Abstract

Title: Love and sexuality on the internet
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The purpose of this thesis is to comprehensively study love and sexuality on the internet, for example user demographics, usage patterns, and descriptions of the arenas that constitute the sexual landscape on the internet. Instead of using more traditional ways of data collection, quantitative and qualitative data were collected through the internet.

A review of prior research in the field shows that the studies conducted are fragmented, specialized, and clustered around specific topics. In addition, prior studies are predominantly empirical with little connection to social theory. In this thesis, empirical findings are related to both prior research and theory. The theoretical starting points are Bauman and his concept of liquid modernity, Goffman and his dramaturgical perspective, and Gagnon and Simon’s theory of sexual scripts. This thesis consists of four quantitative articles and one qualitative report, each with its own demarcated purpose.

The first article examines online sexual activities and how these are influenced by gender and age. Two major dimensions were found among the sexual activities and were labelled “accessing erotica” and “partner seeking”. The results show that men prefer to view online erotica while women prefer to flirt. More men than women use the internet to find partners, to visit dating sites and to reply to sex ads. Women, on the other hand, use the internet to stay in contact with their partners and to seek education/information about sex. Respondents older than 50 years use the internet less for sexual purposes.

In the second article, those who dropped out from the online questionnaire are examined. Approximately half of those who start to fill out the questionnaire drop out before completion. Dropouts can be identified by gender, sexual orientation, and internet connection speed. Men, heterosexuals, and those with modem connections tend to drop out earlier than others.

The third article focuses on those who engage in cybersex, which is defined as two or more persons engaging in mutual sexual talk while online for sexual pleasure. Approximately one third of both men and women engage in cybersex. A multivariate analysis shows that men over 50 are less likely to engage in cybersex. Furthermore, homosexuals are more likely than heterosexuals to have cybersex. Those who engage in cybersex spend more time online for sexual purposes and have more offline sex partners in comparison to those without this experience.

The fourth article examines those who are sexually compulsive according to a 10-item sexual compulsivity scale. Almost 6 percent are categorized as sexual compulsives. A multivariate analysis shows sexual compulsives more likely to be men than women, to be bisexual rather than heterosexual, and to be in a relationship rather than single. Contrary to prior research, the time spent online seems to indicate the activities they engage in. A bivariate analysis shows sexual compulsives to have consumed pornography before starting to use the internet for sexual purposes and to increase their offline pornography consumption more than non-sexual compulsives.

In the qualitative report the sexual landscape, the actors, and the online sexual activities are examined. The report shows that generational differences influence which arenas are used and how they are used. Younger users spend much time online and integrate the internet in their everyday lives of which love and sexuality is part. Older users log on to the internet to engage in activities specifically related to love and sexuality. The results show that online experiences influence the informants’ behaviors offline and vice versa. Finally, this study emphasizes the changing nature of the internet and how this influences arenas and actors which in turn influence behaviors.

This thesis emphasizes anonymity as an important aspect for understanding love and sexuality on the internet. In addition, it shows how love and sexuality on the internet can be explained and understood in relation to prior theory.