Image Management in a Bondage, Discipline, Sadomasochist Subculture: A Cyber-Ethnographic Study

MARIAN PALANDRI, B.A., and LELIA GREEN, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

This article explores a number of chat rooms devoted to cybersex. Case studies have been utilized to relate the intricacies of image management used by the chatters in an effort to balance the often times paradoxical circumstances in which they find themselves. The article includes an area of sexuality that many may find difficult to imagine translating to a cyber activity—that of bondage, discipline/domination, submission/sadism, masochism (BDSM)—and discusses the community of participants formed around BDSM postings. Two female cases are addressed, both of whom subscribe to male/female dominant/submissive BDSM. Although all the material discussed here is authentic, all handles/net names have been fictionalized to preserve confidentiality. Any resemblance between the names in this article and participation by people using these names in BDSM chat sites is purely coincidental—none of the people discussed use the names attributed to them.

INTRODUCTION

This essay examines the seemingly “schizophrenic” behaviors exhibited by many chatters on the Internet. Two case studies have been used to briefly illustrate viewpoints in relation to self-expression in virtual life (VL) and real life (RL). In various ways the Internet has offered the bondage, discipline/domination, submission/sadism, masochism (BDSM) chatter a conduit for exposing the darker side of their personality in a relatively “no blame—no shame” environment. The article is based on the experiences of the first author, Marian, as a participant observer over an extended period of time. This longitudinal exposure indicates that a user might modify his or her behavior based on commitment to community.

One “specialist site” is the focus of this article. It offers self-expression and community to people who celebrate the BDSM world. Frequently the area of discussion/debate/argument in this chat room focuses upon the VL versus RL issue. Real time aficionados of BDSM pour scorn upon those who “only” live out their kink in VL. This discussion is ongoing with definite lines drawn in the sand. Nonetheless, the community survives, indeed thrives around, the controversy. Both case study subjects, sweet~fyre and maribel, are members of this chat site.

Much of the research carried out in a participant-observer situation will have a distinct personal bent and may be construed as engineered or biased. This is because Marian presents as “herself” as much as possible on the Internet, and therefore much of her personality and her experience is grounded in the perspective of the “individual as community member-observer.” Other community mem-

Edith Cowans University, Mt. Lawley, Australia.
bers are aware of Marian’s paradoxical status as a researcher-participant. Research of this kind cannot be wholly objective, yet it is hard to see how ethical and authentic research can be carried out in other ways. The area of ethics vis a vis methodology has yet to be refined. This is both exciting and daunting, as one possible consequence of such a free rein is that it translates to a stampede (and the danger of research being negated) because scholarly process is not adhered to. Finally, this essay will not, because of the constraints of confidentiality and respect for the community, convey the whole story of those interviewed. Personal details have been altered to preserve privacy, without changing the essence of the case studies.

Marian’s research, specifically with Maribel, is ongoing. Marian hopes to present a much larger case study of maribel’s story and experiences in due course. This article is structured to present the case studies first and to analyze these cases, and their implications, thereafter. Firstly, however, a posting on the cork-board from a dominant male chatter, Chopper:

Chopper: BDSM—If it ain’t about sex? Just what the hell is it?

Marian: “Quite a while ago, I came to the conclusion that analyzing (or over-analyzing) my sexual inclinations was a trap of sorts. I mean, trying to decide which urges are genetic, hormonal, etc., and which have been produced and/or altered by my upbringing or other environmental influences; is really a moot point to a degree. They are what they are.

Chopper: As I harm no one, I decided to just accept who I was and what I liked, and go with the flow, as it were.

Marian: My escapades into the world of BDSM are occasional, erotic, and almost always enjoyable. Hell, with 3 kids in 3 different schools (and the inherent chaos resulting from being active and involved parents), along with demanding careers, caring for ill extended family members, and all the other bullshit that life throws at us; trying to find *time* to be wild and crazy is a challenge (to say the least).

Chopper: I have said before that my philosophy (with which my wife agrees) is to snatch moments of happiness (or pleasure) out of the general tumult that is life as we know it. And we do. Okay, that’s a little about me. Now, for the rest of you.

Marian: I have found it’s far easier and much more fun to analyze someone other than myself. *I* This stuff about BDSM being “not about sex” and it being a “lifestyle”

Chopper: I can understand rejecting conventional thinking and social mores with regard to personal behavior and finding a “lifestyle” outside the normal parameters of society. There is a certain appeal to that. I’ve chosen not to do that. For me, it’s more fun being in the closet (so to speak). I like the guilty, underground aspect to certain pleasures of which we partake. But I do understand being a rebel . . .

Marian: But it seems to me that the “lifestyle” and “not about sex” folks seem to be in the same camp quite often, with regard to wanting BDSM to be something *more* than what *I* think it is.”

### METHODOLOGY

Marian’s methodological approach has been to obtain both case study participants’ permission for their words (in precis and verbatim form) to be used. Both maribel and sweet~fyre knew that their interviews might be published and the same questions were asked of both participants. (The lowercase spellings of sweet~fyre and maribel denote women of a submissive nature.) Nonetheless, Marian draws upon a wealth of other research done in this area (particularly with maribel, over an 18-month period) to suggest further conclusions, and to summarize. Questions were asked by ICQ, E-mail, and during chat sessions. The women gave permission for their net names to be used but not their real names. Nonetheless, their net names have been changed. They have been assured of total confidentiality. The URL for the chat room is withheld, both to protect the anonymity of maribel and sweet~fyre, and also for the sake of Marian’s own privacy. She starts by “placing” herself within this realm and writing of her own entrée into cyberspace.

### PRE-AMBLE: A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

One’s entrée to the Internet is colored by one’s rationale or impetus for being there. My own Internet experience began on becoming a sin-
I had been a health professional for many years coming into daily contact with many people on many different levels. Suddenly single, with three dependant children, and imposing a six month break upon myself before I started University—I had time on my hands. I was suffering withdrawal symptoms from not having face to face (f2f) contact with people and sought the Internet as a means of exchange with others whilst I made sense of my new social condition. Although I had accessed the Internet before in a professional capacity, I entered virtual reality this time actively seeking communion with others.

I found that Australian political newsgroups and discussions about health harbor the “type” of person with whom I was wishing to commune. I quickly made a number of contacts and we layered our discussions to include private exchanges via email. On reflection, what I had sought was in fact an extension, a continuation of my immediate past, almost an anchor in a sea of uncertainty. However, it began to feel like work again, and I suddenly found it to be so very sedate and predictable. I mentioned this to one of “my group” and he suggested ranging further afield. I was introduced to search engines and I found the possibility of “real travel” at this point. From a primary, domestic network I found the wonders—and the wanderers—of surfing. Anything you had ever wondered about could be put in the search box and moments later a myriad of information arrived. I had entered virtual reality as a seeker of the real. Through my foray into surfing I found the decidedly unreal, and the out-of-this-world. My brain ran amuck. Here was a medium which would not judge me should I search for the less socially acceptable facts of life. I became covert for a while. Even though I knew no one was in the room whilst I searched, I felt guilt—and sometimes deep embarrassment—at what I found and hurriedly minimized the window or shut down. I felt, as many others have, that I was walking on the wild side. I started to write erotica as an outlet for my frustrated creativity. I found many women were doing the same thing. Most of us were expressing ourselves in ways that had never been acceptable to society or family in our roles as mothers, wives, daughters, co-workers, and so on. From the safety of my office chair, I had slipped over to the wrong side of town.

I had never considered being anyone else on the Internet; the idea of acting out or masquerading as “someone else” had not crossed my mind. This was to change later on down the track when I started to expose a different, more ruthless persona, one that surely was the real me talking but one that I wasn’t particularly proud of. Yet I feel that my experience of my own dark side precipitated a more generous opinion of people who do become entangled in presenting themselves as different from their real life persona.

CASE STUDY ONE

Primary Net Name: sweet~fyre
Other net names (handles): Moonbeam, liquorice, blatant desire
Age: 45
Female
Location: Bible Belt, USA
Occupation: Registered Psychotherapist

sweet~fyre has been chatting on the Internet (net) for 6 years. (Marian has known her for 3 years.) She is married and has four children, aged 15–22. She describes her upbringing as stable and loving, with strict Christian principles and teachings. sweet~fyre considers her marriage vows as sacred and described herself as being obedient to her husband. Her strong Christian upbringing has, she said, given her solid traditional family values and she considers divorce not to be an option even though her marriage is not a particularly happy one. She believes that people should stay together for the sake of the children. sweet~fyre is in private practice as a psychotherapist and works from an individual office in a serviced business center, where she has private and unlimited access to the net. sweet~fyre was interviewed from March 1998 to September 1999 via ICQ, email, and chatroom discussion.

Q1: Why did you start chatting on the net?

I was bored. The kids had grown and didn’t need the level of care that had kept me awake for all those years. I had finished my Masters and found myself with time on my hands . . .
I had regular clients and knew when I’d be needed . . . I was bored stiff.
Q2: Why did you become a member of a BDSM chat site?

I have always liked writing erotica, ever since I was a teen. I think I enjoyed the naughtiness of it all, although I was scared that I would be found out... I used to rip the stories up into shreds and burn them. I used the net to find like-minded people. I looked for writers, writers’ groups and discussion groups. I found the chat site by accident. It appealed to me because of the fantasies I had... I had lurked for a long time before I said a word but enjoyed watching people “scening” [two or more people having cybersex]... I knew that I wanted to write like that... so I paid my membership [life membership].

Q3: Does your self-expression differ in VL from that of RL?

Oh yes!... I would never say the things I say in VL to another living soul in RL! I never cuss in RL, never, the very worst I would say is damnation... in VL I can use extreme language and I love it. I love using words like whore, cunt, fuck, cock... I enjoy writing hot sex, filth, and love being the center of the action too. I have two VL lovers, Sticky K and Prince Nathaniel... It used to be just Sticky K but his RL was heavy, he couldn’t give me enough time... I was lonely... Since Prince Nathaniel came on the scene it’s been much better. They both know me as a wanton whore, always available, always “up.” I love it. It’s like a part of me which has been buried can be free. Our scenes are pretty intense. We do some questionable stuff like daddy-daughter play, rape, stuff that we go private with. I don’t even like people I know on the net to see what I write then. I’m scared they will judge me. I have a position in my community: girl scouts, the church council, a member of the parents’ association, a member of a professional association— I protect my privacy totally—I would be finished if it ever got out that I am that other person. [Yet] it fulfills me, makes me feel wanted and sexy, I can be who I really would like to be in my fantasies on the net.

Q4: Who is the real sweet~fyre then?

Oh both, both, I have always been like that but never had the outlet. However, it sometimes frightens me just how much is inside of me. I wonder where it comes from. I couldn’t imagine not having that [expression] now... I don’t know what I would do without it.

CASE STUDY TWO

Primary Net Name: maribel
Other net names (handles): dark*swan, infinitee X
Age: 39
Female
Location: Canberra, ACT
Occupation: Teacher

maribel has been chatting on the net for 3 years. She is married with two young daughters, and a much older son. She defines herself as a happy person on the surface, but terribly sad deep down. maribel is almost crippled by Arthritis and distributes information about the disease in RL and VL. She thinks her marriage is boring, loveless, routine, and dead and longs to have someone love her for who she really is. She was brought up in a happy home with “lots of brothers and sisters” and although the family income was not significant by any means, she never went without. She has been teaching since she was 21 years old and says she is fed up with looking after other people. She wants to “start again” somehow, but does not consider her husband to be part of that new beginning. maribel was interviewed from March 1998 to September 1999 via ICQ, email, and chat room discussion.

Q1: Why did you start chatting on the net?

I’m not really sure what drove me to be online as much as I am now. In the beginning it was a way for me to help other people with Arthritis who were in a far worse state than I was. [Working with Arthritis groups.] I discovered that I had a lot to be thankful for where my illness is concerned, but along the way I also discovered that I had started to make a lot of new friends. Truth is, I didn’t even know I was looking for something. I often felt as though I was just another piece of machinery in my husband’s day. Online I was seeing that the people I was talking to, and it seemed to me mainly men, were interested in me just because I was me, and we used to talk for hours about anything and everything. I think (even now) that I got bored with Peter, and as one
does in a long time marriage, [we] fell into a rut, taking each other for granted, the sparkle gone...just the every day mundane stuff...kids, work, housework...Struggling financially...You know how it is...I was looking for something. I wanted someone to talk to, I knew there were rooms out there so I went in search of them. I just wanted to talk and have someone in my life...I desperately needed to be wanted...

Q2: Why did you become a member of a BDSM chat site?

In January 97, after a year of being with the Arthritis site, I was beginning to feel restless, like I wanted to chat with others who talked about more than just feeling sick all the time...my RL friend said to try the [BDSM] Room...and in I went, sat, and watched for a long time...I played from time to time...but vanilla...[bland, every-day, non-kinky cybersex] trying out this one and that one...flirting like mad and loving the ego trip it gave me...“infinite X” I was and (still am) in there...an enigma of sorts...Almost no one knew I played...And never ever in public and all the time there I was, in my marriage, hiding all this stuff. I went online more and more...And stayed up later and later...And Peter despaired of it...but said nothing. He had no idea what I was doing except that I was talking to many others and not him. All of it was innocent play...hot cybersex scenes and Peter would get the benefit when I finally got to bed. My online affairs spiced up my sex life with Peter. It was like they were in my head but he was in our bed. I joined and got a life membership. I never wanted to lose it. It was the only way I stay in my marriage.

Q3: Does your self-expression differ in VL from that of RL?

Well, not really—I suppose it’s all me—it must be—who else can it be? I do feel less inhibited chatting, more able to leave my weight behind, my problems, my stretch marks my pain and my Arthritis. I can be the person I think I am inside, if it wasn’t for this burden I carry around. It’s easier to say the things you really want to say when you don’t have to look into their eyes. I am rather reserved in RL. I suppose, but when I come to think of it, I wouldn’t dream of saying certain things to Peter—but in VL they just come out. I think it’s made me open up my mind in that way and let a lot of pent-up things out. Perhaps some of it should have stayed in there though! I would never say “cunt” or “orgasm” to Peter, well not to anyone. We use other words, silly words, as if we are scared of saying the rude or proper names. My Mum used to call down there “floss” and my brother’s “things”—“doodles”—even though we thought that was risqué! In VL I can say what I have always wanted to say but not been allowed.

Q4: Who is the real maribel then?

I think that when I am maribel I am the woman I could be, would like to be, I would love to have the guts to “be” maribel in real life. I really want to be a RL slave to someone... I am scared that that will never happen and I want it more than anything in the world. I want to be dominated...it’s not fair that we only live part of our lives. I think more of our fantasies should be acted out.

CASE STUDY SUMMARY

It is difficult to summarize these interviews without appearing to write in a quasi psychosocial style. However, this articles deals with the once hidden and now emerging “sides” of these subjects, maribel and sweet~fyre. Their experience of BDSM is deeply personal and clearly invites analysis of the “psychology” of the women. They were questioned several times, delving deeply into areas that had never been exposed to analysis before. Even though she is a professional Psychotherapist, sweet~fyre had no idea of the nature of her net personality until she expressed it. Nonetheless, she doubts she would ever have felt “safe” enough to express it in RL, even as part of her therapeutic training. Through the net, sweet~fyre and maribel have been able to identify and enact facets of personality that might never have come forth in RL. The Jungian aspects of these activities are clear—these women are exploring aspects of themselves that they might have previously seen as their “dark side.” Yet this dark side offers benefits in RL, enabling them to function as they choose within RL society.
Goffman’s classic impression management theory\(^2\) indicates that all impressions are managed, implying that this is as true in the VL environment as in RL. This is borne out to some extent by the different names and personae used by sweet~fyre and maribel—and by many other chatters. Change the handle, change the aspect of personality expressed. Nonetheless, expression management theory was developed long before chat sites. Turkle’s view is that “Without any principle of coherence, the self spins off in all directions.”\(^3\) Arguably a walk on the wild side is also a dance with lack of coherence. “Jung believed that for each of us, it is potentially most liberating to become acquainted with our dark side, as well as the other gendered self called anima in men and animus in women.”\(^3\)

An acquaintance with the dark side is a clear psychotherapeutic application of the chat rooms, and sweet~fyre has “practiced” being a man in her writing and found the experience beneficial in understanding what it is she really wants from men. Both women are cognizant of a need being met in them by playing these characters and they offer a cogent rationale as to why they still hide this aspect of themselves in r2r (real-to-real) encounters. In the case of sweet~fyre and maribel, their chat “personae” inform the “other” facets within their daily personality, but are repressed in the interests of coherent impression management. However, if this were not the case, and multiple personae were expressed in r2r, this would be perceived as lacking “coherence,” and might be deemed pathological. Certainly sweet~fyre is aware of the continued importance of hiding her online personality, language, and her affairs with Sticky K and Prince Nathaniel.

sweet~fyre and maribel both have issues in their r2r relationships, and it is possible that having a “place to go,” people to talk to, and a setting that is private and neutral is helpful in providing a breathing space. “There is some truth to the suggestion that the experience of dislocation in time and space—an effect of immersion in Internet culture—can help individuals to see their own identities in a different perspective,”\(^4\) and this new BDSM perspective might be easier to accommodate than its pre-net incarnation. The difficulties experienced by the women within their r2r relationships are particularly in the areas of intimacy and expression. Perhaps in these “teledildonic” episodes the “technologies of the virtual are destined to not only simulate the real, as Jean Baudrillard has suggested but replace it.”\(^4\) Certainly the subjects’ vocabulary and interest in “dirty tech” has expanded. According to Spender, “One of the arguments for co-ed schools was that the girls would ‘civilize’ the boys . . . The same argument for women improving the behavior of men is surfacing again; only this time it is that we need women to ‘clean up’ the sexism and sleaze of cyberspace.”\(^5\) A 3-year exposure to a BDSM community suggests that the opposite might be truer. As much as women might be a civilizing factor, it would be as easy to argue that male chatters have been, in their lewd and “in your face” sleazy manner, a liberating force for women; encouraging women to express themselves in an overtly sexual manner—quite at odds with the usual social demands of impression management. Certainly for sweet~fyre and maribel, this is true.

MEN AND WOMEN’S NAMES

In Marian’s experience, a person’s name or handle is an indication of personality and (significantly) how real a person will be in their dealings on the net. The handle is the bait—a hint or clue as to what to expect from the chatter. This is certainly not always the case, nonetheless it is a general rule of thumb that if a chatter is named “princess sweetheart” or “sweet-as-apple-pie” one can assume that the chatter is female and will “project” a light and friendly disposition. Certainly the two chatters with these (equivalent) names appear to her to be consistently cordial, helpful and of a fair disposition. Women often color their handles intricately with color fazers and transmogrifiers, whilst men tend to use a block color throughout their name; a large proportion of them taking the title of Lord X or similarly powerful monikers.

Lacking a physical body to give visual clues
of different emotional and social circumstances, some women may change their name and announce it to the room along with a detailed explanation as to the rationale. More often than not, the name change is said to reflect major changes in their RL existence, or is linked to a previous personal memory or experience. Lord Jim Liston, a long-term BDSM member, considers that “Women change their names as often as their underwear.” Males adhere to their primary names and it is uncommon to see anything but a minor variation or addition to their handles (e.g., Thunder*Clouds becomes Clouds of Thunder). When questioned, a number of male chatters repudiate any possibility of their VL communication being anything other than how they present themselves in RL. Long-term chatter Iron Filings (IF) was asked if he communicated differently in VL from his communications in RL, given that cyber presented him with an opportunity to try out different personae:

VL communication is indeed another medium to practice another persona . . . but why? . . . I find that no matter what handle I use . . . I am still recognized . . . why? because I have the same “personality” for all of them . . . the handles just hang out in different rooms is all . . . grinning . . . IF for the rape and BDSM rooms . . . and the other handle for the softer rooms . . . It’s a fiction I suppose. The persona IF does reflect the Me that I am in life . . . whether inside the state or outside . . . attention to detail . . . an ordinary Man with an extraordinary love of live . . . A care and respect for people . . . a willingness to cherish my friends.

Marian contrasts the “honesty” of the male chat participants with that of the female personae online:

Their VL chatting is effused with girlish, saccharine prose. There is much “giggling . . . blushing . . . soft silken kisses blown from honey melon gloss lips.” Women leave “baskets of hugs and strawberry kisses . . . shiny ribbons of care . . . “ and all manner of pretty confessions for each other and for their peers. It appears this innocent, almost childlike way of speaking is to attract males—after all, that is what the majority of females are in the BDSM chat site for. Sweet and pretty appear to be the best bait, the more gushy the better. Through my travels and my RL contact with many of these people I have been able to compare the RL and VL personalities of many of the BDSM chatters. The majority of women I have met resemble nothing of their online persona, they have come across as down to earth, level headed articulate women. Yet winsome names fit the gushing, online persona. However, for many, the façade appears to be an attempt to experience some beauty in their lives. Their escape into the pretty castles and the mink lined rooms affords a hiatus from drudgery and the humdrum.

Marian continues:

I have also noticed that the majority of women will not enter or comment on posts of a high-brow intellectual nature. This may be further evidence of wanting “reality” suspended, but it might also indicate a fear of expressing an opinion which appears overtly political or radical, in case they loose their status as sweet, mild, and subservient. It’s interesting to note, however, that the clear majority of flammers and vindictive anon posters are female. These anon posts are often caustic, damaging, highly personal, and emotionally charged. Perhaps the stress of maintaining a sweet and pretty false image has its drawbacks! Research into the impact upon the individual of the presentation and long-term maintenance of differing personae—some the antithesis of others—is likely to be a worthwhile undertaking.

OTHER PEOPLE CHATTING

The authors’ observation-participation in an Australian student computer class laboratory in September 1999, coupled with informal interviews with Marian’s children and their friends about their online activities, tends to indicate that people aged under 25 years may use obscenities and defamation (flames/flaming) more than older people (40+). For younger chatters, introductions are closely followed by requests for “stats” (statistics: age, gender, height, weight, color of hair and eyes, and physical proportions). Without much “fore-
play” the younger MUD chatters will ask/be asked for cybersex. This probably reflects their “age and stage” rather than any technological determinism exerted by chat sites. “The single largest category of MUD’ers are college students, age seventeen to twenty-three, and the particular uses they find for this technology—identity play and sexual innuendo—reflect the preoccupations of that population.” 6 However, it is clear that males and females, young and old, sense a freedom to express a side of themselves on the net that is generally taboo in relation to their peers, their family, and society in general. Even though it would be naive, and inaccurate, to argue that there is no impression management on the net, many chatters feel liberated from the RL systems that control unacceptable language. In the student class encounter with the Internet, even when a moderator expelled a chatter from the room for continual swearing and/or flaming, there appeared to be no remorse or modification of the behavior that secured them that expulsion. Handles were simply discarded, new ones thought up, and they entered the chat room again. There is reason to hypothesize a significant difference between chatter behavior in the under 25 and over 40 age groups.

From her years of association with the BDSM site, Marian suggests that an older chatter will invest a lot more of themselves in the community that they join. They will carve a niche, build respect and a reputation for themselves, and may have a deeper sense of conscience and commitment. They constantly engage in impression management. Marian has observed many chatters in their middle years emerge from arguments, flame wars and personal attacks, both as victim and offender, with a deeper sense of self esteem for having “worked through” their online difficulties. The young people interviewed by her told her that they would not bother with mending bridges, they would simply assume another persona. Personae might be a disposable commodity for young people, whereas many older chatters pride themselves on being able to resolve their misunderstandings and protect and safeguard their net “personality.” Is the rehearsal of conciliatory language, culminating in mediation—and the desire of older chatters to retain face—an indication of their having more to lose, and of being better skilled at communicating?

Marian comments on her own experience of flaming:

I realized as I fell into a pattern of passive-aggressive flaming (in an anonymous fashion) of those with whom I did not agree, that I was acting anonymously out of fear of risking their disapproval. Of course, one’s writing style is one’s signature, and soon I was found out. I chose to stay and work through my reasons for this behavior, in the face of some hostility from those I had anonymously antagonized. It was not all plain sailing—the journey was painful and exposed a side of me with which I had never had to deal. I believe that chatting on the Internet has been a useful cathartic experience for me, as it has been for others, and is for many “a place of healing.” 3

“DEVIANT” CHATTERS

Flamers have a significant function in evolving and establishing online communities. Moderators on IRC (Internet Relay Chat) channels, as was demonstrated in the class practicum, regularly removed the right of the offending chatter to participate. Order is achieved by this method—albeit a transitory order. Younger chatters, using VL language radically different from their public RL communication patterns, were dealt with swiftly and without warning. However, in “older chatter” rooms, the control of unsanctioned communication is a much slower and more subtle process, as in RL. There is a subtle force applied that requires a chatter to conform: the deviant communicator is ostracized and made an example of, they are closed out and ridiculed. Disharmony is not tolerated well and there is significant pressure put on members to be positive and happy.

There is an exuberance of “feel good” posts on the bulletin boards after a fiery debate or argument, and the (mainly female) members pour scorn upon those who would take the contrary view. Certainly this re-establishes group norms and balance again. Nonetheless, this mechanism indicates a fear of conflict in cy-
berspace, and may be an attempt to deny the validity of conflict as a facet of cyber life. The “feel good” posts can be perceived as “unreal” or phony, too complicit with the social expectations of RL. Cyber may be an escape hatch from RL, but it has to be maintained as a safe escape hatch—not too uncomfortable or confronting.

It is possible that older chatters are more inclined to experiment with their communication in a sexual or sensual manner, as opposed to younger chatters’ engagement with “disruption for the fun of it.” Older chatters’ VL communication is relatively more daring and self-exposing—It may well fill an emotional need within them. Through the anonymity the screen affords, both genders are able to practice various role-plays and configurations and learn what it is that works not only for their own RL gender, but also for the other.

The anonymity and dynamic, playful quality of the medium have a powerful, disinhibiting effect on behavior. People allow themselves to behave in ways very different from ordinary, everyday life, to express previously unexplored aspects of their personalities, much as they do when wearing masks and costumes at a carnival or a masked ball.

The VL practice of profanity for profanity’s sake maybe a youthful way of “breaking out”—almost like verbal graffiti. “They are free to act in a context divorced from external measures of response, be they positive or negative.” Nevertheless it meets a need—perhaps it offers a catharsis for anger, frustration, and feelings of powerlessness. “According to Turkle, these young men [MIT hackers] have an intense need to master things; their addiction is not to computer programming but to playing with the issue of control. It is about exercising power and domination within the unambiguous world of machinery.” Psychologists have commented upon the importance of mastery as part of the process of individuation. An experience of competency is integral to the successful journey from dependence as an adolescent to adult autonomy—able to claim an equal place in the world with one’s peers.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

We are fortunate, indeed, to be able to peer through a window (or more than one if you are able to multitask!) and investigate the area of human sexuality. Fantasies, secrets, and sexual fears (many, never exposed publicly before) are now being discussed in open fora in cybersex chat rooms. Men and women are learning from each other about their sexual needs, learning on the screen what is often left unspoken in the bedroom. SteinMann, is “a pony girl Master,” a Master who takes women slaves and turns them into pony girls who pull carriages, etc, and who wear harnesses, bridles, and bits. He comments, “the most important thing I have learned about women here in this VL world that has helped me in my RL world would be that women are verbal sexually . . . Their passion is moved in a verbal way . . . The process of sharing passion is just as important as the act.”

Without the possible embarrassment of f2f contact, researchers are now gifted with brutally and lyrically honest accounts of kink and vanilla sex. The bridge between us (the researchers) and them (the informants) is under construction. The through traffic has the potential to inform numerous disciplines and to improve the emotional and sexual health of individuals, and of society at large. In Perth, Western Australia, discourse such as that collated by Marian and IRC chatters is being pooled in order to inform potential kink-aware medical practitioners, clinical psychologists, and others sympathetic to the BDSM scene. This could prove a highly therapeutic research tool. Perhaps, by being better informed, we will soon see the day that medical practitioners encourage their patients to spend the evening logged into a BDSM chat site. (At least they will no longer feel isolated and alone). There is little doubt that therapeutic uses of the web have the potential to be even more effective as a recipe for social health than practicing image management. Nonetheless, such proposals need formal research and evaluation.

An area of conflict and ongoing debate that emerges almost cyclically, is that of submissive women identifying as having been sexually,
emotionally, and physically abused in their childhood and beyond. The moving, painful, accounts of childhood abuse, rape, and torture emerge as a theme that refuses to go away. Research into this issue alone has the potential to alter the cognition of aspects of care and therapy for both men and women who have been abused.

Male VL and RL submissives, holding powerful positions in industry, commerce, and beyond, speak of the relief and inner peace they gain from “giving up their control” to a dominant woman who may humiliate them, use them as a footstool or perhaps “use” them as a “fuck toy.” Insights and analysis into the stress experienced and verbalized by these powerful men are tools with which to develop strategies to help them cope in lives that may be just “too powerful” for peace. Nonetheless, it is not enough to simply view these people at play as so many goldfish in a bowl. Researchers must take the time to build relationships, forge links and develop trust with these communities if they are to be privy to the wealth of information therein. It would be easy enough to lurk, become the silent, invisible voyeur, and plunder the open hearts and minds of these community members—but one would have to seriously question one’s own ethical and sexual perspective in benefiting from such an action. Ethical standards for the “hunter/gatherer” cyber sociologist/anthropologist are under development,¹ but we need to be partners, not predators.

CONCLUSION

The majority of RL communications appear to be distinctly contrary to those of VL BDSM presentation and speech. However, this difference is likely to be proportional to the chatter’s desire to conceal actively his or her inner thoughts, fantasies and passions. In this respect image management does differ in “real” and “virtual” communities. Yet all of us speak differently to different people all the time. What is appropriate in one forum might not be appropriate in another. We have finely tuned antennae as to what not to say within the family: tucking into a Sunday roast or a Thanksgiving Dinner with Mum, Dad, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters may not be the right forum to express one’s sexual fetishes and desires.

The Internet is no different, we are communicating with real people, and we learn—without many visual clues, cues, or otherwise—to adapt our speech so as not to transgress the code of conduct expected. Yet if we break that code, our peers deal with us in a structured manner. Clearly we have responsibilities in our RL that have translated to our VL lives: in many ways our VL cannot help but mirror the human rhythms and responsibilities by which we live day after day. The Internet experience gives space and time to a great many people who may wish to rehearse or “work through” aspects of themselves they do not “own” in their RL existences. However, when sweet~fyre retreats within cyberspace to an inner sanctum within private rooms it is because she cannot own her private fantasies in the public forum of the BDSM chat site. She is too ashamed of her “dark” side, she still wishes to manage her public image.

In VL expression, we see some women project a sweet and unsullied image. (Their view being that “it is easier to catch a fly with honey than vinegar”). This appears ironic because the bait in this particular chat site is a means to a very deviant end—that of cybersex in all its BDSM gory/glory! Younger chatters appear to have freer rein and live life in ether without fear or favor. They can be boisterous and are seemingly unimpeded by rules and regulations. Although they are dealt with swiftly by moderators when their language is contrary to expectations, they bounce back quickly and relatively unscathed. Older chatters, on the other hand, have a process that closely resembles RL image management. It stresses compliance with accepted norms and threatens ostracism as a form of censure.

A closing hypothesis is that older male chatter may be the most authentic. This might be because the BDSM site is their space—an area that they have constructed and in which they feel comfortable to be the Lord. Perhaps many men are more comfortable (than women) with their BDSM sexual fantasies and have integrated them within coherent BDSM personae. Female chatters may still be experimenting
with their layered selves, and emerging to embrace aspects of themselves that have been repressed and denied as socially unacceptable. Perhaps this increase in self-awareness can usefully be exported from VL to RL. If this were so, image management might become much more creative and expressive in both social spheres.

Some final piercing insights into the BDSM world (nurture the inner voyeur a little!):

I was packing a traveling blood kit last night, for this weekend, not wanting to drag my full kit with me . . . and thought about why I like needle play. I like every part of it . . . I like slipping that needle into the flesh . . . finding it go in easily or not . . . depending on who I am piercing and where. It rarely bleeds on first entry . . . and sometimes it gets red and angry . . . just depends on so many things. I don’t pierce too deeply for the most part because I can get the effect I want piercing shallow . . . and so I don’t wish to be too invasive. I do many things with piercings . . . sometimes I slip monofilament with beads or other decorations . . . and take out the needles . . . they usually bleed then . . . I’ve put feathers into the needle hubs . . . (you might see that sometime if I ever get the prints from the living art show we did) . . . I’ve done birthday candles in them . . . probably the most fun I have though is using them for ribbon lacing or for bondage, of the predicament nature. When slave mbaya visited . . . I pierced her and Tjarre and then I laced them together . . . with pretty cord, of course . . . and there they were . . . left . . . laced breast to breast . . . to move around. I made them go get me a coke . . . and them too. Made them drink more and more . . . then . . . laugh I sent them to pee . . . I had fun that night . . . so did many others watching.” [Names changed.]

REFERENCES


Address reprint requests to:

Lelia Green, Ph.D.
School of Communications and Multimedia
Edith Cowan University
2 Bradford Street
Mt. Lawley, WA 6050
Australia

E-mail: l.green@ecu.edu.au