The internet has become an arena for love and sexuality, but what does this arena look like, how is it used, who are the users, and why is the internet used for these purposes? These are some of the questions this thesis is trying to answer. By presenting data collected through a web based questionnaire and qualitative research interviews conducted online, this thesis provides an insight into this relatively new phenomenon.

The results show that both men and women use the internet for love and sexual purposes and that usage patterns can be related to both gender and age. For the majority, using the internet for these purposes is perceived as having positive outcomes while for a minority it may become problematic.

The anonymity on the internet is a major factor contributing to make it a popular venue for love and sexual activities; not only because of the safety and security it provides by keeping others at a distance while being intimate, but also because it allows people to engage in activities that would be difficult or impossible to engage in offline.

Kristian Daneback

Love and sexuality on the internet

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To Jenny and Leo

Abstract

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Foreword

For me, the opportunity to write this thesis within the Ph.D program at the Department of Social Work at Göteborg University has been an incredible experience in many ways. Not only have I been able to deepen my understanding of a specific subject; through discussions and courses I have also learnt about parts involved in the research process and possible ways of explaining and understanding social phenomena, society, and human behavior. In addition, the education has had a profound influence on me as a person and on my thinking and it consequently has come to permeate my everyday life.

Of course, none of this would have been possible without the efforts and influence from other people. There are many people to whom I am indebted and to whom I would like to express my sincere gratitude. However, writing this foreword I face the risk of forgetting to mention people who have been important to me. If this would be the case for someone, please accept my apologies for this.

The first person I would like to thank is my supervisor professor Sven-Axel Månsson, now at the School of Health and Society at Malmö University. I am not sure what you do or how you do it, but somehow you are able to get things out of me that come as a surprise even to me. It is always stimulating and interesting to work with you because of your knowledge and expertise in many areas, but also because of the constructive and creative atmosphere you create. I have learned so much from you, both professionally and personally. Thank you, Sven-Axel.

I would like to thank professor Margareta Bäck-Wiklund of Göteborg University, who has been encouraging and supportive throughout the research process and who overtook the formal responsibility as my supervisor when Sven-Axel transferred to Malmö University.

I would like to thank my friends and colleagues, Dr. Ronny Tikkanen and Dr. Lotta Löfgren-Mårtenson, who have been part of the research group and who have been supportive and encouraging throughout the entire process. Another friend and part of the research group is professor Michael W. Ross at University of Texas, USA, from whom I have learned very much and who generously has shared his knowledge with me and in an inexhaustible manner answered my many questions. Here I would also like to pay tribute to Dr. Al Cooper of Stanford University and San Jose Marital and Sexuality Centre, USA, who tragically died in 2004. Al was a pioneer and an expert in the field of internet sexuality which he had researched for many years. He was part of the research group and in a short time he became a very good friend of mine.

I would like to express my gratitude to associate professors Peter Dellgran and Ulla-Carin Hedin of Göteborg University, whose readings and comments helped to further improve the manuscript and my thinking around the subject. In addition, I would like to thank the opponent at my final seminar, Dr. Malin Sveningsson of Karlstad University, whose comments and expertise in internet research had much influence on the manuscript. I would also like to thank Dr. Margareta Forsberg and Nils Hammarén of Göteborg University for their comments on earlier versions of the

Table of contents

1. Introduction

This thesis focuses on love and sexuality on the internet, its arenas and actors. It examines how, by whom, and why the internet is used for purposes of love and sexuality. The results are discussed in relation to theories about contemporary society, human interactions, and human sexuality. As the data, on which the thesis is based, were primarily collected on the internet, the methodological approaches are discussed as well. The thesis constitutes one part of a larger research project about sexuality on the internet, in which researchers from both Sweden and the United States have collaborated. The project was funded by a grant from the Swedish Council for Working Life and Social Research and the scientific leader for the project was professor Sven-Axel Månsson at the School of Health and Society, Malmö University in Sweden. The research project started in the beginning of 2002 with the overall purpose to comprehensively study sexuality on the internet, its manifestations, meanings, and consequences. An additional purpose was to examine and describe the sexual landscape on the internet. The project also had a comparative ambition, i.e., to contrast its findings with the results of other similar studies, particularly studies performed in the US.

At the time when the research project was launched, there had been no prior Swedish research focusing on the usage of the internet for purposes of love and sexuality. For example, the large national population-based study on sexuality, Sex in Sweden (Lewin, Helmius, Månsson, Lalos, & Fugl-Meyer, 1998), that was conducted in 1996 did not include any questions about the internet. Internationally some research had been done in the late 90's. However, this research was limited in scope, focusing primarily either on specific subgroups or specific (problematic) aspects of internet sexuality. Around the turn of the century, Dr Al Cooper and his colleagues at Stanford University conducted two large scale survey studies as an attempt to broaden the knowledge about the phenomenon among the general population in the US. Data were collected by online questionnaires distributed on one of the largest American portal sites, www.msnbc.com, and the first sample consisted of 9,000 respondents and the second sample consisted of 7,000 respondents. While these studies generated some general knowledge about internet sexuality previously unknown, they were severely gender biased as each sample consisted of approximately 85 percent men and 15 percent women. Meanwhile, media had started to focus on internet sexuality, primarily on its presumptive darker sides, sometimes implying that it was causing severe social (and moral) problems among its users. This emphasized the need for research and highlighted its contemporary relevance.

In view of the absence of Swedish research and the mostly fragmented and specific international research along with media reports and the apparent public interest to use the internet in search of issues relating to sexuality, professor Månsson and his team (including myself) decided to collect baseline data about love and sexuality on the internet in Sweden. This was done by constructing a questionnaire, based upon a combination of questions from the Sex in Sweden study and the American studies that had been conducted by Cooper and his colleagues, translated to fit Swedish condi-

tions. In the summer of 2002 the questionnaire was placed (during a two-week period) on one of the largest web portals in Sweden, www.passagen.se. This generated approximately 2,000 completed questionnaires. Contrary to Cooper's samples, our sample contained an almost equal gender distribution with 55 percent men and 45 percent women, which, by the way, equals the gender distribution on the Passagen portal site. This fact alone made the survey unique compared to other studies in the field.

The results show that both men and women use the internet for sexual purposes to a similar extent, which is an interesting finding in relation to the widespread belief that internet sexuality is primarily a male activity. Sexual activities were broadly defined to include flirting, dating, reading and viewing erotica, seeking information and education, seeking partners for love and/or sex, and buying sexual material. We found that men mostly viewed pornography while women were interested in interactive activities such as chatting. However, the activities were not mutually exclusive. In addition, when broken down by age, the patterns changed somewhat. Older respondents use the internet to seek partners through dating sites and by placing personal ads on specific web sites. Younger users, on the other hand, engage in a variety of activities, for example, flirting, chatting, viewing and reading erotica, and buying sex products.

Reasons for using the internet for sexual purposes vary. However, the primary reasons mentioned by the respondents are recreation and curiosity. Interestingly enough, the results show that women to a much greater extent than men use the internet for educational purposes, which highlights the need and interest for sex education in a country which is considered by many as a pioneer in the field. Not surprisingly perhaps, the percentages were higher among younger users. Some users, primarily women, also log on to the internet to buy sexual materials. Approximately one third of the respondents had engaged in cybersex (two or more people engaging in mutual sex talk while online for sexual purposes, sometimes including masturbation) and more than one third had met someone online whom they later met offline and had sex with. The findings suggest that people engage in a variety of activities for various reasons and that age and gender influence their behaviors in certain regards. For the majority of the respondents, using the internet for sexual purposes is regarded to have influenced them and their sexuality in positive ways. However, for a small group, approximately ten per cent, it has become problematic; for some it has become a compulsive activity, seemingly beyond their own control. While we cannot know if the internet has reinforced their behavior or if the internet specifically attracts this particular group, our analysis shows that they seem to be aware of their problems. The internet provides easy and fast ways to find sex partners and the fact that more than one third of the respondents report to use it for this purpose, there might also be an increased risk for sexually transmitted infections. The results from our study show that the prevalence of sexually transmitted infections is higher in our sample compared to the general population.

In summary, our study provides us with an initial understanding of the users, what kind of activities they engage in, and with whom, and their reasons for using the

internet for sexual purposes. When compared with prior international findings, our results seem to correspond in many ways, or at least to point in the same direction. However, while this study, with its rather basic statistical analyses, answered many of our initial questions and provided us with a first picture of the use of the internet for sexual purposes, one might say that it generated more questions than it answered. For example, we can say very little about how the respondents navigate through the sexual landscape, how and with whom they interact, and how their use of the internet for sexual purposes relates to other parts of their everyday lives. These questions require more sophisticated and specialized statistical analyses. And to a certain extent they also require another kind of data, data of a more qualitative nature. And this is where the current thesis comes into the picture.

The purpose of the thesis

Since it is part of a larger research project, the current thesis shares the overall purpose to comprehensively study love and sexuality on the internet. Such an ambitious purpose implies broad rather than specific questions, many questions rather than few; it requires a multitude of empirical data of both qualitative and quantitative nature; it requires analyses from several theoretical perspectives. As the project was the first of its kind in Sweden, it emphasized the need to explore and describe the phenomenon in an attempt to collect baseline data about love and sexuality on the internet in Sweden; data that would constitute the foundation for future and more specialized studies. Nevertheless, besides an overall purpose, the research project set out to investigate how, why, and with what consequences the arenas on the internet were used for the purposes of love and sexuality. Broken down into sub-questions, the ambition was to investigate:

- How the internet is used for sexual purposes, what kind of activities users engage in online, how people access the arenas and how they present themselves and interact online, how love and sexuality is negotiated online, love and sexuality in relation to online and offline milieus, etc.
- Why the internet is used for the purposes of love and sexuality and by whom, if motifs and preferences change over time, and if there are differences and similarities between sub-groups, etc.
- What effects and consequences the usage of the internet results in, what the actors gain in terms of happiness, satisfaction, and knowledge and, on the other hand, possible worries, addiction, and disappointment, what feelings the usage generates, how it influences other relations, what risks are taken, what relationships, if there are any, are there between usage and social isolation, etc.
- The possibilities to prevent any negative consequences emanating from the usage of the internet for the purposes of love and sexuality, the kind of information related to love and sexuality that is accessible through the internet, who the providers of such information are, etc.

Quite obviously, these questions are too many to be fully explored within the boundaries of one doctoral thesis and must, therefore, be limited in scoop. The explorative character of this thesis and its comprehensive ambitions to collect baseline data are continued in the current thesis but with the ambition to carry out more complex analyses of the already collected quantitative data. However, even though these analyses focus on specific issues and questions, they are very much devoted to generating basic knowledge and answer questions such as whom, what, and how often and to put subgroups up against these findings. As such, these analyses should be seen as an attempt to deepen and refine the initial quantitative results from the project. Nevertheless, by collecting and analyzing qualitative data, it is also an attempt to contrast and deepen prior results that cannot be explained by the quantitative data. For example, our quantitative results do not reveal much about what the sexual landscape looks like, how the actors navigate through it, how they present themselves and interact with other people online. Neither do they tell us anything about the role of the internet in people's everyday lives nor why they prefer to engage in certain online sexual activities and what meaning they ascribe to them. The qualitative data contributes to the understanding of internet sexuality by adding a narrative interpretive dimension. Besides the focus on analysing and interpreting empirical findings and comparing the results to prior research, the ambition with the current thesis is also to analyze the findings in the light of prior theory. The introduction of a theoretical framework in which to explain and understand love and sexuality on the internet makes it possible to relate the findings to human sexuality, human behaviour, and society in general. In addition, this also makes it possible to criticize, contrast, and challenge the findings from other theoretical view points. However, the theoretical framework suggested should by no means be perceived as complete, let alone comprehensive, but rather as one attempt to theoretically understand and explain love and sexuality on the internet. As the quantitative and most of the qualitative data were collected online and through the internet, there is a need to discuss the methodological approach, both technically and theoretically. The internet opens up for new ways of collecting data, but at the same time it raises new questions about validity, reliability, generalizability, and research ethics. The ambition of the current thesis is to discuss these issues in a general manner, but also to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of using the internet for data collection that were recognized in the current research project. As with the theoretical framework, the methodological discussion should be perceived as an initial attempt to describe an alternative and a complement to more traditional techniques for data collection. As a result, the purpose of the current thesis is to continue analyzing the quantitative data, to add and analyze qualitative data, to put the findings within a theoretical framework, and to discuss the usage of the internet for data collection.

Disposition and summary of the studies

The current thesis is divided into two parts. The first part contains the "overcoat" (transl. "Kappa"), the part where I provide the background and the purpose of my the-

sis and its components, present and discuss prior research, discuss love and sexuality on the internet in relation to social theory, discuss methodological issues related to online quantitative and qualitative data collection, and present my final conclusions. The second part contains five publications; four quantitative papers and one qualitative research report. For orienting purposes, brief summaries of each publication are presented below.

<u>Predicting the future of internet sex: online sexual activities in Sweden (Publication I)</u>

The initial quantitative research report from the research project (Månsson, Daneback, Tikkanen, & Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2003) showed that the respondents engaged in a variety of sexual activities on the internet and that they did so for a variety of reasons. However, the results indicated gender and age differences in some activities engaged in. For example, 72 percent men reported to view erotica compared to 22 percent women, but among respondents between 50 and 65 the percentages changed to 63 percent men and 4 percent women. Another example of age and gender difference concerns those who visit dating sites. Among men, 41 percent reported to engage in this activity compared to 28 percent of the women. If we specifically focus on those between 18 and 25 years old, 27 percent men and 12 percent women reported to visit dating sites. These and similar types of results made us wonder if there was any consistency among the sexual activities people engaged in on the internet, that is, if certain activities could be grouped together. Furthermore, by already having acknowledged the importance of gender and age from the initial report, we contrasted our findings against these variables. This was the first more sophisticated and complex analysis from the project which had so far been primarily descriptive and explorative. However, at this time we had not decided how to handle incomplete questionnaires nor the relatively few respondents above 65 years. In this regard, this study raised some important methodological questions. We decided to proceed with and to further investigate these methodological issues separately but parallel to our original focus on love and sexuality on the internet. As a result, we included all 3,614 respondents that had begun to fill out the questionnaire and let the variables in question for the analyses decide the n.

The analysis showed that most men viewed erotica while most women most frequently engaged in flirting. In addition, more men than women used the internet to seek partners, visit dating sites, and answer sex ads. Women, on the other hand, used the internet more frequently than men to stay in contact with their partner and to find information/education about sexual matters. By conducting a factor analysis on the range of online sexual activities available, two major dimensions were found; one was accessing erotica and one was partner seeking activities. The analysis showed men more likely than women to engage in both these dimensions. Considering age, respondents between 25 and 49 years old were more likely to use the internet for partner seeking activities compared to those who were younger than 25 and older than 50. Accessing erotica, however, decreased with age in an almost linear relationship. Perhaps not surprisingly, younger respondents used the internet for general sexual purposes more than the older respondents. Many of our findings corroborated with prior re-

search which increased our confidence in our study's reliability. Furthermore, we suggested that Sweden might be a fortuitous place for future research about love and sexuality because of its high internet connectivity and a relatively high acceptance of using the internet for sexual purposes. We concluded our analysis by emphasizing the need for more research on younger people who use the internet for sexual purposes as they seemed to have more multifaceted usage patterns compared to older people. In addition, we suggested the findings to be related to theory.

Characteristics of men and women who complete or exit from an online internet sexuality questionnaire: A study of instrument dropout biases (Publication II)

In the process of analysing our quantitative data for the above mentioned study (Cooper, Månsson, Daneback, Tikkanen, & Ross, 2003) we were concerned about those respondents who did not complete our questionnaire and how this could possibly bias our findings. At the same time we understood that the format chosen for the questionnaire opened up for analyses that had previously been impossible to carry out in regular pencil and paper surveys; by examining the data, we could follow every respondent through the questionnaire as they completed each question and could determine, literally with the precision of a second, when and where a respondent had dropped out. Regularly, questionnaires are both completely filled out and sent back to the researchers and if not filled out they are rarely sent back either. The format of this survey made it possible to examine the socio-demographic characteristics of those respondents who left their questionnaires incomplete as well as to relate it to other variables that could possibly influence their decision to drop out.

During the two weeks in June 2002 when data were collected, we had placed a banner ad on the Passagen web portal (www.passagen.se) which was shown more than 2,000,000 times and had made 10,644 people enter the information site that preceded the actual questionnaire. The analysis showed that of the 3,614 respondents (34 percent of the 10,644) who began filling out the questionnaire, only 1,850 respondents completed it. This means that we had lost 51 percent of the respondents along the way. Because we knew the distribution of demographic data from the portal site, we could arrive at the conclusion that these data corroborated more or less with our sample considering gender, age, and occupation. The results showed that men dropped out earlier than women, to be more specific, women were retained twice as long as men. We also found that heterosexual men and men who were in a relationship were more likely to exit. On the contrary, being in a relationship made women more likely to complete the questionnaire. While geographic location did not influence retention or drop out among women, men from small or rural towns were more likely to drop out. A multivariate analysis showed that three variables had a significant influence on the retention/drop out rate; gender, sexual orientation, and internet connection speed. Our results indicate that as increasingly more people access the internet via broadband connections, we could expect a higher retention rate. While we cannot influence general socio-demographic issues (unless we direct our research to specific groups) we can shorten our questionnaires to increase the retention rate. As a consequence of the re-

sults, we decided to omit any incomplete questionnaires to avoid different sample characteristics depending on which questions we would analyze.

An internet study of cybersex participants (Publication III)

Hitherto, we had focused on data mining and explorative statistical analyses of the questionnaire on the one hand and the entire range of online sexual activities on the other. Our conclusions so far were that many people engage in a variety of sexual activities on the internet, that these activities could be grouped into accessing erotica and partner seeking activities and, furthermore, that engagement in online sexual activities varied with age and gender. Cybersex is a subcategory of online sexual activities and refers to two or more people engaging in mutual sexual talk while online for sexual pleasure. It is possible to place this activity somewhere in between accessing erotica and partner seeking activities as it may serve as sexual fantasies as well as practice, preparation, and rehearsal for an offline sexual encounter. In an adjacent study we found that self-identified heterosexual men went online to engage in cybersex with other men (Ross, Månsson, Daneback, & Tikkanen, 2005) indicating that the internet allows people to engage in activities and to try sexual identities, the latter a phenomenon described by Tikkanen and Ross (2000) as approximation. Contrary to what is possible offline, the internet, through the anonymity it provides, makes it possible to approach strangers with whom to engage in cybersex.

In this paper, our interest was to investigate if cybersex was an activity that appealed to specific people; if it was possible to discern any specific characteristics of those who engaged in cybersex. In addition we were interested in measuring their number of offline sex partners and the time they spent online for sexual purposes and to compare them with those who had never engaged in cybersex activities. The initial analysis showed that out of 1,828 respondents, 30 percent men and 34 percent women reported to have had cybersex. Broken down by age groups, we found that 38 percent of men 18-24 had engaged in cybersex which decreased almost linearly down to 13 percent among men 50-65. Among women, engaging in cybersex was almost equally common among respondents 18-49 but among women 50-65 the prevalence decreased to 22 percent. Furthermore, the analysis showed that web chat rooms were the most frequent settings used for cybersex among both men and women. Web chat rooms were followed by instant messaging software, again used to an equal extent by both men and women. This result highlighted cybersex as a real time activity. Through a multivariate analysis we found that age only had a significant effect for men 50-65 who were less likely to engage in cybersex. In addition we found homosexual men more likely than heterosexual men to have cybersex. Those who engaged in cybersex were also more likely to spend relatively long hours online for sexual purposes and to spend almost twice as many hours online per week compared to those who had not engaged in cybersex. In addition, those who engaged in cybersex also had more sex partners offline compared to those without this experience. Taken together, the results from this study made us wonder if and how cybersex might influence sexual behaviour in general, for example in the light of the theory of sexual scripts developed by Gagnon and Simon (1973). Finally, we suggested qualitative data to be collected and

analyzed to gain more knowledge about cybersex, its content and impact on the participants' everyday lives.

Examining online sexual problems (Publication IV)

Our initial analysis of data showed that while most respondents indicated that using the internet for sexual purposes had influenced them and their sexuality in positive ways, a small proportion of the respondents experienced internet sexuality as problematic. As one of the aims of the research project was to investigate the consequences of internet usage for sexual purposes in general but also to focus on the negative consequences in particular, we decided to conduct a special analysis on those respondents who were categorized as sexual compulsives according to a sexual compulsivity scale that was incorporated in our questionnaire. This scale was constructed by Kalichman and colleagues (Kalichman, Johnson, Adair, Rompa, Multhau, & Kelly, 1994) and contains ten questions on sexual behaviour and feelings where each question can be answered on a scale ranging from 1-5. Kalichman et al. (Ibid.) reported an alpha coefficient of .89 for this scale. In our sample of 1,458 respondents who used the internet for sexual purposes, 5.6 percent were categorized as sexual compulsives according to the scale. In this paper, our aim was to examine the characteristics of those sexual compulsives and to measure the time spent online for sexual purposes and their self reported history of sexually transmitted infections. We were also interested to find out if their offline sexual behaviour had changed with regard to their pornography consumption (magazines and video) and having causal sex partners.

A multivariate regression analysis showed sexual compulsives more likely to be men, to live in a relationship rather than to be single, and to be bisexual rather than heterosexual. Interestingly, no homosexuals scored high enough on the sexual compulsivity scale to be categorized as sexual compulsives. We interpreted this finding in terms of homosexuals possibly being more comfortable with a broader range of the sexual behavior possible to engage in. We suggested that bisexuals might have scored high because of engagement in many sexual activities online where they mix heterosexual and homosexual contacts. In addition, sexuality might occupy more thoughts for bisexuals which made us wonder if the scale measured their current level of curiosity, development, and experimenting and, thus, measuring latent sexual normativity. The analysis showed sexual compulsives to either spend 3-10 or more than 15 hours online per week for sexual purposes. Contrary to prior research, we suggested that the time spent online might be an indication of the kind of activity engaged in and not a measure of compulsiveness. In addition, there was also a higher likelihood of having a history of sexually transmitted infections among sexual compulsives. A bivariate analysis of nominal data showed sexual compulsives to increase their offline sexual behavior, after they had begun to use the internet for sexual purposes to a greater extent than non-sexual compulsive individuals. From the results of this study, we concluded that clinicians should examine relationship status and sexual identities of those who are considered to be sexual compulsives and, furthermore, how the internet is used for sexual purposes and how people's offline sexual behaviors might have changed after beginning to use the internet. However, we suggested careful interpreta-

tions of the results due to the restricted number of sexual compulsives and the self se-
lected sample and encouraged further research, both quantitative and qualitative, to
investigate this group further.

<u>Love and sexuality on the internet: A qualitative approach (Publication V)</u>

As the research project was set out to comprehensively study love and sexuality on the
internet, the ambition was to conduct a number of qualitative research interviews to
complement and deepen the results from the quantitative studies. While this approach
was determined a priori, it became more obvious that the statistical analyses only
could answer parts of our research questions and at the same time these analyses gen-
erated new questions that could not be answered by our quantitative data. In 2003 and
2004, 26 qualitative research interviews were conducted with 16 women and 10 men
aged 18 to 40. Two interviews were conducted face-to-face and the other 24 interviews
were conducted online through instant messaging software. The age of the first 6 in-
terviewees was between 27 and 40 and due to the fact that younger people were over-
represented in our sample, which corresponds to the overall usage of the internet in
Sweden as well as that our prior findings suggested their usage patterns regarding love
and sexuality on the internet to differ from older users, we decided to recruit infor-
mants younger than 27 years old. These informants were all recruited from a commu-
nity directed primarily to youths, www.lunarstorm.se.

      The purpose of the qualitative study was to investigate the sexual landscape as
perceived by the informants and how they navigated through this landscape. Further-
more, its purpose was to investigate the kind of activities the informants engaged in,
why they engaged in them, and how they interacted with other actors in the sexual
landscape. Another purpose was to investigate how the usage of the internet for sexual
purposes was incorporated in the informants' everyday lives. The results were com-
pared with prior research in the field, but for me to be able to make some generaliza-
tions beyond the 26 informants in the current study, the ambition was to connect the
findings to prior theory, primarily by using thoughts and concepts from Bauman's liq-
uid modernity, Goffman's dramaturgical perspective, and Gagnon and Simon's sexual
scripts.

      The findings showed that the sexual landscape could be divided into interac-
tive and non-interactive arenas. Furthermore they could be divided into synchronous
and asynchronous arenas, that is, arenas that enable real time interaction and those
who do not. In addition, the arenas could be grouped by the level of privacy they pro-
vided. There was a tendency, primarily among younger people, to prefer private syn-
chronous arenas and public asynchronous arenas. This means that for real time com-
munication, they want to know the people they interact with but this is of less impor-
tance when communication is asynchronous. One explanation is that this strategy
makes it possible to be in control of the interactions and increases the feeling of secu-
rity, which in turn is in line with the reasoning of both Bauman and Goffman. Differ-
ent arenas provide different levels of anonymity and the results suggest that the more
anonymous the arena, the more sexually explicit it is, which can be related to the sex-
ual scripts stating that sexuality is a private matter and not to be shared with others

(Gagnon & Simon, 1973). This is, however, not to say that synchronous media never can be sexual.

Although this and previous research has shown gender to be an important variable regarding love and sexuality on the internet, the findings in the current study emphasize the generational differences and suggest that these might be more important than gender. The younger informants spent more time online and did not differentiate sexual activities from non-sexual activities but these were rather incorporated in their general usage of the internet. Furthermore, they tended to incorporate their internet usage in their everyday lives and dissolved the border between online and offline, while the older informants logged on specifically for the purposes of love and sexuality. However, for all informants, the usage of the internet had influence on their offline lives and vice versa. Finally, the results emphasized the internet as a constantly changing medium in terms of the characteristics of the arenas and the actors which influence online behaviors.

2. Prior research

In this chapter I will present prior research about love and sexuality on the internet, when and how love and sexuality were discovered on the internet, the establishment as a specific field for research, and the focus and content of prior research about love and sexuality on the internet. I will conclude this chapter by placing the current thesis in relation to prior research and show how it contributes to the existing body of knowledge.

Initial focus for internet researchers

By using the word internet we refer to a number of interconnected computers, a network. In the beginning, in 1969, this network consisted of only four computers known as ARPAnet. Sveningsson (2001) states that the focus for the initial research about the internet and computer mediated communication was related to how it would influence and benefit organizations. She identifies two traces in this early research, one focusing on the technical aspects and one focusing on commercial issues. The early research on internet usage focused on organization related topics such as problem solving and decision making. This research left out the usage of the internet for social purposes, which did not capture researchers' interest until later. In the mid 1990s, however, Sveningsson (Ibid.) recognizes that there was a dramatic increase in research covering the social usage of the internet as well as the notion of an internet culture.

The initial research on the social usage of the internet set out to investigate these online milieus, for example what they looked like, their functions, what they contained, what activities users engaged in, what language was used, and how the users interacted with each other (c.f., Pargman, 2000; Sveningsson, 2001; Turkle, 1995).Thus, it was the arenas and the users on the internet that were emphasized and identified as the internet culture. In this type of research, as opposed to the research about the influence of internet usage in organizations, the internet and the internet culture was more or less separated from the everyday life offline. The first studies were primarily speculative in describing utopic or dystopic scenarios that internet usage would eventually lead to, lacking empirical data to accompany these speculations (Sveningsson, Lövheim, & Bergquist, 2003). However, the subsequent studies began to collect empirical data online, often through observation of settings and actors interacting or by analyzing the content, for example language, pictures, and topics discussed. Occasionally, the studies were accompanied by interviews conducted in offline settings about online behaviors (c.f., Sveningsson, 2001). The findings from these empirical studies found that the milieus incorporated rather different qualities compared to offline and that the milieus differed from each other as well; there was no single internet, but a variety of milieus with their own specific qualities. Furthermore, the prerequisites for social interaction were distinctly different from face-to-face interac-

tions, primarily because of the lack of visual and audible cues in the faceless interactions on the internet (Sveningsson, 2001; Wallace, 1999).

In my opinion, two aspects of the results from the early empirical studies stand out as especially important regarding how the internet changed the prerequisites for human interaction. First, it made it possible for many people to meet and interact online despite their geographic location. Second, it was impossible for the participants to verify or dismiss their presentations of themselves. In short, these aspects concern the concepts of community and identity and how the traditional meaning of these concepts changed on the internet. Researchers found that in some of the milieus on the internet, the interaction between people created a sense of togetherness, a togetherness that could be described as being a community (Sveningsson, 2001). However, other researchers have debated whether these online gatherings ought to count as actual communities or not (where the critics have focused on communities as tied to physical space). Regardless of these debates, online communities can be defined as groups of people who, at a given time, have something in common with the other participants or members of that community (web communities are described in more detail in Publication V). Perhaps more delicate is the discussion about online identities. The lack of visual and audible cues allows the participants and members of various communities to present themselves in any way they whish and any discrepancies between online and offline presentations can not be revealed on the internet. This allows people to play with their identities and to play roles that they have been curious of. For example, it is possible for a woman to claim to be a man and the responses she receives on the internet will be related to the gender of character she plays (Turkle, 1995). The consequences of this possibility was a major question among the first researchers in the field (e.g., Stone, 1996; Sundén, 2002; Turkle, 1995), while the public debate focused more on the discrepancy between online identities and offline identities and how common it was to use fake identities on the internet (Sveningsson, Lövheim, & Bergquist, 2003).

The subsequent research showed that the usage of fake identities, to pretend to be someone else, was rare (Shiano & White, 1998 ref. in Sveningsson, Lövheim, & Bergquist, 2003). Perhaps did the idea, that faking identities were a common feature of online interactions, emanated from a time where this was part of the purpose of online interactions, for example in role playing games (MUDs) on the internet before the emergence of social MUDs in 1988 (Pargman, 2000). Nevertheless, despite that research showed the opposite, the belief that faking identities were common on the internet remained persistent among the public, in media, and even among internet users (and is still persistent as shown in Publication V). However, the debate about presentations and identities in relation to an objective truth can be related to similar debates that had been going on for decades prior to the emergence of the internet, for example as shown by Goffman (1959), but also more recently shown by, for example, Giddens (1991) and Bauman (2004a). While many internet researchers have deliberately focused on the online milieus and actors, another type of research must be mentioned. This research has focused on the internet usage in relation to people's everyday

lives and range from large scale surveys conducted by statistical institutes to ethnographic approaches, for example as conducted by Miller and Slater (2000).

Discovering online love and sexuality

In the early research about the internet, sexuality was one issue that interested the researchers and Haraway (1991) was one of the first to discuss how the internet would influence, for example, human sexuality and challenge contemporary understandings of it. Later, Turkle (1995) found that love and sexuality was part of the interactivity in online milieus. For example, in the MUDs, people let their characters engage in romantic relationships and occasionally had them married. The game environment let the players try various characters and explore what it felt like to play these characters and, thus, experience feelings they might have never experienced before. In this environment, Turkle noticed that some characters engaged in sexual activities, an activity she labeled tiny sex. Tiny sex referred to two or more people typing sexual messages to each other that consisted of descriptions of physical actions and emotional reactions. Turkle claimed that tiny sex was a common ingredient of online interaction and for some the exclusive reason to log on to the internet. This meant that people were able to experiment with sexuality, but that it also raised questions about fidelity and minors engaging in sexual activities. Furthermore, Turkle reports that some minors' first sexual experiences happened online and that others found it easier to initiate romantic contacts online and later pursue them offline. Wallace (1999) confirmed Turkle's early observations of the internet as a place for romantic and sexual exploration, experimenting, and adventures. She noted that this not only took place in MUDs, but could be found in abundance in other online settings as well. In addition, she noticed that in some cases online romance and sexuality are brought offline, but states that high hopes online might turn into disappointment offline. Nevertheless, although she acknowledged some potential hazards, she interpreted the internet as a safe way of experimenting and a place to nurture relationships.

Another aspect of internet sexuality that appeared relatively early in the internet research was online pornography. This occurred at the time when the internet became accessible to the public on a larger basis and was boosted by sensational reports by media. The increased power and speed made it possible to upload and download (sexually explicit) images. Researchers concluded that erotic images were abundant on the internet in various milieus and were of both commercial and amateur character. However, Wallace (1999) claimed that some people would substitute their prior ways of accessing pornography as the internet made it accessible for more people who would feel freer to access it online. Wallace concluded that most people would not be interested in online erotica and that it would be a transient phenomenon for those who would be interested. At the same time, she stated that research about online pornography was largely absent. Nevertheless, it raised questions about the pornographic industry, the exploitation of women, and the exposure to minors.

Subsequent internet research also included love and sexuality. Not that the researchers were specifically interested in issues of love and sexuality per se, but they found it to be part of the online (inter)activity and the actors had to position themselves in such issues, whether they liked it or not (Sveningsson, 2001). Sveningsson found that the participants in a web chat room experienced other participants' interest in having cybersex or usage of sexually explicit language to be disturbing and, furthermore, to be negative to flirty behaviors in the chat room if that was their only purpose for participation. Other research showed how the internet usage penetrated many aspects of people's everyday lives offline. Some used the internet to seek partners while others used it to keep in touch with their current partners which emphasized that the interrelationship between online and offline was a complicated one and that online and offline are difficult to consider as separate and isolated entities (Miller & Slater, 2000).

The establishment of a new field of research

Many of the researchers that initially found love and sexuality to be a part of the content on the internet were not sexuality researchers. Thus, love and sexuality were recognized among many other aspects of internet usage. Later, when sexuality researchers' interest of the phenomenon was caught in the mid 1990s, more refined studies were conducted with the specific focus on love and sexuality on the internet (Griffin-Shelley, 2003). However, until 1999 only about 30 articles had been published in scientific journals and about half of these articles appeared in the 1997 special issue of *Journal of Sex Education & Therapy*. These first studies of love and sexuality on the internet included no or little empirical data, but discussed and speculated about possible benefits and potential hazards (e.g., Cooper & Sportolari, 1997; Graugaard & Winther, 1998; Harry & Snobl, 1998; Leiblum, 1997; Shaw, 1997; Schnarch, 1997). In the case they provided data, it consisted primarily of observations, reviews, and descriptions of the sexual landscape, its content, and how it could be used or misused (Barak & Safir, 1997; Durkin, 1997; Kim & Baily, 1997; Newman, 1997). In 1998, Cooper, Sheerer, Boise, & Gordon (1999) conducted a large scale survey study including approximately 9,000 respondents who filled out a 59-item questionnaire distributed through the web portal MSNBC. Despite a gender biased sample, this data was the first to provide information about the users and the activities they engaged in online. To date, the first article presenting the initial results from this data set has been cited about 100 times and has to be considered a milestone in the field.

In the process of preparing a special issue for the *Journal of Sex research* scheduled to be published in 2001, Binik (2001) stated that there were many hypotheses in the field, but relatively little new data and connections to theory about sexuality. However, during 2000 and 2001 more than 60 journal articles had been added to the body of knowledge. Among these articles, two special issues on internet sexuality had been published in 2000, one in *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity* and one in *CyberPsychology & Behavior*. These three special issues accounted for one third of the pub-

lished journal articles these two years. Compared to the period before 2000, the studies included more empirical data, but a substantial part of the articles continued theorizing and speculating. Schneider (2000) conducted a small scale survey that comprised of 91 women and 3 men and Cooper, Delmonico, and Burg (2000) re-analyzed data from Cooper et al. (1999), both studies focusing on cybersex addiction. While one part of the research continued to elaborate on both positive and negative aspects of internet sexuality from a variety of angles (Barak & Fisher, 2001; Barak & King, 2000; Bull & McFarlane, 2000; Cooper & McLoughlin, 2001; Fisher & Barak, 2000; Leiblum, 2001; Levine, 2000; McFarlane, Bull, & Reitmejer, 2000), the addictive/compulsive aspect had become an emphasized area for research with suggestions for treatment (Ochs & Binik, 2000; Orzack & Ross, 2000; Putnam & Maheu, 2000; Schwartz & Southern, 2000; Young, Griffin-Shelley, Cooper, O'Mara, & Buchanan, 2000). In 2000, an additional subfield of internet sexuality research was opened focusing on men who have sex with men. These studies reported that the internet was used as a place to experiment with sexual identities but also as a place to meet offline love and sex partners, which highlighted health issues (Bull, McFarlane, & Reitmeijer, 2001; Elford, Bolding, & Sherr, 2001; Klausner, Wolf, Fischer-Ponce, Zolt, & Katz, 2000). Research showed that men who had sex with men and who visited chat rooms engaged in risk behaviors to a greater extent than those who did not visit chat rooms and suggested the internet to be utilized for preventive purposes (Ross, Tikkanen, & Månsson, 2000; Tikkanen & Ross, 2000). Besides the focus on various aspects of love and sexuality on the internet, the usage of the internet for collecting data became a subject under scrutiny (Cooper, Scherer, & Mathy, 2001; Mustanski, 2001)

During the following four years, 2002 to 2005, another 180 articles were published. About one fourth of these articles were published in the 2003 special issue of *Sexual and Relationship Therapy* and in the edited books *Sex and the internet: A guidebook for clinicians* and *Net. SeXXX: Reading on sex, pornography*, and the internet, published in 2002 and 2004. Between 2002 and 2005, the topics and subfields previously established remained of interest for researchers, who had been collecting more empirical data than had been the case earlier. Two trends can be identified from 2002 and ahead; one is that the subfields had become even more specialized, fragmented, and split up and the other is the uneven growth in the different subfields. The studies about the negative and positive aspects of love and sexuality on the internet focused specifically and respectively on, for example, children, adolescents, older adults, gay men, couples, and women (e.g., Adams, Oye, & Parker, 2003; Bolding, Davis, Hart, Sherr, & Elford, 2005; Brown, Maycock, & Burns, 2005; Ferree, 2003; Longo, Brown, & Price Orcutt, 2002; McFarlane, Bull, & Reitmeijer, 2002; Schauer, 2005; Schneider, 2003). Other studies focused on specific online sexual activities, for example, flirting, cybersex, dating, education/information, and online pornography (e.g., Alapack, Blichfeldt, & Elden, 2005; Barak & Fisher, 2003; Boies, 2002; Philaretou, Mahfouz, & Allen, 2005; Whitty, 2003; Whitty & Carr, 2003; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2005). Yet others focused specifically on health aspects, for example, HIV/STI, addiction and compulsivity, and treatment and prevention (e.g., Benotsch, Kalichman, &

Cage, 2002; Bolding, Davis, Hart, Sherr, & Elford, 2005; Bowen, Williams, & Horvath, 2004; Bull, McFarlane, Lloyd, & Rietmeijer, 2004; Chaney & Dew, 2003; Cooper, Delmonico, Griffin-Shelley, & Mathy, 2004; Cooper, Galbreath, & Becker 2004; Delmonico & Miller, 2003; Green, 2004; Hospers, Harterink, Van Den Hoek, & Veenstra, 2002; Kalichman, Benotsch, Weinhardt, Austin, & Luke, 2002; Kalichman, Cain, Cherry, Pope, Eaton, & Kalichman, 2005; Keller, LaBelle, Karimi, & Gupta, 2004; Klausner, Levine, & Kent, 2004; Levine & Klausner, 2005; McFarlane, Bull, & Rietmeijer, 2002; McFarlane, Ross, & Elford, 2004; Osborne & Hopkins, 2004). Gay men were, by far, the most researched subgroup of users during these years and were the main focus for more than 30 articles. The most researched subfield during the same period of time was related to HIV/STI (30 articles of which the majority were related to men who have sex with men). The presentation of subfields, subgroups, and sexual activities as described above might seem organized in categories, but a closer look emphasizes their, sometimes extreme, specialization, combining a specific subfield, a specific subgroup, and a specific activity. Three article titles may serve as illustrative examples of this: *Seeking and engaging in internet sex: A survey of patients attending genitourinary medicine clinics in Plymouth and London*, *The internet as recruitment tool for HIV studies: Viable strategy for reaching at-risk Hispanic MSM in Miami?*, and *Psychosocial experiences of East and Southeast Asia men who use gay internet chatroom in Toronto: An implication for HIV/AIDS prevention.*

However, while the research had become more split up and specialized, the research focusing on the general usage of the internet for sexual purposes was continued by Cooper, Morahan-Martin, Mathy, and Maheu (2002) who refined and expanded the instrument from the prior survey study conducted by Cooper et al. (1999) and administered this 76-item questionnaire through the MSNBC we portal. This time the survey included approximately 7,000 respondents but, again, the sample was gender biased with 84 percent men and 14 percent women.

What is known about love and sexuality on the internet?

The presentation in the previous section shows the (chronological) emergence and establishment of a research field and how the early speculations and theorizing were complemented with empirical observations. However, while some veins can be traced from the very first research efforts others have emerged along the way. The unfolding picture reveals a field that is both fragmented and specialized. To use a statistical metaphor: there are many outliers and a few clusters on certain topics. While outliers might be interesting in their own right, any statistician would agree that they have the potential to distort and bias the general picture. Similarly, the clusters might indicate certain structures and generate taxonomies that could bias our understanding about the phenomenon depending on the level of aggregation. In the following section I will give some examples of what we know about love and sexuality on the internet from prior research.

User demographics and usage patterns

As mentioned above, the two large scale studies conducted by Cooper and colleagues were severely gender biased and indicated that internet sexuality primarily was a men's activity. Nevertheless, these were the only studies available with the ambition to delineate the characteristics of the users on a general basis (as general as it could be considering the self selected sample). It was found that men were slightly older than women (35 vs. 33 years old), that the majority, 86 percent were heterosexual (7 percent homosexuals and 7 percent bisexuals), that 64 percent were in a relationship and 36 percent were singles, and that 59 percent were working and 13 percent were students. Furthermore, almost 80 percent used the internet for sexual purposes at home and more than 90 percent spent less than 10 hours a week online for such purposes. Men were primarily interested in viewing erotica while women preferred interactive activities (Cooper et al., 1999). The second, expanded and refined, study found the respondents to be younger compared to the first study; mean age for men was 33 years and mean age for women was 30 years. However, in this study, the researchers were interested in the reasons and motivations to use the internet for sexual purposes. They found that the primary reason was distraction, especially among men (80 vs. 60 percent). To seek sex education and information on the internet, on the other hand, was more common among women than among men (55 vs. 31 percent). Women also used the internet to shop for sexual material to a greater extent than men (16 vs. 11 percent). Finally, these studies emphasized that using the internet for sexual purposes was unproblematic for the vast majority of the respondents. However, for a small percentage, the usage was associated with problems (Cooper et al., 2002).

Online sexual activities

Some of the prior research focused on the entire range of sexual activities available online (Barak & King, 2000; Barak & Safir, 1997; Cooper et al., 1999; Cooper et al, 2002), but more commonly it focused on specific activities such as sex education, flirting, dating, online pornography, seeking sex partners, and cybersex. One of the most emphasized positive aspects of the internet was the possibility to provide users with sex education and information (Barak & Fisher, 2001; Barak & Fisher, 2003; Bay-Cheng, 2001; Boies, 2002; Lunin, Karizanskaya, Melikhova, Light, & Brandt-Sorheim, 1997; Millner, & Kiser, 2002; Pendergrass, Nosek, & Holcomb, 2001; Roffman, Shannon, & Dwyer, 1997; Spink, Koricich, Jansen, & Cole, 2004). These studies showed that many people used the internet for educating purposes, especially youths and women. Furthermore, they showed the variety of information available online and how this information could be categorized, for example, according to different age groups. In addition, they suggested how web sites could be constructed for educational purposes and highlighted the fact that user could access this information anonymously.

Another topic that has interested researchers is online interaction, for example flirting, dating, and those who seek partners online for offline meetings, i.e., the connection between the internet and the everyday life. Cooper et al. (2002) found that 10

percent reported to use the internet to find sex partners (more men than women) and another 10 percent claimed to use the internet to meet dates. In addition, almost 40 percent had engaged in cybersex. Cooper and Sportolari (1997) acknowledged the positive aspects of internet romances and the possibility to enhance relationships. Alapack, Blichfeldt, and Elden (2005) suggested safety and security to be part of the reasons to why people preferred online meetings to offline meetings. However, while online relationships allow flirting and safe sex experimenting (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997; Ross & Kauth, 2002), some researchers have indicated the impact on participants' offline relationships, for example in terms of infidelity (Schneider, 2000; Schneider, 2002, Whitty, 2003; Whitty, 2005; Young, Griffin-Shelley, Cooper, O'Mara, & Buchanan, 2000). In a study of college students it was found that many had met a partner through the internet (Boies, 2002; Knox, Daniels, Sturdivant, & Zusman, 2001). Quite early it was found that the possibility to use the internet to find partners, specifically for sexual encounters, was taken advantage of by homosexual men (Benotsch, Kalichman, & Cage, 2002; Bolding, Davis, Sherr, Hart, & Elford, 2004; Bull, McFarlane, Lloyd, & Rietmeijer, 2004; Elford, Bolding, & Sherr, 2001; Hospers, Kok, Harterink, & de Zwart, 2005; Kalichman, Cherry, Cain, Pope, & Kalichman, 2005; Mettey, Crosby, Diclemente, & Holtgrave, 2003; Tikkanen & Ross, 2000; Tikkanen & Ross, 2003).

Online pornography has also been examined by researchers where some have focused on the content (Metha, 2001; Schauer, 2005) and others on the possible effects it might have on men's attitudes towards women (Barak, Fisher, Belfry, & Lashambe, 1999) and on behavior (Fisher & Barak, 2001) as well as the effects on children and adolescents (Boies, 2002; Goodson, McCormick, & Evans, 2001; Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2003; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2005). The results showed that online pornography did not have any effect on men's attitudes towards women and, furthermore, that while pornographic material online increased, statistics showed no increase in the occurrence of rape. In addition, the results suggested that young people under the age of 14 were more likely to encounter pornography in more traditional media, such as magazines and movies and, furthermore, that most youths did not react negatively to exposure. Cooper et al. (1999; 2002) found that although women accessed online pornography, it primary appealed to men in general and to younger men in particular (Boies, 2002; Buzzell, 2005). Finally, Buzzell (2005) concluded that technology influences pornography consumption.

Psychological health risks

Another issue of online pornography has been the presence of child pornography on the internet related to legal issues such as the difficulties to investigate and the fact that some people are unaware of it being illegal to download (Burke, Sowerbutts, Blundell, & Sherry, 2002; Durkin, 1997; Jewkes & Andrews, 2005; McCabe, 2000). This was one of the first problems associated with the internet suggesting that the internet would enable the exchange of pornographic pictures of children (Van Gelder, 1985, ref in Griffin-Shelley, 2003). Further research showed that accessing online child pornography might, for some, be a substitute for offline offences while others might be encour-

aged to commit offences. Nevertheless, the production of child pornography is a crime in itself (Quayle & Taylor, 2002).

More researchers have focused on the usage of the internet for sexual purposes leading to possible addiction and compulsive behaviors (Carnes, 2001; Cooper, 2000; Cooper, Delmonico, & Burg, 2000; Cooper, Delmonico, Griffin-Shelley, & Mathy, 2004; Cooper, Galbreath, & Becker, 2004; Cooper, Griffin-Shelley, Delmonico, & Mathy, 2001; Cooper, Putnam, Planchon, & Boies, 1999; Cooper, Scherer, Boies, & Gordon, 1999; Delmonico, Griffin, & Carnes, 2002; Delmonico & Miller, 2003; Dew & Chaney, 2004; Griffiths, 2000; Griffiths, 2001; Orzack & Ross, 2000; Putnam & Maheu, 2000). Cooper et al. (1999) and Cooper, Delmonico, and Burg (2000) found that 8 percent of the respondents in their sample were categorized as compulsive users, but emphasized that the majority experienced no problems with their usage and added that 1 percent of these sexual compulsives reported to spend more than 11 hours per week online for sexual purposes. Other researchers found pathological internet users more likely than others to use adult only web sites (Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2000).

As a response to issues of addiction and compulsivity, researchers have suggested strategies for treatment and prevention (Braun-Harvey, 2003; Cooper, Delmonico, & Burg, 2003; Cooper et al, 1999; Cooper, et al, 2001; Delmonico, Griffin, & Carnes, 2002; Delmonico & Miller, 2003; Greenfield & Orzack, 2002; Putnam & Maheu, 2000; Schneider, 2000; Schneider, 2002). Generally, this research points in three directions. The first direction emphasizes the need for more research about online sexual addiction and compulsivity (as well as other online sexual problems), the second emphasizes the need for public education, and the third emphasizes treatment rationales. Online sexual compulsivity is described in line with the definition of compulsivity in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) and sometimes compared to gambling compulsivity while addiction refers to psychological dependence (Cooper et al, 1999; Schneider, 1994, ref in Delmonico, Griffin, & Carnes, 2002). For treatment, researchers have suggested 12-step recovery programs and psychotherapy (Cooper et al, 1999; Cooper, Delmonico, & Burg, 2000). Furthermore, some researchers have suggested that web resources might be helpful for both education and treatment (Cooper et al., 1999; Putnam & Maheu, 2000). However, cultural differences in sub-groups have been emphasized, for example among homosexual men, suggesting that they might use the internet for sexual purposes differently compared to other sub-groups which has to be accounted for in assessments (Chaney & Dew, 2003; Ross & Kauth, 2002).

Physical health risks

The risk of physical harm is another aspect of love and sexuality on the internet that has been extensively researched. The focus has primarily been on HIV/STI (McFarlane, Kachur, Bull, & Rietmeijer, 2004; McFarlane, Bull & Rietmeijer, 2000; McFarlane, Bull & Rietmeijer, 2002) and on men who have sex with men in particular (Bolding et al., 2005; Bowen, Williams, & Horvath, 2004; Bull et al., 2004; Elford, Bolding, & Sherr, 2001; Hospers et al., 2005; Klausner, Levine, & Kent, 2004; Levine

& Klausner, 2005; McFarlane, Ross, & Elford, 2004; Tikkanen & Ross, 2000; Tikkanen & Ross, 2003). The researchers stated that the internet is an arena that increases the risk of spreading and getting HIV/STI, primarily because it facilitates easy and fast ways of seeking sex partners from a variety of sexual venues online. Furthermore, they stated that the characteristics of those who used the internet to seek sex partners were different compared those who did not. In addition, these characteristics were different in different online settings.

Parts of the research have focused on preventive strategies (Bolding et al., 2004; Bull, McFarlane & King, 2001; Fernandez, Varga, Perrino, Collazo, Subiaul, Rehbein, Torres, Castro, & Bowen, 2004; Gilbert, Temby, & Rogers, 2005; Hospers et al., 2002; Kalichman et al., 2002; Keller, Labelle, Karimi, & Gupta, 2002; Keller et al., 2004). Some researchers suggested the suitability of the internet to provide health education and information and to reach target populations, but also how existing information could be improved. However, McFarlane, Ross, and Elford (2004) recognized a number of questions that had to be addressed and concluded that more research is needed in this area to facilitate adequate health responses from professionals in the future. For example, if and how existing prevention strategies can be transferred to the internet, if and how HIV testing would be possible online, and to what extent internet service providers should be part of health promotion and prevention.

Concluding remarks

Initially, the studies mentioned above were primarily speculative and drew upon psychological theories focusing on individuals and how they would be influenced by the internet. However, since 1999 studies have become more empirical, explorative and hypothesis testing, cross sectional studies. Still the connections to psychological theories were present, which can be seen in, for example, treatment approaches. In a few studies, however, researchers made references to socio psychological and cultural theories. The bulk of the articles referred to above focus on negative and/or problematic effects of the usage of the internet for love and sexual purposes, while only a minority focus on the positive aspects.

The problem with the prior studies about love and sexuality on the internet is that they seem to be rather fragmented; that only specific aspects of internet sexuality are illuminated on behalf of the larger context, the interconnections with the usage of the internet for love and sexual purposes in general (the publications I-IV included in this thesis are no exceptions to this fragmentation). Perhaps the fragmentation is partly due to the disciplines that have begun to study love and sexuality on the internet? Contrary to the first general studies on the internet which were conducted by ethnographers who observed and interpreted their observations, hypothesis testing researchers have had to limit their studies in scoop and therefore they illuminate smaller spots of the phenomenon. In addition, another restriction might be that publishing results in scientific journals do not allow the kind of lengthy elaborations which are common for ethnographers. Furthermore, the dominating individual perspective might exclude the

interactive and the societal context; a connection most relevant for the study of internet sexuality (Publication V). However, the advantage of these studies is that they can be planned, conducted, and reported relatively fast, which is crucial to acquire results that correspond to the (currently) fast changing internet (in terms of arenas, techniques, usage patterns, populations, et cetera).

In the current thesis, special studies are combined with more general studies and the results are compared with prior research and interpreted within a theoretical framework. By combining several different approaches it is possible, according to Layder (1998), to capture fuller and more valid knowledge about the empirical world. The current thesis can be said to rest on two traditions of sexuality research. One is the Kinseyan tradition of large quantitative studies with its focus on prevalence, frequencies, and categories, followed by other sexuality researchers, for example Zetterberg (1967 ref in Lewin et al., 1998) and Lewin et al. (1998). These studies aimed to describe sexual practices and sexual habits among the general population and the results were presented in absolute numbers and percentages. Often, the results from these studies are compared to other, similar, studies. The other tradition is of the interpretive kind. The aim of such studies is, for example, to understand sexuality from the actors' point of views, to capture the meaning that actors put into their actions, their interactions with others, and how they define the situations and the activities in these situations, how sexuality is influenced by and influences cultural understandings. In this tradition, prior theory is used as analytical tools. One example of the prior studies conducted in this tradition is Gagnon and Simon's (1973) about sexual scripts (described in chapter 3).

3. Theoretical considerations

In this chapter I will describe the theoretical assumptions and theoretical concepts that I have used for the analysis of data, primarily in the qualitative report included in this thesis. Furthermore, my ambition with this chapter is to provide a theoretical foundation for how it is possible to interpret and understand love and sexuality on the internet in our contemporary society. There is no doubt, however, that the choice (or absence) of theoretical frameworks will provide explanations of any phenomenon within their specific range or at their specific level of analysis. Consequently, different theories will shed light upon different aspects and qualities of the phenomenon under scrutiny. As a contrast to much of the prior research on internet sexuality, which has been conducted, predominantly, from a psychological point of view, this study adds a sociological perspective. Before I move on to a description of the content that constitutes my version/interpretation of this perspective, I will give a brief overview of how I understand social theory and its role in social research.

Theory has a variety of definitions ranging from empirically testable (and validated) hypotheses to sets of a priori assumptions or statements about a phenomenon or social life. Often, a distinction can be made between the definition of theory in natural sciences and social sciences. Generally, for the natural sciences theory consists of laws and empirically tested hypotheses of observable objective facts. While this definition of theory applies to some segments of the social sciences as well, the majority reject this and argue for a definition of theory as sets of thoughts and ideas that contain abstract, constructed, and interpreted views of certain (social) phenomena and our world. Sociology is devoted to the study of society and social behaviour. However, there has been a long lived controversy within the discipline about which should be acknowledged as the most important aspect: society or social behaviour. This distinction, or focus, is sometimes referred to as macro and micro sociology, where macro sociologists focus on structural elements such as class, political, or economic structures and micro sociologists are concerned with patterns of interactions between human subjects and groups. Macro sociologists (e.g., Marx, Parsons and Durkheim) claim that structure determines social behaviour while micro sociologists (e.g., Mead, Schutz, and Garfinkel) claim that structure emanates from social behaviour. However, as a critique of these deterministic ideas of the social reality, other sociologists have rejected both macro and micro oriented; perhaps mostly because of their claims to explain society within one "grand theory" (a set of ideas that explain every aspect of social life). Instead, these sociologists, sometimes labelled postmodernists or poststructuralists (e.g., Foucault and Butler), have focused on issues around, for example, power, feminism, and sexuality. Yet others (e.g., Giddens, Bauman, and Habermas) have tried, instead of rejecting these macro and micro theories once and for all, to acknowledge both levels; to merge them or establish links between them. This does not mean, however, that they embrace the entire set of ideas from each of these thinkers, but rather use parts of their concepts, thoughts, and ideas to reduce the gap between them and, thus, provide an alternative explanation of society and social behaviour as

interdependent aspects of social reality. However, even though both macro and micro aspects are acknowledged, some sociologists tend to lean toward one aspect more than the other.

Layder (1994; 1998) means that the acknowledgement of both macro and micro aspects is beneficial to social analysis and lead to better and more powerful explanations of both society and social behaviour. Furthermore, he claims that rather than to dismiss prior theory as useless (as some postmodernists and poststructuralists do), they can still contribute to social analysis. For Layder, it is important to establish links between structure and social behaviour as he believes them to be interrelated. I agree with Layder on this stance, which have consequences for my own theoretical considerations. For example, in the current study, I have chosen to use theories and concepts that contain both structural and social behavioural elements which help me to analyze how people act and interact online as well as to discuss this in a context that reaches beyond the actual online settings to include structural aspects of the contemporary society and vice versa. The theories are Bauman's liquid modernity, Goffman's dramaturgical perspective, and Gagnon and Simon's theory of sexual scripts. Although the chosen theories emphasize different aspects of social life, their common denominator is that they are open to social analysis on different levels.

A common denominator of my theoretical choices is change. For example, according to Goffman (1959), social behaviour depends on the actors as well as the setting. Different settings and different actors produce different behaviour. Thus, social behaviour is changeable, not static. This applies to the thoughts of Gagnon and Simon (1973) as well. They mean that sexual behaviour is dependent on the actors as well as the settings and, furthermore, that sexuality changes over time and place (on a cultural level as well as in practice). For Bauman (2000), change is a central characteristic of the contemporary society, perhaps its signum: the talk of the day may be out of date tomorrow. This means that we can appreciate societal trends and adjust our behaviour accordingly. If we accept this changeability as a characteristic of the contemporary society and of its inhabitants, the consequence would be that what we can know about society is provisional, as argued by Layder (1998), and is bound to change over time. Under these circumstances, it is important to use theories and concepts that are sensitive to change (as opposed to more deterministic versions) or, rather, that change is part of the theory itself. I believe that my theoretical choices are applicable to this view.

However, while I regard these theories as combinable, they are chosen primarily because of their respective focus and specific concepts. Bauman, although he has a distinct actor perspective, contributes with ideas and thoughts on the contemporary society and its features such as time and space, security, and consumerism. On the individual level, he reasons about, for example, human relations, desires, and identities. I find Goffman's dramaturgical perspective useful as it allows a very detailed and yet general analysis of human interaction, performance, and identity while it highlights the importance of the setting. Furthermore, even if it is not his primary interest, he also connects social interaction with structure. Gagnon and Simon's (1973) theory of sex-

ual script provides a useful framework for analysing human sexual conduct and operates on different levels. The sexual scripts are learned and serve as internal manuscripts that guide our sexual behaviour. However, these scripts can be acted upon or broken. In the following I will give a brief overview of each of the above mentioned theorists and describe how their thoughts can be applied to the study of love and sexuality on the internet. Some of these theoretical considerations have been present from the beginning of the project, while others have emerged during the research process.

Love and sexuality on the internet in the liquid modernity

Bauman draws upon the works of several classic and contemporary theorists in his many social analyses and in outlining his thoughts of the liquid modernity (too many to present his relationship with each one of them here) whether he embraces or rejects their thoughts and ideas or parts thereof. However, he is against the thought of an all explaining theory (Marxism) as he believes that no theory can capture all the complexities in our world. Furthermore, he suggests that theory is bound by time and space and that the Marxist concept of, for example, the working class and production society, does not mirror the conditions of our current time (which is rather a consumer society where class is substituted for the varied ability to consume). In Bauman's sociology, there are connections to intrapersonal and existential aspects of human beings; questions about (ambivalent) desire and pleasure, fear and security, and how these aspects influence our behaviour. Bauman does not offer one comprehensive and coherent theory, which is not his purpose anyway, but rather he illuminates aspects and fragments of contemporary social life in his analyses. How, then, can love and sexuality on the internet be understood in our liquid modern times? While the theoretical framework cannot be considered as all-explaining, it can be used to understand certain fragments of the phenomenon. By using Bauman's concept of the liquid modern society we are not restricted to an analysis that only focuses on the content and (inter)activity in specific online settings or on specific activities; it allows us to put this in the context of our contemporary society as seen from Bauman's perspective. This means that we can broaden our analysis and connect it to our everyday life in which love and sexuality on the internet has become a part for many people. Furthermore, it allows us to elaborate on questions such as why the internet has created or gained (or resulted in) popularity for love and sexual activities, how these online activities fit in with and are integrated in our offline everyday life, and what (future) consequences this might have.

The liquid modern society

Several theorists have come to the conclusion that the modern era now has transformed or changed into something else, sometimes labelled post modernity, late modernity, second modernity, or, as in Bauman's case, liquid modernity. For Bauman, however, as I understand it, liquid modernity consists of specific characteristics and consequences of a modernization process rather than referring to, or marking, the transformation or shift from one era into another. In the modern era, things could be

made and were changeable, subject to development and improvement (thereby Bauman's notion of a process). The purpose was to seek and establish the equivalent of traditional societies but at a higher and better level – the state of a perfect future. Industrialism, capitalism, and nation-states became trademarks of the modern societies. However, instead of emancipating the individuals from the past, these trademarks have lead, according to Bauman, to increased social control (Blackshaw, 2005). Today, we live in a liquid modernity; that is, a constantly changing world, a world without solidity/stability always out for the quest of chasing after improvement and emancipation. The liquid modernity, says Bauman, is an ideal-type of reality as is the concept of the solid modernity. The ideal-type liquid modernity is not a complete and coherent notion, but can be used as a distinction from the solid past which when once melted will not take on a solid shape again. Bauman recognizes several aspects that characterize the liquid modernity and I will describe some that I have found useful for my own analysis.

<u>The internet – an ever changing (liquid) provider of individualized togetherness</u>

While, as Bauman (2001) points out, the citizens of the liquid modernity have become more and more isolated, fenced in, and have deserted public spaces for private dittos, the desire and search for communities of togetherness, with all its positive associations like warmth, predictability, and friendliness, are as present as ever. Nevertheless, the communities searched for remain absent and the responses to the fear, insecurity, and uncertainty inflicted by their absence are solved individually. The trouble for the liquid moderns, however, is their reluctance to sign any long term agreements; to tie any bonds too tight (Bauman 2000; 2001; 2003). With the development of the internet, or rather, with its widespread usage and popularity (probably boosted by the emergence of the WWW), it had suddenly become possible to merge the seemingly impossible dichotomy of privacy and togetherness into one; to be able to interact with strangers, those regularly feared fellow liquid citizens, while safely within the four walls that constitute a house, an apartment, a study, or a den; protected from any interfering others whether neighbors, family, or friends. The consequences are that while we regain our confidence in interacting with strangers, once lost as a result of modernity according to Bauman (2001), we simultaneously continue to seclude ourselves to an even greater degree than before. Not only are we fencing off strangers, but the tendency with the internet's web communities, web chat rooms, and web forum, is that we seclude ourselves from family and friends as well. It is common, primarily among youths, to hang out online, not only with strangers, but with friends as well. Furthermore, it is becoming increasingly common to have more than one internet connected computer at home where family members may log on to the internet in private to spend time to surf as well as interact with others. It seems like the more we have found our ways back to the longed for togetherness, the more individually isolated we have become.

As suggested by Bauman (2001), communities in the liquid modernity have to be made and so they are on the internet. On the internet it is possible to choose where and with whom to belong. The range of communities found online unites and gathers

people with the same or similar interests, purposes, and demographic characteristics, despite of their current geographic location. Typically, there are plenty of choices of, for example, web communities, and the more choices available, the more freedom for the individual. At least this is what contemporary consumer culture promises us, according to Bauman (2004b). To be exposed to this broad range of choices, some with only small, barely noticeable, differences, and the difficulty to choose and the ambivalence that follows, results in multiple memberships in various online groups and gatherings. Afraid to make the wrong choice or to choose the wrong path, this is one example on how the liquid modern citizen spreads out the risks. Online web communities and web chat rooms are popular for several reasons besides providing people with places of togetherness. One reason is that the communities have their own rules and regulations for participation and memberships. As with the gated communities, as described by Bauman (2001), it is possible to expel and ban those who do not comply with the rules which increase the feelings of security. The level of enforcement of protective rules and regulations determines the level of security. This is where the contradiction Bauman talks about becomes apparent: an increased level of security means a decreased level of freedom as members have subjected themselves to constant surveillance. In the unguarded and unregulated web chat room, for example, participants might be approached by any of the other participants which imply a response by responding or ignoring this approach. However, it is impossible to predict the content and meaning of such an approach and therefore it appears as a risk. Perhaps this is one of the reasons the popularity of web chat rooms has decreased during the last years; the one thing that was much praised in the beginning of the internet era; that everyone would interact with everyone. The response can be seen in the dramatically increasing popularity of instant messaging software where the participating individuals chose themselves whom to grant or deny access within this interactive network. Individual responses to public fears lead to membership in heavily guarded and regulated communities on the one hand and private solutions like instant messaging on the other, which is in line with Bauman's more general reasoning.

Like in gatherings and groups offline, on the internet it is possible to blend in with the crowd chatting. However, it is also possible to be invisible while still part of the interactions. This phenomenon is also known as "lurking", an activity impossible to engage in offline due to the laws of physics. Not only does the internet allow a secure and safe way of interacting with others, to be together with others, without being in the proximity of others, but also it allows actors to take advantage of this togetherness without being noticed (although complete invisibility is scarce as there are often ways to tell the presence of any participant). This quality allows people to investigate whether or not they have found people or places that appeal to them before they eventually start to interact or reveal their identities. To lurk is to feel safe in more or less anonymous settings – a double precaution. An offline comparison would be to put extra locks on the doors in gated communities. Bauman (2004c) makes references to Kafka's *The Burrow* to illustrate his point that one can never achieve complete secu-

rity despite one's efforts and, in addition, that after having spent an entire life taking precautions this behavior has become institutionalized and cannot be given up easily.

Throughout internet's relatively short history of public availability, online meeting places and practices have changed and have become substituted with new places and practices; the internet we refer to today is not the same internet that we referred to some twelve years ago when it started to become popular, let alone the internet that was speculated upon fifteen, twenty, or even twenty-five years ago when the technology was available to only a few. Whether it is technology or human practices that contribute to this change is difficult to tell, perhaps they influence each other. From Bauman's (2000; 2001; 2005) point of view, constant change is part of the liquid modernity. It is not that places and technology are worn out or have stopped working, but rather that they have lost their ability to satisfy desire, that new inventions and improvements hold new promises to satisfy desire. Furthermore, the liquid modernity is characterized as keeping moving to avoid being stuck with the old fashioned, to avoid being left behind the other movers. This makes some settings disappear while new ones emerge. At the same time, new settings offer a variety of new functions which lead to new practices. For example, the emergence of dating sites attracts those who look for partners and the refinement of the techniques have let people search for matching characteristics of the presumptive partner, which is different to the flirting behaviors in online role playing games and web chat rooms. As a consequence, we must keep moving to be part of the togetherness as well as keeping ourselves updated of the current online practices. Thereby the internet is no different to other phenomena in the liquid modern society; rather a confirmation of it.

Virtual proximity: being close while physically distant

Not only has the internet made it easier for us liquid moderns to be together with others in, for example, web communities and web chat rooms, but it has made it easier to become personal and even intimate with those others. Bauman (2001; 2004a) means that the liquid modernity has brought us from traditional communities where everyone largely knew or knew of each other to cities filled with strangers constantly departing and arriving. To be surrounded by strangers threatens our security and safety as we cannot predict their behaviors and motifs and as a response to protect ourselves, we make various arrangements to avoid them. As a consequence, this dramatically decreases the number of presumptive relationships, unless we get to know these strangers and turn them into acquaintances instead – a contradiction indeed. Seen from this perspective, it is easy to understand the popularity of, for example, internet dating as it has become possible to maintain the safe and secure physical distance between oneself and the stranger while examining and evaluating him or her to determine whether or not a relationship is possible. It seems like keeping the distance to other people, as is possible online, makes it easier to get closer to others compared to offline; protected we dare to approach anyone, which perpetuates our hopes to meet others to form relationships with, for love or friendship. In addition, we dare to open ourselves to others with less fright and might reveal more of who we really are compared to under other circumstances. It is this phenomenon we can read about in newspapers when people

have opened themselves up to someone who has taken advantage of certain information and pictures and misused/abused them, physically and/or mentally, and while newspapers thrive on such reports they might be rarer than suggested by media. The consequence is that we perceive internet as a threatening medium. It is not uncommon, however, for newspapers to highlight the hazards of the internet on one page and praise its potential on the next.

Besides providing us with ways to approach and interact with strangers, the internet also allows us to keep intimacy and monitor relationships even at times when we cannot be together physically. In a time of increased mobility due to work and studies, we have to be prepared to move to different places, nationally and abroad, the internet can serve as a tool to keep in touch with family and friends we might have left behind. In addition, various applications and online settings such as email, communities, and instant messaging allow us to establish interactive channels accessible at all times. For example, we may be constantly in touch with our partners and friends through instant messaging whether at home or at work and it does not require us to interact constantly but, rather, be available for interaction. While the telephone has been available for a relatively long time, the usage differs from instant messaging in several ways. We are, for example, unlikely to keep open lines to everyone in our networks simultaneously and, furthermore, to keep them open at all times. By combining increased availability with virtual proximity we can not only maintain and monitor relationships, but also initiate relationships with geographically distant others and nurture them as offline relationships, further powered by the increasingly more common usage of web cameras. Perhaps, the knowledge of the possibility to be physically present within almost no time, regardless of our geographic location, by car, train, boat, and airplane, enhances our experience and the usefulness of virtual proximity.

A parallel to internet enabled virtual proximity is drawn by Bauman (2003) who observes that the increased use of cellular phones has created zombie-like people constantly talking, not with each other, but with people presumably at the other end of the line, whether business partners or family members, on airports, on public transportation, and in the streets, sometimes solely for the purposes of reporting their current location and ETA, estimated time of arrival. Whether a substitute for or complement to physical proximity, the ability and urge to be virtually present show the importance of human relationships in a society with new definitions of space – the liquid modern society – even though the prerequisites have changed. There is no doubt that in the liquid modernity we have managed to reduce and bridge physical distance in ways previously unthinkable. As mentioned above: despite the distance we are at the most one day's travel away from those we interact with online or through cellular phones and therefore we are able to appreciate the possibility to virtual proximity, psychological closeness.

The specific characteristics of the internet allow its users to approach and interact with strangers and acquaintances in front of their computers, to join communities of togetherness. The physical distance to others generates feelings of safety and security which in turn increase the comfort in meetings and interactions including the

possibility to disconnect at any time with the flick of a switch. In addition, to be able to log on in private, also among family members, enhances these feelings further. Of course, this does not only apply when interacting with others, but also when browsing the web. Given these circumstances, we dare to explore and express ourselves without having to expose ourselves and our activities to others; we dare to take chances and risks or engage in activities we would probably not take or engage in offline, at least not as easily.

As noted by Bauman (2000; 2003), as well as other theorists (e.g., Giddens 1992), our contemporary society is a society characterized by individual reflexivity and responsibility, for example, in the areas of love and sexuality. These two areas are among the most central aspects of human life yet among the most difficult and complex as well. Despite our more liberal contemporary views, many people still find it difficult to talk about, let alone to practice, for example same sex relationships and certain sexual practices (that in some cases are regulated by law and in other cases by surrounding moral standards; I will return to this when discussing sexual scripts). No doubt, there are people who cannot express and experience love and sexuality as they would like to due to policy, law, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, culture, and so on. And this while we are said to be individually responsible for it; if we are not happy, we are to blame ourselves if not doing anything about it (Bauman, 2003). Seen from this perspective, the internet has come to facilitate ways for individuals to actually take this responsibility, to explore love and sexuality, to elaborate with sexual identities, and to find partners. It has become possible to take part of other people's love and sex lives as well as revealing ones own thoughts and experiences, primarily because of the anonymity, privacy, and security provided. Practically, everything one can think of that relates to love and sexuality can be found online instantaneously.

Shopping for relations and identities: no strings attached

Identities provide us with a story of who we are, where we belong, and with whom we should (or want to) be associated (Bauman, 2004a). Bauman (2004b) reminds us, however, that to answer the question "who are you", one has to acknowledge that it is possible to be someone else. Identities are not pre-determined/inherited in the liquid modernity, but created by individual choices and can, therefore, also be re-created, which in turn drastically shortens their life span (Bauman, 2003). It means that identities are not perceived as lifelong burdens/assets anymore, but can be re-created by individuals to fit various situations and demands. It is about here I would insert Bauman's reference to Weber, that the liquid moderns wear "light cloaks instead of steel casings." In the liquid modern society there is a never ending line of identities that can be chosen and worn. If dissatisfactory, new ones can be tried out and perhaps substitute those outdated or uncomfortable identities that are no longer the talk of the day. Bauman (2000; 2005) means that identities in the liquid modern society are marketed by celebrities and can be bought off the shelves in supermarkets and in shopping malls. In fact, to shop, or to be a consumer might even be considered an identity in its own right.

If the search for identity in the liquid modernity is a search for who I am and where and with whom I belong, the search for identity is also a search for social relationships with others with whom I can confirm my individual uniqueness and accept me as a bona fide member. By belonging to a group that can be recognized by its difference from other groups, its uniqueness among groups, a feeling of sameness, togetherness, and a sense of belonging is created. The relationships may vary in content and character, but the common denominator is that they are largely selected, chosen. In the liquid modern society, social relations could perhaps be thought of as networks which have been established by choice and can be managed with cellular phones and the internet and, thus, be less dependent on time and space; that is, physical proximity, in a constantly changing world. Nevertheless, as the relationships and networks are chosen, they can, like identities, be made, dissolved, and re-made according to changing wants and needs. And because it is impossible to know one's future wants and needs, especially in the liquid modern society, the durability of any relationships and networks is largely unknown to all parts. As a result, searching for relations and somewhere to belong is simultaneously to make sure that it is possible to cease, upon one's decision, to belong at some undefined point, not known to either part. With neither a consistent past nor a predictable future, good news for those with high levels of self-confidence and bad news for the rest, this forces people to live in the moment, instantly, as no one knows how long it will last or if it is likely to return in the future (Bauman, 2005).

According to Bauman (2000; 2003), relationships and identities in the liquid modernity are affected by the consumer culture; as consumers we have come to treat them as commodities. Furthermore, Bauman suggests, in the consumer society there are always plenty of choices where the next on offer is more tempting and promising than the one just acquired. The slogans "You thought you'd seen it all? You've seen nothing yet" in combination with "Buy now, pay later" reinforces our consumer behavior and contribute to take "the waiting out of wanting" as Bauman says. And, indeed, we have learned to tie our bonds loosely so the move from one thing to the next can be made as smoothly as possible and can be repeated infinitely. The never ending supply of choices along with the "no strings attached"-mentality lessen the risk of being stuck with the old fashioned as well as the negative consequences one might face due to having made the wrong choices. Nevertheless, each choice to which one ties one's bonds, no matter how strong or loose these bonds may be, must always be compared to other choices, examined and evaluated according to its presumptive capability to satisfy desire and if the investment proves to be worthwhile. Through advertising and commercials on the one hand and guidance through media on the other, needs we were previously unaware of are becoming desires because of the satisfaction they hold in promise. Because we cannot know our needs as we are unaware of them, we appreciate the guidelines and recommendations that are provided by celebrities and other experts who, as authorities, can help us to make the right choices. This is important as the choices we make contribute to who we are, they reflect our identities. In addition, shopping and choosing is a manifestation of individuality and freedom of choice, indi-

vidual choices, let alone the same choices that are being replicated by others (Bauman, 2005).

On the internet, almost any choice and desire relating to love and sexuality can be satisfied because of the range of activities possible to engage in, interactive and non-interactive. The internet carries the entire stock of ever changing things to explore and experience, as well as plenty of people to meet. Because of the supply on offer together with its specific qualities, the internet has turned into a place where we may try the things that are recommended to us by the experts – we are solely responsible for our happiness and well being after all. While for some (disenfranchised) groups and individuals, this might be the ultimate invention for liberation and a source for self-fulfillment, for others it provides possibilities to explore and play with sexuality and sexual identity, to find likes and dislikes. However, seen from Bauman's perspective, this is yet another example of consumer culture in the liquid modern society. The quest for new and untried experiences, believed to satisfy desire, is nothing more than a trip without an end that forces us to navigate in the constant flow of new "must tries", and at the same time we leave behind traces of waste, deprived of its satisfactory value yet not fully consumed in the sense of being "eaten" or "worn out". The drive is the fear of being left behind and stuck with the old fashioned along with the excitement of trying new things that promise to satisfy needs and desires that will show ourselves and others who we (really) are.

Our relationships, as mentioned above, have been affected by the consumer culture in the liquid modernity. Arguably, the internet has reinforced this with the countless dating sites, more recently advertised even on TV, where one can look for possible matches and browse the current supply, much like shopping at the supermarkets. It is also possible to place an ad on one or several of these sites to find out one's market value; how well one stands against the competition. From Bauman's perspective, this is an example of how people are directed to the quest, or chase, to constantly search for something new that promises to be an improvement of the old; the promise of the perfect match is out there is lurking around the corner for one to realize. In a time of loosely tied bonds, it is easy to break up from one relationship and to move on to the next. While the internet has brought people together in new successful and happy relationships, some continue to search, sometimes compulsively, for better and improved alternatives where some succeed and others do not. In addition, the knowledge that one can be substituted for another partner with a mouse-click might increase the feeling of uncertainty in already established relationships.

The easy accessibility along with the constantly new experiences on offer as can be found on the internet have also contributed to the increasing speed with which one throws oneself from one thing to the next. The consumer culture's ability to "take the waiting out of wanting" promises instant satisfaction which breeds impatience among the users. For example, it is not uncommon to have several presumptive partners in the pipeline simultaneously; if one proves unsuccessful, there are several options left. And time spent online chatting with presumptive partners gets shorter as well; if offline dates are not scheduled within reasonable time and, thus, delay the

hoped for satisfaction, they are terminated. In addition, when subjects and objects have lost their capacity to satisfy desire they are immediately discarded and thrown into the waste bin.

Internet dramaturgy

Connected with symbolic interactionism and with a (socio-cultural) constructivist perspective, Erving Goffman is recognized as the inventor of the dramaturgical sociology. In his writings, especially in his book *The presentation of self in everyday life*, which I rely upon in the current analysis, he uses dramaturgical metaphors to describe human interaction. While he acknowledges different levels of analysis, Goffman focuses primarily on the micro sociological aspects of social life, situational interactivity, and stresses that interactions are products of the situations. The dramaturgical perspective can be said to have two important aspects, of course not separable, the performance and the stage. While Goffman's dramaturgical perspective is concerned with face-to-face interactions, its concepts are still useable tools for analyzing online settings and behaviours. For example, we can use the concepts to analyze specific online venues and their qualities similarly to how we analyze other offline venues. Furthermore, we can analyze how the actors present themselves online and how they interact with others. Increased internet connection speed along with increased computer power, the usage of pictures and web cameras have made face-to-face interactions possible online as well. The relevance and adequacy of this perspective, however, becomes even more obvious if we broaden our focus from only including what we can observe on our computer monitors and consider the internet as an integrated part of our everyday lives and the role it plays in our everyday interactions.

Front, back, and outside stages

On the internet, as well as in the offline settings described by Goffman (1959), there are several regions that can be thought of as stages upon which people act, for example, web communities, web chat rooms, and instant messenger software. Each region has its own characteristics considering how they are constructed and thereby defining the possible ways to interact. Some of these regions can be accessed by anyone while others are restricted to specific groups or individuals, sometimes by charging membership fees and sometimes by certain criteria that have to be met to be granted access. These criteria may range from age limits to that the actors must know each other offline, although the implementation and maintenance of this can vary as well as change over time. We may perceive and interpret these online regions as front stages were individuals perform in front of audiences of different sizes, as in offline settings, more or less known to the actors. While the physical properties of the online front stages are absent or limited by its two-dimensionality, each has its own norms, rules, and obligations that most members follow (to avoid being banned or expelled), the behaviour that Goffman (1959) refers to as decorum.

The concept of front stage on the internet might at first appear as completely different compared to the front stages defined by Goffman (Ibid.). For example, in offline performances the actors keep expressing themselves even when they do not engage in direct communication with the audiences because they remain visible on the stage. On the internet a substantial proportion of the performances and interactions are faceless. However, it is possible to detect actors that are present without engaging in any activities (lurkers) and, as a specific quality of the internet, it is possible to make (write) presentations that remain present and are available to others even when the authors/actors are logged out and absent; the actors keep sending out expressions as long as the presentations remain online, front stage, and might receive electronic messages in their mail boxes as usual. This means that actors may be front stage performing while being back stage or on several other front stages simultaneously. On this point, if accepting the last sentence that is, we need to modify or extend or thoughts on front stage performances. Nevertheless, I would like to point out that appearances on several front stages simultaneously is mentioned by Goffman, but only as possible when the audiences can be kept separate and when the stages are within close proximity. I would like to add that the effect of being present at different locations simultaneously while being absent, , can be and has been created by using doubles and look-alikes, for example by celebrities and dictators. In this perspective, the possibilities provided by the internet are modified and refined possibilities the effects of which we have seen offline before, but now available to anyone and with less personnel required to create the illusion of being present while absent.

In some cases we may, as I have implied above, consider the online settings/regions as front stages. If we think of a specific performance upon one of these front stages it would be reasonable to consider all other settings/regions as back stages as these are not accessible to the audiences viewing our performance. If the back stage is placed offline, for example behind the computer screens in our homes, it is perhaps more safe and secure than any back stage Goffman describes (he gives examples of when the audiences appear back stage by mistake). On the other hand, Goffman argues that regions that are used as front stages may also be used as back stages. This means that it is possible to reverse the conditions and perceive online settings as back stages where we practice and refine our performances that we may give on our front stages whether inside or outside our homes. Furthermore, we might use online settings to relax from our regular everyday offline performances, as informal gatherings where we can discuss topics and use language that would be considered as inappropriate elsewhere. Goffman means that it is the intentions and purposes of the performance that determines if the region is used as front- or back stage, which means that the regions are not fixed, but changeable and can shift depending on the situations and the actors.

I would like to elaborate a little further on the back stage concept and suggest that sometimes the online region and the offline region put together can constitute the back stage. For example, in online dating where the informal and secure atmosphere back stage may serve as the initial step towards an offline performance front stage. In these circumstances, the actor and the audience can rehearse and practice together be-

fore the actual performance takes place and thus, perhaps reduce possible stage fright and make the future performance more predictable. However, according to Goffman, such activities back stage could also be seen as performances in their own right. Adding the third stage, the outside stage, mentioned by Goffman, complicates matters even more. When engaging in performances, regardless if we consider them to take place front stage or back stage, it is possible to be interrupted by someone belonging to those Goffman refers to as the segregated audiences not supposed to see the performance, neither front stage nor back stage. To illustrate this we can think of a couple chatting on the internet prior to an offline date when, suddenly, someone else enters the room where one of them sits in front of the computer. In this case the performance is disrupted and the consequences may depend on whether the one disrupting the performance is a friend, a spouse, a parent, or a boss. To avoid being disrupted again, the solution may be a private internet connected computer in a lockable room within the house. If we consider both the online and offline region as a back stage; a place to relax from our ordinary performances and to practice for future ones, we can assume, according to Goffman, that individuals would be keen to guard this space. Perhaps this can also serve as an example of keeping audiences separate when performing on several front stages.

As I have tried to show above, the boundaries between regions are blurred and unpredictable. However, this is not unique for the internet; the same applies to offline regions. Front stages may sometimes be back stages and vice versa, determined by the situations and the actors; sometimes they can be of both types and may change over time. Furthermore, they can be used differently by different individuals simultaneously. Although we may have some ideas of what the ideal types look like, they are, according to Goffman, rarely found in that shape in our everyday lives. However, the internet has made it possible to perform front stage while backstage (or sometimes even off stage), making performances feel safer and more secure. Furthermore, it has allowed performances to be held and directed without having to enter any front stages at all. Being able to act unrecognized would probably equal what we usually think of when we use the word anonymity; when a specific act cannot be ascribed to a specific actor. While any setting through its construction determines the possible level of anonymity, it is the actor who determines if and to what extent he or she takes advantage of it by controlling the information (amount and sorts) the audiences are given in performances.

<u>Online performances: consequences of being in control</u>

Because of the anonymity on the internet, being able to act without being recognized, individuals are freer to play roles with less risk of being confronted with inconsistencies and interference by their other roles. Furthermore, they can compose personal fronts that suit the roles they wish to play in their performances and these personal fronts are changeable at any time; it is possible to control the information given to the audiences in order to obtain specific goals. Due to the lack of visual cues in most online settings, things such as age, gender, and other physical attributes can be manipulated. However, if the individuals would meet offline at some point, such manipu-

lations would be quite easily revealed. On the other hand, manipulation or distortion of other parts of the personal fronts on the internet does not differ from how this is done offline, where we can control the information given to the audiences. Goffman (1959) argues that personal fronts consist of appearance and manners which to be believable have to be more or less consistent. For example, to flirt with someone while being aggressive, rude, and hostile would be seen as inconsistent and would probably bring an end to the performance whether it occurs online or offline. This means that although personal fronts on the internet can be distorted and manipulated, they relate to the same prerequisites as they do offline. At the same time, we tend to be less critical to some inconsistencies while condemning others as deceptive. Therefore, while we may play several different roles in our everyday lives, online as well as offline, these roles need to be internally consistent to be believable. The conclusion would be that the possibility to freely compose or create personal fronts online is limited despite the anonymity. However, online deception might result in less severe personal sanctions on the internet because of the anonymity it provides.

As long as the role we play is somewhat consistent, it can be both believable and convincing to a given audience despite the fact that it might be distorted or manipulated. This means that we cannot change or incorporate anything into that role that can make it appear as inconsistent to the same audience. If we would like to create a new role to make another performance, we would have to make sure to keep the audience from recognizing us and to compare the first role with the second; we need to find another audience. Often we play different roles in different settings for different audiences, for example at home, at work, at the club, and so on. However, if these settings are within close proximity, it is possible that parts of the audience might consist of the same individuals and therefore the roles cannot differ too much between these settings. Goffman exemplifies with individuals who have to change geographic locations because of the incompatibility of their roles. This can be related to the characteristics and content of the personal fronts, but might as well be related to the activities, the performances, the individual engages in. It is, perhaps, in this sense the internet differs most noticeably compared to offline conditions. The internet makes it possible to play several roles on several front stages while being able to keep the audiences completely separated from each other. This means that we can practice roles we are unfamiliar with as well as roles we are unable to play elsewhere due to various reasons. Through practice we can sense what it is like to play certain roles and by the audiences' responses we might learn how to play the roles consistently. In other cases we might be able to explore things that we consider to deviate from how we perceive ourselves in our official roles, even when we constitute our own audience. This is because on the internet we are able to fully control our audiences to make sure they cannot take part of the different personal fronts, roles, and performances, something that is more difficult to guarantee and accomplish offline. Furthermore the experiences of roles and performances (or parts of them) that we make online in various settings can be used in other settings, online as well as offline. Similarly, our offline experiences can be applied online.

<u>The division of performances: deployment strategies</u>

While some take advantage of the possibility to play several different roles on the internet, we can notice some individuals assigning parts of the performances to the internet settings while other parts are played offline. In some cases certain performances are reserved for specific audiences which are unaware of each other, segregated. This means that they are unable to relate these roles and performances to each other. We might say that different performances take place on isolated stages, whether we consider them to be front stages or back stages, which excludes the possible entrance of the segregated audience. In other cases, however, one performance might be played on two stages before the same audience simultaneously; to put it more concretely, two individuals may deploy certain aspects of their interaction to the internet while other aspects are dealt with offline. Typically, things that are experienced as difficult to talk about face to face can be experienced as easier to express online. In these cases we might say that the division line is not between performances but, rather, within them.

We can observe similar tendencies regarding cybersex. This activity rarely takes place when other individuals are present, for example in a web chat room, but when the participants decide to engage in cybersex, they start sending private messages to each other that cannot be seen by other individuals in that chat room. Another strategy is to move to another medium. In this perspective, we can also view online activities such as seeking information about sexuality or pornography consumption as activities that we want to keep back stage where they might be easier or more comfortable to engage in while they can be kept away from our regular roles and front stage performances with their audiences. The conclusion would be that there are certain behaviours and interactions that are deployed to what we associate with back stage activities, even in those cases we refer to performances. This could be because we find them incongruent with our roles, but also because the back stage increases the feeling of security by excluding the segregated audiences from entering. When discussing sexual scripts, I explain why certain behaviours and activities are often deployed to the back stage.

Online sexual scripts

In 1973, Gagnon and Simon published their book *Sexual conduct*. This work, still considered to be a useful theoretical approach to the study of human sexuality, has an interactionist perspective, without the authors describing themselves as symbolic interactionists (Plummer, 2003) and the approach is applicable on both the intrapersonal (intrapsychic) and cultural (structural, collective) level. Gagnon and Simon (1973) use the script as a metaphor to explain how sexual conduct becomes possible. This metaphor implies that we act according to pre-written (or rather socio-culturally constructed) scripts and that these scripts are learned, rehearsed, and may change throughout the life span. They mean that all necessary parts of the script have to be present for a sexual event to occur. This part of the script defines the appropriate settings, the ap-

propriate actors, the appropriate behaviours, and other similar circumstances. If one of these parts is absent or inappropriate, then no sexual event will occur. The sexual scripts have three dimensions: cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic (Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Simon & Gagnon, 2003). Besides these dimensions, the sexual scripts are also gender and age specific (as a consequence of the socio-cultural surroundings constructing sexuality as gender and age specific).

Even though Simon and Gagnon use the term sexual scripting theory, they stress that this is not a theory in the sense of the word, but rather a perspective (or an approach) to study sexuality (2003). This perspective continues Goffman's usage of the dramaturgical metaphor and puts sexuality in an everyday life context. The consequence of this is that sexuality is not perceived as an isolated phenomenon, but interrelated with both individuals and structure, and therefore it must be studied in this context. While the sexual scripts might be considered as an interactionist approach to explore and understand sexuality on the internet, its applicability for cultural and intrapsychic dimensions makes it suitable to analyze aspects of sexuality beyond situational sexual interaction, the particular sexual activities between two or more actors. The empirical data in the current thesis was not a result of observing ongoing sexual activities in specific online settings, but of approaching these activities and settings from the actors' viewpoints, statements, and experiences. The consequence of this standpoint is that the analysis focuses on the prerequisites for sexual activity and the internet's contribution in this regard, for example by providing anonymous access to sexual activities and by linking online activities with offline activities. Besides these prerequisites, the sexual scripts capture socio-cultural norms and values that influence the individuals' sexual behaviors. Similarly, the intrapsychic scripts capture individuals' thoughts and reasoning about sexuality in relation to the cultural scripts and their sexual behaviors. What makes the sexual scripts more usable and, in my opinion, increases their relevance for love and sexuality on the internet, is that they emphasize the non-fixity of sexual scripts in any dimension; that they can change and that, due to their interrelatedness, changes in one level affects the others to various extents. This means, for example, that changes in the cultural scripts affect the intrapsychic scripts and vice versa. Furthermore, sexuality is seen as learned behavior and as we learn, through education and practice related to the contemporary (and changing) sexual scripts, our reference points change and keep changing throughout our lives.

The internet as an arena for exploration and practice

In many western cultures and societies sexuality is surrounded by shame and guilt and often consigned to the private areas of life. Gagnon and Simon (1973) claim that the sexual learning process is often non-verbal or negative in the sense that sexual behaviors are either ignored or deemed as inappropriate. The consequence is that sexual arousal and practices are restricted to the individual and kept as secrets, away from others sometimes including one's partner(s). At the same time, sexuality is discussed more openly today than ever before; constantly present in public settings in various media and defined as the individual's responsibility. This reveals two parallel tendencies: privatization by individualization on the one hand and collectivization by increas-

ing public exposure on the other. Put in other words, there are more choices and opportunities available than ever, which should be explored and taken advantage of by the individual. However, sexuality is still connected with shame, guilt, and privacy which leave individuals to themselves in their decisions and practices and despite the medial encouragement and suggestions the intrapsychic scripts might not always be easy to break, but certainly the exposure and availability of sexual pleasures add to the repertoire of intrapsychic possibilities in the shape of desires, dreams, and fantasies. As a concrete example of this we can consider women who are encouraged to take the responsibility for their own sexual pleasure. Reading a magazine with a sex-toy-best-in-test does not automatically make these women go to the local sex shop to make their purchases. For example, such a decision would risk exposure of one's private sexuality to others and, furthermore, the shop is associated with negative norms and values. In addition, to finally use a possible purchase might be another obstacle whether alone or with a partner.

On the internet, it is not only possible to take part of suggestions about how one can fulfill one's sexual responsibility, but to access almost anything sexual one can think of. While this could be accomplished with patience and commitment offline, the internet provides it cheap and instantly. However, the most important aspect in this regard is probably the anonymity provided by the internet; the ability to engage in sexual activities back stage, to refer to Goffman, without having to reveal oneself. To understand the importance of this we need to make references to the sexual learning process as described by Gagnon and Simon. In young ages we have learned that sexuality is a private matter and should be engaged in privately away from others. This criterion is met by the qualities of internet and, thus, we feel comfortable deploying sexual matters online which, in addition, is accepted by our intrapsychic scripts as they are not in conflict with what we have learned. Therefore, we can claim the internet to have added places where to engage in sexual activities. It should be said, though, that individuals must perceive the internet as anonymous for this reasoning to hold true.

If we accept that the internet resembles arenas on which we have learned that sexual behaviors are possible and preferred to occur, in private, then we can continue to analyze the consequences of this. According to Gagnon and Simon (1973), most of our sexual knowledge is learned from peers when we are young. As we grow older, we make the association between sexuality and guilt which makes us keep sexual matters secret from, for example parents and friends. Again, the internet resembles this situation and defines with whom it is possible to share sexual matters. The sexual material accessible online; information, erotic texts, or images, is found within a secure distance from one's parents, friends, or children and, therefore, the internet constitutes a legitimate source of sexual material. Reinforced by anonymity, sexual matters are experienced as even further away from the peer group education described by Gagnon and Simon. The consequence is that we do not have to keep our sexual secrets to ourselves but at the same time let them remain secret for the offline surroundings. We can keep the secrets and reveal them simultaneously without experiencing any negative sanctions or consequences. This means that it is possible to engage in sexual activities

that would otherwise be restricted by our intrapsychic scripts and instead change them through exploration and practice as we did as adolescents.

Gagnon and Simon mean that as we enter adulthood, the silence and guilt associated with sexuality are ubiquitous. As a result we find it uneasy to talk about sexuality and to share our thoughts with others including our partners. However, talking about sexuality on the internet is actually typing about sexuality, which is a non-verbal way of communicating. Therefore, we may communicate with others, but not have to pronounce words and sentences that would have been awkward to say out loud; we can remain silent while we communicate non-verbally. Some individuals claim that even though the communication is non-verbal, they find it difficult to even type "dirty words" when having cybersex, but after some practice it becomes easier; for some the possibility to use certain words is seen as liberating although they would still hesitate to use them offline. Hence, for some people cybersex appears as more appealing to engage in compared to telephone sex. Similarly, the internet allows individuals to silently browse sexual material as well as taking part of other individuals' texts and images that relate to various sexual aspects, for example in web communities and on web sites, professional as well as amateur. Gagnon and Simon state that silence might diminish the importance of sexuality in society (or distort the picture). Perhaps the internet can contribute to changing this by providing the possibility to communicate silently and without having to challenge too many and difficult sexual scripts. As sex is one of the most frequent words searched for online, we can establish the fact that for many people the internet constitutes an important arena for exploring sexuality.

Breaking and reproducing sexual scripts

It is difficult to anticipate how the internet will influence our sexual scripts in the future, but the results of this and other studies indicate that parts of them have already changed. At the same time we can see that some of the traditional scripts are reproduced online. Furthermore, it seems like some scripts change in some dimensions but are reproduced in others. For example, while women have increased their pornography consumption online, the images still reproduce and portray male sexuality. Another example is that while the internet has made it possible for men and women to find partners for love and/or sex in new ways, most of the time it is men who take the initiatives and initiate such contacts.

Arguably, the internet with its specific characteristics has made it easier to break the intrapsychic scripts, for example by engaging in sexual activities that would have been difficult to engage in offline, restricted by intrapsychic as well as interpersonal and cultural scripts. For example, to approach another, previously unknown, individual offline asking about his or her sexual experiences would hardly ever occur unless for research purposes. On the internet this is possible, whether by asking someone directly in a web chat room or by reading or writing questions on web sites or in web communities. Furthermore, it has become possible and legitimate to visit online web shops to buy sexual materials and to view erotica even though many would hesitate to engage in such activities offline. Some argue that they consume online pornography to become aroused, but claim that they are at odds with the industry. We can see

that it has become possible to ask for preferences online before meeting offline, that the internet makes it not only possible, but more comfortable to ask such questions online. Above, I argued that the internet seemed to bring us back to prior stages in our sexual development process and let us act accordingly, for example by experimenting and practicing sexual behaviors, sharing our sexuality with peers and so on. In addition, it seems like the internet has made it possible to do so because it requires no or only slight changes in the intrapsychic scripts. For example, it is possible to continue to engage in sexual activities in private, non-verbally, and without exposure to others. The question is to what extent the intrapsychic scripts only are broken online in relation to offline. Talking freely about sexuality online might not mean that this automatically transfers to offline situations. Viewing online erotica might not result in doing this offline. However, even if the activities are not transferred to offline situations, engaging in sexual activities online broadens the points of reference and can serve as arousing fantasies and still influence offline sexual behavior as well as interpersonal scripts.

The possibility to consign to the internet those aspects of sexuality that would be difficult to express offline has influenced our interpersonal scripts. It is possible to share preferences and sexual compatibility before meeting offline as well as to negotiating and pre-determine how the offline meeting should be arranged. For some, this means that they are able to engage in activities they would not have engaged in if they had had to negotiate face-to-face due to the embarrassment and shame that such a procedure could generate. While certain sexual aspects might still feel awkward offline, the influence of the internet has changed the prerequisites for these interactions and the interactions themselves. The more widespread the use of the internet for sexual purposes becomes, the more it will influence our cultural scripts. For example, today many counts the internet as an additional arena on which to find partners and, at the same time, media encourage people to log on to find the perfect match and the love of their lives which increases the cultural acceptance of this practice. Furthermore, by the mergence of many different varieties of sexuality, these may be seen as less stigmatized and even possible for anyone to explore and this may contribute to a wider acceptance on the cultural level. Gagnon and Simon argue that our knowledge of sexuality is established in young ages and, therefore, any tendencies to changes in the cultural scripts related to the internet might be found among those who use the internet in their everyday life and for whom it has been available throughout their lives. The findings in the current thesis suggest that the internet generation uses the internet in different ways compared to older users and these differences ought to be studied to explore the understandings of the contemporary cultural scripts.

Concluding remarks

The theories that I have presented above constitute my theoretical framework for analysing love and sexuality on the internet. Individually, these theories focus on different aspects of human life that range from individuality to structure, each with its own em-

phasis. Some of the notions and concepts provided are abstract and general while others are more concrete and specific. The rationale for using all three theories emanates from the original purpose of the project which was to study internet sexuality comprehensively, but also due to Layder's (1998) suggestion that using several theoretical perspectives might generate a fuller and more powerful explanation of the phenomenon under scrutiny and, furthermore, to open for the possibility to contribute to general theories of human life and society. If this is the case, then why have I excluded other theories that might be of relevance for the analysis? This is a good and legitimate question which indeed influences the results of the current study. In my opinion and in this specific case, there are several answers to this question. Initially, the theories were chosen because they seemed appealing and relevant through their convincing argumentation and explanations in relation to prior research and theories, at least to be used temporarily and for the purposes of the initial analysis. During the research process they have strengthened their positions as useful and explanatory tools upon which it was possible for me to continue and deepen the analysis. My choices are also based upon the levels of analysis that the theories allow; that they do not exclude other theories and that they, despite their emphasis, provide some links between micro and macro sociology. Finally, although there are overlaps between the theories, they were chosen as compliments to each other. However, using other theories and concepts might be fruitful as well and I encourage other approaches to contrast and complement the findings in this thesis. In the end it is up to the reader and the scientific community to judge and question the relevance and validity of the theoretical considerations and decisions I have made and to suggest other possible approaches.

The concept of the liquid modernity contributes by adding a contemporary background against which to analyse love and sexuality on the internet. It reaches beyond the online sexual activities per se as well as outside the particular arenas available on the internet, a macro perspective. It adds useful concepts that help to explain the reasons why the internet has become a popular venue in our everyday life and regards inter-human relationships by emphasizing our longing for togetherness while increasing and reinforcing the physical distance between us; our strive for security, safety, and certainty. We live in a society where the technology has made it possible to be close, and even intimate, while being physically distant. Furthermore, it adds a consumer perspective that helps to understand our urges and desires to find out what's behind the next corner; how identities are constantly cast and recast as a means to not being left behind in a never ending race without goals, but a series of new beginnings. Bauman means that this is not exclusive for commodities, but applies to how we perceive human love relationships as well. We are chasing instant satisfaction and gratification and the internet seems to meet the expectations in the case of love and sexuality. One consequence of this is that instead of wearing things out, we produce waste faster than ever before. This demands that we do not tie our bonds too tight, no tighter than that they can easily be untied when it is time to move on.

By using Goffman and his dramaturgical perspective it is possible to analyse the settings on the internet and how they contribute to enabling specific interactive

behaviour, but also how this is integrated in our everyday lives. The settings can be recognized as front or back stages with their specific qualities and help to explain, for example, why we feel more comfortable to express issues of love and sexuality back stage – in this case because of the privacy and anonymity it provides. In addition, we can turn the back stages on the internet into front stages in order to explore love and sexuality and in these cases we consider our homes or rooms, our private space in front of the computer screen as the back stage. Consequently we can remain back stage while giving our performances front stage. The internet allows us to play and practice roles, but if we want to remain believable, different roles cannot be played in front of the same audience. The integration of the internet in our everyday lives makes our everyday offline interactions easier, especially regarding love and sexuality, by constituting an arena where embarrassing interactions can be deployed as well as rehearsed.

The theory of sexual scripts highlights sexuality on both micro and macro levels as well as putting a historical perspective on sexuality. This perspective allows us to understand how certain activities may become more attractive to engage in online and how these prerequisites might change sexuality both online and offline. Individual sexuality is surrounded by feelings of guilt and shame and is consigned to the private areas of life and little talked about. However, the anonymity and privacy provided by the internet makes it a legitimate setting for sexuality; it can be explored and discussed and simultaneously remain in the private sphere. This prerequisite makes it easier to break the intrapsychic scripts. For some, this possibility has consequences for their sexuality offline, for example it might lead them to try new sexual practices or to become (additional) sexual fantasies. Finally we can see that the usage of the internet for love and sexuality is closely related to what we have learned in younger ages, when we become sexually socialized, and therefore it will be interesting to study if and how the internet will influence those who have grown up with it, regarding their sexual scripts on intrapsychic, interpersonal, and cultural levels.

4. Methodological discussion

In the current study, the internet has been used for data collection, quantitative data as well as qualitative data. Hitherto, to using the internet for this purpose has been rare, but an increasing number of researchers occupy themselves with this issue. However, this somewhat unorthodox approach to research methodology raises several questions that need to be elaborated upon; questions that relate to issues of validity, reliability, sampling, and ethics to mention but a few. Nevertheless, the internet has been considered a promising medium for data collection in the field of sexuality research (Mustanski, 2001).

One important thing to keep in mind in the following discussion is the internet's fast paced development; of the new and improved applications and settings as well as the increasing and decreasing popularity of them. Consequently, this means that user patterns and preferred settings change along with the technological development, which makes it a delicate object to study as the research pace is not adjusted to internet/computer development pace. However, the fast paced development provides researchers with new and challenging opportunities to experiment with new technology as a means to collect empirical data.

The internet and research methods

As the internet expanded throughout the world with an increasing number of users along with an increasing amount of time spent online, researchers begun to investigate how the internet was used for social purposes; to find out who the users were, and what they did online, how they interacted, et cetera. Arguably, as described in chapter 2, the first attempts to conduct research online were ethnographical with the purpose to describe and understand different milieus and what was going on in the corners of cyber space and were conducted in the early to mid 1990s (Turkle, 1995). By that time, the world wide web (WWW) with static and dynamic web pages as they appear today, was still under development. Rather, it was bulletin board systems (BBS) and MUDs that were under investigation by researchers (e.g., Turkle, 1995; Stone, 1996; Wallace, 1999). Today many BBSs and MUDs have disappeared or become less attractive compared to the easily accessible and aesthetical fora and communities on the web. However, the first empirical studies collected data by visiting the milieus themselves, by using covert or overt participant observations in these milieus. In later studies, researchers complemented their online observations by conducting offline interviews with people who claimed to spend time in these internet milieus. The common denominator for these studies was that they primarily focused on certain online settings, their structures and functions as well as the activities/interactivity within them.

In the late 1990s the internet shifted from being only an object; an object that could be researched with observational methods, to also becoming a technique for data collection. This shift marked a distinction between the internet as the object under

scrutiny and the internet as a technique to acquire knowledge about certain phenomena (sometimes, as in the current thesis, about specific internet milieus or about how the internet is used for love and sexual purposes). This meant that the researchers did not necessarily visit the online milieus themselves to collect data, but used the internet as a tool to recruit respondents and to distribute their questionnaires instead of the more traditional paper and pencil varieties. Instead of observing and recording how the different internet milieus were used, researchers asked people questions about it (of course using the internet to collect data does not mean that the questions have to concern internet at all). The first attempts to collect data by using the internet as a technique were based on questionnaires that were placed on web sites on the internet which could be filled out online by the respondents (Cooper, 1999; Tikkanen & Månsson, 1999, ref in Ross, Tikkanen, & Månsson, 2000). Cooper (1999) was one of the first to utilize this new technique and on two occasions he conducted two large scale surveys in conjunction with the MSNBC web page, resulting in sample consisting of almost 9,000 and 7,000 respondents respectively. For smaller, directed studies, e-mail has been used to distribute and collect questionnaires about sexuality (cf. Schneider, 2000).

Inspired by previous research using the internet for data collection, we decided in 2002 to investigate internet sexuality in Sweden through an online questionnaire (Månsson et al., 2003; Publication I-IV). However, we refined the technique further by having the database to record the respondents' answers continuously as they filled out the questionnaire. Through time stamps, we were able to see the exact times and date for both entries and exits and, thus, where and when respondents dropped out. In addition, this format let us analyze those respondents who did not complete the questionnaires regarding, for example, their socio-demographic characteristics, which provided us with valuable data of variables that increase or decrease the tendency to complete or quit an online sexuality questionnaire in progress (Publication II). This information would normally be difficult to obtain in traditional paper and pencil questionnaires since respondents who do not complete more traditional (paper and pencil) questionnaires probably do not return them, but become missing cases.

In 2003 and 2004, as part of the above mentioned Swedish study, I used the internet to conduct interviews about internet sexuality (Publication V). Initially, instant messaging was offered to the presumptive informants as one alternative among other options (face-to-face and telephone), but with one exception, instant messaging was the preferred choice. Besides being cost effective, using instant messaging increased the flexibility in time and space compared to traditional procedures as the interviews could be conducted between any two internet-connected computers with the appropriate software. Concretely, this technique allowed me to let the informants suggest the time and date for interviews as I could conduct them both at home and at work. In addition, I was able to conduct interviews without any geographical limitations (which became apparent among the informants). An advantage of conducting interviews through instant messaging is that the interviews become transcribed as they are conducted and, thus, eliminates problems related to this critical stage of processing inter-

view data (Kvale, 1997). However, both qualitative and quantitative techniques for online data collection are relatively recent approaches and, thus, subject for discussion and critique. I will return to some of the issues that I have identified as being central in these discussions and critique, but first I will elaborate a little further on the distinction between the internet as a study object and as a data collection technique.

The internet as a study object and data collection technique

For several researchers in various disciplines, the internet has constituted the study object, while others have used the internet to collect qualitative and quantitative data (sometimes about the internet). Unfortunately, with the internet, there has been some confusion regarding the study object and the methodology. Knowledge about certain settings, for example MUDs and BBS, has served as arguments to why the use of the internet for data collection would be at fault, especially regarding people's honesty in their participation in empirical studies (recall the infamous example of gender bending, i.e., pretending to be of the opposite sex, which, according to Cooper et al. (1999) hardly occurs). The missing link is that nowadays, there are almost no one who uses MUDs or BBS as the technique has evolved and a younger generation has taken advantage of the internet for reasons that did/do not generally apply to prior settings and their users. Furthermore, Sveningsson, Lövheim, and Bergquist (2003) acknowledge the problem of considering the internet to be one setting and they emphasize that different online settings must be approached differently. However, while the distinction between study object and research methods still might be difficult for some to make, it is my belief that in order to take advantage of and to improve the use of the internet for data collection, the methods have to be evaluated and discussed in relation to research methodology. Without dismissing the findings about distant, since long disappeared, online settings and populations, this knowledge has to be related to findings about other, and perhaps more recent, settings and populations, not to be confused with research methodology.

In this regard, the general methodological discussion should, in my opinion, be about whether or not the respondents are honest in general; if they are more honest when filling out paper and pencil questionnaires at the kitchen tables in suburbia, than when filling out online questionnaires in school's computer laboratories. When we mail questionnaires to, for example, four member households, can we guarantee that the questionnaires are filled out by the intended member of the household? Hardly, I would argue, if we are not present ourselves to oversee the exercise. If we ask the same households to speak with a specific person on the telephone regarding an interview study we conduct at the moment, can we guarantee that it is the person we seek who actually is on the other end? Again, this would be impossible to guarantee. At the best we may identify the sex and approximate age of the person we talk to. How, then, could we guarantee that the person is who he or she tells us? Face to face interviews would be one way of stating sex and an approximate age. Furthermore, a ring on a specific finger could, perhaps, reveal something about that informant's marital status.

However, it would be difficult to claim that we can know, from face-to-face interviews, the informants' sexual preferences, where they live, who their best friends are, if they have children, how many sex partners they have had during the last year. We have to trust their claims and narratives or reject them, whether in questionnaires or interviews. Whichever we choose to assume, this is a philosophical question about the human nature which has little to do with the specific technique. Here we as researchers have to make a choice: do we assume that people cheat and lie whenever they have the opportunity to do so or, do we believe them to be honest regardless if they have the opportunity to lie and cheat?

What steps, then, can we take to increase the validity of our research if we cannot be sure that our respondents and informants are being honest, regardless of the technique used to collect data? How can we acquire knowledge about our world of which the internet is one part? Perhaps comparative and longitudinal studies could be part of the answer for external validity along with finding consistence and deviance within and between specific data sets or interview data for internal validity. Deviant and inconsistent studies would constitute interesting cases for special investigation. In the current thesis, the results have been compared to other studies, but also put up against prior theory, as suggested by Layder (1998), in order to validate data and interpret the results. Besides the above questions of ontological and epistemological nature, I will continue to discuss issues of validity in online research in relation to the methods used in the current research project.

Validity and generalizability in online research

One of the concerns when using the internet to gather data, whether qualitative or quantitative, is the validity and generalizability of the data. To obtain valid data is, furthermore, an ethical question. Invalid data may lead the researcher to draw false conclusions, publishing wrong results from his or her study which, in turn, may have consequences for those whom the results concern, professionals as well as clients, patients, or the public in general. As I have implied above, to conduct research by using the internet for data collection raises several questions that can be related to issues of validity. Some of these questions emanate from certain assumptions about the internet and its users while other questions are related to the traditional ways of data collection. In the following discussion I will separate quantitative survey research from research interviews. In addition, I will use examples from my own research in conjunction with examples from traditional methodology. However, it will not be an exhaustive exposition regarding the historical emergence of scientific methods, their (meta) theoretical assumptions, or their areas of application.

Quantitative methods

Quantitative research methods are, generally, recognized by their connections to positivism and concerns with issues of generalizability, i.e., their approach/connectedness to natural sciences and search for conformity with natural laws (Bryman, 1995). The

two most common types of research designs within the social sciences are experiments and surveys. Experimental research designs often investigate groups of subjects, where one serves as the control group to with the experimental groups is compared. Survey designs, on the other hand, aim to gather quantifiable data about larger segments of the population at a given time. Both designs demand rigorous procedures regarding the samples, which must represent the larger population for the results to be generalizable. The most desirable technique to acquire such samples is probability sampling, where the total population is known by the researcher and where anyone in the population, by, for example, randomization, strata, or clusters, has equal chances of being included in the sample. When the total population is known, it is easy to analyze the data as this is the basic assumption for many standardized statistical measures. Furthermore, it is possible to analyze any missing responses, i.e., those who chose not to participate. However, as I have indicated above, this assumes that the chosen respondents are the ones who actually fill out our questionnaires or answer our questions. In addition, the respondents might have reasons for their decision to participate or not and, thus, influence the final results.

In the current study of internet sexuality, our survey was distributed online to an unknown population. This means that we cannot know if our sample is representative of the total internet population (those who use the internet) and, thus, we would not be able to generalize our results, neither to the internet population nor the general population. Only those who visited the Swedish web portal in question and at the time for the survey had the chance of being included in the study. Furthermore, our sample was self selected and not a probability sample. With these limitations, is it simply a waste of time to use the internet for survey data collection as we cannot control our samples nor generalize our results? Are the results only valid for the investigated group? The results provide us with valuable knowledge, but to acquire acceptance they demand greater efforts from the researchers to discuss, evaluate, and interpret the obtained results compared with traditional (more or less orthodox) quantitative research.

Two of the most questioned aspects of online surveys are related to the samples and the generalizability of the results. As the online population is unknown, it is impossible to sample by the book. However, there are some strategies to increase the representativeness of the sample. In the current study, our respondents' socio-demographic data, such as sex and age, were matched with visitors' data from the web portal where the questionnaire was distributed, matched with a national population based Swedish sex survey, and matched with statistics of general internet usage collected by Statistics Sweden (SCB). From these comparisons, our population matched several of these background variables (cf. Månsson et al., 2003; Ross et al., 2005). However, we must recognize the internet population as a changing population. Among 16-24-year-olds in Sweden, more than 90 percent use the internet at least once per week. This percentage then decreases with age. Due to this, the mean age of the internet population will increase with time. In similar ways, we can assume that the internet will change on several other parameters, for example, class and ethnicity. Interestingly, challenging, and worth considering is that if the numbers continue to increase

among the 16-24-years-old, we may soon assume that internet users in this group represent the general population; a population that will have different relationships with computers and the internet compared to older generations, which might increase the possibilities of using the internet for data collection. Nevertheless, until such possibilities might become realized and stabilized, we have to accept that the internet population will remain unknown. In this study, to increase our confidence in the generalizability of our results, we made (cross-cultural) comparisons with other research on internet sexuality (cf. Cooper et al., 2003; Månsson et al., 2003).

Although the standard procedures for quantitative research are not fulfilled, the online survey provides us with interesting findings and aspects of internet sexuality that can be researched further. In addition, it can be used in conjunction with other methods for triangulation (to increase explanatory power). The quantitative survey provided us with knowledge that answered questions of who, how, what, when, and where the internet is used for love and sexuality. However, the questionnaire did not capture the meaning the users ascribe to their usage. Therefore, by using qualitative research interviews, conducted through the internet, we aimed to deepen the knowledge we had acquired through our survey. I will discuss this approach below.

Qualitative methods

Qualitative research methods are typically described as the opposite to quantitative methods in many aspects (even if the descriptions, according to Bryman, 1995, tend to be rather stereotypical than factual when critically examined). Contrary to quantitative research, qualitative research approaches (there are several branches of qualitative research, for example phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, verstehen, et cetera) aim to investigate and acquire knowledge about our world through the eyes of the informants; how the persons studied perceive their world. The actor perspective is fundamental. The most famous and long lived technique for data collection is probably ethnographic fieldwork with participant observations, sometimes combined with interviews. Nowadays, qualitative research interviews may constitute the entire empirical data material without observations. There are, however, a number of problems associated with qualitative research methods. For example, interview data must be interpreted and it is the researcher who interprets the interviews, often, however, followed by cautions, limitations, and reservations (Bryman, 1995). Another problem is the generalizability and representativity of qualitative research. However, these concepts stem from quantitative research and are not central goals to achieve with qualitative interviews, which rather aim to deepen and understand aspects of the phenomenon under scrutiny (Holme & Solvang, 1991). Qualitative researchers have different relations and attitudes to theory; some are convinced that the research process should be inductive (from data) while others claim that it should be deductive (from theory). Yet others place themselves somewhere in between these claims.

In the current study, the informants were interviewed online through instant messaging about love, sex, and the internet; a relatively recent technique for data collection that, hitherto, has not been used by many researchers (some researchers have tried, but because of various reasons decided to abandon this technique, for example

problems with the software and internet connection speed, cf. Sveningsson, 2002, whereas others have been too unfamiliar with online real time interactions). According to the text books about research methodology, qualitative interviews are recognized by the researchers' proximity to the informants. This is, however, not the case with online interviews, which are, rather, recognized by a distance to the informants. Nevertheless, these interviews can generate feelings of virtual proximity; a concept further elaborated upon by Bauman (2000; 2003; 2005), an aspect related to what he labels the liquid modernity. By using this concept, it is possible to think that although separated by physical distance, we can, by the means of high (advanced) technology (cellular telephones, internet connected computers), decrease or bridge this separateness and create an imaginary closeness. In the liquid modernity, physical distance to others is one way of dealing with increasing feelings of fear and insecurity, but also a consequence of the globalization moving people voluntarily or by force. There are, thus, several reasons for the virtual proximity and, perhaps, one explanation to why the majority of the informants in the current study chose to be interviewed online through instant messaging.

Prior research has shown that people are more willing to exchange personal information online with less social desirability and social anxiety (Joinson, 1999, quoted in Mustanski, 2001), which would make online interviews suitable for research on sensitive topics, such as sexuality. This coincides with the findings in the current study (Publication V). As mentioned earlier, qualitative research emphasizes the actor's perspective and, thus, this was put to practice by asking the informants about their reasons and motives for participating and why they chose instant messaging for the interviews. Some argued that the topic of love and sexuality is something rather private; something that they would have had difficulties to elaborate upon in face-to-face situations. This became obvious in the interviews; especially with questions that concerned the respondents own sexual behavior, for example as shown in the quote below:

> I: When you view pornography or read sex novels…do you masturbate at the same time?
>
> H: I am very grateful we don't do this interview in real life.
>
> I: Ok…
>
> H: Yes, it has happened...sometimes.

Some other respondents claimed that online interviews were preferred because of its textual nature and that they would have been too shy in oral conversations by phone or face-to-face. Other respondents emphasized that they felt more comfortable being able to review the question asked and that they got some time to think before they replied. The openness and comfort in the interviews is confirmed by earlier research (Mustanski, 2001) and can be illustrated in the excerpt below:

> I: We offered some alternatives how to do this interview and you chose instant messenger…why did you chose this alternative?
>
> S: I feel that it is easier for me to explain certain things by writing it down, rather than to explain something face to face or on the telephone…it is also easier for me to understand things [in writing].

Another answer to the same question was:

> U: You are more open on the messenger
>
> I: Any other reasons?
>
> U: No, not really…but I am a computer nerd *laugh*

One common question of validity in online interviews is related to the sample and population; how do we know who participates? The answer is that we do not. Again, taking advantage of the actor perspective, the informants were asked about their concept of truth online. From the informants' points of view, almost everyone believed that untruthfulness was common on the internet. However, and contrary to this belief, they claimed neither themselves nor their friends to lie online, and very few had ever been lied to as far as they knew. Some of the informants had been lying when they first got access to the internet and in those cases they had manipulated their age. To lie about one's age and to show "too good to be true"-pictures of oneself were thought to be the most common lies among the informants.

For the research interviews to be useful, the researcher has to trust the informants' narratives; that what the informants say is honest and accurate, which can be a delicate task. Thus, the researcher has to use some strategies to evaluate if the informants' answers and claims hold true or simply rely on the informants. In regular, face-to-face interviews, this seems to be less of a problem and the reason is probably a belief that people would be less prone to lie in such situations. Biased narratives, on the other hand, are debated to a greater extent, especially regarding ideologies and religion (Bryman, 1995). Alternatives and strategies to reduce this, and thus increase the internal and external validity, can be, for example, to shift perspectives, to make several interviews, to evaluate internal consistency, to use several data collection techniques, and to use prior theory.

To gain a further understanding of the concept of truth online, the informants in the current study were asked about their strategies to reveal and deal with liars and fakers on the internet. Most informants agreed upon the difficulty to be absolutely certain on what was true online, but some had developed strategies over time that they used when they interacted with others on the internet, for example to match written text with claimed age, to measure the length of the time spent on interacting with the same person, to recognize persons from time to time, et cetera. They seem to reach the conclusion that faking one's identity online can be accepted in specific settings such as role playing games or in specific activities such as cybersex. However, to maintain some kind of stability in the everyday use of the internet, the truth has to be told. It is especially important to tell the truth if the participants eventually will meet offline or have a desire to do so.

Finally, online interviews contain specific characteristics not found in regular, face-to-face or telephone, interviews. For example, normally interviews are taped and then transcribed, either by the researcher or someone else. This is a critical step where information can be lost or biased (Kvale, 1997). In the online interviews, the transcriptions are made instantaneously as the interviews are conducted. The researcher writes the questions and the respondent writes the answers and the conversation is being

logged simultaneously. Another example is, as mentioned in a previous section, the increased flexibility to conduct interviews with less regard to time and space.

Ethical considerations in online research

Alongside the usage and the development of new techniques for gathering data on - or through - the internet, questions arise about research ethics and if research ethics off-line can be applied online as well. These questions have different focus depending on whether the approach is qualitative or quantitative to its nature. Research ethics in online research, so far, has primarily been related to research in specific online settings (e.g., web pages, web fora, web communities, web chat rooms, guest books, MUDs, et cetera) and, to some extent and where applicable, their respective online populations. Notably, online ethics have primarily been related to qualitative methods, such as online ethnographical field work (perhaps not surprising as this was the first approach to the new phenomenon). Thus, the ethical questions have been concerned with questions about the status of the milieus, the type of information, and modes of participant observation (Sveningsson, Lövheim, & Bergquist, 2003; Ågren, 2000). Regarding the online milieus, the discussions have concerned questions about whether the information should be considered private or public. Some claim that anything published (written text) on the internet is public, according to the fact that it can be accessed by anyone with an internet connection. Others mean that some published material should be viewed as private and should not be used for research without consent. As a consequence, some mean that researchers, therefore, have to evaluate the type of information they obtain, if it can be considered sensitive or non-sensitive. Furthermore, there have been discussions about overt and covert research when it comes to participant observation, for example in MUDs or chat rooms, and thus questions have been raised concerning information about the studies and about obtaining informed consent.

The ethical questions above presume that the internet and its various settings are milieus where research on humans takes place. However, ethical questions regarding the internet as a data collection technique have been less discussed. In quantitative research methods, for example online questionnaires, more attention has been paid to questions about validity and reliability (Mustanski, 2001). The ethical aspects of quantitative sexuality research on the internet have focused on the fact that minors could access questionnaires unsuitable for their age as well as on ways to obtain informed consent (ibid.). As these kinds of discussions and debates have taken place, specific ethical guidelines for conducting internet research have developed (Sveningsson, Lövheim, & Bergquist, 2003).

The need for specific ethical guidelines for internet research emanates from the belief that the internet is a new, specific, domain with characteristics that separate it from other arenas where we conduct research. Truly, some of the ethical aspects can be difficult to meet online, for example those dealing with information about the purposes of the studies, informed consent, and confidentiality. However, I argue, these problems occur (and have occurred) in settings other than the internet as well. For ex-

ample, in observations in public milieus such as a street corners, bar rooms, prisons, asylums, and refugee camps as well as in studies of old newspapers or other published materials/media. When we conduct research in public places or use TV-shows, books, and phonograms as the empirical data to be analyzed, we normally do not inform the bystanders, program hosts, or authors that we treat this as public material. In these cases, we as researchers have to rely on ethical committees at our university or grant providers, existing ethical guidelines, and ourselves as educated researchers. I argue that the previous ethical guidelines and procedures apply to the internet without any modifications; we should always be careful with our research and calculate the benefits and possible harm it could inflict and this is already stated in most ethical guidelines. In each research project, the settings and actors/participants under scrutiny demand their own ethical considerations. To support this provocative thought, I refer to recent research that suggests that the internet is considered by its users to be part of their everyday life where they act as themselves just as in any other arena or setting they happen to live their lives in (Publication V).

Another aspect that is closely related to this is the above mentioned dispute about the information on the internet as being private or public. As the type of information could be placed somewhere on a continuum, the content in these concepts, I suggest, must be re-evaluated in our contemporary society. As Bauman (2003) says, in the liquid modernity private issues, such as love and sexuality, have begun to occupy public rooms, for example on news bills, prime time TV-shows, and, now, the internet. What happens with the concept of something being private if it is continuously is exposed in public? How should researchers respond to this shift? Without answering these questions here, an ethical approach would be to protect the individuals by leaving out any information that could be traced to any specific person regardless of its private or public character (confidentiality) and judged against its scientific value.

Issues of research ethics in online interviews

Today, conducting qualitative research interviews online is uncommon, and in the current study the ethical decisions have been made upon existing research ethics and ethical guidelines (The Swedish Research Council's (HSFR's, nowadays VR's) ethical guidelines). These guidelines are not important only at a particular stage in qualitative research, but rather throughout the entire research process from the research design to reporting the results (Maxwell, 1996; Kvale, 1997). In qualitative research interviews, information, informed consent, and confidentiality are three central aspects related to the protection of the individual (Kvale, 1997).

In the current study of love and sexuality on the internet (Publication V), the informants gave their informed consent to participate by replying to a request sent to their mailbox. As they could choose between several ways of conducting the interview it was decided that, depending on their choice, informed consent should be obtained in the beginning of each interview along with information about the purpose of the study, that the interview was voluntary, the participants' right to withdraw at any time, and that the interviews were confidential.

Interestingly, many informants talked about anonymity, not in the sense that they were concerned about their identity to be revealed nor about their participation in this particular study, but rather talked about anonymity as something that makes it easier to express themselves, to think before they answer, and because of offline shyness. Most informants in this study told their names and geographical location and in half of the cases even showed pictures of themselves. Perhaps the feeling of being able to withdraw from the interview at any point and/or to block the researcher from future conversations creates a non-threatening situation in which the informants gain increased control. Conducting online interviews take away some parts of the power imbalance that may exist in face-to-face interviews or telephone interviews, giving the respondent more control over the rather specific interview situation. When conducting interviews on sensitive topics, such as sexuality, there are reasons to believe that only those comfortable with discussing it would participate. Using the internet for research interviews may appeal to those who normally would not participate in interview studies.

Concluding remarks

Mustanski (2001) means that sexuality researchers should have a specific interest in using the internet for data collection, not only because of the enormous number of potential respondents online, but also because the internet is a domain with sexual material and sexual communication. However, as I have indicated above, it is important to make a distinction between the internet as the study object and as a technology for data collection. We must not confuse characteristics of specific online settings and their populations when discussing the internet as a medium to collect data, whether through questionnaires or interviews. Especially since we know that the internet is neither a static nor a specific, single, setting, but rather dynamic (or liquid) and constituted by several settings that evolve, change, improve, and disappear over time. Furthermore, this applies to the internet users' demographics and usage patterns as well and, therefore, we cannot talk about an "ideal" internet user with a specific set of characteristics determined once and for all.

One typical (let alone simplified) example of this is gender-bending. In the early to mid 1990s, before the internet became popular (or even accessible) among the general public, researchers speculated in what would happen when an enormous number of people got connected to arenas where it, because of the text-based nature of the arenas, was impossible to know, for example, other participants' ages and sexes (Turkle, 1995; Wallace, 1999). It was assumed and verified by scattered empirical observations that people, for example in role playing computer games, invariably would play with their identities online when this possibility suddenly appeared. This assumption became generalized and abstracted to a general internet population (user) regardless of setting. As the computer power and internet connection speed increased and could accommodate picture and sound, the belief that the internet users were constantly changing or playing with their identities persisted (and was emphasized by me-

dia). Recent research suggests that gender-bending is uncommon and when this phenomenon occurs, it can be related to, for example, specific users, specific settings, specific activities, and specific generations (Cooper et al., 1999; Publication V). Despite this, we still tend to believe gender-bending to be a common feature on the internet. As a consequence, we become suspicious against the validity of our online observations, of our online surveys and interviews – "how do we know that the informants are who they claim to be?" I have suggested that these kinds of questions about internet research are not only methodological, but questions of epistemological and ontological nature (with some aspects applying to more traditional research methods as well).

Seen from the perspective of Derek Layder (1998), when we conduct research with explanatory ambitions, we should not limit our methodological arsenal of data collection techniques by dogmatically or routinely shackle ourselves to single alternatives. He means that different approaches compliment each other and emphasizes creativity as an important aspect of trying new techniques. According to Layder, a variety of methods are needed to comprehensively describe, explain, and understand complex social phenomena. Using the internet for this purpose is one example of expanding the possible ways of data collection.

The more researchers who use, evaluate, and discuss the internet for data collection, the more we can learn about its advantages and disadvantages, strengths and weaknesses, and, thus, keep developing these techniques to make them better tools for increasing our knowledge in several areas, both theoretical and methodological. They can also be used as alternatives and compliments to regular research methods. These techniques may prove to be more suitable for certain research topics (e.g., sexuality) and to reach certain parts of populations (e.g., younger users), but this remains an empirical question. Current research shows that by using online questionnaires we can analyze who, where, and when respondents drop out (Publication II) and, thus, contribute with interesting and useful knowledge for future questionnaire construction. By providing online interviews as an alternative to regular interviews we may reach people who would not participate otherwise, for example because of geographical restraints, because it reduces anxiety or shyness related to the power imbalance between the researcher and the informants, because of the possible sensitivity of certain topics, or because it simply is an appealing, comfortable alternative for interaction (Publication V).

As empirical research continues to provide us with results suggesting that the internet is used in less spectacular ways than previously assumed, we should begin to revise our concept of the internet. It is easy to exotify the internet with its seemingly endless number of users and possibilities when considering the first attempts to explain and understand its consequences. Nevertheless, the internet contains some very interesting aspects that have, arguably, influenced human/social life, primarily in an everyday life perspective in our contemporary society. One example of the exotification of the internet can be taken from the business world. Before the year 2000, there was a tremendous belief in the fact that the internet would entirely recreate our lives and societies. An even more tremendous amount of money was invested in this new technol-

ogy and "gurus" went around the globe to mission the new information technology and its intrinsic power, charging top dollars for their wisdom (Nicholas Negroponte of MIT was paid 800,000SEK (approximately $100,000) for a one and a half hour lecture at the conference "Framtidsdagarna" (The future days) at "Konserthuset" (The concert hall) in Örebro, Sweden, January 27th 2000). However, around the same date, as invested money did not pay off, investors withdrew from the arena and the IT crash became a fact. Shares dropped and companies dissolved or went bankrupt as the technology did not keep its promises and the general population did not take advantage of it as predicted. Today, the utopic visions of the information technology have become more moderate and realistic; the visions have become adjusted and based on how people actually use the technology, not on speculations about what they possibly and eventually will do with it.

Part of the work on ethical guidelines specifically for the internet was initiated around this time as well. This can explain why committees were appointed, why the internet was believed to require specific guidelines, as this was how the internet was perceived at that time with its short but intensive historical development. Arguably, the internet has some very special characteristics. However, the need for specific ethical guidelines seems more like continuing and nurturing an exotification of a phenomenon that is not as exotic as we used to believe; a phenomenon and setting that I believe (at present) is well covered by existing ethical guidelines and critical ethical reviews and discussions within the research society. This is, nevertheless, a question for future research and discussions.

5. Conclusions

On the internet, men and women of all ages engage in a variety of sexual activities. The results from the current study show that these sexual activities take place on different arenas; arenas that together constitute the sexual landscape on the internet. These arenas are interactive and non-interactive where the former allow people to communicate and the latter do not. Non-interactive arenas, such as web sites, often contain texts, pictures, and movies that can be viewed or downloaded onto one's computer. The interactive arenas can be divided into synchronous private (instant messaging), synchronous public (web chat rooms), asynchronous private (e-mail), and asynchronous public (communities). Different arenas in the sexual landscape have different levels of anonymity where web sites are the most anonymous as visitors are unaware of each other's presence. Interactions through instant messaging, on the other hand, are the least anonymous as the actors often know each other, more or less, and it is at the same time impossible not to notice an actor in these arenas. This study suggests that anonymity is an important aspect of love and sexuality on the internet and that the most sexually explicit arenas coincide with the most anonymous arenas. Therefore, we can often expect to find more sexually explicit images and conversations, for example, on web sites and in web chat rooms compared to in interactions through instant messenger. However, the level of the sexually explicit content in conversations might be negotiated by the participants and, thus, a less anonymous arena might become very sexual. This study suggests that the sexual landscape is constantly changing; that new arenas emerge while others disappear, entirely or partly. As a consequence, researchers must keep up to date with the sexual landscape and its inhabitants.

The results from this study show that among the various sexual activities available to engage in on the internet, two dimensions accounted for one third of the variance. Based on the content, we identified these dimensions as *accessing erotica* and *partner seeking*. As the quantitative data we collected in 2002 generated a sample that comprises an almost equal gender distribution, we are able to make comparisons in this regard. The results show that both men and women used the internet for love and sexual purposes, which contrasts prior assumptions suggesting the internet to be primarily a male domain. However, there are both gender differences and similarities regarding the activities the respondents engage in. Men use the internet primarily to view erotica, which is their preferred activity as well, while women most frequently use the internet to flirt, but prefer to use it to stay in contact with love/sex partners. More men than women use the internet to look for partners, visit contact sites and reply to sex ads. Women, on the other hand, use the internet for educational purposes more often than men. However, men and women use the internet to flirt and to chat to an equal extent. In addition, there are no differences between genders regarding reading erotica and buying sex products.

While there are both gender differences and gender similarities in our sample, our additional analyses suggest age to be an important variable to consider when investigating love and sexuality on the internet; that gender alone is insufficient when

one wants to understand and explain love and sexuality on the internet. For example, although the preferred activity to engage in for men is viewing erotica, we find their interest to decrease with age. This applies to other activities as well, for example regarding the use of the internet to stay in contact with love/sex partner, to seek education, and to chat. However, the reversed pattern is found regarding partner seeking activities which increases with age up to 49 years and slightly decrease for those over 50 years. Among women, there are no clear patterns to be found with the exception of partner seeking activities where the interest increases with age. Interestingly, a significantly larger proportion of younger women use the internet to access erotica compared to older women, indicating a generational divide. Over all, the oldest respondents in the sample use the internet less for love and sexual purposes.

The qualitative data collected further emphasize the importance of the generational aspect. The informants' ages in this study are distributed between 18 and 40, and, thus, limited to a younger age segment compared to the quantitative study. The initial analysis divides the informants into two groups that are more related to age than gender. This division emanates from how the informants use the internet in general (its role in their everyday lives) and for love and sexual purposes in particular. While it is not an exclusive and definite division (and, moreover, a division that probably has to be revised in the future), the results indicate that the younger users, labelled the internet generation, started to use the internet while in school (up to 12th grade) while the older users started to use the internet in adulthood. Compared to older users, the internet generation use the internet as part of their everyday lives; they do not log on to the internet for any specific reasons or to engage in specific activities, but as part of their general usage. The internet generation adopt, easily and willingly, new techniques and arenas whereas the older users prefer to stick with techniques and arenas they are used to and that satisfy their needs. Another distinction between the groups concerns with whom they interact online. While the internet generation often interact with people they also know online, the older users interact with people they have first got to know on the internet. Furthermore, the internet generation spend many hours online engaging in several activities simultaneously, for example, using the internet to do their homework while surfing the web and interacting with their peers. The older users, on the other hand, use the internet in their spare time and log on for specific reasons to, for example, visit dating sites. Because the internet generation often know with whom they interact, they make up identities less often (although slight modifications and "white lies" occur) while older users more often engage in role playing games where they create their identities. How the internet is integrated in the users' everyday lives, thus, influences how they use the internet for love and sexual purposes. The results suggest that this has to be accounted for when researching love and sexuality on the internet; that the internet is perceived as integrated in the users' everyday lives.

Besides the examination of demographic differences and similarities among users and usage patterns, we investigate a specific online sexual activity – cybersex. Cybersex is defined as two or more persons engaging in simulated sex talk online for the purpose of sexual pleasure. Our results show that approximately one third of our

sample has engaged in cybersex. Among men between 18 and 24, 38 percent report to have this experience which decreases almost linearly with age and reaches 13 percent among men between 50 and 65. Among women, on the other hand, having had cybersex slightly increases with age from 18 to 49 and decreases significantly among women between 50 and 65. With the exception of men and women between 35 and 49, where more women than men have had cybersex, there are no gender differences to be found. However, a multivariate analysis indicate no significant age differences, only for men between 50 and 65 who are less likely to have had cybersex. Our analysis shows that homosexual men are more likely than heterosexual men to engage in cybersex. However, being in a relationship is not associated with having had cybersex for neither men nor women. Those who engage in cybersex have had more sex partners during the last year and spend more time online for sexual purposes compared with those not having had cybersex. Subsequent qualitative research interviews show that most of the time the informants do not know their cybersex partner and, thus, the interaction is completely anonymous. As mentioned above, to engage in interactions in arenas with high levels of anonymity increases the possibilities for more sexually explicit interactions, both regarding content and language. Cybersex allows people to explore sexual fantasies and to use sexually explicit language in ways that are difficult or even impossible offline. In addition, on the internet it is possible to approach strangers and to engage in cybersex with them.

Media and a substantial part of the prior research have focused on the usage of the internet for love and sexual purposes from a problems perspective. Some parts of the worries concern possible physical hazards while others concern possible psychological hazards. Our initial analyses show that the vast majority of the respondents report positive effects from using the internet for love and sexual purposes. Therefore, we set out to investigate those who are categorized as sexual compulsives according to the sexual compulsivity scale developed by Kalichman et al. (1994). Approximately 6 percent of our sample is categorized as being sexual compulsives. We find them more likely to be male, to be in a relationship, to be bisexual rather than heterosexual, and more likely to have had a sexually transmitted infection. Interestingly, there are no homosexuals among the sexual compulsives. The results show that the time spent online varies within this group. Of those who spend most time online for love and sexual purposes, the majority engage in partner seeking and interactive activities. We suggest such activities to be more time consuming than others and, therefore, time is not necessarily a good measure for cybersex compulsivity as suggested by prior research. While there are individual differences, we find that sexual compulsives increase their offline pornography consumption to a significantly greater extent than non-sexual compulsive individuals after they had begun to use the internet for love and sexual purposes. In addition, those who were sexual compulsives had been more familiar with offline pornography before they started to use the internet.

Theoretical reflections

Several of the empirical findings emphasize the importance of the anonymity provided by the internet. It is as a crucial aspect of love and sexuality online; an aspect that enables behaviours that would be more difficult or impossible to engage in if it was absent. Anonymity has also been highlighted by prior research (e.g., Cooper, 1997), but less effort has been spent on connecting this concept to theory. Why is anonymity that important? From Gagnon & Simon's (1973) perspective, we learn from young ages that sexuality is something we ought to keep as our own private matter. We learn that sexuality belongs within the four walls of our bed rooms. In addition, our own sexuality is surrounded by silence; it is something we normally do not talk freely about, certainly not with strangers, but often not even with our partners (with some exceptions, for example within groups with different sexual cultures and perhaps in some sex education and research milieus). At the same time, as Bauman (2000; 2003) observes, other's sexualities are forced upon us through media, suggesting how we should be and what we should do to become happy and satisfied.

With the internet, it is possible to continue keeping our sexuality private and simultaneously share our sexuality, thoughts and fantasies, with others. The reason why this is possible on the internet can be understood by using Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective. Goffman means that in our everyday lives we perform in front of audiences. These performances take place on front stages and these stages determine possible behaviours and actions as well as incorporate sets of rules to which we have to obey. Back stage, on the other hand, we can rest and relax; prepare, practice and fine tune our roles for our next performances, and engage in behaviours that would be inappropriate in front of an audience. The internet and its milieus can be interpreted as back stages in the sense that they constitute settings where we can relax, practice, and engage in behaviours not possible front stage. On the other hand, we can interpret these milieus as front stages where we perform. However, as we perform front stage, we are at the same time back stage, in front of our computer screens in our homes. As with the offline settings and their qualities described by Goffman, the internet settings may be both front and back stages and may change and be utilized differently by different actors. In my opinion, although Goffman referred to face-to-face interactions, the concepts are useful and pretty much as applicable on the internet as in other settings. It seems like the behaviours occurring offline, as Goffman portrays them, occur online as well. The major difference is that with the help of the internet, one can be in one dimension, in one setting, offline or online, back stage or front stage, and simultaneously act in another dimension or setting. The physical obstacles of yesterday that separated settings and people have become virtual possibilities today. Bauman (2003) describes this as virtual proximity; the possibility in our liquid modern society to be close while physically distant. Thus, the internet provides us with settings that meet the learned prerequisites for sharing and exploring our sexual thoughts and fantasies together with others as well as for ourselves; settings in which we feel com-

fortable to engage in activities that include sexuality in various ways. A conclusion would be, then, that one part of our sexual scripts has not changed; we still consign our own sexuality and sexual talk to private areas of life. However, another part of the scripts have changed since we can, after all, engage in sexual talk, express our thoughts and fantasies in ways that would have been difficult or impossible without the internet. How this will influence our sexual scripts in the long run, one can only speculate about.

Anonymity is obviously important in both theory and empirical data and enables us to engage in activities relating to love and sexuality in previously difficult and impossible ways, but what does anonymity mean to the users? The results from the current study suggest that anonymity includes generational aspects as well. For older users, the concept of anonymity means that they may act and interact online but remain unidentifiable. Younger users, on the other hand, may use their real names and show pictures of themselves when they interact with others. For them, anonymity is more about not having to engage in certain interactions face-to-face and to be able to withdraw from certain situations. However, the more sexual the situation or arena, the more it is preferred to be unidentifiable, even among younger users, for example regarding engagement in cybersex or viewing online erotica. The need for anonymity seems to be related to the activities engaged in. In the end, anonymity can be perceived as an issue about personal security and safety; as a way of reducing risks of personal negative sanctions when and if sexual scripts are broken.

Both Goffman and Bauman imply, though from different perspectives, that we nowadays spend most of our days indoors. But as we now have access to the internet, we may interact with family and friends as well as strangers without regard to physical distances, fences, or closed doors. We can sense a feeling of community, a sense of belonging without fear. However, for this to happen, we have secluded ourselves from others. But as we keep secluding ourselves, we communicate more than ever (at least when considering the produced amounts of texts); we are not only being communicated to, but able to communicate as well. Because of the increased safety and security we experience, partly by being able to keep different audiences separated from each other and partly by being able to perform while in protected, physically remote, back stages, we dare to take more chances with less risk and possible negative consequences. For example, we may initiate relationships online and find out if they suit us before meeting face to face, we may ask questions whose answers we cannot predict, and we can access erotica without having to expose ourselves to others. Thus, we dare to try the things suggested by, for example, media in more comfortable ways. However, as seen from Bauman's perspective, this may make us constantly unsatisfied, knowing that there will always be other alternatives that appear as better than those we have already chosen; that choosing and experiencing new things supposed to satisfy our desires will be what we end up with – over and over again; that there are no finish lines in the race. And, furthermore, that things presented as our needs are needs created by the consumer culture; by experts who tell us what we need, what steps we ought to take to become satisfied. One consequence of this is that we must not tie our

bonds too tight, neither to commodities nor to other persons, as they must be easily untied when it is time to move on. The results in this thesis suggest that the internet makes it possible to break traditional sexual scripts, to engage in sexual talk with others and explore and experiment with our sexuality anonymously, in private and without negative sanctions. However, we have yet to find out if Bauman's, in some regards quite pessimistic, predictions will be the future consequences of the usage of the internet for love and sexual purposes or not.

Suggestions for further research

While I hope that this thesis has made some contributions to the field of internet sexuality, empirically, theoretically, and methodologically, I am well aware that the study could have been designed in other ways; that other methods as well as other theoretical starting points could have been used. However, I have identified a few aspects that I consider interesting for further research in the field.

Much of the focus in this thesis was on how the internet is used for the purpose of love and sexuality; quite obvious as this was the purpose of the research project. However, the qualitative study states that for many users, especially the younger users, the internet serves as an important part of their everyday lives and that love and sexuality constituted one part of this. I feel that this was not satisfactorily elaborated upon in this thesis. Further research should focus even more on the integration with the everyday life, perhaps inspired by the very first internet research in organisations. That is, how the internet makes certain aspects of life easier, for problem solving, and to manage networks. Such a focus would also contribute to making the research less susceptible for the ever changing sexual landscape, as the arenas themselves are not the most crucial aspect. This is, however, not to say that the arenas play an insignificant role when it comes to love and sexuality on the internet; they certainly do not, as the possibilities they provide influence our online behaviour.

Cross-sectional designs can only provide us with snap-shots of reality, temporal glimpses of the contemporary conditions. In this perspective, this thesis is a historical document, perhaps not before the ink has dried, but certainly long before its pages has turned yellow. Longitudinal cohort studies could be an alternative in order to capture changes, both regarding technological advancements changing the prerequisites for interaction and the sexual landscape, but also in order to examine how user demographics and usage patterns might change over time for different generations. In addition, in such a design it would be interesting to include the next generation, those born into the age of information technology, and investigate how they will utilize the internet for love and sexual purposes.

From a theoretical point of view, it would be interesting to investigate how intrapsychic, interpersonal, and cultural scripts change our sexual behaviours and what changes might be ascribed to the internet. It would also be interesting to use other theories to analyze the phenomenon to contrast the findings in this study.

Finally, to continue to elaborate on the usage of the internet to collect quantitative and qualitative data is another interesting aspect that has been emphasized in this project. If the internet will meet the same future as regular mail and telephones, it will be an important way of collecting data in days ahead. I would anticipate, however, that before it becomes established and legitimate within the research community, it has to become more a part of everyday life. While the usage of web cameras and microphones might be used to a greater extent in the future and, thus, eliminate some of the disbelief presently surrounding the technique, I think it is the lack of visual and audible cues that makes it a specifically useful tool for topics that might be perceived as more sensitive, such as sexuality.

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