

**Gender Trouble and the Construction of Gender Identity On Internet Chat Sites**

by

**Stefan Wolejszo**

A Thesis

submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of

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**GENDER TROUBLE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER IDENTITY  
ON INTERNET CHAT SITES**

**BY**

**STEFAN WOLEJSZO**

**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University  
of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree**

**of**

**Master of Arts**

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**Gender Trouble and the  
Construction of Gender Identity  
On Internet Chat Sites**

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

From the earliest stages of the discipline, sociologists have agreed that different forms of technological innovation may have a profound impact both upon how individuals view themselves as well as how they interpret the world in which they live. However, there have been dramatically different opinions on the nature of the social change that occurs as a result of major technological innovations. On one end of the critical spectrum, Karl Marx shows that as industrialization and modernization take hold, a role reversal occurs in which machines instead of human workers become the focal point of industry (Marx, 1867/1967). The end result of this process is alienation among members of the working class, as human beings become distanced from different aspects of their humanity. Conversely, Emile Durkheim theorizes that technological innovations can potentially bring about positive change (Durkheim, 1893/1964). Describing the impact of the railroad upon society, Durkheim demonstrates that increasing the intensity and amount of interaction between different groups leads to a higher level of *dynamic density*. As dynamic density increases, a more peaceful coexistence between cultures develops as the beliefs of each of the groups is modified in light of their exposure to a different set of ideals.

This thesis is part of the ongoing debate within sociology regarding how technological innovations may impact upon, and help to modify, existing beliefs about both ourselves as individuals and the social world in which we live. The central focus of this research is the analysis of interaction taking place in the context of Internet chat sites with the goal of determining to what degree the establishment of gender identity in this

context contributes to “gender trouble,” as defined by Judith Butler (1990). At the heart of the argument presented by Judith Butler is the belief that it is necessary to challenge the existing notion that sex is a biological Truth upon which gender and desire are constructed. Due to the fact that Internet chat sites are text-based media, and because individuals are to a large extent free to create and re-create themselves in any way that they choose, the ways in which individuals “perform” gender in this context may challenge many cultural assumptions regarding the linkage between sex, gender, and desire. This challenge may serve to bring about the exact social change that Butler calls for in *Gender Trouble* (1990). For this reason, Internet chat sites appear to be an ideal context for testing the theoretical model outlined by Butler.

The methodology used in this thesis is qualitative in nature, and is based on the research model outlined by Derek Layder in his book *Sociological Practice: Linking Theory and Social Research* (1998). The analysis of interviews with individuals who interact with others in the context of Internet chat sites will provide insight into the strengths and limitations of the concept of gender trouble. This thesis will present an elaboration of how *gender trouble* operates as a concept that is relevant to the field of sociology.



## Chapter 2: Objectives

This thesis has two main objectives. First, it will analyze Internet chat site interaction that leads to the establishment of gender identities. Second, it will determine to what degree the establishment of gender identity on Internet chat sites contribute to “gender trouble,” as defined by Judith Butler. Butler defines “gender trouble” as a political goal in which a “radical proliferation” of gender identities function to displace and subvert existing gender norms.

### Chapter 3: Literature Review

According to Judith Butler, “gender trouble” is a political goal. It involves a proliferation of identities that causes confusion, and serves to break down the binary division between “normal” and “other” gender identities. I will use the argument presented by Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990) as a starting point in order to show how the concepts sex, gender identity, and gender trouble fit together when applied to the context of Internet chat sites. Rather than simply providing a summary of *Gender Trouble*, I will relate Butler’s theoretical framework to existing sociological theory regarding both sexuality and the Internet with the goal of making her theory more directly relevant to the field of sociology.

Judith Butler’s highly complex argument in *Gender Trouble* can be broken down into seven main components. The structure of her argument can be summarized as follows. 1) Women are not a unified group. 2) Gender is dynamic. 3) Cultural identity is an achievement. 4) The assumption that sex, gender and desire are a continuum is false. 5) Gender is performed, and there is no gender identity behind its expression. 6) The performance of gender is not optional, but its form can be changed. 7) Choosing different ways of expressing gender leads to “gender trouble.”

#### 3.1 *Women are not a unified group*

Many third-wave feminist writers point out that women are not a stable group with common characteristics. Although feminist theorists have at times portrayed all women as being united, the category “women” encapsulates many diverse groups and

individuals. Judith Butler presents the case that “women” as a stable political entity does not exist: “For the most part, feminist theory has assumed that there is some existing identity, understood through the category of women, who not only initiates feminist interests and goals within discourse, but constitutes the subject for whom political representation is pursued” (1990: p. 1).

First generation feminists, such as Betty Friedan, identified problems that became known as “women’s issues.” In the process of attempting to turn “women” into a unified political force, they presented arguments that implied that all women have the same sets of issues and troubles. Problems arose because the issues that were presented as being relevant to all women actually reflected the interests of only a small group of women. As bell hooks<sup>1</sup> points out, Friedan’s “problem with no name” actually referred to “the plight of a select group of college-educated, middle and upper class, married white women—housewives bored with leisure, with the home, with children, with buying products, who wanted more out of life” (hooks, 1984: p. 1).

Feminists were not the only group that encountered issues with regard to the creation of a stable political identity. In the 1980's the concept of a unified gay or lesbian identity, which had served as a basis for community building, also came under attack (Siedman, 1994a). The major criticism was that the identity that was supposed to encapsulate all of the members of these groups actually reflected a white, middle-class standpoint. This reached a boiling point: “In the course of what some describe as the feminist “sex wars,” a virtual parade of female and lesbian sexualities (e.g. butch-

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<sup>1</sup> In an attempt to draw focus away from the author and towards the theoretical content of her work, bell hooks does not capitalize her name.

femmes, sadomasochists, sensualists of all kinds) entered the public text of lesbian culture, mocking the idea of a unified lesbian sexual identity” (Siedman, 1994a p.172).

The reason for the breakdown from within these communities can be understood using Derrida’s concept “supplementarity” (1967/1976). Supplementarity, according to Derrida, is the process of defining what something is by stating what that same something is not. In this light, an essential part of defining heterosexuality would be to define things that are not heterosexual, such as homosexuality. This process creates a binary division *between* what is being defined, and “other.” In what Derrida calls “a logic of identity,” each side of the binary is assumed to be a unitary essence. Although differences *within* each side of the binary division are submerged or not acknowledged, these differences still exist. The splintering of the feminist and lesbian communities can be understood as being the result of groups of individuals who reject being placed in the same category as individuals with whom they have little in common

Identity creation through supplementarity has five main components: a) A division is created between two categories of people, behaviors, and/or characteristics. b) Seemingly stable, unified identities are established when one group is defined by its differences from the other. c) Identity features that do not correspond with a desired identity are submerged or not acknowledged. d) A hierarchy is created in which the one side of the binary division is desirable, good, positive, or “Natural,” and the other is undesirable, bad, negative, or Unnatural. e) The newly established categories of identity are not stable and fixed in nature, but are instead socially constructed and situated in specific contexts.

### 3.2. *Gender is dynamic*

In contemporary sociology sex is most often linked to “biological fact”, while gender is seen as a social construct. According to this viewpoint, we are born as either a man or a woman, and are socialized into masculine and feminine roles. This socialization process is summarized in Simone de Beauvoir’s argument that “one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one” (1952). While the process of socialization has been described and criticized by many writers, very few challenge the notion that there is a biological Truth at the heart of the division between “male” and “female.”

The clearest example of biological determinism can be found in writing produced during the formative stages of sexology. Sexology arose as a discipline in the nineteenth century. Using the empirical method established in the natural sciences, sexologists sought to find an inner, essential biological truth and to identify a single, consistent pattern of sexual behavior. The biological model of sexuality put forth by Krafft-Ebing and others working in the early phases of sexology suggests that sexual behavior is reducible to hormonal reactions within each individual’s body. Differences in temperament between men and women are linked to biological differences coded within human genetic structure.

Sexologists believed that they could explain the properties of the complex of sexuality by reference to an inner truth or essence and they set out to discover this truth in biology, to devise a “science of sex” which would reveal a single, basic, uniform pattern ordained by nature itself.

(Stein, 1989: p.2)

Krafft-Ebing makes the case in *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886/1965) that women are genetically predisposed to be meek and mild, which leads to a “passive” role in sexual encounters. Conversely, men are naturally aggressive and sexual, and possess an “active” sexuality. From this viewpoint an individual’s sexual identity does not change over time, and biology is destiny.

By using the scientific method to justify existing assumptions about sexuality, Sexologists further entrenched the idea that existing sexual roles were in fact “natural.” The argument that the truth regarding sex and sexuality is to be found in biology is still popular today, as is shown in the fact that scientists are continuing to look for a “gay gene.”

Butler questions the notion that the relationship between sex and gender exists in the manner described by many theorists. According to Butler, if gender is overlaid upon biological facts, then there has to be some sort of mechanism, or laws, that govern how gender is constructed. The implication Butler makes is that individuals are seen as being passive, with immutable cultural laws imposed upon them:

When the relevant “culture” that constructs gender is understood in terms of such a law or set of laws, then it seems that gender is as determined and fixed as it was under the biology-is-destiny formulation. In such a case, not biology, but culture, becomes destiny.

(Butler, 1990: p. 8)

The issue of whether or not biology is destiny may now be examined in a new light. Technological innovations, such as the Internet, have fundamentally altered the way in

which biology is perceived. Jose Van Dijck argues that although the Internet does not entirely erase the body, technological advances such as plastic surgery and the Internet allow individuals an increasing degree of freedom to become “architects” of their bodies. The fact that people may design themselves in any manner they choose means that they may step outside of preconceived gender roles. People on the Internet, according to Van Dijck, communicate on the basis of equality, and biases based on race, gender, and sexuality are eliminated.

While tracing the philosophical division between mind and body, Butler argues that “the mind not only subjugates the body, but occasionally entertains the fantasy of fleeing its embodiment altogether” (1990, p. 12). The critical distinction between mind as masculine and body as feminine has been an extremely important feature of Western thought. The Internet chat sites pose a new challenge to the critical distinctions between mind and body, or masculine and feminine, because in this environment everything is in the category of *virtual*. Even though actions and interactions in virtual environments may not have a physical component that can be observed or measured, the reality which is produced “exert real influences that allows people to respond to them as if they were real” (Waskul, Douglass, and Edgley 2000: p. 379).

### *3.3 Cultural identity is an achievement*

Butler presents the argument that cultural identity is an achievement. The fact that cultural identity is an achievement is shown by the fact that individuals treat statements such as “I feel like a woman” or “I feel like a man” as being highly meaningful. To

Butler, if there is no cultural component in this equation, and if biology is in fact destiny, then statements about feeling “male” or “female” would be redundant.

Although it may appear to be unproblematic *to be* a given anatomy (although we shall later consider the way in which that project is fraught with difficulty), the experience of a gendered psychic disposition or cultural identity is considered an achievement.

(Butler, 1990: p. 22)

A clear example of how cultural roles are an achievement can be found in anthropology. Margaret Mead used her anthropological fieldwork to challenge the assumption that observed differences in roles between the sexes are rooted in biological facts. In *Sex and Temperament* (1935), Mead outlines differences in the roles that males and females fill in three primitive societies existing within a small geographical region of New Guinea. Her conclusion is that each individual has a temperament, and that the range of temperaments existing in both men and women is as wide and as varied as the colors of a rainbow. Through the process of socialization aspects of one's temperament that conform to an expected social role are highlighted and encouraged. Parts of an individual's temperament that conflict with existing role expectations are submerged through a process of social control (such as informal reprisal from members of a person's group when accepted boundaries are violated). From this perspective, gender identity is formed through a process of shaping an individual to conform to a stable, culturally predetermined, role.



Because cultural identity is an achievement, the process of adopting a gender identity or sexual identity is meaningful to individual actors. Within the context of sociology, social psychological theories of sexual identity focus on the meaning that sex and sexuality have for a given individual. Attention is paid to the metaphorical process of linking things that are alike into categories in order to make sense of the world. While cultural theorists place emphasis on set roles, (social) psychological theories focus on identity: “interactionists shifted research emphasis from sexual *roles* to the looser notion of sexual *identity*- from showing how social norms constrain and shape the sexual impulse, to showing how individuals, as active agents, negotiate sexual conduct through social interaction” (Stein, 1989: p. 7 emphasis in original). The process of sexual identity construction involves an extremely complex negotiation between cultural forces and individual factors (Gagnon and Simon, 1973). Because sexual identity is a product of social interaction, it is subject to change over time as an individual moves through different social settings, and interacts with different individuals.

The Internet chat sites may appear, at first glance, to be a setting where individuals are free of cultural restraints that define and limit the ways in which they construct a gender identity. The most obvious constraint on the way in which people portray and recreate themselves online is that they have to appear human to one another despite the physical distance between them. As Porter points out, “if the culture of the Internet is the possibility of interaction with other people, this desire for human contact, in turn, insists on the appearance of humanity on the other end of the wire” (xii-xiii).

One method of creating “an appearance of humanity” through a computer terminal is compression (A. Stone, 1995), where the five senses are collapsed into the

visual written word. At its core this is not a revolutionary idea. Most poets and writers are capable of describing smells, sites, sounds, tastes, and tactile sensations using nothing but words. Cues are given out, which signify a greater package of sensations, and are then reconstituted by the reader into “multiple sensory modalities.” Through this, an individual is able to create mood, and weave together a tapestry of images that are interpreted by those who are online reading the messages. The process through which individuals send out cues, and reconstitute cues sent by others to form a larger set of meaning, is a form of identity construction.

These cues can be more complex than simple descriptions. Stone points out that sound technicians for radio broadcasts used to crumple up cellophane to indicate fire because it sounded more like fire than real fire did. Following this example, it is possible that men online may have to behave “more like men,” meaning that they follow stereotypes of male behavior, in order to convey a masculine identity to another person. Rather than challenging stereotypes and being liberating, the Internet chat sites may instead reinforce stereotypes of gender, race, and sexuality.

#### *3.4 The assumption that sex -> gender -> desire is a continuum is false*

According to the Bible, man is given special status through divine providence: he is made in the image of the Creator. That we are born either man or woman is “natural,” and it is also “natural” that man and woman will unite in order to reproduce:

God created man in his own image, and in the image of God he created Him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and said to them “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it...”

Genesis (1: 27-28)

Sexuality is within us, transcending time and space, and our sexual roles and identities are in alignment with this innate essence. Just as it is both natural and good for man and woman to bond in a sexual encounter in order to procreate, sexual conduct that is not for the purpose of procreation is seen as “unnatural” and bad.

During the eighteenth century there was a shift in Western society away from religion and towards the empirical sciences as the dominant way of understanding and explaining the world. However, as Anthony Giddens states in *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990), this shift was not a complete rejection of previous values. It was instead a modification of the older system of “faith,” replacing The Bible with science as the source of truth and knowledge:

One type of certainty (divine law) was replaced by another (the certainty of our senses, of empirical observation), and divine providence was replaced with providential progress.

(Giddens, 1990: p.48)

The movement away from divine law and towards empirical observation did not ensure that previous values and beliefs were challenged, and the rise of modernity did nothing to dismantle many of the basic assumptions existing in Western society. Many facets of the existing social order, including beliefs about the nature of sex and sexuality, were “naturalized” rather than scrutinized. Describing this process of reification, Richard Harvey Brown points out: “Society comes to be seen as a natural fact rather than a

cultural artifact” (Brown, 1994: p.236). Rather than being challenged, the categories “male” and “female” became naturalized in the discourse of modern science.

If the assumption that sex is a stable biological category is valid, then it is reasonable to expect that “maleness” and “femaleness” are biologically stable things. Holy Devor presents the case in her book *Gender Blending* (1989) that there are many cases in which tests of looking at an individual’s reproductive organs, or even chromosome and DNA testing, do not produce a clear answer as to whether an individual is male or female. Devor, outlines cases in which individuals are raised as “male” or “female” based on visual inspection of reproductive organs, but who had chromosomal testing later in life that showed that they were “assigned” the wrong sex. In cases where individuals with female chromosomal patterns were raised as males, those individuals started to produce hormones that are associated with “maleness.” The same held true for males who were raised as females. What this shows, according to Devor, is that human bodies are in a “feedback loop” with their environments. It is just as valid, if not more so, to claim that cultural roles have a profound impact on a person’s biological make up as it is to argue that biology determines cultural roles.

Butler follows the same line of reasoning that Devor uses, and presents the argument that there is no difference between “maleness” and “femaleness” on a genetic level:

Exactly the same stretch of DNA said to determine maleness was, in fact, found to be present on the X chromosomes of females. Page first responded to this curious discovery by claiming that perhaps it was not the *presence* of the gene sequence in males versus its *absence* in females that

was determining, but that it was *active* in males and *passive* in females (Aristotle lives!).

(Butler, 1990: p.107)

If sex is not a stable category, it follows then that gender is also not governed by Natural Law. The most effective way of presenting the argument that gender is not a stable, natural, category is to present cases in which gender is constructed in totally different ways in different historic and cultural settings. The best example is Ancient Greece, where gender identity was based on status instead of biology, and biological distinctions between male and female were blurred.

Thomas Laqueur (1990) points out that the ancient Greeks used a one-sex model. In this context, women were seen as having the same general biology as men, except that their reproductive organs were turned inside out. The discourse of the day emphasized the similarities between men and women, and “a great linguistic cloud thus obscured specific genital or reproductive anatomy and left only the outlines of spaces common to both men and women” (p. 27). According to writers of the age women were simply inverted and imperfect versions of men.

The Greeks hypothesized that when producing offspring men breathed the soul into the child, while women contributed the body (Okin, 1979). Differences in the soul of a person were responsible for the different abilities, and thus different roles in society that people were able to fill. Using the concept of the soul Aristotle explained class distinctions within ancient Greek society:

It is true that all these persons possess in common the different parts of the Soul; but they possess them in different ways. The slave is entirely without the faculty of deliberation; the female indeed possesses it, but in the form which remains inconclusive; and if children also possess it, it is only in an immature form.

(Aristotle, in Okin, 1979: p.91)

Aristotle's conception of the soul reinforced what was probably the most important distinction between people in ancient Greece, which was differentiation between "active" and "passive" status. While all Greek citizens were supposed to have active status, passive status was shared by all women, boys who had not yet reached the age of maturity (which was 15-20 years old), and male slaves (Richlin, 1993). This status distinction was thought, in Greek discourse of the time, to parallel the sexualities of people. Thus citizens were united in that they were all thought to possess active status and active sexuality.

It was expected that those with active sexuality would engage in sexual relations with individuals who were defined as having a passive sexuality (i.e. women, boys under the age of maturity, or male slaves). Distinctions between active and passive roles were construed as being "natural" in Greek discourse (Laqueur, 1990). A sexual act was considered to be taboo in Greek society when an individual acted outside of the natural roles. For example, when two citizens engaged in sexual relations only the citizen who was seen as taking a passive role in the encounter was stigmatized (Richlin, 1993).

To Butler, the concept of sexual "taboo" in society is a critical feature of the establishment of gender identity. She puts forth the argument that the internalization of

cultural prohibitions (such as the homosexual taboo in modern Western society, and taboo indicating that the active individual will not adopt a passive sexual role in sexual behavior in Ancient Greece) is the starting point in the formation of gender identity. Furthermore, established gender identities are constructed and maintained by the *consistent* application of this taboo. To Butler, the nature of the taboo governs not only the “stylization of the body” in compliance with discrete categories of sex and gender, but also the production and nature of sexual desire. She argues that cultural roles become naturalized over time through a process of repetition:

The subject is not *determined* by the rules through which it is generated because signification is *not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition* that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects.

(Butler, 1990: p.145)

If sexuality is not natural, and is established through a process of repetition of cultural taboos, what are some of the “concealed” factors that influence the establishment of sexual roles? In *The History of Sexuality* (1978) Foucault argues that sexuality is not an innate feature of our being, and the way in which members of society perceive and interpret sexuality is framed within the context of uneven distributions of power in society. Foucault’s argument has three main components: a) the construction of sexual identity is imbricated with the structure of power relations in society; b) the words people choose, and the way in which people talk about sexuality, will reinforce the existing

discourse; and c) individuals cannot challenge the validity of the category of sexual identity without simultaneously supporting its existence.

Foucault argues that a new discourse surrounding sexuality was created in Victorian England, during the “rise of the sciences,” with the genesis of the term “homosexual.” According to Foucault, the differences between interpretations of same-sex sexual activity across time and space are so vast that any claim to a “truth” concerning this type of activity is necessarily unstable. Foucault puts forth the argument that power and discourse are implicated in the production of knowledge and truth. Power, from this perspective, flows from the bottom up, relying on the freedom of individuals to make choices. Power is manifest not only in formal social control, but also in the creation of a discourse, or template, from which interpretations by individual actors are made. Knowledge is produced from within this discourse: “[discourse] is the body of rules which define and limit the sorts of statements which we can make” (Phelan, 1990: p. 422). While we are free to make choices, the framework from which we see certain options, and not others, is a product of discourse.

According to Foucault, discourse serves in the interests of groups that hold power in society. The discourse created by the Victorians facilitated social control of certain types of sexual activity: physicians could treat homosexuality as a disease or mental disorder, and certain types of sexual activity could be made illegal. Within this context, the discourse surrounding sexuality moved from simply differentiating between natural and unnatural acts, to forming identities for people based upon the sexual acts in which they participated.



Steven Epstein notes that “in Foucault’s account, sexual categories—homosexual, heterosexual, and the like—are themselves the products of particular constellations of power and knowledge” (1994: p.192). Discourse functions to perpetuate certain “truths” which are not absolute, but are instead situated within specific boundaries. A “Regime of Truth” is created when discourse functions to both describe and create a specific set of “truths”:

Modern sexuality is a product of modern discourses of sexuality. Knowledge about sexuality can scarcely be a transparent window into a separate realm of sexuality; rather, it constitutes sexuality itself.

(Stein and Plummer, 1994: p.183)

The creation of a sexual discourse also had an unintended effect, which was the formation of a “reverse,” or unintended, discourse. People who were categorized as homosexual, or perverse, were united under the category to which they were assigned:

Homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or “naturalness” be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified.

(Foucault, 1978: p.101)

Within this frame of analysis, the movement towards building communities based on the premise of distinct gay and lesbian identities is problematic insofar as this process reinforces, instead of challenges, the distinctions made between people within the dominant discourse. This reproduction of the existing “Regime of Truth” supports the terms of a discourse, which functions to oppress people of differing sexualities.

While Foucault's theory of sexuality is useful in unmasking the relationship between power, discourse, and truth in society, it can be criticized in two ways. First, some theorists argue that if Foucault is correct then there is little reason to resist: "Foucault suggests that if our resistance succeeded, we would simply be changing one discursive identity for another, and in the process create new oppressions" (Harstock, 1990: p.170). While this danger is real, to say that a new discourse will create new oppressions ignores the fact that the oppressions that exist at the present will remain entrenched in our society until they are dislodged. Another criticism of Foucault is the lack of emphasis placed on agency and free will within his system of power and discourse (Harstock, 1990; Phelan, 1990). If people were absolutely constrained by the discourse in which they operate, social change would never occur, and power would become further entrenched with the passing of time.

If it is possible to break free of the current discourse regarding sexuality in Western society, or for meaningful social change to take place, technological advances such as the Internet may be a catalyst. In *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) Marshall McLuhan argues that technological advances, such as the invention of the printing press, fundamentally change the way in which people think, as well as how they interpret the world. Most written narratives are linear and, as use of the printing press spread, people's interpretation of the world reflected this linear mode of thinking. Standardization of spelling and grammar led to a stronger form of national identity, as language that has been fixed in print does not shift easily under the influence of other dialects.

Computer technology in general has already led to a shift in the way people think about space and borders (A. Stone, 1995). For example, Stephen Hawking is perhaps the most brilliant physicist of our time, yet he relies on all sorts of sophisticated technology in order to communicate. Without the aid of computers he would not be able to write, without a laptop computer with a voice synthesizer he could not communicate with others, and without an electric wheelchair he could not move about. Yet he can write books with his computer, lecture using a synthetic voice, and move about without the direct aid of a nurse.

The questions “where does Stephen Hawking end?” and “what are his margins?” are not normally considered. There is no doubt in people’s minds that Stephen Hawking is “really” talking and writing. In terms of identity construction, this shows that technological advances in computers have already challenged the notion that the locus of identity is always centered squarely within the physical body of an individual. Other technological advances, such as the Internet chat sites, may further challenge the way in which people interpret the relationship between their physical bodies and their identities. The Internet chat sites could potentially be a medium in which the illusory continuum between sex, gender, and desire is shattered.

### *3.5 There is no gender identity behind its expression. It is performed*

Judith Butler presents the case that “there is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results” (p. 25). If gender is rooted in biological fact, then the roles that are adopted by men and women are simply a manifestation of biological principles.

Butler argues that the expression of gender is not anchored in some sort of biological Truth, but is instead a performance. The biological essence that is assumed to be at the core of the gender identity is, in fact, a fabrication that is sustained through a repetition of signs and symbols.

Butler argues gender identity is a performance that is “instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of facts” (p. 140). If this is the case, then it is useful to take note of which cultural symbols are being repeated, and how they are being expressed. Behavioral research, such as Kinsey’s empirical studies of male and female sexualities (1948 and 1953), may be useful in answering a part of the question as to how sex is performed. His studies show that individuals often acted outside of the constraints of culturally defined sexual mores. For example, homosexual activity to orgasm was experienced by almost 40% of the males in his sample, and pre-marital sexual activity among women is the statistical norm. In his interpretation of his findings he presents the idea that existing categories of sexual identity (e.g. “homosexual,” “heterosexual,” “nice,” and “slut”) do not adequately, or even accurately, encapsulate the human sexual experience.

Assuming that Butler’s argument is correct, and gender identity is “what you do rather than who you are”, a tension may exist within individuals or communities who try to define and organize their gender identities according to existing labels. In the 1970’s, at a time when gay and lesbian community building was strong, Barbara Ponse wrote *Identities in the Lesbian World: The Social Construction of Self* (1978). In this work Ponse explored the way in which lesbians organized and interpreted their lesbian identity, and described how connections were made between their gender identity, political

beliefs, and sexuality (a term she uses to mean whether a person is heterosexual, gay, or lesbian). Ponse paid particular attention to how lesbians re-interpreted their personal histories in order for it to conform to their present identity, and to achieve a consistent view of self. In order to make sense of their present identity as lesbians, women in the community would often attempt to find cues and symbols in their past that anticipate their sexual orientation in the present.

Ponse's research shows the impact of the "object constancy assumption" upon identity formation. The "object constancy assumption" states that people want to see things as being whole, consistent, and unchanging (Mehan and Wood, 1975). When faced with different ways of seeing an object, a person will pick one as being "real."

Social psychologists have argued for many years that identity is not fixed and stable, but is instead bound by context and a complex interaction between biology, psychology, social context, and history. Kenneth Gergen argues in "Multiple Identity: The Healthy, Happy Human Being Wears Many Masks" (1972) that each individual is made up of many "selves," or identities. He uses letters he has written to separate individuals in which he takes on entirely different personalities as an example of how individuals unconsciously move from highlighting one feature of their personality to another without losing their sense of identity. This is the healthy condition for individuals, because we each fill many distinct roles (such as the role we fill at work as opposed to the one we fill at home) and operate in varied contexts (within work itself, we may show a different side to our bosses than to our coworkers). To Gergen it is a misconception to see identity in unified terms: we actually house a variety of identities that reflect the complexity and variety of our social context. Like Judith Butler, social

psychologists tend to think of identity in terms of a complex mix of factors instead of seeing it as an expression of “biology is destiny.”

Andrew Weigert argues in “Identity: Its Emergence Within Social Psychology” (1983) that although the term “identity” is often used in the social sciences, universal acceptance of any definition of this concept does not exist. Rather than attempting to construct a static definition of “identity,” Weigert states that it is more fruitful to conceptualize identity (or sexual identity, in the case of this research) as a set of interdependent relationships. This matches well with Butler’s argument that gender identity is an expression that isn’t based in anything, and is simply what you do rather than who you are.

### *3.6 Performance is not optional, but its form can be changed*

The fact that gender identity is not rooted in biology, but is instead an expression that is performed by individual actors, does not mean that an individual can “opt out” of the process of acting out gender roles. Derrida’s famous quote that “there is no outside text” illustrates the impossibility of putting on *no performance* in terms of gender roles. Butler presents the case that although we can not work outside of the margins, individuals can still control the way in which they act out their gender identity: “For an identity to be an effect means that it is neither fatally determined nor fully artificial or arbitrary” (p. 147). To Butler, the key to upsetting the process of repetition and reification lies in the fact that the “act” is arbitrary and not rooted in biological truth. The arbitrary nature of gender identity means that existing roles may be subverted: “possibility of a failure to

repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction” (p. 141).

Although Butler may be right about the way in which social change can occur, she does not adequately outline the potential costs to individual actors who work outside of culturally established roles. Working in the context of the Second World War, Erik Erikson studied the effect of rapid social change and historical circumstance upon the formation of what he calls “ego-identity” (Erikson, 1968/1994). He loosely defines this concept as being the “self-sameness” and “continuity of self” that is recognized by both an individual and his/her social group. He found that a stable ego-identity is necessary for one to become a well-adjusted adult. Individuals caught in flux, such as were Italian-American children trying to be American citizens when America was at war with Italy, suffered “identity crisis” which was evidenced by confusion, apathy, or anxiety within them as individuals. Regardless of whether gender identity is an expression of biological fact, or is a performance of social mores, there may be a high emotional cost to working outside of established roles and expectations.

Gregory Stone holds that identity is not simply a synonym for “self” (G. Stone, 1962). To Stone, having an identity means that an individual is *situated*. The two components involved in being situated are that an individual *announces* an identity for him or herself using any number of symbols (e.g. a type of clothing), and others *place* the individual as a “social object” into the same category that has been announced. When the announcement and placement coincide, identity becomes meaningful to the actor. Furthermore, identity also simultaneously involves the processes of bringing together and identifying with things that are alike (i.e. those falling under the same category of

identity), and a separation from things that are unlike. This argument invites the question of how performing (announcing) gender in unexpected ways impacts upon individuals who are interpreting the performance (placing).

The fact that gender is performed, and that this performance is meaningful to individual actors, leads to the question of how the performance is structured. In *Stigma* (1963) Erving Goffman argues that *in face to face interaction* there are three distinct processes of identity generation which simultaneously influence the way in which people interpret themselves and others. Social identity is characterized by markers that are based either upon physical features, aspects of an individual's character, or features of lineage. Personal identity refers to the process through which individuals control information they present to others with the dual purpose of excluding discreditable features of identity while maintaining a credible, socially accepted persona. Goffman places ego identity (based loosely on Erikson's concept of the same name), in which individuals form consistent identities and communities based on similarities, into the third realm of identity creation. To Goffman, the process through which individuals create and maintain identities involves a complex interaction between: a) interpretations of biological fact, b) situation within a cultural schema that values some facets of identity over others, and c) an individual's desire to have a sense of "belonging" with others whom s/he identifies as being similar.

Due to the fact that context plays a huge part in the way in which individual actors perform their identity, it is useful at this point to examine the context of Internet chat sites (i.e. how the environment is structured, and which individuals are interacting in that way) in more detail. Perhaps the most serious limitation of the Internet with regard to changing



values is that the cultural landscape within which it has been created has influenced the way in which it has developed (Biyker, 1995). For the most part, men have been responsible for the creation of the Internet. This fact has contributed to a structure which many women have found problematic and unfriendly (Truong, 1993). Furthermore, the Internet is also a text-based medium, which means that language will invariably constrain what is being written to some degree. Language is laden with culturally based values, assumptions, and ideologies. As Shawn Wilbur points out in "An Archeology of Cyberspaces: Virtuality, Community, Identity" (1997), words are not simply neutral tools that we use in any way we see fit. They are often the products of intense ideological struggles, and have specific histories. The fact that individuals are constructing and reconstructing themselves using language and words means that, to some degree, they are reproducing existing stereotypes of both sexual identity and sexual identity construction.

Liebling wrote that "freedom of the press belongs to those who own one" (quoted in Tamosaitis, 1995: p.24), which highlights an important limitation of the Gutenberg revolution. If one group in society nearly has complete control of what is written, presented, and disseminated using this new technology, the technology can and will be used (on either a conscious or unconscious level) to preserve a set of relationships that favor those who are doing the writing. McLuhan also observes that technological innovations are not value free, and his famous quote "the medium is the message" implies that a set of values are embedded within the very structure of every technological advance.

An important limitation of computer and Internet technology is that access to these media is far from universal. According to CyberAtlas, in the year 2001 90% of

worldwide Internet users were located in industrialized countries, with Canada and the United States accounting for 57% of the global total. Currently, only 2% of the world's population has access to the Internet (Hammond, 1998). Furthermore, there is a disproportionate number of individuals online who have university education (Tamosaitis, 1995), and who are white, middle-class, and English speaking (Smith, 1998). It is an extremely narrow group of individuals that have access to Internet technology. Although it is impossible at this stage of research to speculate on the exact influence that these demographics have upon the process of sexual identity construction on Internet chat sites, it should be noted that most individuals online are quite similar in many ways.

### *3.7 Choosing different ways of expressing gender leads to "gender trouble"*

In his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman states that the "body merely provide[s] the peg on which something of collaborative manufacture will be hung for a time" (1959: p. 253). The fact that gender identity is not rooted in biological fact means that the way in which it is constituted may change over time and across space. This leads to the question: *by what process(es) does gender identity change over time?*

Unlike many radical thinkers, Butler outlines a course of action that will enable positive, meaningful social change. She argues that in order to break free of the existing gender roles, individuals have to subvert the "collaborative manufacture" of gender identity by performing gender in unexpected ways. This course of action disrupts the repetition of set cues, actions, and expressions, and casts a shadow of doubt over the

assumption that existing gender roles are Natural and unchanging. To Butler, “the task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat or, indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, *to displace* the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself” (p. 148).

The creation of a new politics of gender is the end result of the process of gender trouble that Butler has outlined. Performing gender is not optional, but the form it takes can be changed and modified. Once the existing set of gender roles are subverted, new roles and expectations will take their place and a new form of politics “would surely emerge from the ruins of the old.”

This thesis will examine the way in which individuals perform gender identity while using Internet chat sites, and determine to what degree the establishment of gender identity on Internet chat sites is an example of Butler’s “gender trouble.” Due to the fact that individuals online can perform without limitations, outside of cultural roles, and without any biological restrictions, the Internet chat sites seem to be the perfect environment in which to test Butler’s theories.

## Chapter 4: Methodology

### *4.1 Defining "Internet chat site"*

Individuals using the Internet are able to communicate with one another in many ways. Due to the fact that methods of online communication are diverse, it is necessary to limit the focus of this research to interaction in one particular type of forum. The chat sites that were used as a context for this research have five main similarities. 1) The chat sites are all text based, and have no internal method of sending multimedia files such as photographs, video clips, or sound clips. 2) Each chat site requires an individual to claim a name that is distinct, and guards each name with a hidden password chosen by that individual. 3) The chat sites used in this research allow an individual to write a profile that is visible to other individuals. 4) Each of the chat sites allows individuals the option of either speaking with others in private, or else taking part in discussions that take place in public areas. 5) The interaction that takes place on Internet chat sites is "real time," and is not subject to long delays.

### *4.2 Data collection*

In order to triangulate the data, this research utilizes three distinct methods of data collection, all of which are considered to be "non-random." The reasons for triangulating data through multiple forms of data collection are to correct for errors or biases inherent in each of the forms of data collection, as well as to verify the results of each of the groups of data through cross-comparison (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The three forms of data collection used in this research are: 1) Open-ended online interviews, which were

conducted through the Internet on various Internet chat sites. 2) Questions posted onto message boards within assorted chat sites, which led to individuals placing public responses on these boards. 3) Participant observation, in which the researcher participated in online life during the course of the interview process.

#### 4.2.1 *Open ended interviews*

With the goal of finding chat site users who were willing to take part in the interviews, the researcher spent time on assorted Internet chat sites developing friendships with individuals in that setting. Over the course of time, some individuals volunteered to be interviewed for this research. Individuals who were a part of the sample were also encouraged to let other chat site users know about this research process, thus forming a snowball sample. A third way of finding participants for interviews was to detail my research in a personal profile that was visible to other chat site users. All individuals participating in the interview portion of the data collection process were sent an Email containing a consent form, and were required to print it, sign it in ink, and mail it back to the researcher before an interview was scheduled.

The structure of the online interviews was open ended. The initial questions were based on central concepts that were drawn from the literature review. Once each interview started, the researcher was flexible in terms of encouraging the respondent to share stories, and allowing each individual to talk about the things that personally matter the most.

#### *4.2.2 Questions placed on public message boards*

A second form of data collection was conducted by placing questions on public message boards that exist on assorted chat sites. The questions were composed in such a way as to highlight key elements of the research that were highlighted in the literature review. Chat site users were free to answer the question regardless of whether they participated in the interview portion of the data collection process. The message boards were in public rooms, and anyone was able to read both the questions and the responses to those questions. Due to the fact that the message boards are totally public, no consent form was required in order to use the responses for purposes of this research.

#### *4.2.3 Participant observation*

The third and final method for data collection was through participant observation. While collecting data and finding interview participants, the researcher spent a great deal of time on the Internet chat sites talking with people and forming personal relationships. During this time, notes were kept in a journal that recorded the thoughts and experiences of the researcher. Notes were taken during the span of time between when the researcher first logged onto a chat site until the end of the data collection process. The data collected through participant observation was only used to validate and double check the theory generated by the other forms of data collection.

#### *4.3 Demographics of the interview respondents*

The respondents for this research were not chosen in a random manner, and no attempt was made to ensure that the demographics of the research sample reflect the

overall demographics of individuals online. Of the 59 individuals that agreed to take part in the interview process, 38 identified themselves as being female, while 21 identified as being male. Although the respondents in this sample ranged from 18 to 50 years of age, the majority of participants (n=46) were between the ages of 18 and 25. Eleven respondents were between the ages of 26 and 39, while only two were between the ages of 40 and 50.

Most of the respondents in this study lived in either Canada (n=15) or the United States of America (n=39) at the time of the interviews. Others were from Australia (n=3), England (n=1), and New Zealand (n=1). It should be noted that all of the interview participants were located in English-speaking, Western countries.

Ten respondents were married at the time of their first interview. During the course of the interview process two individuals went through divorces that were directly related to their online activity. Of the ten individuals who were married at the outset of the interviews, six had spouses who were not aware of large parts of their spouse's online activities. Three of the married individuals were in marriages that were identified as "open" (i.e. sexual or intimate relationships with individuals besides their spouses, whether online or in person, is acceptable to either partner).

Individuals in the sample were well educated, with only 7 of the 59 individuals in the research sample reporting that they their education ended with the completion of high school. 38 respondents identified themselves as being students, and 14 individuals in the sample had completed a university degree (three of which were at the graduate level). Perhaps surprisingly, only four participants who were students were involved in an

academic program that is computer-related. The other students in the sample were in a wide variety of arts and sciences programs.

#### *4.4 Linking research findings with extant theory*

In order to interpret and analyze the data in a systematic way, this research utilizes the principles of “adaptive theory,” as outlined by Derek Layder in his book *Sociological Practice: Linking Theory and Social Research* (1998). According to Layder, there are strengths and weaknesses in both atheoretical methodology, such as grounded theory and other types of qualitative research, and the theory-testing methodology that is prevalent in most quantitative research. In order to capture the strengths, and limit the weaknesses, inherent in both grounded theory and theory testing models, Layder proposes that there should be an interchange between prior theory and development of new theory: “The adaptive theory approach has an equal emphasis on the discovery of theory and the employment of prior or extant theory which stand in a relation of reciprocal influence to each other” (p. 20). Layder also argues that new theory that is relevant to the research may be added at any stage of the research process, including the data analysis stage that occurs after the data has been collected. The central aim of research from this perspective is to elaborate upon existing theory through an interchange between theory and data collected during the research process, while at the same time leaving open the possibility of discovery of new theory.



#### 4.5 Procedure for data analysis

Interviews used in this research were conducted online, and were stored in computer memory. The fact that the exact words used by each individual were logged and filed directly into computer memory eliminated any potential for errors that sometimes occur during the process of transcribing interviews at a later date. However, individuals sometimes made typographical errors, misspelled words, or used forms of Internet shorthand during the course of the interviews. When using quotes from interviews in the data analysis portion of this thesis, obvious errors and misspelled words have been corrected. Grammatical errors and Internet shorthand have been left intact.

The first stage in the data analysis procedure was pre-coding the data. During this stage of the data analysis, quotations from interviews that are relevant to the central concepts identified in *Gender Trouble* were highlighted. No labels were assigned at this point, and the concepts were not grouped. The initial stage of data analysis was also marked by openness to discovering new areas of importance, which is similar to the grounded theory methodology outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1990).

The next step in the data analysis process, which Layder calls “provisional coding,” is sorting and grouping the data. Central concepts that are relevant to gender trouble, as defined by Judith Butler, were used as areas of importance under which the data was initially grouped. During this stage quotes of interest that were highlighted during the pre-coding process were color-coded and sorted based on their relationship to areas of importance identified by Butler. This process is always characterized by openness to discovering new areas of importance not identified by Butler.

The pre-coding and provisional coding took the form of a continual dialogue between the existing theoretical model by Butler in which concepts were continually tested and validated. This interchange between existing and emerging theory is the defining feature of adaptive theory:

The 'adaptive' part of the term is meant to suggest that the theory both adapts to, or is shaped by, incoming evidence at the same time as the data themselves are filtered through (and adapted to) the extant theoretical materials that are at hand.

(Layder, 1998: p. 38)

The interchange between Butler's theory and the data resulted in establishing three core categories that were consistent with themes that individuals identified in the interviews, and that were identified by Butler as being key components of gender trouble. The three core categories include: the sex→gender→desire continuum, expressions versus performance, and repetition versus gender trouble. Along with these three core categories that are consistent with Butler's theory, a fourth category emerged and was named "architects of the body." These four core categories, emerging from the interplay between existing theory and patterns in the collected data, form the basis of the final data analysis.

Once the core categories were established, satellite categories were then developed and grouped under each of the main themes. Satellite categories are main themes and patterns that emerge both within and between the core categories. Within each of the core categories, satellite categories function both to describe main themes within the established core categories as well as providing an analysis of how these

themes operate in relationship to gender trouble. Satellite categories also emerged between the established categories, as four general patterns of behavior among Internet chat site users emerged through the data analysis process (named Realist, Personality Shopper, Hydra, and Hellenist).

Memo writing was used throughout the process of collecting data as a way of recording thoughts, ideas, and questions that arose throughout the research process. The thoughts of the writer during the interviews, as well as during the data analysis, were noted and recorded in a binder. While highlighting quotes in the pre-coding stage, written notes containing thoughts and ideas regarding the relevance of the selected quotations were placed in the margins of the transcripts. A separate log was kept of notes that were documented regarding assorted theoretical perspectives and potential additions to the literature review portion of this research project.

Data was analyzed in terms of testing the theory outlined by Butler, and creating an elaboration of that theory based on the data collected in this research. The structure of the data analysis is constructed in such a way as to analyze Internet chat site interaction that leads to the establishment of gender identities as well as determining to what degree the establishment of gender identity on Internet chat sites contribute to "gender trouble," as defined by Judith Butler.

## Chapter 5: Data Analysis

There she weaves by night and day  
A magic web with colors gay.  
She has heard a whisper say,  
A curse is on her if she stay  
    To look down to Camelot.  
She knows not what the curse may be,  
So she weaveth steadily,  
And little other care hath she,  
    The Lady of Shalott.

(Alfred, Lord Tennyson, 1832/1936)

Much like the Lady of Shalott, users of Internet chat sites weave a shadowy reality in which they create and recreate themselves and others. The world in which they become immersed is often a mix of hopeful illusions and futile delusions. Due to the physical distance between participants, the line between “real” and “illusory” is often blurry. Much like “looking down at Camelot” was to the Lady of Shalott, the results of bringing online experiences into everyday reality are sometimes disastrous. Despite the dangers, individuals continue to use the Internet chat sites in ways that may challenge deeply rooted cultural assumptions regarding the relationship between sex, gender, and desire.

Judith Butler argues that “parody in itself is not subversive,” and goes on to ask “And what kind of gender performance will enact and reveal the performativity of gender itself in a way that destabilizes the natural categories of identity and desire?” (p. 139). In order to address this fundamental question, the analysis of the data collected for this research will describe and analyze chat site interaction which leads to the establishment

of gender identity with the goal of determining the extent to which this interaction falls into the category of “gender trouble.”

The data analysis will be divided into four sections: 1) “Architects of the body” will describe the factors that influence the establishment of gender identity online, and will examine how these factors make the Internet chat sites fertile ground for the creation of gender trouble. 2) “Debunking the sex → gender → desire continuum” will show that the way in which individuals create gender identity on the Internet chat sites presents a fundamental challenge to the assumption that biological gender, sexuality, and desire are rooted in a larger biological Truth. 3) “Expression versus performance” will examine the complex interplay between the expressions of one’s nature, or true self, and the performance of a role or playing of a game that exists within the confines of the Internet chat sites. 4) “Repetition versus gender trouble” will present the argument that while being exposed to variations of gender identity online is important for setting the stage for gender trouble to occur, several other factors have to come into play in order to establish the subversive element that defines gender trouble as an important political goal.

### *5.1 Architects of the body*

The structure of online chat sites, and the impact of this structure upon the way in which individual actors interact, is a vital component of understanding the way in which gender identity is formed on Internet chat sites. Goffman points out in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) that human interaction takes place with established contexts, which he calls “front stage,” that are fixed and consistent. Front stage is divided into “setting,” which is the physical scene in which actors perform, and “personal

front,” which includes expressive equipment (such as uniforms) that are identified as being a part of specific performances. The personal front is further subdivided into “appearance,” which are markers that are used to indicate social status or role, and “manner,” which indicates what type of role the actor is portraying to an audience. While individuals using Internet chat sites are not able to rely on physical cues in the same way that Goffman describes, they are still able to present cues to one another through chat sites in order to present consistent and intelligible “self” to others.

The interview respondents identified four main features of interaction on Internet chat sites that are vital in terms of understanding how individuals perform roles and identities in this context. These features are: 1) Internet chat sites are text-based, 2) Chat site users may invent and re-invent themselves easily, 3) Physical distance and anonymity, and 4) Real life repercussions sometimes follow online interactions. I will examine each in turn, paying particular attention to how the structure of the chat sites influences whether gender trouble is taking place.

#### *5.1.1 Internet chat sites are text-based*

In the context of face-to-face interaction, an individual can rely on sensory cues to help announce a feature of his or her identity. In terms of what Goffman identifies as “appearance,” a person may put on perfume or a new silk shirt before a date in order to make a good impression. Touching rough whiskers on an individual’s face may automatically lead an individual to place that person as “man,” or as being “masculine.” The tone of a voice used by an individual is an indicator of “manner,” and may present the impression to others that that individual is being “stern,” “feminine,” or “sexy.” In

everyday face-to-face interaction the five senses impact upon, and help to shape, the process of establishing identity.

When an individual logs onto an Internet chat site he or she enters into an environment where the senses are compressed into one. An actor can see words on the screen, but he or she is unable to hear, smell, or taste any of the virtual surroundings. Due to the fact that sensory cues are limited, the setting becomes increasingly important in terms of developing meaningful interaction. In light of this, most Internet chat sites have been carefully constructed with emphasis placed upon the creation of settings that mimic those in which real life interaction takes place. Entire chat sites are often built around a central theme, such as the layout of a house or a castle. A person entering into a chat room is offered a written description of the surroundings that have been created by the owner of the chat site. Some rooms are set aside for public discussion, in which any individual can participate. Other areas of the chat site are private, and can be secured for personal conversations. Individuals may also communicate with other users through private messages called "tells," which will appear only on the screen of the person to whom the message is sent. The environment is sometimes frantic, and typing speed is the only constraint to the amount of simultaneous conversations in which an individual may engage.

When an individual chooses to speak with another person on the chat sites he or she often does not have any immediate physical cues on which to base reactions and interpretations. Many chat site users see the absence of most physical identity markers as a positive part of the Internet experience: "[chat sites] are another dimension of interacting with your fellow humans without the immediate physical assumptions that

shouldn't be there in the first place, but that are there subconsciously" (M #8). A shadow of doubt is cast over any verbal description of personal physical characteristics, as chat site users are keenly aware that a male may choose a female name, a Native American may describe herself as an East Indian, and an unattractive person can pose as a model.

Due to the fact that doubt regarding physical features of other individuals looms over interaction on chat sites, physical appearance and cues tend to be of lesser importance than is described by Goffman in *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. This lack of importance of physical characteristics is replaced by an emphasis on the mind of the individual with whom one interacts: "because the physical is not readily apparent, there is a focus on thoughts and ideas rather than visually-based cues and identity markers...the chat sites are a place where the word rather than the picture still reigns supreme" (M #4). Being free from the physical body can lead to dramatic changes in interaction patterns when compared to face-to-face encounters. One female succinctly summed up the appeal of using a text-based medium like the chat sites as follows: "I like not having men stare at my tits" (F #27). Individuals who are often considered to be overweight, unattractive, or exceptionally attractive tend to report that they find the anonymity afforded to them by the chat sites refreshing, and the interaction wonderfully pure. The focus on the mind and personality of individuals is often seen as a departure from being treated as a "piece of meat," which is often the case in real life encounters. Even the use of emoticons, such as :) to represent a smile, blurs physical distinctions between individuals because it appears the same way regardless of who uses it.

Visual elements are somewhat removed from being a principal factor within online interaction, resulting in a range of views regarding whether or not individuals feel



as though they are talking with actual people when they use the chat sites. Some people see chatting as interacting with a bunch of pixels on a screen, and they do not have much concern about the thoughts and feelings of the other chat site users. At the other extreme, other people view the interaction on the chat sites as being very real. As a general rule the latter group will treat people they meet online in the same way that they would treat any individual they meet in face-to-face encounters.

People attempting to form relationships on chat sites often find themselves in intense relationships that tend to burn bright in the early stages, but fade away within days or weeks. This pattern matches the perspective presented by Georg Simmel, who put forth that relationships involving two people (a dyad) have a greater degree of longevity if individuals release “individual exclusive” (i.e. things shared with no one other than the other person in the dyad) information gradually (Simmel, 1950). The result of forming bonds quickly, where deep dark secrets are shared within the first few conversations, is that the relationships are often not suited for “small talk.” For example, one interviewee described how she told her partner all of her secrets regarding abuse in her past, and revealed all of her fears. He opened up to her as well, sharing his inner thoughts and desires. After a few weeks, they no longer had anything “big” to share that was new, and the conversations revolved around what they did in a particular day, or their plans for that evening. This “trivial” style of relationship is poorly suited for the Internet chat sites, because the role of conversation increases in importance when the another individual is not physically present (i.e. she described how in long term relationships people can just cuddle instead of talk when they have nothing to say, which is missing online). The text-based nature of the chat sites makes silence extremely uncomfortable.

Trust is sometimes an issue because of the nature of text-based interaction: "I tend to accept what people say, but not put too much faith in their statements. I tend to associate with people I think are trustworthy, but still there is always a small doubt...nothing big" (F #27). The trust issues usually stem from the fact that without face-to-face interaction it is often difficult or impossible to verify many things that any given chat site user says. When interacting with an individual who lives 1000 kilometers away it is impossible to know for certain whether he or she is being honest about having red hair, for example. Even in cases where a person sends a photograph to another there still may be doubt as to whether the picture is actually of someone else. This lack of trust is the antithesis of what Habermas calls an "ideal speech situation" (Habermas, 1975). According to Habermas, the potential lack of reliability of the individuals with whom a person online communicates, and the inability of individuals to verify whether certain statements made by others are true, both constitute a fundamental breakdown of communication leading to a loss of legitimacy.

#### *5.1.2 Chat site users may invent and re-invent themselves easily*

The most important component of gender trouble is re-inventing one's self in forms that contradict set gender roles and societal assumptions. Individuals who frequent Internet chat sites have a great deal of freedom in the process of creating and re-creating themselves within this virtual setting.

The first choice a person makes after choosing to log into a chat site is picking a name. In the terms laid out by Gregory Stone (1962), it may be said that individuals online can freely *announce* features of identity through use of a name, while in real life

interaction an individual does not usually have control over what is being announced because names are most often assigned to an individual (particularly a family name or a nickname). The name a chat site user picks usually reflects a part of his or her character. For example, a user who views himself as formal and sophisticated may pick the name "Tuxedo," while an individual who is going through changes in life may be drawn to "Ovid" to reflect this metamorphosis. Aside from establishing one's own identity, picking the name "Ovid" also reflects the starting point for constructing identities for others. The chat site user may value education, and will not be interested in interacting with an individual who has to ask to what the name "Ovid" means. Some individuals will move beyond the literal meaning of a name in order to announce a feature of their online identity: "I picked it because it had things in common with my real name, but it also had a nice harsh sound" (M #17). Chat site users sometimes forgo the option to create a new name when they are online, and use their real life names when they are on the chat sites. Usually individuals will choose to use their real life names as a statement that there is no distinction between an online persona and their real life persona: "using my real name [online] means theoretically it should be closer" (M #4).

Chat site users fall into four main categories in terms of how an online persona compares to their offline personality or personalities. The first group of chat site participants can be described as being *realists*, preferring to act in the same way online as they do in face-to-face interaction. Individuals in this category make no distinction between their online and offline personality, and see the friendships and relationships they develop as being every bit as real as their face-to-face relationships. The second category of chatters can be seen as *personality shoppers*. This group tends to treat the

chat sites as an imaginary shopping trip to a virtual store for personalities. They tend to try on an assortment of different personae, casting off ones that do not suit them. This group of chat site users tends to experience the greatest amount of change in their everyday lives due to their experiences on the chat sites, because they adopt personality traits that receive good responses while consciously casting off features of their personality that evoke poor reactions. The third group of individuals can be seen as being like the multi-headed *hydra* from Greek mythology. These individuals will create many selves, using multiple names. Each persona reflects a different, but one-dimensional, aspect of his or her personality. Several of the interview participants described having a dozen or more separate personalities online: “one of my friends here said that she finds me different in all my accounts. ‘Y’ is a depressive side which I don’t bring out much on the net cos as a wiz I’m a host and think I should be warm and convivial.. ‘X’ is kinda wild like I really am.. perhaps not quite so shy” (M #4). The fourth group of chat site users will create an idealized self when interacting with others online. Perhaps the most fitting label for this group would be *hellenistic*, which is the ancient style of sculpture where flawless beauty was presented in art and imperfections were nowhere to be found. Traits that are seen as undesirable are hidden from others, while other identity features (both physical and personality-based) are created: “In my view, most people use chat rooms as a means to be someone other than they are, they make themselves into who or what they desire to be, but couldn't never pull off in real life” (F #10). When asked whether or not people online see the “real” you, another chat site user responded: “I think they see what I wish I could be” (F: 26). Creating an idealized or Hellenistic account of self should not be confused with lying and portraying an untrue self: “the chat site allows

people to be who they really are because who they are is really who they WANT to be. It's pure choice, not inhibited by expectation" (M #8). Companion to the Hellenistic portrayal of an idealized self is an idealized other, where individuals fill in unknown identity features with their imaginations, creating an image of other which is most desirable: "a character I once knew thought I was about his age... assumed I was "white"... assumed I was from a middle class family...assumed I was a college student... etc... rather than a university graduate... older.. from the streets as well as from the suburbs" (M #8).

The Realist, the Personality Shopper, the Hydra, and the Hellenist are not always mutually exclusive categories. Some individuals may be realists when they first experience the chat sites, but will evolve into presenting an idealized self as time progresses. Hydrae tend to establish a multitude of personae, but as a general rule they find it difficult to manage them all for prolonged periods. Personalities often blur and merge over the course of time, until a small number of very distinct main personalities remain. There may also be cases where an individual has personae of mixed types. For example, one chat site user described his main online persona as being very much like himself in real life, and he used his real life name. His other personae were a mix of idealized selves and assorted personalities he wore for a short period of time.

The anonymity that Internet chat sites may offer sometimes has the effect of being a catalyst for formations of identity that exist for a short period of time. If they have a reason for wanting to do so, individuals can change names, and identities, quickly and easily. Some individuals will change their names in order to avoid contact with specific

people, or to get a “fresh start” after falling into disrepute. Others will change names as they move from one type of personality to another.

Some chat sites have set codes of conduct and rules that prohibit users from having multiple personae. The nature of the chat site often dictates the formal and informal regulation regarding multiple identities. As a general rule, the chat sites that do not involve adult themes are more likely to discourage multiple identities: “it was NOT a sexual site...just all friends that post to the same group...much more a feeling of family. If you use an alias, people tend to think that you are...hmm...trying to think of the appropriate word here....untruthful about who you are, I guess” (F #27). When moving to chat sites that are sexually orientated, users often find it less desirable to use their real names and are more likely to use an alias or alter ego. There are many reasons for this, including fear of being stalked by someone from the sexual talkers, avoiding being linked directly to sexual activity on the chat sites, or being “outed” as a deviant. As Becker points out in *Outsiders* (1963), individuals who are a part of groups that are considered outside of the norm enact behaviors (such as switching names or having multiple identities to avoid people who are harmful, or to avoid being linked to expressions of desire that fall outside of accepted social boundaries) that serve to isolate them from interference from “the square population.”

The ephemeral quality of the chat sites, where individuals can disappear and reappear in different guises that are not easily connected with one another, also brings out destructive features of identity hidden within some individuals. An example of this is racists and white supremacists who use the chat sites as a way of directly stating messages of hate: “because whities often think this is THEIRS and they can say things

they can't normally say in real life without consequences. I have seen white power fascists get on chat lines and start screaming their crap all over the place" (F #1). Other individuals who were interviewed told stories of members of hate groups recruiting new members on the chat sites, or using the chat sites as meeting places.

The fact that individuals have the ability to change identities often, and interact seemingly without consequence, would appear to be a mixed blessing. An individual actor can take on roles that challenge the assumptions hidden within "normal" gender identity. This process would appear to be a part of what Butler calls "gender trouble." But if that individual quickly discards the subversive identity formation soon afterwards, was the role, or the process, truly subversive? Furthermore, does gender trouble include acting out in ways that are subversive, but that cause harm in other ways (e.g. racism, or attempting to have sexual interaction with children)?

### *5.1.3 Physical distance and anonymity*

A common theme that emerged from the interviews is that individuals using chat sites will talk about things online that they do not share with even their closest friends in their corporeal life. This follows the pattern outlined by Goffman regarding management of an identity that is considered to be discreditable : "A very widely employed strategy of the discreditable person is to handle his risks by dividing the world into a large group to whom he tells nothing, and a small group to whom he tells everything" (Goffman, 1963: p. 95). Because distance and anonymity that chat sites provide help to shield individuals from bad reactions and hurtful actions from others, individuals often choose friends on chat sites to be a part of the group to whom they tell everything. The main reason for this

selection is that the physical distance between themselves and their friends engenders a sense of safety and security that allows individuals to take risks when participating in online interaction. For example, one participant stated that she would never tell someone in face-to-face interaction that she was sexually abused as a child because she would not want to see the expression on the person's face when she told the story. She stated "sometimes I don't want to deal with real people... in your face emotions" (F #26). The chat sites provided a forum in which she could talk about this painful experience without having to see their reactions.

The fact that many people feel that they can share deep secrets, or meaningful dreams, with the friends they meet online more readily than with real life companions leads them to believe that online interaction is "more true" than its face-to-face counterpart. People often feel as though the masks they wear in face-to-face interactions are stripped away when they connect with another individual online, and they are able to be "as they really are" when they frequent the chat sites. As expectations based on age, gender, occupation, race, sexuality, and other things are stripped away many individuals report that they feel that they can "just be themselves."

The physical distance that exists between chat site participants also has the effect of making interaction more direct: "I say things to people that I normally wouldn't say in real life out of consideration etc. I can be the biggest bitch ever known online pretty much. And they love me for it!" (F #10). The direct style of communication stems from the fact that there is often a large physical distance between them and the person with whom they are interacting, and because the text-based medium limits the amount that a person can say at one time. Beyond making interaction more direct, individuals report



feeling less inhibited on the chat sites than they do in face-to-face interaction: "I don't have a very good image of myself so it is easier to be more confident and outgoing on here than in real life..." (F #26).

Some individuals are drawn to safety that exists due to the large distance between agents in chat site interaction: "females I think view this as a "safe" way to interact with other people, especially guys....There is a really high proportion of women I have met on line that have undergone some sort of sexual abuse in their past that makes them more leery of meeting guys in real life" (F #26). The physical space between chatters forms a barrier of safety, which fosters a style of interaction that does not have the same level of informal constraints and concerns as face-to-face encounters.

Judith Butler refers to the role of political and social regulations that force individuals into established categories, which are then naturalized. Informal social constraints, where physical violence can be the result of working outside of moral regulation, are not a strong factor on the Internet chat sites. An individual may be able to curse at another person for stepping outside of gender roles, but this is not on the same level as the physical reality of being in physical danger for being gay, or worrying about being raped because you make a suggestive comment or dress in a provocative way. The loosening of social regulation and increase in physical distance in which the interaction takes place fosters a sense of security in which individuals feel free to express themselves in a variety of different ways that may challenge assumptions regarding gender identity.

#### *5.1.4 The interaction between real life and online activities*

Although the landscape of the Internet chat sites exists in the minds of the individual participants, there are times when a person's physical existence impacts upon Internet interaction. When asked to give an example of how real life can impact on chat site interaction, one interviewee responded that: "one immediately comes to mind... another person walking in the room and wanting to carry on a discussion with you while simultaneously asking what it is you're doing online exactly and trying to read over your shoulder" (F #10). The uneasy interplay between the physical reality of an individual's existence and that person's interaction on the chat sites can be difficult for some chat site users. Even though the imaginary world of Internet interaction may be idyllic, the real life context may include constant distractions such as the doorbell ringing, hunger, or feeling hot or cold.

Some Internet chat sites users feel that it is necessary to keep online activity hidden and separate from their real life existence. An example of this is individuals who are in the military who have access to the Internet, but have to keep their activities online hidden: "I'm in the office alone at night. If I hear someone coming by I hit "X" and change screens. If I was caught I would be in serious trouble" (M #7). Many other chat site users described having access to the Internet through computer common areas at their University. This leads to a fear that the person sitting at the next terminal may be able to look over and read the text on the screen, which is sometimes sexual in nature. Married chat site users who keep their online activities a secret from their spouses also find that their everyday existence has a great deal of impact upon online interaction. They usually are not able to be online at certain times of the day, and may have to log out of the chat

site suddenly and without warning if their spouse or partner unexpectedly walks into the room.

Similar to Goffman's theory regarding how discreditable features of identity are hidden (Goffman, 1963), Internet chat site users sometimes hide aspects of their identities that they feel are embarrassing, or that they are uncomfortable disclosing to others. The identity features that are hidden from view most often among the interview participants are virginity, being married, and identifying one's self as of a different gender online than in real life. As relationships on the chat sites develop, there is often an emotional inclination to mix elements of physical interaction into the equation. People will exchange photographs, talk on the phone, or even agree to meet face-to-face. A large concern among some chat site users is that a relationship that develops online may be jeopardized, or limited to the confines of the chat sites, if either party is not honest or forthcoming about their physical appearance. As a general rule, if a chat site user wants to meet a person in real life, or take the step to show a person a photograph, that person has to be honest with the person with whom he or she is interacting. At the point in which pictures are exchanged, physical identity markers, and all of the assumptions regarding physical aspects of identity, are introduced into the dynamic of interaction with that person. The idealized other is replaced by the corporeal other: "It's almost invariably disappointing. I like knowing what people look like, but...well. I'd rather they were more attractive, and less stereotypically computer-useresque" (M #17). When asked if a photo ever changed the way that she viewed another chat site user, one individual responded: "I would like to be good and say no, but sometimes they do...as shallow as that sounds" (F #26). Exchanging photos, and bringing the physical body back into play to a larger

extent, reintroduced issues such as sexism, ageism, and racism. After exchanging photos for the first time with an individual, the response one chat site user received was: "then he said 'I'm surprised to be so attracted to you because I don't usually find colored women attractive.' He made lots of racist comments after that" (F #1).

People in the Realist category tend to be the most honest when giving physical descriptions of themselves to potential friends or partners. A portion of individuals from the Hydra and Personality Shopper categories will provide an honest physical description while in the context of certain personae. As a general rule, if the identity is the person's central persona online (i.e. the persona that most resembles him or herself in real life, or the one that has the same name as the individual's name in real life) then people tend to be honest when giving physical descriptions. Individuals from the Hellenistic group are more likely to embellish or lie about their physical appearance, and are the least likely to be able to move a relationship from the confines of the Internet and into the physical world in some way. In order to make the transition into a physical world setting, individuals from the Hellenistic group have to admit to being deceptive about their physical appearance. There is often embarrassment that accompanies having to tell someone that has grown to be important in your life that you have misrepresented your physical appearance: "we started talking and I really liked him...so a few days later I told him that I wasn't really like what I had described, which was 36d-22-34....and very sexually experienced and adventurous" (F #26).

The fact that individuals can be honest about some physical features and not others creates a dilemma in terms of gender trouble. When Kinsey published his studies on male and female sexuality, a large part of why they were revolutionary is because they

made public the fact that people often acted in ways that fell outside of societal expectations. If an individual lies about his or her physical appearance and finds it difficult to meet people in a face-to-face setting for fear that the inaccuracies in what they described will be exposed, no one else would know that a new formation of gender was established. Like a tree falling in the philosophical woods, this activity would make no political sound.

The introduction of the physical can also unravel the web of identity, reducing new formations of identity to old stereotypes and prejudices regarding the constitution of gender identities. Despite these difficulties, the fact that individuals can interact without physical constraints for extended amounts of time will lead some individuals to (potentially) *challenge* some deeply rooted assumptions regarding gender identity, and to *repeat* these challenges in other contexts. The combination of challenging gender identity, and repeating subversive elements of the formation of new gender identities, is the essence of gender trouble.

Regardless of whether an individual feels that other chat site users are “real” or “words on a screen,” use of the Internet chat sites often has repercussions that trickle through an individual’s real life. While a chat site user may meet a group of friends online, this sometimes has a negative impact on face-to-face relationships: “It confuses things to a painful extent...I become torn between my girlfriend (who lives a good distance away, so I seldom get to see her), and this person or persons who I’ve developed an interest in. It’s actually broken up a relationship, in the past” (M #17). Individuals often describe scenarios in which they spend more and more time on the Internet and less time with friends and family that live in the same area: “I have had a couple [of Internet

relationships] where they have gotten serious enough to have interfered with my real life. I wanted to be on here talkin all the time, I was thinkin about em all the time” (F #1). Individuals sometimes suffer from what is commonly known as Internet addiction, and spend many hours online to the detriment of all other parts of their lives. During this time their jobs may suffer, they may experience a lack of sleep, and their continual online activity may lead to the breakdown of friendships and family ties.

The physical distance between people who frequent the Internet chat sites makes it difficult to move Internet relationships and friendships into real life. The cost of telephone bills and transportation often make it impractical for individuals to bring relationships that develop in the context of Internet chat sites into reality: “It leads to some pretty expensive phone bills if you aren’t careful. And plane tickets aren’t cheap either” (F #26). Another factor that prohibits individuals from bringing online relationships into real life settings is the fact that they are already in existing face-to-face relationships. Several individuals in the armed forces noted that infidelity is seen as a serious offense, punishable by dishonorable discharge. One individual stated: “if anyone found out I would lose my wife, my kids, and my career” (M #2).

Several individuals described being stalked by people they met on Internet chat sites. A person who is technologically sophisticated may be able to find personal information, and move the interaction into a face-to-face context without permission from the other party. “He got my email address, and he was a hacker who had connections, ways of finding out who I was. Then one day he showed up at my front door. Luckily I live in a security building, and I didn’t buzz him in. Then he confronted me on the street, in broad daylight, a few days later. He was eventually locked up” (F #29).

Despite the risks to other parts of their real life existence, the allure of the Internet chat sites can be extremely strong: "I began thinking of The Other Woman all the time, whilst my real relationship atrophied... my girlfriend would come to the computer and I would ask her, not very nicely, to leave me alone" (M# 17). Much of the reason why individuals such as M #17 will sacrifice their real life relationships stems from the fact that once they start to experience sexual variations on Internet chat sites that they have fantasized about for their entire lives, they find that their real life relationships become mundane by comparison. Other users also attribute the depth of sharing that occurs on the chat sites make real life relationships seem emotionally shallow or hollow in comparison. There is also the element that the "grass is greener on the other side of the fence," in which an individual that you see for a short time is seen as being more desirable than the person with whom you interact on a daily basis.

The fact that online interaction has serious real life consequences makes it difficult for many people to stay involved in the chat sites for long periods of time. Negative reactions from real life friends and partners can act as a form of social control, making Internet chat site participants feel as though their activities online are wrong or tawdry. Wanting to bring certain variations of sexual play, or formations of gender identity, into reality can lead to harsh criticism from friends, peers, and partners. The gender trouble that occurs as a result of interaction on the Internet chat sites often comes at a high personal cost to the individuals involved, despite the veil of anonymity that is usually associated with online interaction.

### 5.2 *Debunking the sex→gender→ desire continuum*

One of Butler's main arguments is that rather than being the natural foundation upon which gender and desire rests, sex is itself a product of gender identity. If sex is not natural, and is not an unquestionable Truth, then gender and desire fall into the realm of "performances" rather than expressions of an inner essence. The issue this thesis will address is whether or not the ways in which individuals create and express gender identities on Internet chat sites support Butler's claim. This is a difficult task, because the assumption that sex is a biological Truth is deeply ingrained and has only recently been challenged. Butler outlines problems inherent in stepping outside of established norms and cultural expectations in order to break free of the sex→gender→ desire continuum:

There is no ontology of gender on which we might construct a politics, for gender ontologies always operate within established political contexts as normative injunctions, determining what qualifies as intelligible sex, invoking and consolidating the reproductive constraints on sexuality, setting the prescriptive requirements whereby sexed or gendered bodies come into cultural intelligibility.

(Butler, 1990: p. 148)

If Butler is correct, the very process of presenting sex in a way that is intelligible to others will mean that individuals using chat sites will echo current assumptions about sex and gender identity. Much like drag queens represent a stereotypical image of "female" in order to make the gender transformation intelligible, users of Internet chat sites may challenge some assumptions regarding gender while simultaneously reinforcing others.



Based upon analysis of the online interviews, this portion of the data analysis will be divided into three sections, each of which will outline an area of importance that provides insight into whether the way in which individuals establish gender identities on the Internet chat sites challenges the sex→gender→desire continuum. The three sections are: 1) “Does gender identity take the same shape online as it does offline?”, which examines the question of whether gender identity take the same shape online as it does offline. 2) “The mind and the imagination” presents the argument that the validity of the sex→gender→desire continuum is challenged by the fact that within the context of Internet chat sites there is an emphasis on the mind as a source of desire. 3) “Identity markers” shows that there may be features of gender identity that remain constant as an individual moves between real life interaction and that which takes place on the Internet chat sites, but the features themselves are not rooted in biology.

### *5.2.1 Does gender identity take the same shape online as it does offline?*

If sex is the natural core of gender identity and desire, then it would be expected that sex, gender identity are all natural expressions of the same inner biological Truth. If this is the case, sex, gender identity, and desire would take the same form online as they do offline. At times, desire in the online chat site environment seems to echo desire in the corporeal world. This is particularly true once individuals introduce a physical element, such as a picture, into their interaction:

Question: Does a picture ever change your perception of the person?

M #4: no, cos I'm much more excited by minds than bodies. Though if they have a distinctive feature... such as large breasts etc...you can focus on that in net.sex.

(M #4)

Other individuals do not find any appeal in expressing sex and desire in ways that are different from corporeal interactions. The belief is that sex as an inner essence, and desire is a human instinct. These individuals are usually in the Realist category, and they tend to avoid net.sex encounters. A common complaint is that they do not like the way that everything has to be described and imagined during net.sex, and that the focus is on the mind rather than letting nature takes its course: “[net.sex] takes too much thinking... of the right phrase, to make it seem more erotic... just too much of a chore... in real life I can be good based on instinct” (F #10).

As Butler's theory predicts, some individuals do not like net.sex if the partner steps outside of traditional gender roles. At the point in which “normal” roles are abandoned, sex and gender identity become unintelligible and desire does not come into being. Telling the story of his worst net.sex experience, one Realist interview participant described his reaction to a female who took control and was sexually aggressive during the encounter: “now, I'd whistle & say that could be sexy... if it weren't for a heavy clumsy air to it. It seemed heavy & unnatural... even from the man's rough sex, no foreplay point of view” (M #8).

Not all individuals whose beliefs mirror the assumptions of the sex→ gender→ desire continuum are Realists. A female, who falls within the Personality Shopper

category of online interaction, also described having issues making sense of Internet users that present gender identity in ways that do not conform to cultural expectation. This individual, who described herself as sexually submissive, showed no respect for a man who approached her and asked her to play a dominant role in an online sexual encounter that included cross-dressing: "He was telling me he was only wearing pink silk bikinis and nothing else and that he wanted to submit to me. I was like... yea you could use a little fucking dignity" (F #11).

Predictably, Hellenistic individuals presented themselves as being the "ideal" males and females. Expressions of gender identity from this group all fell into alignment with expected codes of conduct for males and females. One individual, who described herself as being sexually inexperienced in her corporeal life, said that she acted "shy," "coy," and "feminine" while interacting with others on Internet chat sites. Furthermore, when it came to sexual activity online, she stated: "well, I just let the guy lead the way usually. In other words I wont initiate it on my own." (F #13). M #10 adopted a hyper-masculine role online, saying that he feels he should be the one to initiate sexual interaction with female personae online: "Its my job as a man to get the ball rolling. Online is like any other place when it comes to that." In both these cases the individuals involved did not question the traditional belief that it is the role of the male to initiate sexual encounters despite the fact that they were interacting in the context of Internet chat sites.

Members of the Hydra category of chat site users all formed at least some of their online identities in ways that challenge the assumptions existing within the sex→gender→ desire continuum. For example, F #20 participated in online activities that

challenged the assumptions of gender identity in two radically different ways. Rather than using the same persona to enact each of these expressions of desire, she used a distinct persona for each. Using the identity that she described as closest to her face-to-face personality, she experienced sexual contact with another female, which is an activity that she stated she wants to bring into her corporeal life: "I actually thought it would be interesting to have some sort of experience with the female. She and I fooled around for maybe 5 minutes. Just a little fondling of the breasts and stuff." Using a different sexually charged persona, F #20 also experienced forms of desire that she had no intention of bringing into reality, but still fall outside the boundaries of "normal" female gender identity: "anyway, [on a chat site] we ended up having anal sex, which is hilarious, because I would never do that in real life. But it wasn't hurting me, and like I said, no one would never know, so I did it."

### 5.2.2 *The mind and the imagination*

One of the greatest challenges to the sex→ gender→ desire continuum is the fact that individuals from all four categories tend to focus on the mind and the imagination, rather than physical factors, as the ultimate source of desire. The source of desire among individuals using the Internet chat sites tends to be inner qualities such as imagination and intelligence rather than physical "reality" of an individual: "I will only be with a good net.sex artist. I cannot be with someone who can't spell or has no creativity" (F: 27). Much like Butler's argument that gender identity is the source of sex instead of being a result of it, the focus on the intellectual part of desire among chat site users challenges the assumption that the quest for physical pleasure is the source of human desire. There

are differences, however, in the *meaning* ascribed to desire on the Internet chat sites which reflect the differing attitudes of the four groups.

Realists will often focus on the intellectual and spiritual components of desire online, and see it as fundamentally the same as the way in which desire operates within the context of corporeal interaction. Showing continuity between corporeal and Internet interaction, one individual made no distinction between the two when describing what constitutes desire: "The best sex comes from the soul" (M #8). Other realists also describe a different type of continuity, in which the desire they experience online is closely linked to the way that they believe desire should be in face-to-face interaction. One individual who was married chose to use the chat sites to satisfy sexual needs that her husband was unwilling to provide: "For me, I think net.sex is an extension of my fantasy world... a part of what I should be having but dont" (F #27).

The lack of distinction between online and corporeal desire by members of the Realist group is fertile ground in which gender trouble may grow. F #16 told of how desire is rooted so deeply in her mind that physical pleasure, specifically orgasms, resulted from mental and emotional stimulation. Describing the impact of experimenting with BDSM<sup>2</sup> play on the Internet chat sites, she states: "I don't touch myself when I do that online. My imagination creates a sim of reality that works better. I have yet to not have an orgasm" (F #16). In a total reversal of the assumption that physical sensations are the root of sexual excitement and release, F #16 chooses to forgo the physical aspects of desire entirely while interacting online because they diminish the mental and emotional power of the experience.

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<sup>2</sup> BDSM is a combination of the terms "bondage and discipline," "dominance and submission," and "sadism and masochism."

Perhaps due to their desire to find partnerships or identity formations that “fit,” Personality Shoppers tend to link desire with feeling “connected” to another person or to a form of identity. Regardless of whether desire is expressed on the Internet chat sites or in real life, the ultimate goal of being connected is seen as more important than physical sensations: “it only pisses me off when people focus on the sex to the detriment of the connection ...bad sex is when you feel you haven't touched the other, good is when you feel like one entity” (M #14). ). The focus on connection between individuals leads to entirely unexpected permutations of desire: “I got truly and legitimately aroused by our arguments. We argued about politics and economics and then like.... at halftime we would update each other on how pleased and aroused we were, then eventually we would log off and go masturbate” (F #1). Ultimately, the search for a connection with another person in a non-physical context such as the Internet chat sites leads to expressing desire in a variety of ways. A female interview respondent described trying variations of desire in the context of chat sites with individuals who identified themselves as being male, and then experiencing “a different bond” with a woman during her first sexual encounter with a person who identified as being a female (F #32).

Although members of the Hydra group perform gender identity in ways that are more diverse than other groups, they make the greatest distinction between how desire occurs online as opposed to how it exists in corporeal reality. Some Hydrae report that their experiences online have not changed their view of desire in real life: “no.. since they are worlds apart.. what happens on the net is idealized and much more descriptive and detailed... real life sex is not an intellectual pursuit in the same way” (M #4). Others report displaced feelings and weak emotional connections: “One is like playing with a

toy. You might have real feelings, but they are displaced feelings... The real thing is much more involved, more dangerous, more pleasurable" (M #17). While it is true that Hydrae adopt more forms of gender identities than the other groups, the fact that they see online interaction as being inherently different from face-to-face interaction means that their activity is closer to what Butler would call "parody" than "gender trouble."

Hellenistic individuals tend to focus on romantic notions of how desire operates when they interact online: "I have found that the best net.sex is with someone you care about...it adds an emotional content that is absent if you are just fooling around cause you are horny" (F #13). Although the elevation of the emotional connection above the physical elements of desire seems similar to the Realist or the Personality Shopper, it is likely that this individual is acting out a cultural stereotype of what females are "supposed" to crave. Given that other aspects of identity construction within the Hellenistic group tend to be conservative rather than subversive, this construction of desire may in fact conform to cultural expectations for females. The importance of interpretation of online interaction will be explored in more detail in Chapter Four.

### *5.2.3 Identity markers*

In theory, Internet chat sites enable individuals to construct gender identity in any way that they can imagine. In reality, most individuals have identity features that are consistent in their real life interaction with the interaction that occurs within the context of Internet chat sites. If the sex→ gender→ desire continuum accurately reflects human experience, biological sex would be the unchanging foundation upon which interaction takes place. However, this model only describes the interaction patterns of a small

portion of the individuals participating in the study, and does not reflect the complexity of identity formation. While grouping individuals into the categories of Realist, Personality Shopper, Hydra, and Hellenist has been useful to this point to describe larger patterns of behavior, these groupings shed no light on the nature of set identity markers that are consistent between corporeal life and Internet chat sites.

Two interview participants, who identified themselves as being female, constructed gender identities online that explored sexual experiences with both males and females. These individuals both stated that they are willing to engage in sexual activity with females in their corporeal lives as well. The assumption of heterosexuality hidden with the sex→ gender→ desire continuum is challenged by the way that these two individuals construct their gender identity, because the biological sex of these two individuals does not dictate their formation of gender identity or the ways in which they express desire. Despite the fact that they are willing to construct formations of gender identity that may include sexual exploration with either men or women, the two women shared an identity feature that was unchanging and not open to exploration. Both identified themselves as being sexually monogamous in both their online and real lives. One individual stated “this brings into a point that I rarely do sex, in real life or otherwise. Even netsex is personal...Sex, in any form, is personal” (F #16), while the other stated that “I wont play with strangers, or people I don’t like, just like I wouldn’t sleep with them in real life” (F #27). Even though “biological sex” is not a meaningful identity marker in these cases, there are still aspects of gender identity that both individuals are not willing to challenge regardless of the context.



While many of the males that were interviewed for this research stated that they had taken on a female persona at some point in time, very few of them constructed their gender identity in a way that included having sexual contact with individuals who identified themselves as being male. Some males adopted a female persona in order to gain status and authority in some chat site context: "I was trying to be a wiz<sup>3</sup> at Lintilla which only has female wiz for historical reasons.. I still sometimes use female accounts though I don't net.sex" (M #9). Another male interview participant stated that he created female personae in order to lure people onto his chat site: "When it was just me here people tended not to stay. So I gave them a woman to talk to. I was kinda ruthless about this place working" (M #4). In both of these cases the men adopted female personae while in the context of Internet chat sites, but their focus on power and success as reasons for doing so still fell within the context of identity markers that are traditionally associated with masculine roles and identity. Their lack of willingness to participate in sexual contact with other individuals who identify as being male showed that their heterosexual identity marker was still secure, regardless of the context. Individuals who value being connected with other people will occasionally adopt personae that are of the opposite sex in order to establish friendships and gain access to people who would otherwise be inaccessible: "There are people, generally women, generally bi, who won't speak to a male except to insult him... so they might insult me when I'm a male... then I come on as a female, exhibit the same personality, and they talk to me on friendly terms" (M #17).

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<sup>3</sup> "Wiz" is an abbreviated form of the word "wizard." A wizard is someone who has administrative privileges and responsibilities on an Internet chat site.

Another example of individuals who create gender identity in seemingly challenging ways, but without disrupting their heterosexuality, are the men who create female personae in order to have "lesbian" sex: "well, the horny net geeks are crazy...they either want to "fuck" or tell me they are female and want to be with me <groan>" (F #27). Usually, individuals who show no commitment to the way that they construct gender identity, and who adopt formations of gender identity with the sole purpose of gaining access to others, are treated with scorn and ostracized by other chat site users.

A very small group of chat site users do not seem to have any "sacred" aspects to their identity, and freely move from one formation of gender identity to another in both their corporeal and their online lives. Despite appearances to the contrary, these individuals actually do have a defining portion of their identity. The identity marker that is secure regardless of context in these cases is that the identity of the individual centers around experimentation. As one interview participant described: "Um... [net.sex] changed me... but it could do so because I am bold and dislike constraint and consider myself experimental. Whether its online or off I would rather live an interesting life than a pure one, a right one or even an ethical one" (F #5).

It is clear that the ways in which individuals construct gender identities online subvert the assumption that biological sex is a secure foundation upon which gender identity and desire rest. Despite the fact that biological essence is not the central identity marker among chat site users, this group of individuals still appears to have features of identity that are sacred and unchanging regardless of the context. The error within the sex → gender → desire continuum is not that there are key elements within each individual that are unchanging, but in the false assumption that for each and every person,

biological factors dictate what those sacred and unchanging factors are as well as the form they take. In *Rules of Sociological Method* (1895/1964), Emile Durkheim states that the objective of sociology is to uncover, and describe, what he calls *social facts*. The process in his eyes is akin to finding stable poles in shifting sands, and building a house upon them. Based on this research, each individual has a stable, but unique, foundation upon which he or she constructs gender identity.

### 5.3 *Expression versus performance*

Judith Butler asserts that sex is actually an aspect of gender identity, and is something that is performed rather than being rooted in biological nature. Butler argues that because sex has been naturalized in Western discourse, individuals are often unaware that they perform gender identity. Most people will instead interpret acting out set roles as expressing an inner truth. In her book *Gender Trouble*, she argues that gender is a type of drama that is performed by individual actors: “Consider gender, for instance, as a *corporeal style*, an “act,” as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where “*performative*” suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning” (1990: p. 139). However, the line between a performance (i.e. taking on a role) and an expression (i.e. allowing a biological Truth to show through) is often blurry and difficult to establish.

The goal of this section will be to establish to what degree the data collected for this research supports Butler’s claim that gender is a performance. The interview participants identified five main themes when dealing with issues of expression and performance on Internet chat sites, each of which will be discussed in this chapter. 1) “Reality and expression” will outline why individuals tend to identify identities

constructed on the Internet chat sites as being real rather than performances. 2) “The consistent identity assumption” will outline how individuals tend to think of identity as being an unchanging entity, and re-interpret their past and present lives to form a consistent view of themselves. 3) “Announcement, placement, and being situated” will present the case that when announcement and placement are aligned, and individuals feel as though they are expressing their true selves rather than performing a role. 4) “Dramatic performances” will outline how individuals consciously act out roles in cases in which interaction is intended to be a performance rather than an expression of an inner essence. 5) “Game playing” will present action that takes place in the context of Internet chat sites, but which is not physically possible outside of this setting, constitutes a distinct form of role-playing and performance.

### *5.3.1 Reality and expression*

Many Internet chat site users view the way in which they present themselves on the chat sites as being “real” and “honest.” As Goffman points out, “when an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them” (Goffman, 1959: p. 1). Chat site users often refer to how media accounts of Internet chat sites sensationalize this form of interaction. Newspaper and television stories that include Internet chat sites tend to focus solely on the extreme cases, such as predators gaining access to children through chat sites, or people that are murdered after moving an online relationship into a face-to-face context without taking any safety precautions.

Realists, as a group, tend to take issue with the assumption that online relationships are inherently false, less than, or even fundamentally different from face-to-face relationships: "I get very annoyed about people who are told they have a 'virtual relationship.' What they have are real relationships which start thru the net.. to me its just a way of meeting and sparking the relationship.. It's not how you come together that matters" (M #1). The fact that they do not see online interaction as being less real than face-to-face interaction, Realists view constructions of gender identity online as expressions of their true being. They will interpret adopting a feature of identity which is not apparent in their everyday lives as expressing a part of their core identity that is hidden in other contexts. However, this does not necessarily mean that individuals in this group are expressing an inner essence that is rooted in biology. As Goffman points out, a performer can sometimes be "fully taken in" by his or her own act (1959).

Personality Shoppers also tend to refuse to distinguish between their online personae and the way they are in their real lives. This group focuses on the experimental aspects of interaction on the Internet chat sites. Individuals from this group often describe interaction on chat sites in terms of exploration, where their inner reality is discovered through the process of adopting various formations of identity: "I do not role play. I prefer to be myself..it is much more fun that way. I like to explore things on-line..It is a safe environment. But if something doesn't interest me on-line, it doesn't in real life and vice versa" (F #19). By continually adopting new guises, the Personality Shopper discovers forms of identity that are appealing through a process of trial and error. If a certain form of identity is appealing, then the Personality Shoppers will tend to view it as a part of their "inner truth" that has never been uncovered.

Hydrae each house an assortment of personae. Of these, there is normally one that is favored above the others and considered to be a closer reflection of the person's "true" personality. Hydrae often describe this core persona as being more "real" than the others. The interaction that takes place when they are using this persona is qualitatively different in terms of intensity: "although I love playing all these roles, I'm old-fashioned, and enjoy honesty in a real, connected relationship" (M #17). Personae other than the main one(s) reflect either a single, and one-dimensional, aspect of their being, or represent a role that is performed for a short period of time. While using the persona on the Internet chat sites with which they feel the closest connection, Hydrae are similar to Realists in that they feel as though they are expressing their natural selves. During times when they use one-dimensional personae, Hydrae will often see the role as a natural expression of one part of their "real" selves.

Hellenists often describe themselves in ways that are not accurate in order to create an online persona that is different from their corporeal reality. Role playing on the Internet chat sites is a form of escapism or fantasy, where individuals are freed from the constraints of their physical bodies, or where individuals can present idealized personalities when interacting with others. Identities adopted on Internet chat sites by Hellenists are intentionally different from their identity in face-to-face interaction: "they are also a way to escape from reality.. you can do anything and be anyone you want on a talker" (F #26). Due to the fact that Hellenist individuals act out roles that show what they want to be, rather than who they think they are, chat sites users in this group do not feel that their online gender identities, or expressions of desire, reflect their inner essence.

There is normally no attempt made by individuals in this group to move their fantasy interactions on chat sites into face-to-face settings.

### 5.3.2 *The consistent identity assumption*

Many individuals using Internet chat sites view their online identity as an expression of an inner Truth. However, this does not necessarily mean that such an essence exists inside of each individual, and it does not necessarily invalidate Butler's claim that gender identity is performed rather than expressed. Most individuals also believe that sex is a biological fact upon which gender identity and desire are formulated, and are unaware that sex is performed. In much the same way, individuals may view the way in which they perform identity online as expressing an inner Truth rather than performing a role. In order to establish that gender identity is something that is performed, rather than being an expression of biological fact, it is necessary to find clues that show that individuals are, in fact, constructing a gender identity. This thesis will present the argument that individuals enter into what can be identified as the *consistent identity assumption*. The consistent identity assumption leads individuals to re-interpret their pasts, as well as their present lives, in order to establish a consistent view of "self." This re-formulation of ideas forms a tautology in which an individual look for clues in the past, and changes his or her current viewpoints, in order to make sense of the way in which he or she has constructed his or her gender identity on the Internet chat sites. That gender identity is then naturalized, and "makes sense," because the individual's gender identity is shown to be consistent and stable.

The principle of the object constancy assumption is that individuals will tend to see things as unified, unchanging entities (Mehan and Wood, 1975). Through the course of the interviews, it became apparent that Internet chat site users who believe that they are expressing their “real” selves online actually go through a process of re-interpreting their pasts in order to make the way that they construct gender identity online “fit.” Similar to Barbara Ponse’s account of lesbians searching through their pasts in order to find clues that make their present identities make sense to them, Internet chat site users will put new slants on past experiences and viewpoints. For example, one chat site user, who identified herself as being female, stated that she had never had a sexual experience with another female before entering into the world of the Internet chat sites: “I like women...never have consciously decided NOT to be a lesbian. I just like men so much it didn’t leave time to for women” (F #27). Despite the fact that she had never experienced any sexual activity with another female in her past, and was drawn exclusively towards men, she was still able to re-interpret her past to make sense of her gender identity on the Internet chat sites. If being drawn to women is a part of her essence, one would expect her to have shown more curiosity towards sexual activities with other females in the past.

Along with re-interpreting their pasts in order to make sense of the present formulation of gender identities, Internet chat site users also re-interpret and re-work their present beliefs in order to establish a consistent view of themselves. One female who described herself as an ardent feminist described how exploring consensual power exchange and Sadoomasochistic practices online led to difficulties. She was troubled with the idea that she enjoyed engaging in activities on the Internet chat site that she did not support on a political level. In order to re-establish a consistent view of her current self



and gender identity she re-worked her definition of feminism: “I had always been a feminist critic of S&M<sup>4</sup> as a form of male domination . THEN... over time.. I started to really ENJOY it online. So.. I didn't engage my feminism at all.. just reduced it to a statement of FEMINISM IS ABOUT BEING ME.. and this is ME” (F #5).

Re-interpreting the past and the present are both examples of how individuals will attempt to establish a consistent view of self as well as their gender identity. The individuals in the examples above both defined their online gender identities as being expressions when, in fact, they were both engaged in the tautology. Rather than being expressions, the construction of gender identity online is actually a performance that is hidden by the consistent identity assumption.

### 5.3.3 *Announcement, placement, and being situated*

The process through which individuals *announce* their identities, and other individuals *place* them based on how they interpret the announcement, leads to an individual being *situated* within a category of identity (G. Stone, 1962). This process can have a great impact on supporting the belief that individuals are expressing parts of their inner being when they adopt given identities. There is clearly a power that stems from having someone else identify you as something that you feel you are. In the context of Internet chat sites, it is clearly the case that when another actor places an actor into the same category that has been announced, that individual feels as though he or she is expressing his or her true self. However, when an individual is placed into a category that is contrary to what he or she has attempted to announce the role that is adopted during the course of interaction is exposed as a performance to those involved.

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<sup>4</sup> The term “S&M” stands for “sadism and masochism.”

One male participant (M #18) said that he was a father, a computer technician, and a husband in his real life. All of the roles that he adopted in everyday life made him feel as though he did not “know himself.” He viewed Internet chat sites as being a simple place, where he could express himself in ways that were not clouded by all of his responsibilities. He found interaction on chat sites to be extremely rewarding, because he was able to strip away the other roles and focus on being sexually submissive. The main power in this type of interaction, however, was not the expression of his submissive desires. To him, being identified as “a good submissive” rather than as a good father, or a good husband, made him feel as though he was expressing his true self. The fact that he was not able to have this sort of interaction in his everyday life brought the submissive feature of his identity into focus, and being able to act out this unfulfilled form of desire made him feel as though the action was an expression of his inner Truth.

Sometimes performances are not convincing, leading the other person to place an individual in a way that is contrary to how that person has attempted to announce him or her self. In these circumstances it is sometimes the case the “we find that the performer may not be taken in by his own routine” (Goffman, 1959: p. 1). In other cases an individual may not be placed into a category of identity because that person did not conform to existing stereotypes. For example, when asked how he is able to determine if a chat site user is a male adopting the role of a female, one interviewee responded “a noticeable lack of understanding of female anatomy is the biggest clue” (M #4), while another stated that “there is a lack of subtlety and descriptive power” (M #1). In reality, being female is no guarantee than an individual knows about all of the features of female anatomy, and men are just as capable of producing subtle writing as women. What these

examples show is that regardless of any sort of biological Truth, if individuals stray from stereotypes about what is masculine or feminine they are less likely to be placed in the categories they attempt to announce.

#### 5.3.4 *Dramatic performances*

There are times when individuals do not consider their online identities to be reflecting an inner essence, and they clearly play a dramatic role while interacting with others on the chat sites. During such times, individuals are not “taken in” by their own performances, and savor the escape that accompanies acting out a new role for a set period of time. Mangham and Overington refer to dramatic performances that *demytify* the traditional theatrical process of creating empathy and sympathy within the audience as being “Brechtian” (1990). The process of demystification of the theatrical process serves to *alienate* the audience from “naive involvement” with the actor, and grasp the nature of the theatre itself. In the case of performing gender identity on Internet chat sites, the Brechtian process plays out as an exposure of the fantasies inherent within online interaction.

Individuals in the Hydra, Personality Shopper, and Hellenist category all report some degree of role-playing on the Internet chat sites, while Realists tend to gravitate towards the online venues that are set up as role-playing game formats such as Multiple User Dungeons (MUD’s) when they want to leave their “real selves” behind. During role-playing the individuals did not feel any degree of connectedness with the identity they adopted, and they acted out roles for a set amount of time. The fact that Internet chat sites are seen as a distraction for many individuals may lead to a disdain for chat site

interaction that is too serious. Describing her biggest complaint about the chat sites, one user stated: "I hate how some people get too serious about the people that you come across... taking everything which is said or 'done' as something possible in real life etc... I mean that in all senses" (F #10).

Like stage acting, in which many individual actors may play a given role without "owning" it, some chat site users share one persona. One individual told of how he and three of his friends created an account on an Internet chat site. All three would log in under the same name, and would interact with others as though they were one and the same person. This was confusing for the individuals with whom they interacted: "One day I would log in and give this girl lots of attention, and then the next day my friends would come on and ignore her. She was really confused and got mad" (M #15). It is common for people to be introduced into the realm of the chat sites by friends, and many times a group of individuals will act as one: "at that time we were all 'X.' We were all in front of the computer yelling at each other about who was gonna type and what 'X' was gonna say. So I guess it went on with all 3 of us as 'X' for about 2 months" (F #1).

Individuals who are playing a role often state that they avoid becoming too close with others: "If she crossed a boundary--actually becoming romantically interested, for example--I'd remove myself from the situation. I've gotten tangled in that sort of thing before--it ain't pretty" (M #17). This is especially true if an individual plays a role, and suspects that another person is far more serious about the interaction: "It'd probably wind up hurting someone, if they found out I was actually a guy, and they were in love with me or something" (M #17). For most individuals involved in overt role-playing online, bringing the interaction into a face-to-face setting becomes an impossibility. This is

especially true if an individual has been performing in a way that is inconsistent with physical reality: "I mean its easy here, no one can see you but in the end, if you pursue things lying is not the way to go. I mean, you lie to someone, you get to know them, then you want to meet them but can't because you've lied so much" (F #29).

Despite the fact that performances on Internet chat sites are not seen as real, some individuals still blend the mental images with physical stimulation. During net.sex many chat site users joke about masturbation, referring to how it is difficult to type with one hand. Others will bring elements of the interactive fantasy into physical reality in order to enhance the experience: "so if I have nipple clamps put on, I put them on in real life too. But many times it is just for fun...no real orgasm comes from it.... Just an image that I can take to bed with me, for my own enjoyment. It helps to clarify what my fantasies are" (F #27). Individuals will sometimes also give false accounts of what they are doing in real life in order to present a better online performance: "I remember the guy asking me if I had stripped out of my clothes in real life. I said no (and thought "why would I?")... he had said that he had taken all his clothes off... so I started to pretend to do stuff in real life that I was in fact not doing, just to make him feel better" (F #6). In order to enhance the fantasy, there is a willing suspension of disbelief in which an individual will trust that the other person is doing the things in reality that are being described.

Some users confuse dramatic performance with reality, and assume that individuals can perform the same way in a face-to-face encounter as they do online. The performance, when taken into reality, often produces results that can best be described as a "bomb" for chat site users. One female related the story of meeting a net.sex partner in real life, and stated: "he was much better online. He is just a bit insecure sexually in real

life... ok, VERY insecure... and as a result is an incredibly selfish lover. I.e. he sucked in bed” (F #35). Several individuals complained about a lack of continuity between the sexual partner they met online, and the real person they encountered once the relationship was taken into a face-to-face context. “I was expecting him to be like he was online...and I guess that was my mistake...we talked constantly...but then he got here and he didn't say more than 20 words. Online he talks and does stuff freely” (F #22).

### 5.3.5 *Game playing*

At times, things acted out on the Internet chat sites are out of the realm of physical possibility for any human being. This thesis will identify instances where the interaction takes a form that cannot be reproduced in any setting by any individual or groups of individuals as *game playing*. Cases in which activities cannot be performed in face-to-face interaction are distinct from role-playing in three major ways. First, there is never any confusion by any individual involved as to whether the interaction is a performance or an expression. Second, the roles adopted in games are seldom, if ever, repeated in future interaction. Finally, there is almost no attachment between an individual and the role that is adopted in game playing. While the ability to present a given role effectively is the main focus in role-playing, game playing depends solely on the imagination of the individual or individuals involved.

The main game players on the Internet chat sites are in the Hydra category. Hydræ embrace new formations of identity itself and identity construction, and see online interaction as inherently unreal: “it offers a unique opportunity for a writer to get instant feedback.. hence I prefer the term interactive erotic fiction.. cos a really well done

or clever net.sex session can verge on the literary” (M #4). During game playing interaction, individuals will adopt roles and permutations of identity that are limited only by the imagination. One individual described a net.sex encounter with another male and a female in which he played the role of a living table: “it was quite a performance. The guy turned out to be bi.. and wanted the table to oblige him in an anal sandwich.. while he penetrated her... now that’s imagination!” (M #4). The way that an individual interprets the activity is based on the mental reaction rather than the physical possibility of what is taking place: “This guy ended up turning into a panther and we had some mild S&M scene. But, it was empty.. I mean.. we weren't IN the computer yet. WE were.. both laughing at each other and egging each other on to play .. it was just play. We hadn't been touched by it yet. To be touched it has to get personal” (F #5).

#### *5.4 Repetition versus gender trouble*

The social world is complex, and it is often impossible to act in a coherent manner without making reference to existing models of interaction and stereotypical behavior. In *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990), Anthony Giddens compares trying to direct social change with attempting to steer a juggernaut that is always on the verge of rushing off course. Giddens argues that two main factors make social change difficult to predict or direct. The first factor is “unintended consequences,” where the complexity of social life makes it difficult to account for every variable. The second factor that Giddens identifies is the “circularity of social knowledge,” in which new knowledge not only renders an aspect of the social world “transparent,” but also fundamentally changes it.

Giddens argues because of these factors it is impossible to “seize ‘history,’ and bend it readily to our collective purposes.

Establishing a line of argument that is similar to Giddens’ “unintended consequences,” Judith Butler points out that there are times when a performance that falls into the category of “gender trouble” may be mixed with aspects of the performance that appear to negate its impact. Using the example of drag, Butler outlines some of the difficulties involved when attempting to invoke gender trouble:

As much as drag creates a unified picture of “woman” (what its critics often oppose), it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. *In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency.*

(Butler, 1990: p. 137)

While Butler focuses a great deal on unintended consequences, her account of social change does not adequately account for the “circularity of knowledge” that Giddens describes. In order to make her crucial distinction between parody and gender trouble, Butler states that:

[t]he critical task is, rather, to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions, to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them.

(1990: p. 147)



Butler's description of repetition does not take into account that the *meaning* that adopting subversive forms of identity have to individual actors, as well the *context(s)* in which the repetition takes place, both influence the nature and effectiveness of gender trouble.

The goal of this section is to outline the ways in which gender trouble occurs on Internet chat sites, as well as to illustrate different forms that gender trouble may take. 1) "Stepping outside the margins of gender identity" will show that the lack of social control, and the escape from a corporeal context and into an environment dictated by the imagination, leads to a willingness to express gender identity in different ways. 2) "Exposure to alternative forms of gender identity" will present the argument that individuals are exposed to new ways of expressing gender identity while using Internet chat sites. 3) "Interpreting online action and interaction" will illustrate that the way in which individuals interpret online action and interaction influences the amount of impact this interaction has upon their everyday lives. 4) "Gender trouble" will present the case that there are four distinct levels of potentially subversive behavior, which are *game playing, parody, comedy, and gender trouble*.

#### *5.4.1 Stepping outside the margins of gender identity*

All of the individuals interviewed for this research said that they experienced, and felt, a lesser degree of social control on Internet chat sites than they do in the context of face-to-face interaction. When asked why she is able to express variations of identity online that she would not bring into her real life, F #10 responded that it was a result of

the “freedom from repercussions” that exists within the context of Internet chat sites, but which does not exist in everyday life. One dimension of social control that exists in face-to-face interaction, but not on the chat sites, is the overt or implied threat of physical harm. For example, when asked why she is more sexual on the Internet chat sites than in real life, one chat site user stated: “because the rape deal is much more of a big deal in real life” (F #27). Due to the physical distance between participants, and the text-based environment, some individuals are not concerned about whether other chat sites users disapprove of the way in which they express themselves. These individuals often feel as though they are operating in a vacuum rather than interacting with others: “There are no strict moral codes for what you write in your diary.. and likewise I felt unconstrained” (F #38).

The relative lack of social control due to anonymity and distance mean that individuals using the chat sites are not as likely to feel compelled to work within the margins of societal expectations for behavior as they do in face-to-face interaction. When asked if her online persona is different from the way she acts in her real life one chatter stated: “she isn’t really... maybe a little more open about sexual proclivities that I allow myself to be in real life” (F #27). One Realist individual stated that she initially adopted a passive role during online sexual encounters. As she became more experienced online, the way in which she constructed her sexual role during net.sex encounters changed: “well once I was finding myself having net.sex out of a sense of obligation...and then I was like--HEY! I am on the net for Christ's sake, I needn't have obligatory sex” (F #27). From her viewpoint she was simply expressing what she felt like “deep down inside” by no longer feeling that sex is an obligation. However, this still represented a dramatic shift

from the way that she expressed her gender identity in her everyday life, where she felt that it was her duty to provide sex to her partner.

#### 5.4.2 *Exposure to alternative forms of gender identity*

Because people using the chat sites are not constrained by the same social controls as in face-to-face interaction they are more likely to express gender identity in alternative ways. In the context of Internet chat sites, even Realist individuals who are not interested in a high level of sexual experimentation will still be exposed to many different forms of gender identity through the course of interacting with others. Reflecting Durkheim's concept *dynamic density*, which states that values and morals may shift as the degree and intensity of interaction increases through communication with individuals who have a different set of beliefs, individuals interviewed for this study often stated that exposure to different expressions of desire and formations of identity helps to build an attitude of tolerance towards sexual difference (Durkheim, 1893/1964). Furthermore, this process also creates a sense of curiosity in many individuals, which, in some cases, leads to experimentation with alternative forms of sexual expression and desire.

Realists occasionally experiment with alternative formations of gender identity or desire on the chat sites. When they do experiment, they see the process of experimentation as being justified within the boundaries of established gender roles. For example, one female described having online sexual contact with another female and a male at the same time. Her description of why she agreed to do this was based on her being passive, and doing it in order to please a male who came up with the idea: "I basically did it because we were friends and he kept pushing for it and I finally gave in to

get him off my back and because I was curious what it was like....” (F #29). Even though she had sexual interaction with another female, the way in which it occurred, and her reasons for agreeing to try it, echoed a more traditional viewpoint regarding sexual roles.

Personality Shoppers described acting out alternative forms of identity and desire in order to find out which ones appeal to them: “I mean, really, you can't know until you try it. But the guy has introduced me to a few concepts I'd never really come across before. Net.sex gave me the opportunity to toss it over in my head, kind of try it out, to see if I liked it or not...” (F #6). Although Individuals in this group were very likely to try new things online, the formations of identity and desire that they adopted were mainly short term. At the point in which a Personality Shopper discovered a form of gender identity that appealed to them, that person most often switched into the Realist category and interpreted the experience as finding an “inner essence” or “truth.”

Hydrae showed a clear tendency towards exploring a wide variety of gender identities and expressions of desire. Individuals in this group were likely to adopt roles for a period of time even if they found them repulsive on some level: “She enjoyed pain...so we did a lot with tying down, candle wax... I felt very... not comfortable...with her... enjoyments... they were new to me... but it all clicked...I found myself getting into the experience...with that undercurrent of discomfort, feelings of both ‘this is forbidden’ and ‘this is sort of tacky’” (M #17).

Sometimes all of the options that are open to an individual in the context of Internet chat sites led to an emotional overload: “Tried [net.sex] with this woman who was admittedly lesbian. The first time she was so damned aggressive she scared the hell

out of me. It's like knowing you'd love to taste chocolate ice cream, never having tasted it until now, and someone dropping you into a vat and you almost drowning" (F #35).

#### *5.4.3 Interpreting online action and interaction*

The way in which individuals interpret alternative expressions of gender identity and desire influences the impact these expressions have upon their everyday lives. One female described how interacting on the chat sites made her feel less guilty about sex and sexuality, and made her more willing to talk about sex in her everyday life: "seeing the words 'fuck and cunt and asshole and smooth curve of your neck, suck etc' just makes them normal.. To then think those words over your own body in real life.. is easy.. and arousing. I am more confident sexually... I am more honest with in real life friends... I have more self-confidence in general (the inner kind rather than the outer one)..." (F #5).

Individuals do not act in a vacuum, and the role of "other" in placing a form of identity is a critical component of the construction of identity. Rather than challenging assumptions regarding gender and identity, negative experiences that occur when enacting alternative expressions of gender identity can lead to a fortification of established gender identity:

M #17: It was with the same woman... we "ganged up" on a really stupid guy... and revealed at the end I was a male, to freak him out.

Question: What did he do?

M #17: Started cursing at us, yelling and all of that. It was fun, for a lark

While it may be true that M #17 challenged assumptions regarding gender identity by having net.sex with another male, the experience did nothing to dislodge the fortified belief in mind of that individual that sexual activity between two males is inherently bad.

#### 5.4.4 *Gender trouble*

In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler outlines the distinction between *parody* (which involves expressing alternative formations of gender identity in ways that do not ultimately lead to a radical re-thinking of how sex, gender identity, and desire are interrelated) and *gender trouble* (which involves adopting formations of identity which subvert and challenge existing norms and expectations regarding gender identity). In order to elaborate upon Butler's definition of gender trouble from a sociological perspective, it is useful to include C. Wright Mills' distinction between *troubles*, which are located within the character of an individual or within his or her "immediate relations with others," and *issues*, which are defined as being matters that transcend local environments (Mills, 1959). From this perspective, gender trouble, as a political goal, will occur with the establishment of gender identities that transcend local environments, and that are not easily dismissed as being the result of a character flaw within an individual.

By following the framework laid out by Butler of what constitutes gender trouble, and paying close attention to the distinction laid out by Mills between troubles and issues, four patterns of potentially subversive identity construction within Internet chat sites emerge from the data. These patterns, which will be grouped under the headings "game playing," "parody," "comedy," and "gender trouble" are distinguished by two main

factors. The *degree of repetition* indicates the frequency and duration in which an individual adopts a potentially subversive form of gender identity, as well as whether it is local to only one social setting. *Internalization of identity* indicates the level of attachment that an individual has towards a particular expression of gender identity (i.e. whether he or she feels as though this expression is a part of an inner, “true” essence rather than an obvious role). The way in which the categories are defined and organized can be shown using the following chart:

		<b>Degree of Repetition</b>	
		<i>Low</i>	<i>High</i>
<b>Internalization Of Identity</b>	<i>Low</i>	Game Playing	Parody
	<i>High</i>	Comedy	Gender Trouble

In the context of *game playing*, individuals do not have a high level of attachment to the role that is adopted. There is also little or no repetition of the role in any context, and the expression of gender identity that takes place may easily be dismissed by others as either being a joke that is not serious, or as being a part of a flawed psychological makeup of one particular individual. Individuals who take part in game playing usually adopt roles for the duration of one online sexual encounter, or else act out roles that are physically impossible to bring into reality. According to the terms established by Mills this form of identity construction clearly falls into the category of personal troubles,

while Butler would view it as a parody that does not constitute gender trouble. Hydræ and (to a lesser degree) Hellenists usually construct identities that fall into this category.

*Parody* describes forms of identity construction in which there is a high level of repetition, but where an individual has little or no attachment to the role being played out. Individuals who construct a large number of online personae, or who use the Internet chat sites as a meaningless, ongoing form of escapism, make up the majority of this category. Butler presents the case that simply acting out roles does not in and of itself constitute gender trouble, and this group is an example of the construction of potentially subversive forms of gender identity can be a hollow process if there is no personal meaning behind the act. From the perspective of Mills, constructing gender identity in this manner would not be defined as a form of trouble of an issue, because nothing is being directly questioned on either a personal or societal level.

The third form of identity construction is *comedy*. Comedy takes place in cases where there is a high degree of attachment towards the established gender identity, but the identity is only performed in specific contexts. In order to understand why this process is not a part of gender trouble, it is useful to examine the structure of Shakespearean comedies. Many Shakespearean comedies (such as *As You Like It*) start by establishing that a state of disorder exists. This disorder is often symbolized by the fact that a female takes on the identity of a male, or a male becomes a female. At the end of the comedy, when the universe returns to its natural order, the female reveals her "true" identity, and a wedding takes place in order to show that everything has returned to its natural state. In the context of the Internet, behavior that appears to be subversive often takes place. But, much like a Shakespearean comedy, if people do not repeat that



subversive role when they shut the computer off, "order" is once again restored. A clear example of the *comedy* comes from a Hydra individual who became attached to a female role that he adopted online. He developed relationships that he felt were impossible to bring into reality:

I started going to...dungeon, I think it's called... mostly as bdsm talker, but not really devoted to that particular form of sexual expression... I went as 'X', pretty much just to talk... and, at the time, didn't care so much about the boundaries--if I had sex as a female, well and good... I met a guy there...late 40's, well-off... he turned out to live not too far from me... we had lots in common... and he was \*very\* attracted... and, I found myself slipping into thinking of myself \*as\* 'X', as this female, who was attracted to him... we became fairly heavily involved...spending hours talking, some sex talk but not much.... my mind was working overtime, creating this female persona, and a history... finally, I couldn't take the deception anymore--it was obvious he was \*far\* gone, in love with 'X'... and I left dungeon, and have only seldom been back...I never actually told him I was male.

(M #17)

Although Butler would group this type of gender identity into her category of parody, it is useful to distinguish this pattern of identity construction from cases in which individuals have no level of attachment to their roles. While Mills would not see any form of trouble or issue within the parody group, he would view the comedy grouping as expressing personal troubles. The only distinction between this form of identity construction and

gender trouble is because the constructed identities are specific only to certain environments, identities constructed in this manner do not transcend the realm of personal trouble.

The final category, *gender trouble*, refers to interaction in which there is a high degree of attachment between an individual and an expressed identity as well as a high degree of repetition regardless of the context. This interaction pattern is the most subversive because people cannot easily disregard or dismiss the way in which gender identity has been constructed as being a product of an online environment, or as a personal issue. By performing subversive identities in all aspects of their lives, the process moves from being a personal trouble and towards being a convincing expression of a larger social issue. This category includes individuals who are in the Realist category, or individuals who started their online careers as Personality Shoppers and evolved into the Realist category after ceasing exploration and experimentation. The fact that individuals who are in this category cannot be easily dismissed as taking part in an online fantasy, or as being psychologically unbalanced individuals, can lead to an “crisis of institutional arrangements” (Mills, 1959: p.9). This “crisis” mirrors the concept of subversion and social change that Butler outlines in *Gender Trouble*.

## Chapter Six: Summary and Conclusions

- 1) Although Internet chat sites appear to be an ideal setting in which gender trouble may occur, factors such as distance, the nature of text-based communication, and issues regarding trust sometimes create a level of detachment between an individual and the persona(e) he or she adopts in the context of Internet chat sites.
- 2) Individuals using Internet chat sites may be grouped according to four main patterns of identity construction, which are: Realist, Personality Shopper, Hellenist, and Hydra. The way in which individuals perform identity online, and the interaction between an individual and the established identity, is dependant upon which of these patterns best describes the individual.
- 3) Although there is no fixed basis in biology upon which gender, identity, and desire are established, individuals do have facets of desire and gender identity which do not shift as they move from one setting to another. These features are highly personalized, vary from individual to individual.
- 4) The focus on the mind and imagination as the starting point of gender, identity, and desire subverts the sex→gender→desire continuum outlined by Butler.
- 5) Individuals reinvent themselves in order to achieve a consistent view of “self.” This process leads to the belief that individuals have an inner essence or nature that defines their gender identity.
- 6) Butler’s distinction between parody and gender trouble is incomplete. An elaboration of these terms rooted in the theory of Mills shows four types of patterns of potentially subversive identity construction.

7) There is a false assumption in popular culture that the locus of subversive behavior on Internet chat sites is composed of individuals who play with identity in the most extreme fashions, and who act out wild and bizarre scenarios. Individuals who adopt roles that are subversive while on Internet chat sites, and carry that formation of gender identity or desire into their real lives because they feel as though it more accurately describes their true inner core than established gender identities, are far more likely to be the catalyst for de-stabilizing gender identity and enacting gender trouble.

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