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# The Internet and Research Methods in the Study of Sex Research: Investigating the Good, the Bad, and the (Un)ethical

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## Abstract

The Internet has thoroughly revolutionized sex. On an individual level, the technology has become a key source in exploring sexuality, researching sexual interests, and participating in erotic activity, both vicariously and potentially even physically. For scholars, the Internet has given effortless access to academic databases and archives, to social media sites and public diaries, and notably to a world of possible research participants, in turn dramatically altering the ways sex gets studied. This chapter outlines, analyzes, and problematizes the use of the Internet in sex research, drawing on a wide range of literature on research ethics as well as my own background as a sex researcher, an author of a range of recent material specifically about the Internet, a supervisor of several dissertations on new media, and a long-time member of my university's human ethics committee.

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## Keywords

Internet • Sexuality • Ethics • New media • Technology • Sexology

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## 1 Introduction

The Internet has thoroughly revolutionized sex. On an individual level, the technology has become a key source in exploring sexuality, researching sexual interests, and participating in erotic activity, both vicariously and potentially even physically (Rosewarne 2011, 2015, 2016a). For scholars, the Internet has given effortless access to academic databases and archives, to social media sites and public diaries, and notably to a world of possible research participants, in turn dramatically altering the ways sex gets studied.

This chapter outlines, analyzes, and problematizes the use of the Internet in sex research. I begin with a brief discussion of the ethics of researching sex and, more specifically, the role of the Internet in this endeavor. I follow with an examination of the Internet as a tool in secondary source data collection. I explore the technology's use in recruiting research participants: both in general via the utilization of an easy means to broadcast requests, and then, more specifically in targeting the hard-to-reach, notably members of sexual subcultures. Lastly, the role of the Internet as shaping research participation is examined: both its usefulness in concealing identity – and thus potentially fostering enhanced honesty – as well as the deception potential that such anonymity fosters.

This chapter draws on a wide range of literature on research ethics as well as my own experience as a sex researcher, an author of a range of recent material specifically about the Internet (Rosewarne 2016a, b, c), a supervisor of several dissertations on new media, and a member of my university's human ethics committee since 2010.

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## 2 The Ethics of Studying Sex

Sex researcher Leonore Tiefer wrote a 1991 essay criticizing the persistent call from within the discipline for “rigor” in sexology. Tiefer considers that this as, at least partly, a ham-fisted response to the struggle sexology has had in securing legitimacy, and is a call designed to somehow counter the tireless “yes, it’s interesting, but it isn’t science” criticisms of sex research (Tiefer 1991, p. 596). Numerous theorists in fact have spotlighted the struggle that sexology has had in being recognized as legitimate in a relatively conservative academic environment (Irvine 1990; Waynberg 2009). Many of the underpinnings of this struggle – i.e., suspicions about the prurient interests of researchers (Rosewarne 2011; Thomas 2016), and the widespread belief that sex is a private matter and a topic in bad taste to casually discuss (Rosewarne

2013) – are the very reasons why such research is often considered problematic: asking people about their sex lives, fantasies, and attitudes has long been considered sleazy and invasive, if not also *low-brow*, in the academy.

Research – particularly the kind that involves humans – is under permanent pressure to be ethical. Ethics committees at universities and hospitals go to great lengths to ensure that safeguards are in place to protect both participants and researchers (see also “► [Ethics and Research](#)”). Such committees exist to thwart troublesome or unworkable research and to provide guidance to scholars on how to improve research design. The geographer Clare Madge (2007) discussed the conduct of human research online and summarized the five key areas prioritized in research ethics policies: informed consent, confidentiality, privacy, debriefing, and netiquette. While these concerns are relevant for any human research project, each factor – notably consent, confidentiality, and privacy – have additional relevance in sex research. For all those reasons that sex is considered private, embarrassing and difficult to talk about are the very reasons that special care needs to be taken when conducting sex research, notably when consent, confidentiality, and privacy have heightened relevance. In a world where judgment, marginalization, and criminalization often occur as a result of exposed sexual interests, research into sex necessitates that effort goes into both comprehensively informing project participants and – as far as possible – ensuring their confidentiality. It should be noted that achieving these things has additional burdens online. Social researchers Jesse Bach and Jennifer Dohy (2015, p. 319), for example, identified the troubles they encountered in establishing consent while using the Internet to study human trafficking: “informed consent, is exceedingly difficult when researching online commercial sex advertisements due to the clandestine nature of the crime and the environments that host it.”

It has been contended that scholars undertaking online sex research are not uniquely burdened in regard to ethics, but just need to be mindful of the ethical demands placed on human research of *any* kind and the necessity to keep abreast of best practice around sex research (Wagner et al. 2004; Dewey and Zheng 2013; see “► [Ethics and Research](#)”). It is, however, worth questioning whether conducting such research online creates any additional ethical quandaries, a topic addressed by numerous scholars (Binik et al. 1999; Madge 2007). Madge (2007, p. 656), for example, summarizes the existing literature, identifying:

It has been suggested that online research ethics raise many interesting debates as the computer stands ‘betwixt and between’ categories of alive/not alive, public/private, published/non-published, writing/speech, interpersonal/mass communication and identified/anonymous.

Here, Madge spotlights the complexity of online interactions whereby ideas about geography, privacy, and identity have different meanings online than off. Should the identities, for example, encountered online be considered “real”? Should statements made in social media or in a blog be treated as on the public record? Are exchanges made in chatrooms considered private or public conversations? As Madge

highlights, medium specificities need to be kept in mind. Studying sex online also necessitates a rethink of some unique practical and theoretical factors relating to ethics. Binik et al. (1999, p. 82) for example, question: “Are paper and electronic consent forms interchangeable? Can we promise anonymity and confidentiality on the Internet?” The authors extend their concerns to the determination of age: “The researcher probably cannot use the Internet to verify the minor’s real circumstances and responses to the research (e.g., whether they are actually safe from harm as a result of participation)” (Binik et al. 1999, pp. 84–85). While Binik and colleagues posed these questions in 1999 – in the earliest days of mainstream Internet use – they nonetheless remain concerns relevant to researchers today.

Discussed later in this chapter is virtual ethnography: of relocating fieldwork to an online space. While indeed, such research boasts appeals, the idea of a researcher “lurking” in online spaces, without making their presence known, conflicts with a range of ethical principles established by research bodies. Binik et al. (1999, p. 83), for example, reference the American Psychological Association whose guidelines note that psychologists should “describe themselves and their activities and should avoid deceptive statements and inappropriate or excessive inducements.” While these guidelines are applicable to on- and offline research, there is heightened applicability in cyberspace whereby a website user might be conducting activity which they may realize is not quite “private” in a literal sense, but nonetheless neither is it an activity they want documented in a research publication. Mentioned earlier was privacy and confidentiality. A further concern noted by Binik et al. (1999, p. 86) is the inability to completely guarantee data security: “Promises of anonymity on the Internet can rarely, if ever, be given with 100% certainty, since a persistent hacker or an official with a court order may be able to discover the identity of research participants.” Hacking indeed remains a concern, however, given that most scholars today would use Internet-connected computers to store sensitive data collected in *offline* settings anyway, hacking is not uniquely or additionally pronounced for online research.

While obvious risks – reputational, emotional, and psychological – exist for participants in sex research, numerous risks also exist for researchers. Doing online sex research potentially exposes a researcher to illegal sexual activity and prohibited sexual images; situations which could place a scholar in a legal tangle and which are circumstances unique to online sex research.

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### 3 Secondary Research: The Internet and Desk Research

Most research projects will begin with a desk research stage whereby readily available, on-topic material is assembled without fieldwork. Secondary research materials – work that has already been published such as books and reports and journal and newspaper articles – are reviewed to gauge what is already known about a topic, to ascertain what areas remain to be investigated and to determine whether fieldwork is necessary (see also “► [Unobtrusive Methods](#)”). If fieldwork remains desirable, the desk research stage helps brief a scholar about what research methods

have used previously – both to positive and negative outcomes – in order to design suitably ethical projects and to expand a field of research. The Internet has completely revolutionized this process. The *desk* in *desk research* was once used relatively loosely whereby this process could be executed at the scholar's own desk but also at desks and on surfaces in a range of libraries and archives. The Internet, however, has made *desk review* much more literal whereby the entirety of the desk review process can be conducted from one's own desk, in a fixed location, via utilization of an Internet connection. Doing so saves enormous amounts of time navigating through documents and commuting between libraries and other locations. Interned-aided desk research is also notably cost effective: not only is money saved on travel, but if the scholar is affiliated with an education institute, they will likely have access to full-text scholarly databases.

Aside from cost-saving and convenience, the Internet broadens the range of secondary materials available for analysis. On a cursory level, it means that a newspaper archive search can easily be conducted from one's own desk as opposed to sitting behind a microfiche machine in a library. Equally, the (not uncontroversial) Google Books library project has resulted in some 30 million books being scanned and (in varying degrees) made accessible to scholars no matter their location (Wu 2015). Amazon's "look inside" feature accomplishes something similar.

While the usefulness of the Internet in conducting a desk review is undeniable, it would be naïve to ignore that very worthwhile research projects that have transpired in its entirety without a single interview or survey being conducted. Tiefer (1991), for example, surveys a range of sexuality studies which use advertisements or cinema as a dataset; my own research is also heavily reliant on the analysis of popular media to tell the story of our relationship with sexuality. That said, it is necessary to acknowledge the limitations of desk research. Such problematizing is done not to devalue the importance of briefing oneself on the field, but simply to acknowledge that this stage does not exist without shortcomings.

Desk research in general and, more specifically in the context of sex research, is perceived as having some notable limitations; limitations which, incidentally, motivate many scholars to undertake *primary* research (as addressed later in this chapter). First, the very nature of desk research necessitates that only materials already in existence are explored. Such research is perceived not merely as frequently uninteresting, but as lacking in the innovation, newness and gravitas that new results would have. This is particularly important in the context of publication. Many journals prefer to publish new and seemingly innovative research as opposed to review articles without primary data. This frequently skews the research that scholars elect to produce. Marketing scholars Paul Hague et al. (2013, p. 41), in their book on research methods, identify a range of other shortcomings:

It may be that we are suspicious of the secondary sources because we had no involvement in their compilation. It may be that the data we are looking for are not in quite the form we require. It could be that we have not searched long enough or dug deep enough to see if this information is already available. Sometimes, desk research seems too easy. A big decision surely needs a lot of money spending on it and merits an original piece of research.

While Hague et al. were discussing desk reviews in the field of marketing, these concerns also plague sex research. Tiefer's acknowledgement of the criticism of, for example, feminist analyzes of advertisements or films, is part of a bias toward "scientific" studies as opposed to secondary data analysis; the latter which might still teach us about society and the sexual mores and scripts produced within but which does not utilize primary data.

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## 4 Primary Research: Online Materials

Autobiographies, memoirs, diaries, and correspondence are all part of the deluge of materials considered as primary sources. While, as discussed earlier, the Internet has made a range of materials – books and archives and articles, for example – accessible, the Internet itself has also been crucial in the *creation* of such material. People have, of course, been writing and publishing diaries and memoirs for centuries. Whereas the diaries that got studied historically were commonly documents written privately and studied or published posthumously – even if, as writer and literary critique Thomas Mallon (1984) speculated, many writers secretly imagined an audience for their musings – blogs take a different form. As described by media theorist Geert Lovink (2008, p. 6): “Blogs experiment with the public diary format, a term that expresses the productive contradiction between public and private in which bloggers find themselves.” Blogs are a very good illustration of Madge's betwixt/ between categories as an example of writing online that is both simultaneously private and public (see also “► [Blogs in Social Research](#)”).

Bloggging, a practice dating back to the earliest days of the Web, allows users to write and instantly publish entries. While the concept of a deliberately public diary raises concerns about performance and authenticity (Lomborg 2014; Whitehead 2015; van Nuenen 2016), the very same concerns also plague more traditional diaries (Mallon 1984), and as expanded on throughout this chapter, the idea of their only being one true self and one true expression is fraught (Rosewarne 2016d). Private diaries as well as more public ones like blogs provide a fascinating resource for scholars, particularly in relation to sex.

The writer and memoirist, Kerry Cohen (2013, p. 12), identifies that “[words] help us see who we are in our darkest, most private places. There are few memoirs this is truer for than sex memoirs, for nothing elicits vulnerability quite the way sex can.” Certainly for sex researchers, the sex memoir has served as useful research source material. While books like Frank Harris's volumes *My Life and Loves* (1922–1927) or Ingeborg Day's *Nine and a Half Weeks* (1978) have historically proven illuminating for scholars, the number of book-length sex memoirs pale in comparison to sex blogs, material predominantly produced by women (Attwood 2009) and which often produce a level of immediacy and explicitness absent from offline publications. While the veracity of sex blogs and whether considering them as akin to diaries are debates had elsewhere (Cardell 2014), the Internet nonetheless has facilitated the creation of a new source of primary source material where first-person sexual confessions are made available online, providing valuable individual

testimonies, obtained without having to apply for permission from an ethics committee.

While sex blogs are a good example of a new source of public data available for analysis, they also provide insights into some very medium-specific ways of being sexual: from insight into netporn-aided sexual fantasy (Muise 2011) to the exhibitionist titillation that comes from public sexual confessions, of the caliber that only the Internet can so easily deliver (Wood 2008; Rosewarne 2011, 2014, 2016a; Fullwood et al. 2013).

This section has focused on the Internet's role in the creation of public diaries and thus the creation of new sources of data for investigations into human sexuality. Blogs, however, are not the only primary source research material available on the Internet. The study of the contents of sexual interactions in chatrooms (Koch et al. 2005) and in online games (Marteya et al. 2014), the presentation of the sexual self in dating profiles (Rosewarne 2016a, b), in vlogs (Biel and Gatica-Perez 2013), and in amateur porn (Paasonen 2010), and analysis into the sexual interactions between members of social network sites such as Fetlife (Fay et al. 2015), along with the activity logs of shopping sites (Coulson 2015), each provide new and notably *medium-specific* materials for scholars to mine for insights into human sexuality.

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## 5 Primary Research: The Internet and Participant Recruitment

While the Internet has provided sex researchers vast quantities of new information, the technology has also had a major role in reconceptualizing a very traditional area of research: participant recruitment. Primary research is about the conjuring of new questions and the obtaining of new answers to research quandaries that either have not yet been posed, or – at the very least – not posed in the way that a scholar intends to. In order to undertake this kind of research, a constant supply of people willing to fill in surveys, answer questions, and sit in laboratories are needed. The Internet helps enormously in this regard. Psychologists Danielle Murray and Jeffrey Fisher (2002) summarized the range of reasons that the Internet has become so indispensable in soliciting research participation including that doing so is efficient and cost effective, that scholars are able to get samples up to four times larger than those organized in-person, and that much money is saved on paper and other stationery costs by relocating operations online. The Internet enables research participants to be found anywhere in the world and for a potentially larger sample of primary data to be collected. From Interviews using Skype (Deakin and Wakefield 2014) or questionnaires using Survey Monkey (Waclawski 2012; see also “► [Web-Based Survey Methodology](#)”), the Internet has meant that some of the traditional impediments to primary research such as recruitment time, costs, and geography are rendered less important. Scholars have also noted other advantages to online primary research such as physical distance from researchers encouraging participants to self-disclose in ways less likely to transpire in a face-to-face environment (White and Thomson 1995; Reid and Reid 2005). Such a method also helps a scholar to circumvent

“gatekeeper” concerns (whereby access to participants in a particular organization or clinical setting needs to be granted to a researcher) (Coulson 2015). Conducting research online also allows participants greater flexibility with the completion of, for example, surveys, enabling them to do so at a time, and in a place, convenient for them (Coulson 2015).

Using the Internet for participant recruitment boasts a range of obvious positives. Worth acknowledging, however, are some of the concerns; concerns which do not devalue the use of the technology in this regard, but nonetheless force deeper thought on research design.

Scholarly work on online methodologies frequently (although increasingly less so) spotlight limitations such as not everyone having a computer or Internet access, thus in essence excluding some likely already-marginalized people. While these factors of course are becoming decreasingly relevant in a world of smartphones, wifi, and public libraries with Internet access, they nonetheless remain relevant in countries where Internet use is not ubiquitous. Equally, early online research concerns, such as fears about those white, wealthier, educated men who once dominated Internet use and, in turn, datasets, have become dramatically less relevant 20 years on where online activity is near universal.

More pressing, however, are issues created by some of the benefits of the technology. In any research project, concerns are raised about representativeness and the degree to which the sample reflects the broader community. While the Internet facilitates the advertising of projects and the ability to locate and easily target individuals and communities, ultimately the sample still ends up being self-selected: these are individuals who have *volunteered* to participate. While the lack of representation in a self-selected sample will exist regardless of where participants are recruited and is not an Internet-specific problem, nonetheless, if the Internet is selected as the exclusive recruitment tool over other sampling methods such as *stratified random sampling* or *opportunity sampling* (Liamputtong 2013; Patton 2015), then this lack of representativeness may be more pronounced.

Mentioned earlier was the convenience factor of research participants being able to complete surveys or answer online questions whenever it is most convenient. A downside of this, however, is that the researcher has little control over the setting in which participation transpires, something problematized by criminologist Lynne Roberts (2007, p. 23): “This means [researchers] cannot tailor instructions to an appropriate level for an individual, clear up any misunderstandings (unless contacted by e-mail) or ensure the survey or measure is completed in an environment free from distractions.” A connected concern centers on response quality: studies indicate that written responses tend to be briefer and less comprehensive than verbal ones (Burton and Bruening 2003); thus without a researcher asking questions, follow-ups, explanations, and expanded answers are thwarted.

Noted earlier was the ability to engage in global recruitment of research participants. This, of course, creates its own challenges. In nursing scholars Eun-Ok Im and Wonshik Chee’s work (2004) on online methodologies, they discussed a range of projects where the Internet was used for recruitment. If documents, for example, are only made available in English, the ability to globally recruit means in practice



that only people with relatively strong English skills can participate. Even then, mastery of English does not fully account for uses of, for example, idioms which may seem unimportant in a survey design but may result in uninterpretable answers. Im and Chee (2004, p. 295) reflected on their study and identified: “Since data were collected using only English, the validity of foreign terms identified to be used in cancer pain descriptions from the nine countries may be threatened by language problems of the participants as well as the translation process.”

Another concern, and one specifically pertaining to ethics and sexuality, is anonymity. While anonymity online raises issues pertaining to identity and honesty, and while sometimes it may encourage participants who might be reluctant to expose their identity, there are some notable shortcomings. The capacity for online participants to create a false identity – in line with the identity play that the Internet is renowned for (Rosewarne 2016a, b) – means that factors frequently essential in data collection, like the gender of the participant, may not be accurately gleaned online.

Like any research method or sampling technique, using the Internet has a series of deficits. Such factors, however, have not diminished the desirability of using the technology, particularly given that doing so gives scholars not just a way to target a lot of possible participants efficiently and effectively, but enables specific kinds of participants to be targeted, something with pronounced relevance to sex research.

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## 6 Primary Research: The Internet and Sexual Subculture Participant Recruitment

The Internet has completely revolutionized how individuals experience sexuality, it turn altering expressions of intimacy and becoming a key source of informal education (Rosewarne 2011, 2015, 2016a). Resultantly, the Internet has become a one-stop shop for sex researchers: there they can observe and collate, and as discussed, *recruit* research participants. Social researchers Wendy Bostwick and Amy Hequembourg (2013, p. 658), for example, discussed the use of the Internet in specifically targeting bisexuals, identifying that the technology “has opened up innumerable avenues to conduct targeted recruitment and research. Bisexual-specific listservs are not new, but the proliferation of social media venues (e.g., Facebook and Meetup groups) has made Internet recruitment of bisexual participants particularly appealing for both face-to-face studies and Internet-based survey research.” Highlighted here is the use of the technology to investigate populations notoriously difficult to target, in turn helping to create truly representative research samples. Psychologists Danielle Murray and Jeffrey Fisher (2002, p. 6) discuss some of the limitations of social science research which tends to rely on university undergraduate participants because “this population is an easy-to-access, convenient, and inexpensive group of participants. . . .” Such studies invariably exclude “hard-to-reach” subjects such as those who live in rural areas, who are not out, who are transgender or intersex, who eschew sexuality labels, who are sex workers, who have been trafficked or are any of these populations in association with other factors such as drug-use, homelessness, and mental illness (McDermott and Roen 2012;

McCormack 2014; Bach and Dohy 2015; Barros et al. 2015). Murray and Fisher (2002, p. 7) propose that the Internet is an answer in accessing these populations: “Use of the Internet for data collection has already shown an increase in diversity over that of college student populations, and as computers become more accessible to the general public, the diversity of potential samples will increase dramatically.”

Use of the Internet in attracting research participants boasts a broad number of advantages in sex research. Firstly, while many reasons explain the “hard-to-reach” nature of certain minority sexual populations, a central reason for this is shame: these populations are hidden because there is a cost (real or perceived) to identity revelation (Rosewarne 2011). Participating in research online – with the ability to take advantage of anonymity and not having to engage in face-to-face contact – is considered one way to attract research participants who, otherwise, would not be inclined to participate and thus may not get their voices included in research projects (Liamputtong 2007, 2013).

While accessing hard-to-reach populations has been made substantially easier through use of the Internet, it is necessary to identify the shortcomings of using the technology in this regard. While on one hand, the Internet provides many ways to target groups, it should not be taken for granted that doing so is effortless. In psychologists Ilan Meyer and Patrick Wilson’s work (2009) on sampling in lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations, the authors spotlight that many websites, “particularly those that are sexually explicit or deal with provocative subject matters,” actually *prohibit* online solicitation of study respondents. On Fetlife, for example, it is very common for profiles to include a statement objecting to the information posted being used in research projects. Meyer and Wilson similarly identify that while advertising for research participants online might get an advertisement seen by many people, there is little correlation between the number of eyes on an ad and the number of respondents.

Another hard-to-reach population for the purposes of sex research is children, something that Binik et al. (1999, p. 84) address:

In the past, researchers did not have easy or direct access to minors or patients independent of their parents, caretakers, schools, or some third party or institution. This insured that legal third parties were at least minimally aware of the research and were involved in giving consent. Now, many thousands of users under the age of 12 and legally defined as children use the Internet every day. . . Potentially important research with minors (e.g., relating to surviving sexual abuse or childhood sexuality practices) might be effectively carried out over the Internet, possibly even more effectively than face-to-face interviewing. . .

While the ethics pertaining to conducting research with children – specifically around issues of sexuality – is addressed elsewhere (Flanagan 2012; Sparrman 2014), as outlined by Binik et al., the Internet creates both a motivation to undertake research with children – as a result of things such as access and their exposure to erotic content – but also creates the capacity to reach children in ways outside of traditional education settings often blocked by gatekeepers.

## 7 Primary Research: Online Ethnography

An interesting hybrid between primary and secondary is online ethnography whereby fieldwork gets undertaken from the comfort of a desk. Discussed earlier was the capacity for an enormous amount of research to be conducted from one's own desk. While commonly desk work is associated with secondary source data collection, the Internet has also revolutionized how *primary* research is conducted.

Thinking of the Internet as a place is well established (Rosewarne 2016a, b, c). Thinking of it as a somewhere that people can go, or be from, underpins popular perceptions of it as a badlands or Wild West at one end of the spectrum and as a new frontier at the other. As related to fieldwork, the idea of the Internet as its own geographic site(s) creates the capacity for a scholar – without leaving their desk – to observe social interactions; a research method known as *virtual ethnography* (Hine 2008). In practice, online ethnographies have been conducted on communities as diverse as Brazilian migrants (Schrooten 2012) to software developers (Cordoba-Pachon and Loureiro-Koechlin 2015), but for the purposes of my chapter, it is ethnographies in the realm of sexual communities that make this research method particularly useful. Discussed earlier was the Internet offering the capacity to analyze a range of online activities such as blog posts, chatroom interactions, and amateur pornography. In fact, the virtual possibilities for ethnography are much broader, as outlined by Binik et al. (1999, p. 82):

The growth and popularity of personal Internet services allow for novel investigations of sexuality at home, in the absence of physical presence, and under conditions of relative anonymity. By making use of existing or experimental on-line sex therapists and sexual self-help or entertainment groups, researchers can study topics such as interpersonal attraction, flirting, sexual language, sexual self-help, sexual writing, role playing, and therapeutic relationships.

Such ethnographies have been conducted widely in the study of sex. Social researcher Faracy Grouse (2012), for example, conducted an ethnography of the sexual behaviors of Second Life players using an avatar to investigate how intimacy gets transformed without physical contact. Criminal justice scholars Kristie Blevins and Thomas Halt (2009) used similar techniques to study the attitudes of male clients of sex workers as exhibited in Web forums. Sociologist Joy Hightower (2015) conducted a virtual ethnography which observed the interactions of women on a lesbian dating website to examine gendered bodily presentation, label use, and peer perceptions.

Just as the Internet has dramatically benefited the desk review stage of research, it has also overhauled ethnography (see also “► [Ethnographic Research](#)”). While many scholars will, of course, still want to undertake in-person observations in places like gay bars (Johnson 2005), pride marches (Ammaturo 2016), and swingers conventions (Kimberly 2016), the Internet opens up scope for conducting this kind of research without leaving one's desk. This can make work substantially cheaper, more convenient, and able to overcome geographic boundaries, but it also taps into a

reality that the Internet does not just create new ways and places to study sex, but rather the technology has completely overhauled the way sex itself is experienced and thus, in turn, generates its own, medium-specific data. In my book *Intimacy on the Internet: Media Representations of Online Connections* (Rosewarne 2016a), I examined the range of ways that the Internet has revolutionized the experience of sexuality, from changing how we meet partners, maintain relationships, self-stimulate, fantasize and obsess, have “sex,” hook up, cheat and betray, experience our interests vicariously, dabble in subversive sexual practices, expand our networks, and how we feel less alone. In each of these areas, the Internet plays a crucial role and one that necessitates research methods that observe these practices in situ. Virtual ethnography is one method that facilitates this. This technique also has advantages of being less intrusive than interviews, focus groups, or physical observations and it can be viewed as (comparatively) more authentic than had the researcher orchestrated a space for interactions to transpire.

Like each of the methods discussed in this chapter, virtual ethnography is not without criticism. Scholars have problematized this method as so fundamentally dissimilar to traditional fieldwork that it is inappropriate to dub it as such (Lenihan and Kelly-Holmes 2016). An extension of this is that by just observing, for example, a lesbian’s interactions in a dating website, does not provide data on her life in its entirety (although, arguably, even offline methodologies would struggle with gleaning such information). Limitations similarly exist in extrapolating data from sexual spaces online and assuming that this provides insight into offline activity, although again, it is hard to imagine that any methodology could truly encapsulate every aspect of identity. Worth noting, the same concerns about authenticity that plague other digital research methods plague ethnography. Communication is somewhat compromised if visual cues cannot be monitored. Similarly, ethical concerns exist about researchers “lurking without consent” (Roller and Lavrakas 2015, p. 190). While these limitations should not be considered as deal breakers – consent can be obtained and a broader definition of “authenticity” can be utilized (Rosewarne 2015, 2016b) – nonetheless it is worth identifying that this method does have unique elements that need to be accounted for.

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## 8 The Internet and Deceptive Responses

In this section, the role of the Internet in obtaining more deceptive data, and alternatively *more truthful* data is examined. While deception is a possibility in any human research, this concern is more pronounced in the context of work done online. Since its inception, the Internet has been framed as a kind of badlands (Rosewarne 2016a, b). A key underpinning of this perception is the capacity for the concealment of identity and, in turn, the concealment of potentially duplicitous intent. While this can partly be explained by techno- and cyberphobia whereby things that are new are both feared and perceived as malevolent (Rosewarne 2016c), the reality is that some people *are* frequently deceptive online. The ability to conceal identity, to play with identity, to don the guise of another gender, and to exaggerate

appearance are all behaviors fostered by the default-anonymity of the Internet and what have come to be construed as one the many gameplay-like behaviors executed online; something legal scholar Chris Ashford (2009, p. 298) discusses:

These sites enable the formation of a “virtual identity” which may be regarded as “false”. . . This is particularly relevant in the construction of age. This may take the form of a 40-something male becoming a 30-something for the purposes of a networking site, or may attract the attention of the law where this is seen as representing a “subversive” motive, for instance in the “grooming of children.”

The possibility of this kind of deception has indeed long haunted online research. Sociologist Christine Hine (2008, p. 263), for example, discussed the issue of duplicity in her discussion on virtual ethnography:

Online ethnography, and indeed all research using data collected online, has been dogged by the question of authenticity. . . Such was the association between the Internet and identity play in the early days that considerable doubt was expressed whether enough trust could be placed in what people said online for their words to constitute grounds for any sound conclusions to be drawn.

While the capacity for deception must be factored into research design, this should be considered as less an impediment and more so as a complicating factor, and one that ultimately can yield fascinating findings in new areas. Ashford (2009, p. 302), for example, discusses the complexity of researching online sexual identities and the expanded scope created for unique kinds of analysis:

The Internet enables the identity of the researcher to be recast as a fluid, relentlessly shifting construct. Those researchers who maintain Facebook and other Web 2.0 accounts, project one self; another self may be projected on a dating or hook-up site, another in the classroom and a further self at a conference presentation. No single self can, or should, be regarded as ‘true’ in any absolute sense.

Outside of identity play, it is worth noting other kinds of deception transpiring as a result of the anonymity fostered by the Internet. The social scientist Ian Greener (2011, p. 52), for example, spotlights that the ability to be anonymous creates the capacity to be deceptive without consequence:

People taking part in research can behave in remarkably dishonest ways when the assurance of anonymity is in place. Research participants have been shown to be more likely to steal and to lie about test results they have taken, for example, when they believe they are anonymous.

While this might be interesting if a research project is about deception, it is often perceived as less helpful if scholars are seeking personal insight. While scholars have put efforts into refining techniques to validate identity and to verify things like age and signature, the reality is that truth and identity are concepts needing to be reconceived in the design of research projects using online methodologies.

## 9 The Internet and Truthful Responses

At the same time that we have questioned the truth of online responses and the *real* of online identities, there has been another set of conversations transpiring about the Internet's capacity to aid *greater honesty*: that anonymity can facilitate truth-telling because a person is not self-censoring in fear of judgment; i.e., serving as an online illustration of Oscar Wilde's famous "Give a man a mask and he'll tell you the truth." As applied to social research, Greener (2011, pp. 51–52) also sees capacity for positives to come from anonymity: "Offering anonymity will lead to respondents being more honest, and feeling that they can say what they believe without being concerned whether their answers will in some way be used against them."

Numerous scholars have spotlighted a capacity for heightened self-revelation online. Social researcher Mark Griffiths (2010, p. 9), for example, discusses the disinhibiting effects that have contributed to this: "For populations discussing sensitivities issues like addiction, this may lead to increased levels of honesty and therefore higher validity in the case of self-report." In the context of sex research, disinhibition can lead to heightened self-revelation of a caliber that sometimes struggles to emerge in offline research environments.

While as noted earlier, the identity concealing or identity fabricating possibilities of the Internet need to be acknowledged, so too do the very reasons why researchers have so enthusiastically embraced online spaces: research participants sometimes open up and self-disclose in ways that offline environments might never permit.

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## 10 Conclusion and Future Directions

The Internet has completely revolutionized every aspect of sex: from overhauling our fantasies, supplementing our masturbation, helping us connect, hook-up, cheat, rinse, and repeat. It is no surprise, therefore, that with all these changes transpiring online, that the interest of scholars would be piqued. Scholars have delved into every aspect of sex online, probing the how, the where, and the why and putting under the microscope each element of this new private life accoutrement. Of course, for scholars, the role of the Internet in sex research is much more than just a new set of stuff to study. As discussed throughout this chapter, the Internet is *itself* something to study, but it is also a tool to explore sexual behavior occurring online as well as offline: research on online dating sites and hookup apps invariably involves online-instigated activity that often ends up playing out in real life.

While the Internet serves researchers as a tool and a source of data, it is important to recognize the complexity of this. Going online to do research creates an enormous array of benefits but also a range of methodological shortcomings and ethical concerns. Such factors do not devalue online research, but nonetheless create pause for thought for scholars and a necessity to think very carefully about research design.

A key challenge for researchers going forward – and, notably, a key issue for university ethics committees – is keeping abreast of new online tools that aid with

recruiting participants and also yield new materials of the kind sex researchers might be keen to study. In my experience, for example, students were navigating the use of Tweets and Facebook posts in research long before ethics committees settled on best practice as related to such material. Just as governments are challenged with needing to write legislation that meets constant technological change, scholars are charged with the same burden in regard to ensuring the ethics of their online methodologies.

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