdiness as a condition that reaches beyond an archetype, and as constraining his romantic life.

23689 attempts to challenge 12599’s linking of nerds and undesirability again and in Line 7 cites her boyfriend who she describes as a “HUGE nerd” (Line 7) but who, presumably, she still finds attractive and sexually desirable. In her next turn she also mentions another Walford user who is presumed to be even geekier than both 23689’s boyfriend and 12599 (Line 8) but who has found a partner. At this point there is a shift in the conversation. In the parts of the conversation that I have not transcribed, 12599 makes it clear that many women would make unsuitable mates for him. He paints unflattering portraits of some of his friends, explaining that despite their social failures, they have girlfriends while he does not. At one point he states that a woman would rather date men like some of his friends and acquaintances than “me, who is nice and kind and caring and DOESN’T use a girl for sex”.<sup>112</sup> He provides evidence that he is “nice”, such as

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<sup>112</sup> This is a direct quote from the untranscribed part of the conversation which takes place between Lines 9 and 10 of Example 8.6.

an ex-girlfriend he quotes as describing him as “nice to date”. He also provides an example of his moral duty socially backfiring when he refused to have unprotected sex with a woman. He associates his geekiness with being nice and caring, all of which he understands as barriers to finding a suitable mate, described in Line 10 as a “Linux geek lady”. Kendall (2000) also found that some male geeks made a connection between being a geek and a “nice guy”. While the “nice guy” image associated with geeks could be accorded a positive affective value, 12599 chooses to understand it as an impediment to his desirability to women.

One can argue that, in addition to the positioning of geekiness as negative, in these instances hegemonic masculinity is not questioned. Rather, the male speakers’ failure at achieving hegemonic masculinity and other men’s problematic adoption of hegemonic masculinity are not discussed or viewed as issues. In this way, the men do not need to view their geekiness as their problem to solve, although they do often view it as problematic or constraining. Instead, as 12599 demonstrates, the onus is placed on women for desiring men who represent hegemonic masculinity, rather than on the “nice guys” or geeks to appear more attractive to women. Although they can be seen as adopting a viewpoint that reconfirms hegemonic masculinity, it could be argued that some male geeks in Walford view themselves as victims, a position stereotypically associated with women. The geeks’ reconfirmation of the importance of hegemonic masculinity simultaneously strips them of their agency because they see women partners as responsible for changing their marked status.

When 23689 encourages him to actively engage in attempting to find a mate, 12599 becomes more dejected about his romantic situation. He states that he has already tried online dating (Line 14) which he then dismisses along with any future suggestions that 23689 might have because “the likelihood of a compatible female for me is very low” (Line 16). In her two final attempts, 23689 adopts alternative strategies for encouraging 12599. First she states that there is likely a woman out there, a soul mate for 12599, who is bemoaning her own situation (Line 17). Finally, she changes her focus from love to sex when suggesting that 12599 attend a Walford meet, the geekiness of Walford participants established in Line 4, because “people always hook up at meets”

(Line 18). In this turn, she sexualises Walford participants, and counters the stereotype that geeks are undesirable and desexualised.

23689 offers evidence that geekiness is not a barrier to sexual desirability and also challenges the idea that the category of geeks is male. However, 12599 directly links his geekiness to undesirability and as an obstacle to finding a girlfriend. He offers evidence that he thinks that he might be a good boyfriend, in that he has integrity and is caring, but he then positions these attributes as antithetic to the kind of masculinity that he believes heterosexual women desire in romantic partners, a point reinforced in Example 8.7.

### EXAMPLE 8.7 GEEKS AND NERDS 2

Line	Speaker	Setting	Communication
1	26527	Local	says No wonder he doesn't have a girlfriend, he just seems so geeky
2	20241	Local	says Hadn't even noticed he's not been around much
3	26527	Local	LOL me neither

The participants in Example 8.7 discuss the nerdiness of other users. The participants engage in an exchange about why another of their Walford friends has been absent in the MUD recently. The association of geeks and undesirability that was prominent in Example 8.6 is present here again when 26527 states that they are not surprised that the absent Walford user does not have a girlfriend because “he seems so geeky” (Line 1). Rather than isolating members for being geeks as Bishop et al. (2004) and Kinney (2003) found was common, here as with Example 8.6 participants use conditional modifiers such as “so” (Line 1) to evaluate geekiness. Thus, nerdiness is measured by degree rather than as an absolute category. It is not simply that there are categories or archetypes of jocks, burnouts, and geeks (see Eckert 1989), but that within these categories there are geeks who are not very geeky or at least “not as much as me” (Line 5, Example 8.6), which is evaluated by their peers by their ability to find a mate, and those who are “so geeky” (Line 1) or “HUGE nerd[s]” (Line 7, Example 8.6).

After this exchange in Example 8.7, the male participants discuss female users but, unlike their conversations about male participants, the terms ‘geeky’

and ‘nerdy’ are not used. Instead they base their comments about women entirely on hegemonic or conventional notions of women’s attractiveness. They refer to some participants as “not very pretty girls”, and discuss their perceptions of their body flaws. There are no comparable discussions about men’s attractiveness made by either male or female speakers in the corpus. The only parallel that can be made is to the ways in which the ‘geek’ is conceptualised in Walford. In Section 6.2.4.1 I discussed men’s conversations about women in Walford and referred to other research such as Allison (1994) and Cameron (1997) to argue that discussions about women’s bodies may be more about the homosocial bonding subtext than about the topic of conversation. Similarly, when adding the relevance of geekiness to the analysis, it can be argued that these conversations might be particularly useful for geeks and nerds as it gives them an opportunity to index their sexuality using by demonstrating that they are interested in women.

Geekiness is seen as depleting masculinity in Walford: if a participant has enough masculinity and sexual desirability (to heterosexual women) to obtain a girlfriend, then he shows that he is less geeky. When male participants in Walford discuss women’s attractiveness they conform to hegemonic ideals of masculinity as evidenced through the indexing of sexuality, the information that they find women attractive, and the objectification of women’s bodies as topics to consume in their conversations. In this end, they not only index their heterosexuality, masculinity, and geekiness, but they also attempt to show that their identities as heterosexual men are more salient than their identities as geeks.

### **8.3.2 WOMEN AND GEEKS**

In this section I continue to discuss how nerdy men’s discussions of women can be seen as adopting narratives of hegemonic masculinity and heteronormative sexuality. Kendall (2002) finds that geeks on BlueSky often refer to women using sexist terms, and found that in interviews some participants argued that because they are geeks they fail to fit into the ideal of hegemonic masculinity. It could also be argued that their articulated failures at masculinity provided them with a perceived disenfranchised status which they found to be

sufficient rationale for their behaviour. In other words, because they are seen as lacking in hegemonic masculinity, some speakers may assert their sexist statements need not be read in the same way as if uttered by a man whose behaviours fall within the aspirational ideal of masculinity. Thus, they can be viewed as having disengaged from responsibility for their utterance.

However, similar to Kendall, I argue that these men conform to ideals of masculinity when they adopt hegemonic masculinity to describe women. Rather than these conversations demonstrating their precarious masculinity, they may be one of the few instances when their heterosexual masculinity triumphs over their status as geeks. They are not queering the concept of the masculine but can be seen as reclaiming a piece of it for geeks. Their discussions of women are one way that they demonstrate power that is usually reserved for men who exhibit the attributes of hegemonic masculinity. When Walford male geeks discuss women in ways that objectify them, they have membership in the category of hegemonic masculinity for as long as the conversation lasts. However as I discussed in Section 8.1, this attempt to reclaim hegemonic masculinity for geeks is not entirely successful because participants view intimate relationships with women as a lasting and effective strategy for diminishing levels of their geekiness. Implicit in these relationships is women's willingness to be the keepers of hegemonic masculinity and a way for male geeks to demonstrate their heterosexuality. Geekiness in Walford is tied to a particular kind of failed masculinity among participants who do not embody the ideals of hegemonic masculinity. However, despite their precarious masculinity, users can be seen as reconfirming hegemonic masculinity in many ways. In Section 8.2 I argued that masculinity and heterosexuality can be seen as entwined for men, and in the examples analysed in this chapter it can be argued that participants link geekiness to their sexuality when they reference geekiness.

### EXAMPLE 8.8 WOMEN AND GEEKS

Line	Speaker	Setting	Communication
1	5486	Direct	chuckles I don't even know I'll be going... ComicCon? <sup>113</sup> Ugh
2	17933	Direct	Says I'm <b>not</b> going to that.
3	5486	Direct	says I would think it would be funny to show up with females and have everyone staring at us
4	17933	Direct	Lol
5	5486	Direct	says Can hear the whispers now 'Oh my god... females... they've probably had sex' <b>gasp gasp</b>
6	17933	Direct	says Randomly 'lose' condoms out of your pocket.
7	5486	Direct	Lol
8	5486	Direct	says Actually kiss in front of them... maybe their heads will explode.
9	17933	Direct	says There would be a chaotic rush for inhalers... pretty soon the paramedics and fire department would have to come.
10	17933	Direct	says Mmmm, firemen
11	5486	Direct	says Mmmm, killing geeks
12	17933	Direct	Chuckles
13	5486	Direct	Could make a game out of how many klingons we can piss off.
14	17933	Direct	says There is <b>so</b> much touristy crap down there. I can't imagine wasting part of it in ANY convention, much less a '35 year old virgins that live in their mother's basements' convention.
15	5486	Direct	points out that you're travelling with Walforders... heh
16	17933	Direct	says True, but this one will have less dorks. Me, you, [name], [name].

Participants in Example 8.8 discuss the possibility of attending the annual Comic-Con conference. Yet, despite 5486's geekiness<sup>114</sup> the conversation focuses on others considered geekier than he is. Again, the degrees or levels of geekiness that were evident in Examples 8.6 and 8.7 are also present here. 5486 and 17933 discuss both meeting in San Diego, California, at the same time as the ComicCon convention, and the possibility of attending the conference.

<sup>113</sup> ComicCon is the world's largest international comic convention, and has been experiencing rapid growth and expansion since the time when this conversation took place. According to their website ([www.comic-con.org](http://www.comic-con.org)) more than 29,000 people attended the four-day conference in 2008 and more than 125,000 in 2010.

<sup>114</sup> This is drawn from other conversations taking place in this particular chatlog.

While the participants do not deny their own status as geeks at any point in this conversation they mock ComicCon attendees and appear to differentiate themselves from them throughout their interaction. 5486 suggests that they should bring women with them which would “have everyone staring” (Line 3) because the mere presence of women might indicate that “they’ve probably had sex” (Line 5). 17933 adds to the narrative by suggesting that they could also bring condoms (Line 6), to which 5486 responds by suggesting that they could kiss women and that perhaps the ComicCon geeks’ “heads will explode” (Line 8). 17933 then makes a connection between geeks and sickness when stating “there would be a chaotic rush for inhalers... pretty soon the paramedics and firemen would have to come” (Line 9). 5486 appears to take delight in the idea that this could kill geeks (Line 11).

The participants agree with each other that the conference is intrinsically nerdy. 17933 suggests that the convention is for “35 year old virgins that live in their mother’s basements” (Line 14). This statement is the first that invokes a comparison to Walford users (Line 15). The implication is that Walford users are also geeky, sexually inexperienced, and perhaps still living with their families of origin. 17933 does not deny this, or the likelihood that there is a link between Walford users and ComicCon attendees if they are planning a Walford meet in San Diego at the same time as the convention. Instead, 17933 calls on the notion of the degrees of geekiness again when stating “True but this one will have less dorks” (Line 16), thus differentiating between ‘geeks’ and ‘dorks’.<sup>115</sup>

The participants make a connection between geekiness and sex in such a way that having had (heterosexual) sex is to be seen as less geeky and abnormal than ComicCon geeks. They joke that convention attendees will be sexually inexperienced to such a level that seeing women will alarm them and make them “gasp” (Line 5). The women that 5486 suggests that they bring (Line 3) and kiss (Line 8) are tools that can demonstrate the men’s heterosexuality, masculinity, and coolness in comparison to the other attendees of ComicCon. In other words, the women, or “females” as 5486 refers to them in Lines 3 and 5, could be seen as accessories to promoting male identity and hegemonic masculinity. The women at

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<sup>115</sup> There are very few references to *dorks* in the academic literature and as a result I am unable to determine whether or not this is a standard differentiation or a hierarchy specific to Walford.

ComicCon, and in Walford more generally, are not understood to be geeks or as possessing subjectivity beyond how they can improve the status of the men they accompany.

## **8.4 CONCLUSION**

In Chapter 8 I have built upon the previous theoretical and empirical chapters of this thesis to offer additional evidence of how the space is constructed as both heterosexual and heteronormative. I have argued that it is possible to develop a classification system for indexing sexuality, and that the three forms this can take are: references to heterosexuality (e.g., the deployment of person reference terms), demonstrations of heterosexual desires, and the renunciation of homosexuality. The renunciation of homosexuality can be accomplished in a number of ways, such by using “gay” as a catachresis, referring to something or someone with derision, or by framing homosexual practices or identifying-people as a moral issue. Furthermore, participants can stress that they are “not gay” as a strategy to demonstrate their heterosexuality. Walford participants use all three strategies for indexing their heterosexuality in their conversations.

Alongside the heterosexuality and heteronormativity that underlies interaction in Walford, I have argued in Chapter 8 that its geekiness domain must not be overlooked. The participants make explicit the connections between geekiness, heterosexuality, masculinity, and heteronormative gender and sexuality as they are articulated in all aspects of the social comprehensive. Their conversations demonstrate that participants have a shared social meaning when articulating an inverse relationship between geekiness and hegemonic masculinity. As a result, some participants perceive their geekiness, and that of others, as an impediment to the attainment of a heterosexual intimate or romantic relationship. Some participants attempt to overcome this, ideally by acquiring a girlfriend or, failing that, through demonstrating their heterosexuality in other ways. In this process, women become desirable objects that have the ability to counter male geekiness. A feminist analysis might argue that the reduction of women to their body parts, attractiveness, and benefits to male subjectivity fall



under the hegemonic ideal of masculine gender that these men claim to fail at due to their marked status as geeks. When Walford users adopt the narrative styles of hegemonic masculinity, it may be one of the few instances when they can be considered members of that unmarked group. Although some of these male participants might see their behaviour as unproblematic because of their precarious masculinity and geek status, the conversations in which women are made into little more than accessories to combat geekiness both conforms to and reconfirms the ideals of hegemonic masculinity.

## CONCLUSION

### 9.0 INTRODUCTION

In this thesis I have shown that sexual conversations are rich and diverse, context dependent, and laden with social meaning and purpose. How people discuss sex is not based in their desires and preferences alone. Rather, their conversations are framed within the social comprehensive, their social groups, and the larger society. Sexual communication is one way for members of a group to demonstrate their in-group status: to know what to say, how to say it, where, to whom, and in what context is to demonstrate an awareness and understanding of both the group-specific and social norms of sexuality that are present within a nonsexual community of practice.

In order to accomplish the task of linking sex to the social I have written a two-part thesis. In Part 1, I provided an overview of the literature on sex and sexuality within sociology, the main contributions of queer theory, and efforts to combine sociology and queer theory (Chapter 2). Building upon that foundation, I then offered my own version of a feminist and sociologically informed queer theory that centralises the social comprehensive, which is comprised of five dimensions of the social, as well as the main themes of queer theory. I also described the importance of sexual citizenship in order to frame the discussion of

why sex and sexuality are intrinsically social issues, and how they are interleaved with, but distinct from, issues of gender.

With this strong theoretical foundation I embarked on Part 2 of this work. These chapters are empirical in nature. I first situated the research on sexuality in both sociolinguistic studies of sex as well as online research on sex and sexuality (Chapter 4). This provided context for describing my study, the MUD conversations I used for my analysis of sexual communication in a nonsexual community of practice, and the methodological and ethical concerns that I encountered by undertaking this project (Chapter 5).

The analytical section of the thesis comprises of three main themes: the norms and uses of sex talk (Chapter 6); cybersex (Chapter 7); and heteronormativity and geek culture (Chapter 8). Despite these central themes, there are similarities beyond their connection to the theoretical part of the thesis. Walford participants discuss sex in deliberate ways and participants make use of the complex communication commands and settings for different kinds of sexual conversations. Distinctive patterns emerge such as the tendency for participants to make sexual jokes using group conversational settings (either *direct* to their friend lists or *local* to other users currently occupying the same room), relationship discussions in dyadic conversations using the *direct* command, and cybersex in dyadic conversations in personal *local* rooms. These patterns occur with regularity and cannot solely be the result of individual choice.

The study of online sex conversations in this MUD demonstrates the presence of social norms regarding sexuality in nonsexual communities of practice that are online, such as Walford. These norms and conventions are implicit to the community structure and rules, and can only be learned over time and through interaction and participation in the community. The adoption of group-specific norms surrounding sex communication is a key feature for developing an in-group status and a sense of belonging in the community. Sexual communication is particularly effective for the understanding of social norms because of the way in which institutionalised heterosexuality is an institution that is used as a basis for good sexual citizenship in the current social comprehensive.

One result of this understanding is that the idea that the web is a place where people are free to adopt any sexual presence or admit to any sexual proclivity is a myth. The web may be a space where people can seek information,

images, text, or communities tied to any sexual interest with greater ease, affordability, safety, and anonymity than would be available before the diffusion of web technologies. However, it is essential that they must find these niche sexual subcultures and operate within them. Sexual subcultures remain marginalised on the web in comparison to unmarked, heteronormative spaces. Furthermore, it is likely that within online sexual subcultures that there will be sets of norms and conventions that the participants are expected to follow. In nonsexual spaces such as Walford, participants learn, through their involvement in the community, the expectations and norms around sexuality; Walford is not a space to freely explore sexuality and transgress sexual social norms. Rather, the participants regulate their sexual discourses in their conversations in large part based on their understanding of relationship and value in offline spaces .

While there are norms and conventions surrounding sex talk in Walford, and a strong foundation of heteronormative conversations, it must also be said that participants challenge offline sexual norms in some ways. For instance, users discuss sexuality in ways that may be considered inappropriate in some offline spaces. The same informal rules that apply to sex talk in Walford may not be transferable to other online spaces, or MUDs including Kendall's BlueSky, Rheingold's The Well, or Cherny's ElseMOO. In addition, although Walford can be understood as a geeky space, the participants portray themselves as actively (hetero)sexual which can be seen as in contrast to the stereotype of the desexualised geek that the participants themselves adopt at times.

Sex talk is both persistent and prevalent in Walford. It is a regular topic of conversation despite the nonsexual focus of the community. In addition to its frequency and perseverance as a topic, it is also varied and contextualised. Participants are careful to engage in sex talk that is specific to their setting. Given the technological opportunity present, they talk about sex through the deployment of automated commands, sexual jokes, sexual camming, self-disclosure, banter, and cybersex adopting both group-specific and larger social norms.

## 9.1 CHAPTER SUMMARIES

I began this thesis by defining sexuality and gender in **Chapter 2** as operational concepts that set the tone for the rest of the thesis and a framework for understanding the relationship between sex talk and the social. I discussed sexuality and gender as interleaved but distinctive terms and noted the ways in which *appropriate gender* tends to be conflated with heterosexual gender ideals (this discussion was relevant to the discussion of gender and heterosexuality in Chapter 8). I discussed how feminist sociologists have contributed to a field of study called critical heterosexuality and which understands institutionalised heterosexuality as it pertains to the life- and social worlds, sexuality, and gender. I also discussed the contributions of queer theory in regards to the understanding of the importance of sexuality and how sexuality is relevant to social belonging, a theme that was relevant to the analytical chapters. Near the end of Chapter 2 I discussed sociological approaches to queer theory and a critical point I articulated is that although sociology and queer theory frameworks differ in their approaches to sexuality and their methods, they conceptualise sexuality in similar ways.

In **Chapter 3** I developed a feminist version of queer sociology to use as the theoretical base for the analytical chapters of this thesis. I argued that there are five dimensions of the social comprehensive: (1) individuals or agents; (2) social structures and institutions; (3) discourses; (4) shared social meanings; (5) everyday experiences, and that these dimensions are one way to understand the importance of the social to sex and sexuality. All of these elements are relevant to contextualising sex talk in both on- and offline settings. I argue that the social comprehensive is an intrinsic part of sexual communication, and that sexual conversations in Walford can be understood using this approach. In addition, I discussed heteronormativity, identity and sexual citizenship, and transgression and subversion as fundamental components of a queer theory approach. I examined these three elements of queer theory, arguing that they are negotiated, confirmed, challenged, and lived through the social comprehensive. Heteronormativity, identity (and sexual citizenship), and transgression of sexual norms are all relevant to how Walford participants frame their sexual conversations.

In **Chapter 4** I reviewed the empirical studies of sexuality that are relevant to this thesis, and concentrated on studies of language and sexuality as well as studies of sexuality in online environments. I argued that the language and sexuality literature can be understood as following five directions: (1) sexual identity and how members of marginalised sexual groups talk; (2) sexual bodies or how the sexualised body is discussed by speakers; (3) heteronormativity in nonsexual conversations; (4) the language of sex and desire; (5) sexual communities of practice in online research on sex talk. In addition, I have argued that a commonality that can be seen in the literature on language and sexuality is the adoption of sexual communities of practice as the focus of the research. The use of sexual communities of practice can be seen in non-linguistic studies of sexuality as well, which is argued in the rest of the chapter.

In relation to literature on online sex and sexuality I have argued that it is possible to distinguish 10 strands of research relevant to this thesis: (1) the history of sex and technology in which the connections between the sex industry and technological advancements is highlighted; (2) the online sex economy which focuses on the economic success and power of the online sex economic sector; (3) the rationale for the popularity of the web as a venue for sexual exploration; (4) examinations of who uses the web for sexual purposes; (5) the potential of the web for addictive and compulsive use; (6) the relationship between seeking sex online and engaging in high risk offline sex, such as unprotected anal intercourse among MSM; (7) youth and their involvement in online sexual activities; (8) the potential for the web to demarginalise members of sexual minorities and to create new formations of sexual cultures; (9) cyberporn or online pornography, particularly the potential to democratise pornography; (10) women's sex blogging or writing of sex on the web. These frameworks all contribute to the understanding of sexuality in online settings and offer sets of findings that are informative to the research that I set forth in this thesis. While a great deal is known about how different populations describe their use of the web for sexual purposes, very little is known about that use, particularly in online settings, unmitigated by their responses to their practices. This is a subject for further research.

Walford was introduced in **Chapter 5** as well as the research methodology and ethical concerns relevant to this project. I described Walford as a talker-style

MUD which is similar to other early talker MUDs, such as TinyMUD and UglyMUD. Although participants can communicate in multiple ways in Walford (e.g., bulletin board, photo galleries, internal email messages), the synchronous chat in the MUD is the central component of the community. The conversations in Walford are not publicly accessible by web search engine, and that they are synchronous, taking place in real-time among participants who are currently logged on to the site. The chatlogs I used as my data consisted of all conversational turns taking place in the MUD, in all of the rooms. I described four ethical considerations that I adopted based from those highlighted in research from the field: (1) the process of obtaining ongoing informed consent by the participants; (2) the use of a pseudonym for the MUD; (3) the use of an XML programme to convert all usernames to numerical sequences using a one-way hashing algorithm; (4) the removal of identifying information (e.g., non-standard capitalisation and spelling and personal details that could be identifying to other participants).

The various kinds of sexual conversations in Walford and the norms and patterns of their use were discussed in **Chapter 6**. I linked sex talk in Walford to both larger social norms, such as heteronormativity, and to a discussion about social norms. In addition, I discussed group-specific conventions that arise from participants' conversations about sex in the Walford corpus. I argued that sex talk in Walford can be seen as including the following categories, in addition to cybersex (which was the focus of Chapter 7): (1) the use of automated commands, including both the *snog* and *shag* commands; (2) sexual joking; (3) sharing sex links; (4) webcams and sexual conversations; (5) sexual self-disclosure.

Some of the findings related to each of these types of sex talk include: the reciprocal use of the automated *snog* and *shag* commands. In addition to their existence as dyadic, same room or local commands in which there is a participant who activates the command and a person who is implicated in the command as a co-participant, there are other heteronormative patterns in their use. When a user activates one of these commands, there is a norm that the recipient then replies placing the formerly active participant into the passive position. In addition, there is a pattern that the *shag* command is activated after the *snog* command. In this way, the participants appear to replicate norms around sex.

The presence and use of sexual joking in Walford was analysed, and I argued that the popularity of sexual joking is neither tied exclusively to the universality of sex nor to the adoption of humour as an evocation of a repressed desire. Rather, the use of sexual joking is one way for members to demonstrate their ‘communicative competence’ (cf. Hymes 1971), particularly in regards to their knowledge and understanding of the group’s norms. Jokes push the boundaries of acceptability in the group but not enough to transcend them completely. In this process they foster group membership and camaraderie between the participants.

I showed that the sharing of sex links, including links to pornographic images and dating websites, fosters homosociality amongst the participants in the conversation. These conversations can be seen as both heterosexual and homosocial. The heterosexuality stems from the content of the conversation, including discussions that demonstrate heterosexual attraction. Meanwhile, the homosocial aspect of the conversation can be seen in the way in which the heterosexual topic is a means to promote group cohesiveness and closeness between the speakers.

In the discussion about webcams and webcamming, I discussed the ways in which camming is turned into a spectator’s event. Women are asked and sometimes offer to expose their breasts on their webcam to male participants in Walford. I argue that this puts many women webcam users in a double-bind category referred to as the ‘camwhore’. Other participants sometimes refer to women who expose their breasts on their webcam to multiple users, or who appear to enjoy the attention that they receive for doing so, as camwhores. This is a ‘sticky label’ (cf. Ahmed 2000) in that once a participant has been labelled as a camwhore it becomes difficult to reposition oneself otherwise.

I did not provide any examples of sexual self-disclosure for ethical reasons, and I argued that extracts from these conversations could make the participants identifiable to other users. However, similar to other sexual conversation topics in Walford, there is a pattern for this type of conversation. In the examples of sexual self-disclosure that I read in the corpus there is a tendency for participants to use the *direct* command for these dyadic conversations and also, from their use of pronouns and other information that these are likely heterosocial conversations. I argue that the use of the *direct* one-to-one setting for



these conversations allows the participants to create intimacy whilst simultaneously maintaining their space and separation.

Cybersex conversations were the focus of **Chapter 7**. Cybersex features heavily in the literature that examines sex in online environments, and the data I had access to allowed me to make a substantial contribution to this field. I argued in this chapter that cybersex conversations consist of narratives. These narratives are linked to the social comprehensive, including the material realities of everyday, individual experience, and the social discourses and shared meanings of the institution of heterosexuality. I make five further arguments in regards to the use of narratives regarding cybersex conversations: (1) they are heteronormative and dyadic; (2) the interactional space can prove to be significant; (3) there are style shifts within cybersex, most notable of these is that while participants refer to their co-participants using the second-person form, they refer to themselves in the first-person form preceding and succeeding cybersex, and adopt the third-person narrative form during cybersex; (4) mutuality and reciprocity can be used by participants, in addition to back-channels, as methods for creating cohesive, joint narratives and shared meanings; (5) intimacy can be a salient feature of some cybersex conversations, participants may refer to personal or intimate details in order to foster personal connections to their co-participant and to the material realities of their lives.

In **Chapter 8** I drew upon the earlier theoretical and analytical chapters of this thesis, and used empirical evidence to further suggest how Walford is constructed as a heterosexual and heteronormative space. I argued that heterosexuality can be indexed in three ways in conversations: (1) references to heterosexuality (e.g the use of person-reference terms to refer to partners and lovers); (2) demonstrations of heterosexual desire (e.g., making sexualised comments about others that are consistent with heterosexual desire); (3) the renunciation of homosexuality (e.g., denouncing homosexuality in some way). I argued that in addition to being a heteronormative space, Walford can also be seen as a geek community, or a community steeped in geek culture with members who identify as geeks and assign this social label to other users.

I used evidence that points to Walford users linking of geekiness, heterosexuality, masculinity, and heteronormative gender and sexuality. In Walford, there appears to be a strong inverted relationship assumed between

geekiness and hegemonic masculinity and heteronormative sexuality. I argued that the label ‘geek’ is generally applied to men both in Walford and the literature, perhaps because of the association of contemporary nerds with technology, which is seen as male-dominated. In addition, Walford geeks challenge the desexualised perception of the nerd, centralising their heterosexuality in relation to their membership in the marked category of geeks and when positioning women (i.e., having female intimate partner) as one way to overcome the stigma of precarious masculinity and heterosexuality that is connected to male geekiness. In addition, some speakers adopt heteronormative narratives rich in hegemonic masculinity in order to temporarily join that group.

## **9.2 MAIN CONTRIBUTIONS**

The contributions of this thesis are both theoretical and analytical (or empirical). The contributions to social theory can be seen as tied to feminist sociology, feminist and queer sociolinguistics, and queer theory more generally. I articulated connections between sociological positions of sexuality and queer theory in a way that has not been done before but is useful to researchers in sociology, queer theory, feminist and gender studies, and sociolinguistics. In addition, I discussed heteronormativity, sexual identity and citizenship, and transgression from a perspective that makes sense to both sociologists and queer theorists alike by centralising them in relation to five dimensions of the social world that I refer to as the social comprehensive. I then tied this to sociolinguistic frameworks and to the feminist sociolinguistic perspective of the community of practice, arguing that sociology, feminist theory, queer theory, and online perspectives can all benefit from recognising the importance of the community of practice approach. In addition, I showed that sexually liminal spaces, such as nonsexual communities of practice can also provide valuable and illuminating findings in regards to the connections between sex and the social, which might otherwise be overlooked when conducting research on social issues such as sexuality from only sexual communities of practice. I make a strong argument

suitable to these disciplines of the importance of sex to the social and the importance of the social to sex and sexuality.

The analytical findings of this thesis can be seen as contributing to disciplines in addition to sociology, queer theory, feminist and gender studies, and sociolinguistics, particularly human-computer-interaction and online research in the social sciences. I provide evidence that sex talk is grounded in group-specific and social norms. I also provide collaborating evidence that sex talk serves particular social functions that can be seen as linked to the social comprehensive, including all five dimensions of the social, and as tied to group membership, belonging, and social camaraderie as observed in nonsexual communities of practice, such as Walford. This is in addition to the existing research, which I have argued, has shown this to be the case to some extent for sexual communities of practice. Furthermore, I have shown that participants ensure that while their sexual conversations and joking may push the boundaries of the community, that they do not completely transgress the norms and conventions. Understanding this insecure boundary is one way for speakers to demonstrate their communicative competence. When participants transgress these norms they face social policing and social sanctions.

This thesis has also made substantial contributions in the area of cybersex research. This is one of the first studies of ongoing, continuous naturally occurring cybersex conversations and as a result, I have findings that counter some of the earlier arguments about this practice. I provide evidence that cybersex can be viewed theoretically and empirically as a communicative act. By approaching cybersex as interaction, it is possible to see that there are important definable features of cybersex, including the relevance of developing a shared, mutually constructed narrative. Along those lines I argued that geek culture in Walford can be seen as heteronormative. I found that there are three ways to index sexuality in conversation when previous studies have only referred to one (references to heterosexuality). In addition, I have noted that there is an association between geeks, masculinity, and heteronormative sexuality in the Walford chatlogs, similar to Kiesling's (1997, 1998) findings in a more 'traditional' offline sphere. Despite research research by Bucholtz (1999, 2001), I assert that geekiness tends to be associated with men and that geek identity can reconfirm hegemonic ideas of masculinity and heteronormativity. Thus, some

geeks overcome the precarious masculinity often associated with geekiness, both in the literature and among the speakers, by positioning themselves as (hetero)sexual and by adopting positions that are often associated with the type of hegemonic masculinity that is idealised in aspirational heterosexuality.

### **9.3 FUTURE WORK**

This thesis opens the potential for much future work. There is a limited body of work on language and desire, which combines sociology, queer theory, and sociolinguistics in such a way, and even less that is specific to online settings. While this thesis goes some distance in contributing to this new field of inquiry, there are many possibilities for building upon this theoretically and analytically.

Given more time and space, it would be possible to extend the arguments in Part 1 to further develop the theoretical aspects of sex and the social. The connections between heteronormativity, identity, sexual citizenship, and transgression could be elaborated upon, particularly with the use of more references applicable to a media and cultural studies audience, thus broadening the potential reach of the work. In addition, it may be possible to do a comparative analysis of the relationship of sex and the social across societies and cultures, and how that has changed or remained consistent over a period of time. The argument on the importance of marriage to good sexual citizenship could also be further expanded as tied to the social comprehensive, along with a discussion of how the campaign against state involvement in both mixed- and same-sex marriage has stagnated in the current global climate.

There are many directions to take in regards to further analytical work that draws from this thesis for its inspiration, foundation, and theoretical orientation. One direction is to analyse more chatlogs using a qualitative software programme such as Atlas.ti or a similar programme, as well as reanalysing the chatlogs examined here. Running such a software programme would allow me to complement this qualitative study with quantitative findings. I would be able to be more specific about of the types of sexual conversations that occur in terms of their frequency. In keeping with ethnographic work (starting with Goffman 1959

and Hymes 1971), a qualitative study as I do here, is the foundation for future quantitative analysis. One of the reasons why I believe this to be the case is the use of sexual imagery in language and its importance when discussing sexuality. For example, it is not possible to search for the frequency of words and argue that this is comprehensive data as sexual language often involves in-group slang and metaphors.

With the coding programme that I ran, a piece of XML code, I was only able to code the data in the system and then manually, in a notebook, find subcodes. This meant that it was not possible to conduct a quantitative analysis of the qualitative findings of the calibre that would be essential for such an approach. In addition to the quantitative contributions that could be made with this thesis, the qualitative analysis of additional logs could show more patterns. I would also like to have the opportunity to analyse all of the logs over a specific period of time (e.g., 14 days) to see if participants revisit sexual conversations, and to see if sexual conversations are more prevalent with certain participants or groups of people. This would also lead to information as to whether or not there are certain private or personal rooms in Walford where people are more likely to engage in cybersex.

Another direction of future research would be in the further articulation of the importance of heteronormativity and geek culture, and an analysis of this culture in comparison with queer geek culture. Geek culture is under-explored although it is gaining more cultural capital in the contemporary period, as evidenced through the recent rapid expansion of ComicCon and other events (Section 8.2). It would be useful to analyse Walford participants' discussions of masculinity, sexuality, and geek identity along with an analysis of media *representations* of geeks in contemporary film and television. This comparative data would show where there are similarities and differences between the representations of geeks and their gender and sexuality in media and the ways in which geeks actually represent themselves in their conversations. Further comparative analysis could be done in relation to heteronormative and queer geek positions. While both geeks and queers can be seen as radical departures of standard high school archetypes, it may be interesting to examine how queer geeks can be seen as further applying their marginal position to issues related to sexual politics, and perhaps politics more generally.

## APPENDIX: CONSENT FORM

Consent was sought through the ‘Conditions of Use’ displayed prior to the login screen for Walford:

“Walford Conditions of Use

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Walford is a non-commercial service provided for the purpose of communication research by the IMC Research Group in the Department of Computer Science at Queen Mary, University of London.

Use of WALFORD is voluntary and subject to the following conditions, which we, the administrators of the service (mud-master@dcs.qmul.ac.uk), may vary at our discretion.

The administrators reserve the right to exercise absolute and final discretion over permissible content and the right of connection to WALFORD. All content stored in WALFORD remains our property.

The content and views expressed in WALFORD are those of the users, and do not represent the views of the administrators or of Queen Mary, University of London or its employees. Complaints about defamatory material or abusive behaviour will be responded to, and should be directed to the administrators.

All activity and content in ‘WALFORD’ will be monitored and logged for research purposes, however any material used will be anonymised to protect the identities of individuals. You should note that all information on illegal activity which comes to our attention will be passed to the relevant authorities.

English is the working language of WALFORD. Use of other languages is not permitted.

To use WALFORD you must provide us with a valid email address - we may

contact you using this address from time to time to check its validity or for research purposes.

Further information on this service can be found at <http://walford.dcs.qmul.ac.uk>.

IF YOU CONTINUE YOU AGREE TO THESE CONDITIONS. IF YOU DO NOT AGREE, PLEASE DISCONNECT NOW.”

## GLOSSARY

**AGENTS** – associated with Giddens (1984); another term for individual but one which stresses individual freedom of choice and personal agency

**ALEA** – associated with Caillois (2001); a game of chance

**APPROPRIATE GENDER\***<sup>116</sup> – the cultural prescriptive that people classified as men are masculine and those who are classified as women are feminine

**ASPIRATIONAL GENDER\*** – the idea that there is a specific kind of gender presentation or performance that is ideal and that people should aspire to adopt or obtain

**ASPIRATIONAL SEXUALITY\*** – the idea that there is a specific kind of sexuality that people that is ideal and that people should aspire to adopt or obtain

**AUTOMATED COMMANDS\*** – a type of local command in Walford that is programmed to produce a specific communication or command (e.g., an automated greeting that appears when a user visits a room)

**BEAR** – used in LGBTQ culture to refer to a gender performance, perception, or identity by a man, who is a member of the LGBTQ community, who can be coded as masculine, typically in a way that satisfies the cultural prescriptive of appropriate gender; can also refer to a physical type: bears often have facial hair as well as body hair and may be heavy set

**BERDACHE** – two-spirited people in First Nations cultures in North America; adopt mixed gender roles and are considered to have both feminine and masculine spirits

**BUILDER FLAGS** – a special permit in Walford that allows users to design new geographical, physical, or communicative infrastructure

**BULLDAGGER** – antiquated term in LGBTQ culture to refer to a gender performance, perception, social signifier, or identity by a woman who is a member of the LGBTQ community and butch

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<sup>116</sup> The asterisks signify terms indigenous to this work.



**BUTCH** – used in LGBTQ culture to refer to a gender performance, perception, social signifier, or identity by a woman, who is a member of the LGBTQ community, who can be coded as violating the cultural prescriptive of appropriate gender; can refer to female masculinity; butch and femme identities are typically seen in relation to each other

**CAMMING** – communication mediated by webcam; can be reciprocal (webcam to webcam) or streamed on the web

**CAMWHORE** – a pejorative used in Walford in reference to a person, generally a woman, who exposes parts of her body (e.g., uncovered breasts) in a sexualised manner to other users, typically men, via her webcam

**CHASER** – used in LGBTQ culture to refer to a member of the community who sexually desires and seeks out members of a specific subculture (e.g., chubby chaser)

**CHATLOGS** – also conversational logs; transcribed logs of conversations from an online setting

**CHUBS** – used in LGBTQ culture to refer to a member of the community who is also a member of the chubby subculture that is typically associated with men; implies a distinctive overweight physical type

**CISGENDER** – the alignment of gender identity with the gender that an individual was assigned at birth; seen in relation to transgender

**COMICCON** – the world’s largest international comic book convention which is held annually in California

**COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE** – associated with Hymes (1971); the knowledge of how and when to talk appropriately, as well as referring to the understanding of grammatical knowledge

**COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE** – associated with Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992); a way to research nonnormative difference, examines the difference (e.g., gender, race, class, religion, sexuality, etc.) within specific communities in which people spend part of their lives (e.g., bowling alleys, a church, shopping mall, high school, etc.).

**COPIES AND ORIGINALS** – associated with Butler (1999:175) who stated “gay to straight is not copy to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy”, thus challenging the notion of the original and the natural in comparison to a copy or a replication

**CURRENT ADMINISTRATOR** – a handful of users in Walford who have achieved a top level status in the MUD and who assume additional responsibilities in the MUD; there is ideally one current administrator connected to the MUD at any given time

**CYBERPORN** – pornography that is available online either freely or for a fee which may be produced specifically for the online market

**CYBERSEX** – a distinct type of sex talk that involves multi-party real-time interaction in the construction of an erotic and shared textual representation of sexual activities

**DIAGNOSTIC STATISTICAL MANUAL** – the manual published by the American Psychiatric Association which includes all current mental health disorders for children and adults

**DIRECT\*** – a communication setting in Walford that is used to target a synchronous communication to one or more specific user regardless of their location within the MUD, can also be employed to send a message to all those listed on a friend list

**DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS** – a role-playing game that was developed as a board game in the 1970s and later became one of the first MMORPGs.

**DYADIC INTERACTION** – interaction which takes place between two participants who take turns speaking and listening

**EGO-DYSTONIC HOMOSEXUALITY** – a type of homosexuality listed in the DSM until 1987; homosexuality that is in contrast with an ideal self-image

**FACTS** – associated with Habermas (1996); refers to norms that have been formalised into law

**FAERIES** – used in LGBTQ culture to refer to a gender performance, perception, or identity by a man, who is a member of the LGBTQ community, who challenges the commercialisation of and patriarchal aspects of LGBTQ culture while taking part in pagan rituals and celebrations

**FALSE CONSCIOUSNESS** – associated with Marx (1972a) to refer to the way in which the proletariat is misled in capitalist society, particularly in that they do not know that under a capitalist system that they exploited and undervalued, and fail to see that they are accomplices in this, not recognising the potential for their own upwards mobility

**FEMME** – used in LGBTQ culture to refer to a gender performance, perception, or identity by a woman, who is a member of the LGBTQ community, who can be coded as feminine, typically in a way that satisfies the cultural prescriptive of appropriate gender; butch and femme identities are typically seen in relation to each other

**FIRST-PERSON** – a narrative style in which the story or a speaker speaks for themselves and uses the terms “I” and “me” or the collective “we”; this style provides the audience with the story from the point of view of the narrator rather than from the perspective of anyone else

**GAY ASSIMILATION\*** – the process by which members of the LGBTQ community can be seen to have adopted Sedgwick’s (2008) universalising position and as a result attempt to integrate completely within heteronormative culture

**GENDER** – the embodiment of the social meanings ascribed to being a ‘man’ or a ‘woman’ and doing ‘masculinity’ or ‘femininity’.

**GENDERFUCK** – an informed and self-conscious decision to transgress notions of appropriate gender

**GLOBAL\*** – a communication setting in Walford that is used to target a synchronous communication to all users currently connected to the MUD, is restricted to only those users who have current administrator status

**GONZO PORN** – derived from ‘gonzo journalism’ in which the journalist is part of the scene they are reporting; usually professional pornography in which one or more participants are involved in both performing and filming the scene; contains tight shots and minimal narrative

**HANDKERCHIEF CODE** – a secret code in LGBTQ culture that was particularly popular in the 1970s and 1980s, for members of the LGBTQ community and leather subculture to signify their involvement and interests with other members of the LGBTQ leather subculture; in this code the position of the hanky indicated a dominant or submissive position and its colour communicated the particular practice that one was seeking

**HETERONORMATIVE** – associated with Warner (1993); an extension of a certain type of heterosexual lifestyle that positions it as ideal, aspirational and as the basis for all sexual relations and organisation

**HETEROSEXUAL IMAGINARY** – associated with Ingraham (1994); the way in which heterosexuality is overlooked in its relationship to gender and as a social institution; views heterosexuality as normal and natural, rendering it invisible to everyday life, whilst this heterosexuality is cultivated and constructed

**HETEROSOCIAL** – interaction or sociability between people of different genders

**HIGH-RISK SEX** – includes those sexual practices that have increased potential to expose people to some kind of harm, whether mental, physical, exposure to infection, or other; examples and definitions of high risk sexual behaviours vary across sexual communities as well as individuals and their personal definitions of what constitutes as ‘risky’

**HIJRAS** – a third gender category that is outside of the dominant sexual and gender binaries in some South Asian cultures; many are assigned a male sex at birth (although some may be intersexed), and some undergo castration and/or penectomies later in life; may adopt a ‘feminine’ dress and modality of speaking but do not see themselves as women

**HOMOSOCIAL** – interaction or sociability between members of the same gender

**INAPPROPRIATE GENDER\*** – those gender presentations and performances that transgress the norms expected of the cultural prescriptive of appropriate gender are often coded this way

**KISSING BANDIT\*** – another term for the snog command in Walford

**LEATHER CULTURE** – a LGBTQ subculture that involves sexual practices and a particular style of dress; often associated with membership in the BDSM community and/or the wearing of leather as erotic fashion

**LEATHERDYKE** – used in LGBTQ culture to refer to a woman, who is a member of the LGBTQ community, who is also involved in the leather or BDSM subculture; typically wears leather and may be butch, but not necessarily

**LIPSTICK LESBIAN** – used in LGBTQ culture to refer to a gender performance, perception, or identity of a woman, who is a member of the LGBTQ community, who can be read as feminine, typically in a way that satisfies the cultural prescriptive of appropriate gender; differs from femmes in that it is not seen in relation to butch and many lipstick lesbians are attracted to other lipstick lesbians

**LITEROTICA** – erotic fiction or literature, often online; also a website of the same name in which users can freely upload and read member-generated online erotic fiction

**LOCAL\*** – a communication setting in Walford that is used to target a synchronous communication to all those in the MUD who are currently in the same room as the person who is sending the communication

**LURKER** – someone who is present in a room but who has a non-participatory presence; usually refers to such a person in an online setting

**MARKING** – distinguishes groupings and breaks from the norm by positioning some social categories as normal others as different or abnormal

**MASTER STATUS** – a social label or identity that is dominant to a person's subjectivity or others' perception of that person

**MATERIALIST FEMINISM** – a type of feminist thought that takes into account the material realities of women's lives, in particular their everyday lives; historically it is also tied to Marxist thought and class consciousness

**MINORITISING POSITION** – associated with Sedgwick (2008); in relation to LGBTQ culture, assumes that there is a distinct minority of the population who are LGBTQ and that this minority is different from the heterosexual majority

**MUD** – a text-based online programme that connects multiple users from different locations (usually via telnet) to a shared database of rooms and locations within a community setting, users are free to move around the database and

engage in synchronous communication with others by entering commands at the telnet prompt

**MUSCLES** – used in LGBTQ culture to refer to a man, who is a member of the LGBTQ community, who has a muscular build and is a member of the gym and muscle LGBTQ subculture

**NETIQUETTE** – social etiquette of online interaction

**NETSPEAK** – associated with Crystal (2001); a new linguistic medium associated with web-based technologies in which people adopt signifiers, such as signatures, greetings, and spelling variations that are locally specific

**NONNORMATIVE** – an action, behaviour, or activity that deviates from the normative in a given situation, place, community, society, culture, or time

**NONSEXUAL COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE\*** – the examination of sex and sexuality in communities of practice that are not drawn together based on a shared sexual interest, proclivity, preference, or orientation (e.g., Walford); does not mean that that these aspects are not present in the community; as is the case with Walford, nonsexual communities of practice are often bound by heterosexuality and heteronormativity that is unmarked, particularly in relation to marked sexual communities of practice

**ONLINE SEXUAL ACTIVITIES** – associated with Cooper (1998); refers to the collection of sexual behaviours, communication- and information-seeking that people may engage in online

**PARAPHILIAS** – a category of ‘psychosexual disorders’ included in the DSM which are characterised by nonnormative sexual interests, proclivities, and practices

**POLARI** – a dialect used primarily by gay men and some lesbians in the UK gay subculture of the mid-twentieth century

**POLITICAL LESBIANISM** – a politically-minded solution proposed to the subordination of women in society in which women consciously choose to engage in relationships with other women that may or may not be sexual

**POLYAMORY** – the practice of or belief in having more than one simultaneous intimate relationship with the knowledge and consent of all participants

**PORNIFIED** – associated with Paasonen, Nikunen, and Saarenmaa (2007); a society in which pornography has become entrenched

**QUEER** – previously used to refer to something bent or wonky; slang for homosexual, mostly derisive but reclaimed in the 1990s by a faction of the LGBTQ community to refer to those with nonnormative interests, proclivities, preferences, or orientations; also ‘queer theory’ is a type of theory borne from feminist and poststructuralist theories.

**RAUNCHED** – associated with Levy (2005); a society that has become increasingly raunchy or lewd

**SECOND-PERSON** – a narrative style in which the story or a speaker refers directly to other characters or people through the use of terms such as “you”, thus making the audience feel as if they too are part of the story that is being told

**SEXTAPES** – homemade amateur porn typically intended for personal viewing

**SEXUAL CITIZENSHIP** – the idea that sexuality plays a role in citizenship, both legal and social

**SEXUAL COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE\*** – a term used to refer to the examination of sex and sexuality within communities that are specifically organised and base around shared a sexual interest, proclivity, preference, or orientation (e.g., online forums for bears, BDSM circles in London, etc)

**SEXUAL DISSIDENCE** – associated with Rubin (1984); sexual nonconformity that also resists hetero- and other normativities while desiring and working towards sexual social change

**SEXUALITY** – sexual identifications or the sexual directions in which a person orients

**SHAG COMMAND\*** – an automated command in Walford that allows a user to textually represent sex with another user; activating the command produces a randomly generated sexual position from a short list as well as a length of time for which the activity lasts

**SNOG COMMAND\*** – an automated command in Walford that allows a user textually represent a kiss with another user; activating the command produces a randomly generated a type kiss from a short list and a duration of time for which the participants are left breathless

**SOCIAL COMPREHENSIVE\*** – five dimensions that organise social life: agents, structures, discourses, social meaning, and everyday experience

**SOCIAL LABELS\*** – also social signifiers; the identities that people ascribe to others, these can be in conflict with both identities (or how people identify themselves) and people’s practices

**SOCIAL NORMS** – those behaviours or beliefs that people are expected to do or hold and that they in turn expect of others; are both proscriptive and prescriptive

**SOCIAL CITIZENSHIP** – social belonging in a particular society

**STANDARD CHAT ENVIRONMENT** – a synchronous chat environment in which multiple users connect and converse in real-time; not a MUD

**STICKY STATUSES** – associated with Ahmed (2000); the notion that once an affective value has been ascribed to describe someone or something that it has the potential to follow them or to stay affixed

**STRUCTURES** – the parts of the social apparatus that typically can be seen as inhibiting to people and restricting their life choices

**TALKER-STYLE MUD** – a MUD that people primarily use for talking and communication; a precursor to other styles of chatroom and instant messaging systems; multiple users are connected (usually via telnet) and communicate with each other in real-time

**TEAROOM TRADE** – chiefly American; known as cottaging in Britain; the practice of men seeking anonymous, casual, quick, homosexual sex in public toilets

**TELNET** – an internet network protocol that provides text-based communication through a terminal connection either at the command prompt or through a user interface

**TEXTSPEAK** – a linguistic medium associated with text messages in which people adopt spelling variations, typically in order shorten the number of characters in a message

**THIRD-PERSON** – a narrative style in which the story or a speaker refers to characters through using the terms “he”, “she”, and “they” and attempts to assume a position in which the story is told by an unspecified entity or as someone uninvolved and outside of the narrative

**TONGZHI** – Hong Kong Chinese men and women in Taiwan who are members of the LGBTQ community

**TRANSPHOBIA** – discrimination against members of the trans community (e.g., transsexuals and transgendered people) based on their gender identity

**TRIPLE A ENGINE** – associated with Cooper (1998); refers to three aspects of the web (affordability, accessibility, and anonymity) which make online sexual activities popular

**TWINK** – used in LGBTQ culture to refer to a man, who is in the LGBTQ community, and young looking in his teens or twenties, with little facial and/or body hair, of a slender build, that can be coded as violating the cultural prescriptive of appropriate gender and who may be read as feminine or effeminate

**UNIVERSALISING POSITION** – associated with Sedgwick (2008); in relation to LGBTQ culture, assumes that although there are LGBTQ people that those people are the same as the heterosexual minority, with the exception of whom they desire

**URNING** – a German word used in the nineteenth century that was used to describe men who were sexually attracted to men

**USENET** – an early internet discussion system resembling bulletin board systems

**VIRTUAL ETHNOGRAPHY** – associated with Hine (2000); an ethnography conducted online that maintains the rigour of traditional offline ethnography

**VLOGGING** – video blogging



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AMAZON – ([www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com))  
BEBO – ([www.bebo.com](http://www.bebo.com))  
BLOGSPOT – ([www.blogspot.com](http://www.blogspot.com))  
BUST – ([www.bust.com](http://www.bust.com))  
COMICCON – ([www.comic-con.org](http://www.comic-con.org))  
DIARY OF A LONDON CALL GIRL ([www.belledejour-uk.blogspot.com](http://www.belledejour-uk.blogspot.com))  
DREAMWIDTH – ([www.dreamwidth.org](http://www.dreamwidth.org))  
EBAY – ([www.ebay.com](http://www.ebay.com))  
FACEBOOK – ([www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com))  
FLICKR – ([www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com))  
GAYDAR – ([www.gaydar.co.uk](http://www.gaydar.co.uk))  
GIRL WITH A ONE TRACK MIND – ([www.girlwithaonetrackmind.blogspot.com](http://www.girlwithaonetrackmind.blogspot.com))  
GMAIL – ([www.gmail.com](http://www.gmail.com))  
GOODREADS – ([www.goodreads.com](http://www.goodreads.com))  
GUARDIAN – ([www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk))  
HOTMAIL – ([www.hotmail.com](http://www.hotmail.com))  
ICQ – ([www.icq.com](http://www.icq.com))  
LAST.FM – ([www.lastfm.com](http://www.lastfm.com))  
LITEROTICA – ([www.literotica.com](http://www.literotica.com))  
LIVEJOURNAL – ([www.livejournal.com](http://www.livejournal.com))  
MYSPACE – ([www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com))  
NEW YORK TIMES – ([www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com))  
PORNHUB – ([www.pornhub.com](http://www.pornhub.com))  
PORNOTUBE – ([www.pornotube.com](http://www.pornotube.com))  
RAVELRY – ([www.ravelry.com](http://www.ravelry.com))  
REDTUBE – ([www.redtube.com](http://www.redtube.com))  
SPOTIFY – ([www.spotify.com](http://www.spotify.com))  
SUICIDE GIRLS – ([www.suicidegirls.com](http://www.suicidegirls.com))  
TUMBLR – ([www.tumblr.com](http://www.tumblr.com))  
TWITTER – ([www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com))  
WORDPRESS – ([www.wordpress.org](http://www.wordpress.org))  
YAHOO – ([www.yahoo.com](http://www.yahoo.com))  
YAHOO CHAT – ([chat.yahoo.com](http://chat.yahoo.com))  
YOUTUBE – ([www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com))  
YUVUTU – ([www.yuvutu](http://www.yuvutu))