

Abstract Based on the theory of social construction of love and sexuality, this project uses a sexually explicit computer bulletin board (BBS) named *Pleasure Pit* as the source for contacting individuals who combine their technological computer abilities with their sexual desires. The purpose of this paper is twofold: to examine how and why individuals participate in sexually explicit computer bulletin boards; and to see if sex on-line is a way of *replacing* face-to-face relationships or a way of *enhancing* them. Specifically, this project focuses on how one sexually explicit BBS operates, what types of people use this BBS, what kinds of activities are available for the participants, why individuals participate in *sex* on-line and how those sexual behaviors are accomplished without face-to-face interaction. The findings suggest that individuals get to know each other much better, quicker, and based on different characteristics than those in face-to-face relationships. Similarly, the computer BBS has worked as a way of enhancing the face-to-face relationships rather than replacing them.

Keywords computer bulletin boards, computers, interpersonal communication, sex, technology

Diane Kholos Wysocki

University of Nebraska at Kearney

Let Your Fingers Do the Talking: Sex on an Adult Chat-line

. . . a sexual affair or romance requires that both parties be in real physical contact at some point. But romance in the on-line universe requires little more than a computer, a modem, and an ability to make conversation.
(Phlegar, 1995: 4)

Interpersonal relationships have changed at a dramatic rate during the late 20th century, with the advancement of technology and the emergence of the 'information society' (Ryan, 1997). According to Giddens,

. . . the modes of life brought into being by modernity have swept us away from all traditional types of social order . . . on the extensional plane they have served

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to establish forms of social interconnection which span the globe; in intentional terms they have come to alter some of the most intimate and personal features of our day-to-day existence. (Giddens, 1990: 4)

As a result, the ways in which people develop interpersonal relationships have changed, allowing them opportunities to explore new ways of social interaction (Marx, 1994; Turkle, 1995; Porter, 1997).

The increased availability of technological products such as computers, modems, computer bulletin boards (BBS) and the Internet, along with their declining prices (Van Dijk, 1993) have had a dramatic affect on social life as we have known it (Adamse and Motta, 1996). While in the comfort of home or office, social networks are increased (Wysocki, 1996), new on-line communities created (Rheingold, 1993; Marx, 1994; Stone, 1995; Turkle, 1995; Schwartz, 1996; see also Porter, 1997) individuals have met their spouses/partners (Morgan, 1993; Sanz et al., 1994) and even fulfilled their deepest sexual fantasies (Tamosaitis, 1995; Goldstein, 1996; Hamman, 1996a; Lubove, 1996).

The purpose of this paper is twofold: to examine how and why individuals participate in sexually explicit computer bulletin boards; and to see if sex on-line is a way of *replacing* face-to-face relationships or a way of *enhancing* them. This analysis focuses on the social construction of love and sexuality and uses a sexually explicit computer BBS that I have called *Pleasure Pit*¹ as the source for contacting individuals who combine their technological abilities with their sexual desires. Specifically, this project focuses on how one sexually explicit BBS operates, what types of people use it, what kinds of activities are available for the participants, why individuals participate in *sex* on-line and how those sexual behaviors are accomplished without face-to-face interaction.

Love and sexuality

An essential aspect of the social construction of romance, love, and sexuality has evolved around the individual's attempt to go along with the various *scripts* made available to them (Gagnon and Simon, 1973). Gagnon and Simon (1973) describe scripts as 'repertoire of acts and statuses that are recognized by social groups, together with the rules, expectations, and sanctions governing these acts and statuses'. Males and females learn very different scripts as they grow up (Simon and Gagnon, 1984) and by puberty, societal scripts for both sexes traditionally become 'emphatically heterosexual and oriented towards marriage' (Laws and Schwartz, 1977: 39). The scripts about love and romance are learned from peers, family, and the media in preparation for an individual to act within the dominant scripts of society (Cancian, 1989) that is to find the *ideal*

romantic relationship with the hope of living *happily ever after* with their mate (Giddens, 1992: 40).

People usually meet their 'true love' and their sexual partner in a pool of eligibles who are in close proximity to one another and who are involved in the same activities such as church, school, and play. Thus, meeting a potential partner is 'already socially and economically sorted' (Allen, 1992: 18) and individuals tend to pick partners who are very similar to themselves in religion, education and within 5 years of their own age (Michael et al., 1994). The desire to pursue a relationship is often based on the belief that passionate love has been found, which 'has a quality of enchantment which can be religious in its fervour, [where] everything in the world seems suddenly fresh, [and] is so strongly bound up with the love object . . .' (Giddens, 1992: 38–40).

The problem for many long-term relationships seems to be that the 'fervour' that Giddens refers to doesn't always last throughout the lifetime of the relationship. While there can be similarities between the two people involved in the relationship, there can be differences as well, especially regarding sexual desires. Sustaining the romantic relationship or marriage is dependent upon many things, but especially on what Giddens calls *confluent love*, which

makes the achievement of reciprocal sexual pleasure a key element in whether the relationship is sustained or dissolved. The cultivation of sexual skills, the capability of giving and experiencing sexual satisfaction, on the part of both sexes, become organised reflexively via a multitude of sources of sexual information, advice, and training. (Giddens, 1992: 63)

Modernity and the advancements made in technology have brought about dramatic changes in the amount and variety of sexual information or scripts that are available (Gagnon and Simon, 1987). As society has changed, sexual desires and scripts that were once hidden behind closed doors have become readily available for anybody to experience. However, according to Michael et al. (1994), while couples in long-term relationships have talked about many different issues prior to their marriage or partnership, they rarely have talked about the specific sexual practices they desire in their relationship. Therefore,

the inability to talk about sex before actually having sex has consequences that go beyond disappointment or disillusionment . . . not only do we not want to ask what our partner prefers to do during the sex act but we also cannot bring ourselves to ask about our partner's sexual past . . . (Michael et al., 1994: 152)

Furthermore, Michael et al. (1994) found that many of the differences in sexual desires were based on sex. For instance, men were found to be more interested than women were in oral sex, anal sex, using autoerotic

material, and having sex with a stranger, thus widening the sexual gap between the individuals in the relationship.

The ability or willingness to express new sexual desires to a spouse or close partner can potentially pose a very high cost to the relationship (Hinde, 1979; Dindia and Canary, 1993; Michael et al., 1994). For instance, if a male in a heterosexual marriage has a desire to experience having sex with a man, telling his wife about this desire could cause problems in the relationship; therefore, the cost or potential damage to the relationship might not outweigh the possible sexual benefit. If the desire to have new sexual experiences becomes strong enough, the individual might decide to move into a 'pure relationship', characterized by both

sexual and emotional equality . . . that is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; which continues only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it. (Giddens, 1992: 2, 58)

The benefit of the pure relationship is that it is characterized by 'plastic sexuality . . . [which] decenter[s] sexuality [and frees it] from the needs of reproduction (Giddens, 1992)² and where the relationship is 'only defined by the desire for sex' (Michael et al., 1994: 79) rather than long-term commitment.

It is no wonder that the changes in the way individuals think about relationships, love, and sex, along with the advancement in technology have 'narrowed the bandwidth'³ where individuals are able to meet in virtual space without the ability to touch. Meeting in virtual space allows the participants the ability to 'create extremely detailed images of the absent and invisible body, of human interaction, and the symbol-generating artifacts which are part of that interaction' (Stone, 1995: 93) so they may participate in on-line sexual relationships.

Sex on-line

It has been suggested in the mass media that the computer, via email, chat mode and BBS is *the place* to go for on-line 'sexual' relationships (Elmer-Dewitt, 1995; Adamse and Motta, 1996; Kornbluth, 1996). Sex via the computer can develop through the interactive sharing of fantasies, looking at sexually explicit photographs and/or sharing similar sexual interests (Bright, 1992; Rheingold, 1993; Childs, 1994; Bloom, 1995; Hamman, 1996b; Brophy, 1997). According to one source more than 50 percent of all on-line communication is related to sex (Childs, 1994) and sexually explicit BBS with names like *Kinknet*, *ThrobNet* and *StudNet*, are geared to all kinds of variations of sexual pleasure. On the Internet, the lists of sexually explicit BBS are extensive, have active user participation and are very lucrative, with one service making over \$500,000 a month

(Anonymous, 1997a). Similarly, in one web site the chat (or Internet Relay Chat – IRC) rooms were separated into those rated G – for users of all ages; R – not recommended for those under 18; and X – for those who are over 18. The site has between 800 and 1000 users on it at any given time. Within each of the sections there are different chat rooms for people to meet other individuals. The G-rated section has 7 chat rooms, the R-rated has 16 chat rooms and the X-rated was the most active with 41 chat rooms that included *The House of Pain* for those interested in bondage and S & M, *The Sex Shop* for those interested in sex toys, and *The Locker Room* for gay men (Personal observations, Feb. 1998).

In *net.sex*, Nancy Tamosaiti (1995: 2), a journalist who writes about electronic communications and who spent time investigating sexual BBS, states that ‘cybersex’ refers to ‘looking for a partner to exchange erotic e-mail with, or to meet live for steamy sessions on the IRC (Internet Relay Chat) area’. Finding people who participate in cybersex is not difficult and Tamosaiti found that individuals who use sexual BBS report they are more comfortable telling secrets on-line, having on-line sexual encounters, and ‘cheating’ on their spouses with someone they have ‘met over the BBS’. Similarly, Jack Richard (1994) states it is impossible to tell how many sexually explicit BBS there are; however, in a poll by *Boardwatch Magazine*, the second and third choices of best BBS are sexually explicit and geared towards adults.

In October 1995, an on-line sexual survey was created by the InterCommerce Corporation. By June 1997, a total of 20,791 respondents had participated in the survey and reported that being on-line *enhanced* their sexual behaviors (InterCommerce Corporation, 1996). The top reasons respondents gave for participating in sex on-line was that it was ‘a benign outlet for sexual frustration . . . It has made me more open-minded . . . Promotes honest communication . . . Promotes safe sex . . . [and] has improved my sex-life’. Other respondents believed cybersex helped their marriage and discouraged adultery. While information about the exact number of people who use the computer for sexual activities and information changes constantly, it is becoming recognized that if you want sex . . . it is only a keyboard away.

***Pleasure Pit*: a sexually explicit computer bulletin board**

Gaining access to Pleasure Pit

In order to learn about the sexual relationships people have developed over computers, I located the name and telephone number of a BBS through a computer newspaper offered free of charge in a computer store. The BBS was located in a Midwest US city and called *Pleasure Pit*. Previous research

has suggested that gaining entry to a new research setting could be difficult. Gaining access to this BBS however was easy with the help of *gatekeepers* or in this case the systems operators (SYSOP) (Berg, 1998). Originally I logged onto *Pleasure Pit* and explained to the SYSOPs that I was a sociologist interested in using *Pleasure Pit* to collect data. I was unprepared for the enthusiastic response I received and was invited to meet the SYSOPs and learn how the BBS was run.

When an individual first signed onto *Pleasure Pit* they were required to give their correct name, address, and phone number to the SYSOPs. Before the user was given full access to the BBS, the SYSOPs checked to make sure the individual trying to gain access was not a minor by calling the home telephone number. If the number given by the user was not correct, BBS access was denied.

That first night, even as I was learning about the BBS, one of the SYSOPs wrote a message for all users to see that said:

There will be a female here at the *Pleasure Pit* office to do interviews with anybody who happens to be on-line . . . she is doing research on BBS relationships and is interested in what happens to your inhibitions when your⁴ on the key board (we know what happens to them). Watch for more info on her activities. I may call you voice to set up a voice interview with her. If you volunteer you will be first called and you husband types (with spouses not into this) be sure to let me know that you do or don't want a call . . .⁵

During that same evening I placed my questionnaire onto *Pleasure Pit*. Using a doorways⁶ questionnaire program, each question gave the respondent the option of either choosing one of the multiple-choice answers or writing text if they wanted to give a more detailed answer. When the respondent completed a question and hit 'enter', the program automatically moved to the next question. The *Pleasure Pit* programmer made it very easy for me to collect the data from my home computer. Every few days I would call *Pleasure Pit* from my home and then download the answers given by the respondents. At that time I would separate the respondent's name from the questionnaire and then give each questionnaire a number to ensure confidentiality.

The SYSOPs and I tried a few more approaches to gain more involvement in my study. First, the SYSOPs told users once again that there was a questionnaire on-line from a sociologist who needed help and told them how to locate the questionnaire. Second, my presence was advertised on *Pleasure Pit* when people first signed on⁷ and there was also a flashing notice saying I was the CO-SYSOP of an on-line relationship conference. Respondents – predominantly males – began to contact me immediately.⁸ In order to attract more women, the SYSOPs sent a notice from me to the 122 registered females and couples on *Pleasure Pit*. The note said:

To All Female Users of Pleasure Pit BBS.

I am a graduate student at UC Santa Barbara. I am doing my Ph.D. dissertation on the relationships people develop over computer bulletin boards. I have placed a questionnaire in the Questionnaire menu (it is number 6) and I am CO-SYSOP in Conference 36. People have been responding, however, I haven't heard from many women. Please help me by taking the time to answer my questionnaire. If you have any questions contact me on this board. Just address it to Diane. Or you can contact me on the Internet (address given) or Prodigy (address given). All of your answers are confidential. Thanks Diane

Women began to contact me immediately and were quite willing to help by answering my questions.

Interviewing subjects on-line was very easy. *Pleasure Pit* users saw my requests for respondents and contacted me. If they were willing, we would get into chat mode on *Pleasure Pit* where we could type back and forth to one another in real time. Otherwise, I would email some questions to the respondent, who would then email the answers back. The best part about doing 'interviews' on-line was that I could capture⁹ what was being written and I would automatically have it transcribed. Many of the respondents were more than willing to answer my questions and truly liked the idea of being 'interviewed on-line' and talking about their cybersexual experiences.

Pleasure Pit: logging on and getting involved

Pleasure Pit was launched in 1992 with a small home computer, but soon needed to expand to a faster, larger IBM in order to accommodate all its clients. *Pleasure Pit* was started as a sexually explicit BBS in order to attract the most customers and because very little time was required to run the BBS because of the automatic nature of the BBS program. The SYSOP spent about an hour a day ensuring everything was working well. In this particular case, the SYSOP's primary job kept him from meeting women in a traditional face-to-face way, so *Pleasure Pit* proved to be not only a side business to run, but the best way for him to begin new relationships.

When individuals logged onto *Pleasure Pit* for the first time they were automatically asked by the computer to give personal information about themselves, which the *Wildcat* program took automatically. After the user gained access, the computer wrote:

Good evening, DIANE, you are caller number 57,395.
Pleasure Pit cooperates with all law enforcement agencies

If you suspect illegal activities on this BBS it is
required of you to report it to the SYSOP of this BBS.
(via E-mail to 'SYSOP')¹⁰

Hit return if you understand the above statement
[C]ontinue, [N]onStop, [S]top? [C]

The program then disseminated information about subscriptions to the bulletin board. Because there were fewer women than men, women were encouraged to participate in the BBS with unlimited access free of charge and longer on-line time. Men were charged \$10 a month for their subscription.¹¹

Next, the user saw the listing for the *Pleasure Pit* staff and then the following message about the number of users who had written more than 200 messages:

<i>User name</i> ¹²	<i>Written messages</i>
AMAN	357
LADY	337
CHELSEA	430
DAN	279
FESTER	228
GEORGE	354
E G	338
LADYBIRD	260
LAGO	266
LESLEY	1125
LYNN	734
MARK	235
HENRY	734
SNAKE	203
ROB	433

It should be kept in mind that the numbers reflected only the people who had written over 200 messages. Based on the gender presented on *Pleasure Pit* (there is no way of really knowing a person's true sex), the women in this sample wrote a total of 2894 messages while the men wrote 3427 messages. However, the average number of messages for women was 578.8 and for men only 343.7. The differences reflected the demographics of the *Pleasure Pit* users, since the number of men who wrote messages to women was higher than the total number of women on-line. Therefore, if 50 men wrote to one woman she could be answering more mail and therefore be writing more letters. Since women on this particular sexually explicit BBS appeared to be such a rarity, they were very popular.¹³

Next the users were given options about the available activities on *Pleasure Pit* (Table 1).

Information was given about other users who were on-line at the same time (Figure 1). This was done so users could chat with one another, which could be accomplished by typing '=', after which the other user would be paged with a note saying someone wanted to chat with him or

her. Next the users were given options about the activities they wanted to participate in on *Pleasure Pit* (Figure 2).

Who uses Pleasure Pit?

A total of 133 usable questionnaires were collected in this study. Questionnaires were discarded only if the respondents did not answer the demographic questions or if I had reason to believe they were not serious. I discarded two questionnaires because, after I examined them, I found they were from children who managed to gain access to the BBS.¹⁴

The amount of time the *Pleasure Pit* respondents had been using on-line bulletin boards of any kind varied from the first time to 15 years with a mean of 2.61 years. The hours each respondent spent on any BBS each day ranged from 1 minute to 12 hours a day, with a mean of 1.63 hours, with the majority (97%), having spent 5 hours or less a day on-line. This is consistent with other projects that have found users to spend 3 or more hours a week (Anonymous, 1997b). The respondents who used *Pleasure Pit*, and who communicated with other people on-line, said they talked with up to 100 different people each week for pleasure, but on average they communicated on-line regularly with 13.31 people in a week. The majority (72%), communicated with less than 20 different people.

The individuals who used *Pleasure Pit* were predominantly male (77%), which might be expected because, overall, more men use computers than women (Sanz et al., 1994). The respondents ranged in age from 19 to 62 years, and were relatively young with the average age of all of the respondents being 35.2 years, and the majority (94.30%) under the age

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Select [0-40], [C]ontinue, [N]onStop, [S]top? 36 Changed to conference ON-LINE
RELATIONSHIPS.
Message Menu:
[Q].....Quit to the main menu           [F].....File menu
[J].....Join Conference                 [R].....Read messages
[S].....Scan messages                  [E].....Enter a new message
[K].....Kill a message                 [G].....Goodbye & Logoff
[H].....Help level                     [?].....Command help
[T].....Transfer QWK Mail              [U].....Update conf scan/read
[C].....Check personal mail           [N].....Read New Mail
[Y].....Your settings                  [A].....Graffiti Wall
[B].....Add a quote of the day

Conf: '[36] - ON-LINE RELATIONSHIPS', time on 11, with 100 remaining.
Message Menu: [Q F J R S E K G H ? T U C N Y A B] ? R
Read from [1-7], [H]elp, [N]ew mail, [S]earch, [U]nread personal, [J]oin, or [ENTER] to quit?
u
Read mail in [C]urrent, [A]ll, or [S]elected conference(s)? [S]A
Scanning conference 0 - Private Email
Scanning conference 1 - Open forum
Scanning conference 3 - General messages

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Figure 2. An example of joining a conference on *Pleasure Pit*

of 50. Reported ethnicity was mostly white (89.9%). Regarding religion, 22 percent said they were Catholic, 25 percent said they were Christian, 4 percent said they were Jewish and the rest did not answer the question. Over 50 percent of the respondents stated religion had no influence in their lives. About half of the respondents were married, 30.28 percent stated they were single, and over 51 percent reported having up to three children. A total of 71 percent stated they were heterosexual, 22 percent reported they were bisexual, and only 4 percent stated they were homosexual.¹⁵ Only 3 percent reported themselves to be transgendered or transsexual. Most of the respondents worked, with 70 percent having a full-time job. Only 2 percent were retired and the rest worked part-time, were students, unemployed, homemakers, or volunteers. The majority of the respondents in this sample reported having had a college education. Only 18 percent reported a high school education or less. Of the *Pleasure Pit* users in this sample, 22 percent declined to say how much money they made, but the majority (52%) of these respondents stated they made \$39,999 or less a year. The respondents in this study were similar to the respondents in other sexual studies on-line as shown in Table 2 (Tamosaitis, 1995; InterCommerce Corporation, 1996).

Motives for on-line sexual activity

Five basic reasons were reported by the respondents of this study for using sexually explicit BBS. As shown in Figure 3, the reasons most commonly given for taking part in sex on-line were due to the need for anonymity, time constraints in their personal life, the ability to share sexual fantasies with other people, to participate in on-line sexual activity and to meet other people with similar sexual interests.

Anonymity

As expected, respondents stated they participated in sexually explicit BBS because they were able to take on whatever persona they liked from within the comfort of their own home or office. According to Stone (1995: 84):

our commonsense notion of community and of the bodies from which communities are formed take as starting points, among others, that communities are made up of aggregations of individual 'selves' and that each 'self is equipped with a single physical body . . . [however, computers] place the 'I' without whose coupling to a physical body there can be no race or gender, no discourse, no structure of meaning . . . [it is] about negotiating realities.

In other words, individuals using computer BBS have the opportunity to be whoever they want to be because the computer 'provides ample room for individuals to express unexplored parts of themselves' (Turkle, 1995:

	<i>This study (%)</i> N = 133	<i>InterCommerce Survey. Net (%)</i> N = 20,791	<i>Tamositis net.sex (%)</i> N = 423
<i>Sex</i>			
Male (%)	77	77	82
Female (%)	22	21	17
<i>Age</i>			
Under 18		7	
18–21	6	22	Age Percentage (%) ^b
22–25	23	17	(years)
26–30	23	16	18–29 62
31–40	36	20	30–44 30
41–50	29	11	45–59 7
51–60	4	4	
60+	1.4	1	60+ 1
<i>Ethnic background (%)</i>			
Caucasian	93		85
Black	0		2
Hispanic	4.2		2
Others	2.6		10
<i>Religion (%)</i>			
Catholic	22		15
Christian	25		15
Jewish	4		7
Other/None	49		63
<i>Marital status (%)</i>			
Married	51		26
Single	41		62
Separated/Divorced	6		12
<i>Sexual preference (%)</i>			
Heterosexual	71	80	
Homosexual	3	5	
Bisexual	22	11	
Transgendered	1	13	

Table 2. Comparison of respondents in three on-line sex studies^a

^a Only demographic information that was available was used for this comparison.

^b Each of the three studies used in this comparison handled the ages of their respondents differently. For the purpose of showing the similarities among subjects in all three studies, I grouped them as closely as I could.

Note. Totals do not always add up to 100% for a number of reasons: (1) I did not include a missing data section; and (2) the numbers were rounded up or down.

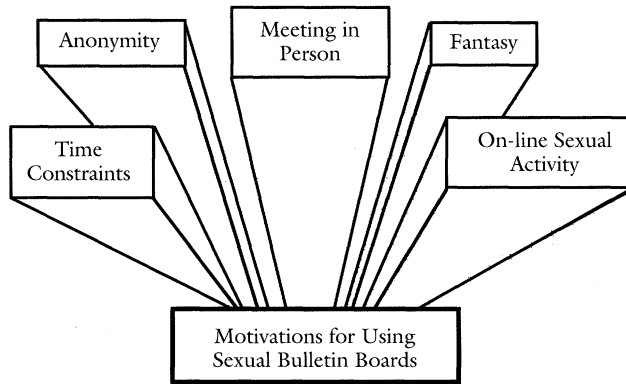


Figure 3. Motivations for using sexual computer bulletin boards

185). The users can take on a different identity and portray themselves as that person or persons. If they are too shy and/or are unable to be comfortable meeting people face-to-face, the computer provides the physical barrier and anonymity which enables the users to meet new people and communicate from a distance. For instance, a 29-year-old female, states that

they [other BBS users] can get to know me, faults and all, and vice versa, without too much pressure. It is also a great way to weed out the scary ones [individuals] . . . no one can hide behind their words for long . . . I have met more people on-line than through traditional methods.

According to Goffman (1963), when individuals possess attributes that discredit them in the eyes of others, it can greatly affect their self concept of themselves and the way they interact with other people. The anonymity of the BBS is one way in which individuals can conceal themselves in order to avoid receiving the negative reaction of others. The computer provides the perfect shield against stigma. A single male wrote that since he was shy, email 'provided a curtain to hide behind'. Similarly, Fred stated he has had more opportunities to talk to people on-line than he does off-line. In fact, he said:

I am a little more shy face-to-face, but I'm working on it. On-line, you can talk to someone without worrying about how you are dressed or undressed, what you look like. All the other person can see is what you want them too. I'm very open on the boards [BBS] . . . for some it's just a fantasy life and the people aren't usually anything like they are in person. I am, I'm just the same, just a little more shy in person.

Some respondents, especially women, mentioned they felt they were fat and undesirable in person. On the BBS, they stated they felt completely different; they felt young, wanted, slim, and sexual.

Too many time constraints

Another reason respondents stated they used sexually explicit BBS was due to the many time constraints in their lives. Some mentioned they had very little time in their busy schedules to pursue friendships or sexual contacts on a face-to-face basis. Traditional face-to-face relationships of any kind develop through a pool of 'eligibles' who are involved in the close proximity to one another (Michael et al., 1994). However, there are many constraints to finding a person with similar sexual ideas and desires within close social networks. According to Michael et al. (1994: 153) it is 'difficult to find a sexual partner who, right off the bat, has the same sexual preferences as you have. If you desire anything but vaginal sex or, perhaps, oral sex, it will be hard to find a partner with your tastes'. The respondents in this study stated the same thing. They believed it took too much time and was almost impossible to meet people with similar sexual interests and therefore the computer was the best way to handle this dilemma. A 41-year-old married man said he uses email and BBS to meet people for sex because of the 'immediacy of sexual conversation. Real life sexual relationships require a lot of small talk first'. Paula, a single female who said she was in a face-to-face relationship with a man, considered the BBS as the 'preliminary foreplay leading to real sex with swinging heterosexual couples who are real and sensitive'. Paula was interested in trying new sexual behaviors, such as having sex with other couples, engaging in sex with women, and watching other people having sex. Paula believed she would not have found couples who shared her similar interests if she had not been on-line looking for sexual sharing.

Sharing sexual fantasies

The views most commonly held about sex are formed at a very early age and are dependent upon the dominant views held by groups we associate with and society as a whole (Rubin, 1990). Any sexual activity that is not heterosexually oriented and geared towards reproduction traditionally has been considered to be against the *ideal* norms of society (D'Emillio and Freedman, 1988), which makes it difficult for some to share sexual fantasies and interests with those in the *face-to-face* world. David stated he would never be the type to go to bars hoping to find some kind of (sexual) action, but wanted a friend with whom he could talk and have sex. He also said he had some sexual fantasies he was unwilling to share with his wife and had found the BBS was a safe way to ask for what he was really interested in. David was very specific about what he was looking for:

I want a special woman who can understand and handle it when I want to wear nylons, panties, etc. . . . one who would not mind strapping on a dildo and say giving me a work-out . . . one who would let me watch her please herself as well as watch me put on a show for her . . . also a male who would like to try a few safe fantasies together . . . no strings attached . . . just pure pleasure . . .

A bisexual male stated that his:

on-line friends are safe and we should all be able to have fun with no guilt feelings . . . if people have fantasies and their spouse doesn't want to hear them or do them . . . well what's the harm if we do it on the BBS . . . we are all adults.

Of the 72 percent of respondents who stated they had a spouse or significant other, only 20 percent had told their partner about their use of sexually explicit BBS. Often the users stated they *would not* or *could not* tell their significant other about their sexual fantasies. *Pleasure Pit* provided an outlet for them that they could keep private from those closest to them.

It has been found that fantasy and role-playing are a very pleasurable addition to sexual activities (Benjamin, 1983; Bright, 1992; Michael et al., 1994; Hamman, 1996b), which has made the sexually explicit BBS attractive to its users. In order to assess the types of sexual fantasies that were common to the respondents, each respondent was asked to answer questions about 10 different fantasies which were as follows:

1. Bisexual Fantasy: having sex with both males and females
2. Lesbian Fantasy: two women having sex
3. Gay Fantasy: two men having sex
4. Being Submissive: also known as masochistic enjoying being dominated
5. Being Dominant: also known as Domination – being in control
6. Transvestism: wearing the clothing of the opposite sex
7. Water Sports: sexual excitement from contact with urine
8. Threesomes: sex with more than one other person
9. Group Sex: sex with a group of people
10. Sex Outdoors: sexual activities outdoors

For each of the fantasies described, the respondents were able to pick one of the following answers: (1) No interest at all; (2) Some interest; (3) I am interested, would try this under the right circumstances; (4) Have tried this, did not like it; and (5) Have tried this, plan on trying this again.

The majority (55%) had already tried and liked the outdoor sex fantasy and 14–23 percent had tried and liked Bisexual, Dominant, Submissive, Threesome, and the Group Sex Fantasies. The fantasy that rated the lowest among the respondents was the Transvestite fantasy, where only 4 percent said they had tried and liked it and only 1 percent said they were willing to try this fantasy at all. This supported the data that showed less than 3 percent of all respondents claimed to be transgendered. Between 22 and 49 percent of respondents stated they would be willing to try all of the fantasies except for the Transvestite and the Gay and Lesbian fantasies. The reason gay and lesbian fantasies rated so much lower than the other

fantasies could be due to the fact that there were numerous BBS geared to gay and lesbian interests. BBS users who stated they were gay or lesbian could be more comfortable on those BBS than on *Pleasure Pit*, which seemed to attract mostly heterosexuals. The answers also suggested the individuals who signed onto *Pleasure Pit* had particular sexual interests, some of which they have tried and others they were hopeful of finding someone to try them with. While some of the respondents have thought about these particular fantasies, and would try them if the opportunity arose, many also stated they had tried them and liked them. No one needed me to explain what I meant by any of the fantasies and most of the respondents did not have any to add to my list, which suggested I covered most fantasies. However, the responses of the individuals in this project suggested that they came to sexually explicit BBS because of their unfulfilled fantasies.

On-line sexual behavior

Sexually explicit material, such as videos, books, or magazines, are just a few of the outlets for people to find out about new sexual acts and develop new fantasies and ideas. Traditionally, this material has been geared towards the heterosexual male and has included scantily dressed or nude women in all kinds of poses or sexual acts; now sexual material has been made available for people with all kinds of sexual interests. Reading stories and looking at sexually explicit pictures typically has been known as 'material to masturbate by'. Whereas masturbation used to be considered dangerous and apt to 'destroy both the body and the mind' of the individual (D'Emillio and Freedman, 1988: 69), it is currently taught as an accepted practice and takes place on a regular basis for many individuals (Michael et al., 1994).

With all this in mind, it should be no surprise that computers, email, and various BBS have provided outlets for people interested in fulfilling their sexual fantasies. It is easier than meeting someone face-to-face and trying to decide if that person would experience the same sexual interests. For instance, if two people meet on a BBS conference for bondage, they already know that each has some interest in that kind of sexual activity and are able to divulge their fantasies early in the 'relationship'. If they like one another, they could then act out their sexual fantasy on-line.

On *Pleasure Pit*, one of the most common ways sex on-line happened was that the individuals went into chat mode and in 'real time' typed out a fantasy with each other or a group of people. The sex act was accomplished by typing out in detail what each person could be doing to the other. Nate, a man who is getting married and whose significant other knows about his on-line escapades, stated he had sex on-line and 'loved it'. It began with 'me and this lady talking and she then called my

computer, and we told each other what we looked like and then we started with . . . well, what we wanted to do with each other and then acted it out with words'. Nate said he didn't masturbate during this because he 'loves the real thing, but it was fun to role play'.

Most often the act of having 'sex' on-line involved masturbation for the users and ended usually in an orgasm. One female stated that she had 'sex' on-line quite frequently and she said:

I love it when the guy gets off . . . it starts with teasing and flirting . . . leads to more . . . I usually rub my clit and we eventually get off . . . I most often am wearing a mini skirt or nude and it goes from there . . . it is planned sometimes, most often not . . . usually the men are on-line for a hot chat and wanting to cumm [sic] . . .

However, a female stated that sex on-line for her was both good and bad: 'one time was VERY good, had 3 orgasms! One time I fell asleep (really) the rest were just like masturbating to a magazine/book, but OK'. A 28-year-old male, who describes himself as single and heterosexual, stated that sex on-line is: 'interesting . . . made my floppy drive into a hard drive : . . . [and is] good practice for the "real" world'. Some commented they learned more about what their cyber partner wanted sexually, because they were more willing to talk about their sexual needs and desires than with their face-to-face partners. Sex on-line, therefore, provided a place to practise what could be done later on in person.

Meeting the sexual fantasy person of your dreams

Meeting the perfect sexual partner is not always easy. If individuals were looking for someone who could fulfill their sexual fantasies off-line, they needed to be able to meet someone who expressed similar sexual interests. It was also difficult for most people to discuss sexual fantasies with someone face-to-face because it meant risking rejection (Culbert, 1968). Normally when individuals meet each other face-to-face, the meeting follows a fairly straightforward path, as shown in Figure 4. At the initial face-to-face meeting, physical characteristics, such as gender, class, ethnicity, and age are shown because the individuals are in close spatial proximity and the bandwidth is greater. These characteristics have been found to be very important variables in the continuation of face-to-face relationships (Cameron et al., 1977). If the relationship is continued, then the individuals involved take their time learning about the internal characteristics of one another while often putting on a *facade*, or *frontstage* appearance that could mask their true problems, feelings, or emotions (Goffman, 1959), thus making the sharing of sexual desires difficult.

On the other hand, relationships that develop over BBS appear to be much easier for people. They are able to get to know one another without

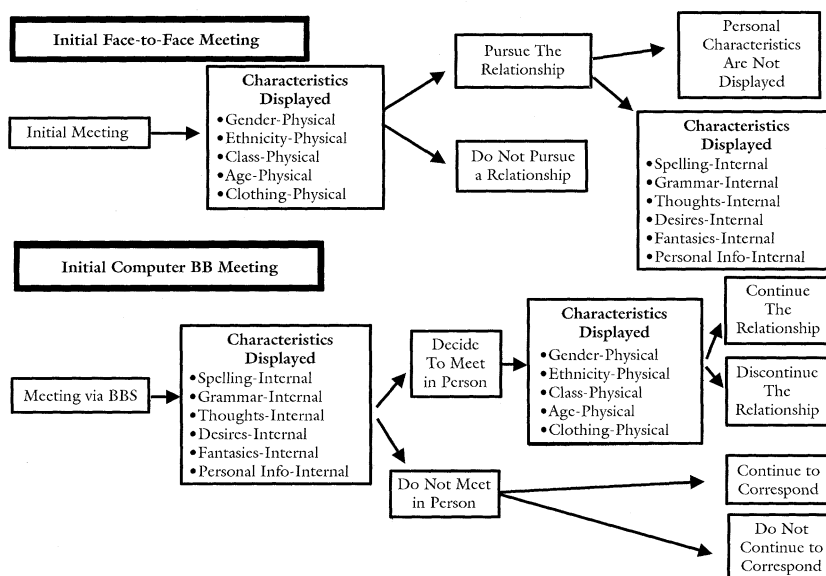


Figure 4. Initial meetings face-to-face vs on-line interactions

inhibitions and share their sexual fantasies with their on-line partners. They meet on 'conferences' where they are more likely to have similar sexual interests. Sexually explicit BBS discussions tend to move very quickly since both people divulge their fantasies early in the 'relationship'. The main difference between the greater and narrower bandwidth is that the individuals can create detailed images as part of their interaction with one another (Stone, 1995). If they like one another, they can act out a sexual fantasy on-line while typing in detail the images they are trying to portray about their sexual situation. In this way, the users also acquire clues about the individual backgrounds by way of their writing, grammar structure, and the internal characteristics. In other words, their *backstage identity* is shown at a much faster rate (Goffman, 1959).

After meeting on-line and finding they have similar sexual interests, the individuals decide whether to meet one another face-to-face. If they meet, the physical characteristics are then revealed (as shown in Figure 4) and the individuals decide whether to continue or discontinue the relationship based on the physical characteristics they display. If they decide not to meet one another on a face-to-face basis, they still have the option of continuing to correspond via computer. The computer BBS ultimately gives individuals more options than face-to-face meetings and the respondents in this study who have met one another in person say that when they got to know one another by their internal characteristics first, then physical

characteristics did not matter as much. In other words, finding someone who in fantasy is sexually compatible can be more important in the relationship than looks, age, sex, and ethnicity.

Many of the respondents stated they were quite willing to meet and have sex with another willing partner either over BBS or in person if the chance arose. Over 57 percent stated they had already met someone face-to-face with whom they became involved as a result of meeting through *Pleasure Pit*. Most stated the experiences went well for them. A single man who claimed to be bisexual went to the park and met his on-line friend, but said 'nothing happened' after that. A woman, who was married and claimed to be heterosexual stated that she met 'many nice couples and single males'. Another male who stated he was bisexual and married met people from the BBS and 'had at one time a bi encounter . . . that was great [and] would do it again with the right person . . . would like to meet an understanding female for special encounters'. Another single female found that '2 guys were WONDERFUL! nice, good-looking, funny, friendly, great'. However, she also found 'two guys were fat, lied about [their] looks, shy, 1 of them is obsessed with me and the rest (8 or 9) are normal, everyday nice people:'. One married woman, who was bisexual and whose husband knew about her on-line relationships stated: 'We, my husband and I, meet people all the time as we like to meet new people and make new friends, not all the people we have met have stayed friends, and some have become lovers'. Fred stated he met many women on-line and some have worked out well:

. . . the last woman I met from a BBS was from GA. She lives there still, but is thinking of coming out here. We seem to be falling in love with each other. The one before her, I met through a Denver BBS . . . we chatted many times before we got the chance to meet . . . she was very nice, I came to love her, but there wasn't that spark that said she was the right one for me. We are still very close friends.

Lady had face-to-face contact with numerous people she met over the BBS. She said:

I expected nothing but friendship when I met them and that is exactly what I got . . . most of these people I met over lunch . . . one of them ended up being a date and then later a lover but as I said before nothing was different than what I expected since I really didn't expect anything but friendship in the first place.

For Don, actually meeting a person face-to-face was the ultimate goal of finding on-line relationships and he appeared to be 'selling' himself by advertising the things he was willing to do sexually for a woman.

Meeting on-line makes telling fantasies much easier and people were able to 'experience' what they had only been fantasizing about. One

married man, who considered himself heterosexual, stated he had an interest in cross-dressing and submission and met some males on-line as well as females. When he met a man who shared his interest in cross-dressing he stated:

. . . both of us had always wanted to meet some-one (guy) and be dressed up with garter belts, nylons, panties and then to see what happened . . . Last year we met and went back to my place, undressed from our clothes, he was watching a XXXX movie I had in the VCR while he was playing with his cock, well I couldn't stand it anymore so I made the 1st move, yes I knelt in front of him and proceeded to give him my first blow-job . . . after awhile he had me position myself so I was fucking his mouth, then we both decided to do the 69 bit . . . so on the floor we went with me on my back and him slowly riding my mouth . . . he stopped because he didn't want to cum in my mouth, we finished the session by both of us jacking off onto my stomach. . . . I do want to do it once again only for the other guy to shoot his load into my mouth . . . this same guy has not wanted to meet because now all he wants is to jack-off, not into any bi stuff . . . but he has asked me to meet with him and his wife, yes his wife wants a big dick as well as two men doing her . . . right now I'm just waiting to hear from them.

Sometimes, when individuals have met face-to-face after spending time in cyberspace, there was disappointment, which usually was the result of one or both parties not having told the truth about themselves. Most often the lies were about physical appearance. One male respondent stated that some people he had met had not been completely honest and:

tell you how good of shape their [sic] in . . . you know like 38-22-36 and 128 LB . . . when you get there they are more like 180 or so . . . or they will tell you things like yes, I want to do this or that and when you meet it is different . . .

David looked forward to meeting a woman face-to-face, stated he really did not care too much about her personal appearance and said:

. . . yes, sounds like we are going to finally meet and if the mail was any promise as to what we both are going to do or want . . . we better call the fire house now and have them stand by . . .

One single man, who had met with people off-line, said he had one sexual relationship that 'was a bust if you will forgive the choice of words'. Another man who now is divorced found 'a couple of the people just weren't my type for whatever reason!' but never really said what his *type* was. One man was very uncomfortable when meeting his on-line friend because she brought her child to the meeting. Regardless, disappointment does not seem to stop these respondents from trying once again to meet someone with whom they may be sexually compatible.

Other relationships

Significant others and on-line sex

Although most spouses or partners knew their significant other had been using the computer, very few knew exactly what their partners were doing and that the computer was being used as a sexual outlet. One respondent stated he communicated with other people sexually at work or when his wife was not at home. Others logged on after their partners went to bed at night. Another respondent stated he had a laptop and 'unless you're looking straight at it is hard to see'. This same respondent said he was 'hoping to get lucky and of course I don't want her to know'. Yet another respondent said he 'does all my BBS work at the office . . . don't want the headaches of explaining my fantasies to my wife'.

Other times, the significant other knew their partner was on-line, but not that so much time and money was being spent on the X-rated BBS. One respondent stated his wife and he

were married young and no matter what we really haven't been able to relax with each other . . . I'm always told she has no fantasies and she has never masturbated. I've tried a couple of times to relax her and masturbate her, but it just seems like it can't be . . . I'm sure its not what I'm doing cause I've done this with other women and both have enjoyed it . . . also phone sex with my wife . . . we used to do it when I was gone or working the all day shifts, but that too has stopped . . . she is going through a lot of changes and guess maybe I am also . . . but the bottom line is that I do need and want sex, either on phone or in flesh with a special friend . . .

Jan, a 30-year-old married female, stated:

just access the BBS when he [her husband] is not here or sleeping, Why? Because of our relationship. I don't want him to have the access to the email. I have little sexual contact with my husband. I want to look at pics of naked men for some stimulation.

The mass media commonly has stories about love and lust on-line and about couples who have gone off to live happily ever after (Kerr, 1993; Edwards, 1994). However, the other side of these stories is that some individuals spent endless amounts of time on-line, withdrew themselves from communicating at home, and became involved in a cybersexual romance with someone other than their partner. Some respondents stated they were having trouble with their face-to-face relationships because of their sexual computer use. One man stated his ex-wife met some friends on *Pleasure Pit*, and then their relationship broke up. Similarly, the SYSOPs of *Pleasure Pit* stated they knew of many more relationships that had broken up as a result of one spouse who became involved in an on-line relationship.

Women and sex on-line

Men tended to outnumber women on-line (Morgan, 1993; InterCommerce Corporation, 1996), because sometimes women felt they had been reduced to sex objects, degraded, or sexually harassed (Kantrowitz, 1994; Sheppard, 1995). However, women stated they felt comfortable when they participated in on-line sexual activities. In this study, I found women become involved in sexual BBS for reasons similar to those of the men. There seemed to be two distinct groups of women: those who were on-line to meet someone for sexual purposes and those who were on-line just for safe sexual discussions or encounters. One single woman said she 'met more people on-line than through the traditional methods'. Lady, who stated she is bisexual, started off by telling me she was not a 'typical woman, nor your typical BBS using female either'. She explained:

. . . I don't do much of the things most women do . . . my values and morals are much different than most women . . . and as far as the BBS goes I actually tell the truth about who I am and what I look like . . .

Other women stated they were on-line because they considered themselves 'bi-curious' which means they wanted to have sex with another woman and have come to the BBS to find exactly what they are looking for. Over 61 percent of the women stated they had previously been interested in or had already had a bisexual experience. One woman who is married said: 'I am really interested in trying a bi-female relationship and the BBS given me protection and a chance to meet someone in a safe environment before I meet her face to face'. Ann, who is a single woman with a boyfriend, stated she was 'looking for an entry into the swinging scene. We are new, interested, and willing to learn and would like to meet other heterosexual swinging couples and go to swinging parties'.

The second group of women who participated in sex on-line were those who came to the BBS only for fantasy within the safety of their own computer. One woman, Katie, who was 'happily married to a really great guy' stated she came on-line looking for:

sex hot chats . . . it provides me a way to be a bit freer sexually than in real life and yet still meet friends . . . [I am] a lot more open on-line and able to be nastier and sexier [than off-line].

Katie added that one of the reasons she was on-line was because she had fantasies she felt she couldn't and wouldn't act out in real life, but could act out on-line. Another single woman stated she felt much safer having sex and being involved with people on-line 'because I will most likely never meet these people so I can say and be anything I want'.

Some of the women in this study said they were attracted to the impersonal aspect of sexual BBS. The computer gave a 'sense of anonymity' (see

also Wysocki, 1996) which enabled the individuals to be more open and direct with one another. Many stated they could say things to other people they would not think of saying face-to-face or even to their spouse or significant other. Computer BBS seemed to make self-disclosure much easier.

The women stated that one advantage to being in a relationship with someone on-line was they had no commitment to the individuals they became involved with and they did not feel they had to take care of them. For instance, one woman who was divorced stated that on the BBS there was 'no laundry, no cooking, no putting up with some man's crap when they live with you'. She was able to be in cyberspace and have cybersex when she wanted to and only when she wanted to. There were no demands put on her. Another woman suggested that 'the person [on-line] doesn't know you so you can say virtually anything'. And someone else said the BBS 'sometimes provides you with a sense of security and no questions'. A married woman who stated she had little sexual contact with her husband, had tried computer sex but found it 'too difficult to be into it when typing . . . phone sex is better, you don't have to use both hands to talk with'.

Women were on-line for many of the same reasons as men. They were looking to fulfill specific fantasies and wanted to eliminate the wasted time looking for people with the same interests off-line. While some of the people who responded claimed to be in good strong relationships and just looking for added excitement, other women were looking to obtain fulfillment that was not happening in their off-line relationships. Most of the women who answered this survey knew exactly what they were looking for and were very specific. They did not appear to want to play games which failed to meet their needs and found comfort in the fact that if they did not like the sexual activity on-line, all they had to do was hang up.

Discussion

In conclusion, this study of adult sexual relationships over a sexually explicit BBS found people used it for many different reasons. The most common reason given was that the respondents had specific fantasies and desires that were not being fulfilled in their relationships off-line. Some of the respondents stated they did not have the time it took in off-line relationships to get to know one another and see if they have similar sexual interests. It became much easier to go to a 'conference' set up for specific pleasures, such as S&M, and know that the people participating in that 'conference' have some interest in the subject or they probably would not be there.

The anonymity of the BBS also seemed to be an attraction to many of the users. They felt they could be more open and direct without having

face-to-face interactions. Many stated they could say things to other people about their sexual needs and fantasies that they would not think of saying to someone they knew face-to-face or even to their spouse or significant other. Computer BBS just seemed to make self-disclosure much easier, and therefore reversed the order of the relationship. When people first meet in face-to-face relationships they look at the character of the individual to see how they are displayed (clothing, ethnicity, class) and then they decide whether to continue. In on-line relationships, the order is reversed. Once the BBS users had developed a relationship on-line, even if it was relatively new, the people involved sometimes met to have 'real' sex. Ultimately individuals got to know each other much better and quicker, based on actual characteristics. Rather than face-to-face relationships being replaced by computers, the computer BBS has worked as a way of enhancing the face-to-face relationships in some cases. Often the ultimate goal of meeting on-line for many individuals on this BBS was to meet in person. Therefore, the BBS and face-to-face encounters work together in a common enterprise to enhance interpersonal relationships.

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Notes

1. The name of the BBS has been changed to protect the identity of both the users and the owners.
2. For more information on studies on sexuality see (D'Emillio and Freedman, 1988; Rubin, 1990; Michael, Gagnon et al., 1994).
3. The term bandwidth is a technical term in which 'the range of frequencies occupied by an information bearing signal can be accommodated by a transmission medium such as copper wires, microwaves or optical fibers. The greater the bandwidth, the more data can be transmitted' (Constable, 1900: 122). Stone, who researched the field of film, TV and radio, uses the concept of bandwidth to show the varying amounts of information that are exchanged. Wide bandwidths would be face-to-face interaction, while narrow bandwidth would be the communication that takes place on-line (Stone, 1995).
4. I have decided to leave the quotes in their original form and have not changed the original spelling. Often, spelling as well as grammar are incorrect.

5. It was never my desire to do voice interviews for this project. Rather, I wanted to see how far I could get by collecting all of my data, which included both interviews and questionnaires, on-line. I was able to accomplish this for the entire project.
6. This is a program that allows a user to access other programs. In this case, the questionnaire program allowed me to make multiple-choice or open-ended answers and would automatically go on to the next question when the respondent finished with the question that was being answered.
7. This also helped cover any ethical issues that might have come up due to the nature of this study. Everyone knew as soon as they logged on, that I was 'lurking' around and what I was doing. At the time I was conducting this study, which was part of my doctoral dissertation (Wysocki, 1996), collecting data on-line was very new to most people, especially University Institutional Review Boards. It was decided that if a respondent took part in either an on-line interview or answered my questionnaire, they were giving consent. No one ever complained to the SYSOP or myself about my presence on the BBS as a researcher.
8. I only kept track of the number of people who actually filled out a questionnaire, not the number of people who contacted me to ask questions or make comments.
9. I used the program TELIX to call *Pleasure Pit* and to capture what was being said. The procedure is simple: all I needed to do was hit Alt L on my keyboard, give the file a name, and it would automatically download.
10. Users send the SYSOP of this BBS all kinds of information, pictures, games, and anything else that is displayed over the Internet. Currently, he has people who are sending him child pornography that they have collected at various other sites. They collect the GIF file, along with information about where they found it, send it to the SYSOP, who collects them and turns them into the local police department. Anything including children or animals is not displayed on *Pleasure Pit*.
11. I went on-line recently after having been away from *Pleasure Pit* for about 1½ years and found out that the entire BBS is free to everyone who wants to use it. I also found the BBS was not getting the kind of attention it was getting when I was originally involved. There were no apparent upgrades and the number of users seemed to have decreased.
12. All of the names have been changed to protect the identity of the BBS users.
13. This could be one explanation for why men might have the desire to take on the persona of a woman in cyberspace. For more information see Stone (1995).
14. In this case I brought my feelings to the attention of the SYSOP, who checked out their phone numbers and found that they were actually children, who were using the computers at their high school to call this sexually explicit BBS.
15. There are a few possible explanations for the low number of people who stated they were homosexual in this study: it could be that the respondents did not feel comfortable describing themselves as homosexual, or that there are BBS geared towards homosexuality.

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Biographical Note

Diane Kholos Wysocki, is an Assistant Professor of Sociology who is interested in sociological technology, gender, and medical sociology. *Address:* Department of Sociology, University of Nebraska at Kearney, Kearney, NE 68849-1295, USA. [email: wysockid@platte.unk.edu]

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