

**Performing the Discourse of Sexuality Online**

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### ABSTRACT

This chapter focusses on Foucault, Butler, and video-sharing on sexual social networking sites. It argues that the use and prevalence of video-sharing technologies on sexual social networking websites, has a direct impact on our notions of sexual identity. Though sometimes pitted against one another and at times contradictory, the ideas of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler on the nature and expression of our sexuality and our gender identities in fact gel rather well, and both can help us to gain a deeper and more rounded picture of the impact and importance of the burgeoning phenomenon of internet dating websites in general, and sexual social networking in particular.

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter begins with the notion of performance – in particular the performance of **sexuality**, and most specifically, the performance of the **discourse** of sexuality. It posits that the proliferation of sexual discourse and sexualities since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century outlined by Foucault (1990; 1992; 1998) continues apace in the Information Age, if anything accelerated and broadened to a wider public by the phenomenon of internet dating. It also posits that the **performativity** of gender identities outlined by Butler (1990; 1993) continues, with online categorization in internet dating sites in fact prescribing ever more specific and ‘niche’ roles. This chapter contends, moreover, that the practice of video sharing on internet dating (perhaps better described as sexual social networking) sites, is illustrative of why Butler’s criticisms of Foucault in fact fail. Finally, this chapter introduces the sociology of masculinity to information systems and communication studies readers, in the voice of Whitehead (2000), and his Foucauldian understanding of the discursive masculine subject.

This is a very large topic to which a book chapter such as this cannot do true justice, so the objectives of this chapter, more narrowly, are to introduce the relevant ideas of the three theorists just mentioned, applying them briefly to two websites, one global the other specifically for the UK, aimed at the gay male community, and to examine the impact of video-sharing on these websites upon these Foucauldian and Butlerian notions of the self, and upon Whitehead’s ideas concerning the discursive masculine subject. The author, a gay man, has undertaken an ethnographic study of these two websites, having been a member and participant in Gaydar since April 2000, soon after it was launched, and of Fitlads since a year after its launch in April 2003.

Through discussion of these two websites, this chapter argues that – certainly in the gay male experience, and by implication in a broader sense, also - video sharing in online sexual social networking proves to be illustrative both of Foucault’s concepts of the body as Idea, of sexuality as **discourse**, and of Butler’s notions of the performative body.

### THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

**Social Constructionism** was famously introduced (albeit leaning on Mead’s (1934) work on symbolic interactionism) by Berger & Luckman (1967), as an approach which focuses on the ways in which people and the groups they form contribute to the creation of their perceived social reality – the collective **power** of society to determine individual identity. Social interaction lies at the heart of all knowledge for the social constructionist. Whilst this chapter aligns itself with the fundamental contention of social constructionism, namely that no man is an

island, and that our selves and our interaction with each other are indivisible, **poststructuralism**, and its more contemporary approach to the nature of identity, is the principal philosophical approach propounded in this chapter. Although there is a good deal of overlap, not all social constructionists are poststructuralists, but the author of this chapter is. As an approach, poststructuralism represents the deconstruction of all systems of thought, treating all ideals, systems, structures, definitions and assumptions with suspicion, encouraging, on the contrary, a continual and profound scepticism and freshness and open-mindedness of enquiry as central tenets of its approach (Kreps 2010). This applies, of course, as much to social constructionism, as to any other system of thought.

However, there are number of fundamental alignments between the two approaches that are pertinent for the discussion in this chapter. Poststructuralism arose from the structuralist approach espoused by a number of 20<sup>th</sup> century writers. Structuralism originates from Saussure: ". . . we cannot know the world on its own terms, but only through the conceptual and linguistic structures of our own culture . . . Structuralism's enterprise is to discover how people make sense of the world, not what the world is." (Fiske, 1990; p.115). The aim of structuralism is an explicit search for the permanent structures of the mind itself, which is where both social constructionism and poststructuralism diverge from it. Such an approach is both too realist and even positivist, and constructionism is interested in culture more as a set of structures of meaning and power. It is here that it shares much of poststructuralism's focus. Constructionists and post-structuralists share a postmodern rejection of such concepts as objectivity, reality and truth. However, in the post-structuralist view, the veracity of meaning, too, is in question - it is always 'deferred,' and because meaning is in dispute, it is the basis of political and ideological struggle.

Foucault, Butler and other **poststructuralists**, share a number of ideas which hold them together as a 'movement' in philosophical thought. Poststructuralists hold, for example, that the concept of "self" as a separate, singular, and coherent entity – such as the Individual Subject - is a fiction. Any poststructuralist critique must embrace a multifaceted set of interpretations, including the possibility of shifting meaning and movement dependent on perspective. A related poststructuralist approach, deconstruction, aims to espy any binaries, e.g. subject/object, male/female, symbolic/imaginary, rational/emotional, and to contest the normative dominant in such pairs, preferring to show the dependency of the dominant upon the supposedly subservient half of the pair, and through the deconstruction of the assumptions and knowledge systems that set up such binaries show the fluidity between them, how one becomes the other from particular perspectives.

Our **sexualities**, as a part of our personalities, for the social constructionist, come about as part of that development of self that is a conversation between what may be regarded as 'innate' proclivities and the influence of the world in which we develop. Highly significant, in this social context, is Foucault's notion of political technologies of the body. **Foucault** was arguably the greatest thinker of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. This chapter embraces his concept of the political technologies of the body, and of the progressive disciplination of the self over the last few centuries. His work on the creation of our concepts of sanity through the creation of the medical discipline of mental health (Foucault 1995); the creation of our concepts of good citizenship through the creation of the prison system (Foucault 1977); and the creation of a range of sexual character types and whole modes of desire in recent centuries (Foucault 1990; 1992; 1998), collectively provide an extraordinary insight into how social technologies of organisation, power and control have progressively shaped not just our lives but our bodies themselves, our self-

concept, the individual performances of who we are. Foucault, then, outlines the map of contemporary social roles from our own subset of which we are able to select who we will be in any given situation. This map derives from the social environment of control where **power** and knowledge are intertwined and focused upon the human body as the object of their interplay. The human body is exposed as object and target of power in the modern era. "It is manipulated, shaped, trained, [it] obeys, responds, becomes skilful and increases its forces.... [it is] constituted by a whole set of regulations and by empirical and calculated methods relating to the army, the school and the hospital, for controlling or correcting the operations of the body." (Foucault 1977:136)

Thus constituted as a node or nexus of power relations within society, to understand how the human body reveals and embodies such relations it is useful to turn to **Butler's** notions of **performativity**. The dramaturgical metaphor in social constructionism was introduced by Goffman (1990) and his notion of the performance of the self. In the context of 1990s postfeminist gender studies, Butler took this dramaturgical metaphor a step further with the contention that *all* gender identity is social and performative. Performativity arose originally from the linguistic turn. As Diamond (1996:4) describes in the introduction to her book, *Performance and Cultural Politics*, "Performativity derives from Austin's (1964) concept of the performative utterance which does not refer to an extra-linguistic reality but rather enacts or produces that to which it refers". Austin (1964) distinguishes between illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts, the former doing what they say in the saying of them, the latter producing certain effects as a result of being said. The concept, in short, suggests that, at least with reference to some cultural realities, 'doing' pre-exists 'being,' and that being, moreover, is something that only exists in the 'doing' of it. The implications of this are profoundly anti-essentialist, putting aside once and for all the notion of an 'essential' self inside the body, guiding and directing one's actions. It says not merely that our selves are the product of **social construction**, but, specifically with reference to gender, "It's not just that gender is culturally determined and historically contingent, but rather that "it" doesn't exist unless it's being done" (Diamond 1996:4). Gender is an activity, not an attribute.

The theatrical metaphor behind performativity as a concept useful for cultural theorizing reveals its real depth in the acknowledgement that each doing is a repetition, a reiteration, a well-rehearsed enunciation of something already written as a cultural code. The "act one does, the act that one performs is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene" (Diamond 1996:4-5). Gender is both a doing and a thing done - a pre-existing category and a pre-defined situation. But it is perhaps important to note, here, that the concept of the performative utterance includes within it the notion of failure - that a great deal of what is uttered in a performative manner, fails to enact what it says. Without this element of failure, the negotiation and play-off integral to the day-to-day working consensus spoken of by Goffman (1990) would be impossible. So, too, would those whose real feelings do not fit easily into the grooves of gender roles be prevented from their pioneering in re-defining social situations at this profound level.

**Performativity**, then, describes a gender constructionism that entails the performed repetition of gender codes, as stipulated by cultural norms, and strips these codes of the very bodily substance they attempt to signify, reducing them literally to codes, whose very existence depends upon their repetition by the performers who are themselves defined by them. It is important to note here, though, that these codes, unlike some unsubstantiated free-floating virtual information, are

not to be considered as in any way existing outside of or beyond their very real instantiation as gender signifiers. The point here is that these codes are actions. Gender is a role presented.

This in turn reflects upon the nature of the "I" that clearly neither 'has' nor 'is' but *does* gender. As **Butler** says, "In the sense that the 'I' has no interior secure ego or core identity, 'I' must always enunciate itself: there is only performance of a self, not an external representation of an interior truth" (Butler 1993:12). Freud's argument that "the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego," (Butler 1993:13) is of note here. As Butler takes it up, it is an 'imaginary morphology,' a body image of self which is the lived body, as opposed to the physical body. This 'morphologising,' as Butler terms it, takes place very early on - indeed the 'sexing' of the body at birth is the first step in the process, and every step thereafter is a reiteration of the norms of sex.

The construction of the individual, in short, is a continuous, interpenetrative, and never-culminating process. But where does all this lead? Butler analyses the limits of **constructionism** as a concept - how it is prone to fall either into a linguistic monism, "whereby everything is only and always language," (Butler 1993:6) or into places where construction requires the agency of a constructor, viz 'If gender is constructed, then who is doing the constructing?' Her proposal is to return to the notion of matter, which she re-defines as "a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter." The body, in Butler's analysis, is marked off through a process of erasing, of selectivity, which, through persistent reiteration, becomes a boundary that is defined rather by what it is not, than by what it is. The process of reiteration is what defines these boundaries. As Butler asserts, "there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body" (Butler 1993:10). The sexing of the body - the very first act of life beyond (and even within) the womb - is also the delimiting of possibilities, the stamp of conformity. As Butler asserts, "To 'concede' the undeniability of 'sex' or its 'materiality' is always to concede some version of 'sex,' some formation of 'materiality.'"

Once formed, then, in this manner, in considering the relations *between* the sexes, it is less an understanding of materiality or identity to which we must look, and more to an understanding of power. Most notions of the power of men over women in our society, and of the power of society over our sexual activities, importantly, rely upon what **Foucault** described as a juridico-discursive model of **power**, an understanding of power as something essentially repressive, negative, and constraining. There are five aspects to what Foucault describes as this model of power: (i) There is a negative relation between sex and power: sex is always something that power constrains; (ii) Power acts juridically - as a law - determining how sex should be treated; (iii) Power acts only to suppress sex; (iv) Power says sex cannot be permitted, cannot be spoken of, and ultimately doesn't exist; (v) Power works in the same manner at all levels: everywhere, there is uniform repression. Of course Foucault spends much of his three volume 'History of Sexuality' (Foucault 1998) contesting this conception of power. On the contrary, he argues, power is in fact positive, and immanent; it is being exercised at all times and from all points in any relation. Nor is it applied externally upon such relations, but internally within and between them, and in idiosyncratic configurations at all levels of society, rather than in some simple top-down hierarchy. There are no individuals who are singly or collectively exercising power within society, whom the rest ultimately obey - as Butler terms it, there is no-one 'doing the constructing'; all individuals are caught up in the nexus - this discursive field - of power relations. Resistance to **power** is therefore part of the power relationship, and not external to it, and takes different forms in different contexts, (Foucault 1998).

The most significant element of this reconception of power is the re-appearance of the subject – the individual, and their individual differences, identities, and influences. The subject is ultimately absent from notions of hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy, in which the generalised mass of men become ‘the oppressor,’ or in which some cabal or secret society of rational actors are ultimately and deliberately responsible for the ideological forces they ‘deploy’ through all men, whose subjectivity and individuality becomes subsumed – erased – within this generalised field of oppressor-victim dualism. (Whitehead 2002 p99) In contrast to this early feminist model of ‘the oppressor,’ following the lead of both Foucault and Butler, Whitehead brings us the concept of the discursive masculine subject: an independent actor within a field of immanent power relations, both expressing and resisting, in idiosyncratic and deeply contextual ways, what are otherwise seen as hegemonic masculine attitudes. In this way individual identity gains new power, becoming part of the discursive matrix of power relationships, both in service of traditional roles, and in resistance to them, at levels both conscious, and unwitting. The behaviours of both men and women take on far greater depth and import when both are seen as both maintaining and undermining traditional gender roles, through their performances, and their iterations of the codes of sex.

### **THE SCIENTIA SEXUALIS**

There is, clearly, no ‘doing’ of gender more fundamental than the physical, visceral act of sex. Yet surrounding the act comes a plethora of non-physical, conceptual and discursive envelopes, not least of which the concept of **sexuality**. **Foucault**’s contention, in his three-volume History of Sexuality (1990; 1992; 1998) is that sexuality is discourse. Foucault critiques the commonly held view that sexuality is something that we have, particularly since the nineteenth century, "repressed". On the contrary, he contends that what appears as a "repression" of sexual drives has actually formed, defined, categorized, delineated, and constituted a concept - ‘sexuality’ - as a core feature of our identities. Far from being suppressed, he argues, we have witnessed a proliferation of **discourse** on the subject. Foucault’s story, in the first volume, The Will to Power, (Foucault 1998) focuses around the nature – and sexual content - of ‘confession,’ first in its Christian context, through the evolution of its use in Christian theology and political influence, to its translation into a ‘scientific’ form on the sexologist’s and then psychoanalyst’s couch. These changes together constituted what Foucault describes as the “*scientia sexualis*” (Foucault 1998:67) – sexuality as discourse. This *scientia sexualis*, moreover, joined with the multiplicity of other forces in the **power**-knowledge network described in Foucault’s other works as one of the many political technologies controlling, constituting, directing, and producing the human body in contemporary society.

It is the contention of this chapter that this discourse, once perhaps more the domain of the learned and of the professional classes, has with the phenomenon of the World Wide Web, and especially of Web 2.0, become the domain of all. Viewing today’s online social networks, and especially the internet dating sites that have proliferated in recent years, from this Foucauldian perspective, we can see that the discourse of sexuality is very much apparent. There are a great range of different kinds of internet dating websites for a panoply of different tastes, where discussion, connection, and the sharing and exchange of confessional photographs and videos can be undertaken, all at the touch of the button for today’s computer user.

It is truly not that long ago that spending large amounts of time in front of a computer screen was regarded as the behaviour of a young adolescent male, devoid of social skills. Now, more and

more of us are attached to our screens much of the time, at work and at home – and increasingly to our mobile screens on our journeys in between. This activity is increasingly seen not only as socially acceptable and a ‘cool’ thing to do, but crucial to our economic well-being. Behaviour somewhat frowned upon in the 1980s, by those pejoratively referred to as ‘geeks’, has in a sense taken over as normal activity, no longer viewed as the behaviour of a social misfit lacking in social skills, it is the social interaction mediated by the computer that has become the norm: social interaction has thus been subtly shifted from the control of the individuals involved to a shared control with the computer networks that now mediate it - a classic Foucauldian transformation that increases disciplinary **power**. Online social networking is, from this perspective, an almost fabricated form of social interaction that through its advertising and subscription models satisfies the needs of pervasive computer-network-based transnational capitalism as much as the gregariousness of its participants (Light et al 2005; Kreps & Pearson 2009). The bodies of those using these online social networks, moreover, are the nexus of intense power relations, required to perform a myriad technical duties in a multi-tasking environment that has them pinned - literally - rooted to the spot, physically immobile sat in front of the screen. Whether that screen is a large fixed unit on a desk or a small portable unit on a mobile phone, the eyes, concentration and focus of the user of online social networks are captured by the screen for the tasks associated with networking, while other tasks such as making coffee to drink at one's desk, or undertaking a journey on a train or bus, become secondary to the focus upon what is happening on the screen. Small wonder then that the sexualities of these disciplined bodies have migrated to the screen as well.

## **GAYDAR AND FITLADS**

Today's internet dating sites offer up a plethora of virtual sexual identities represented in online profiles. “Given the opportunities the Internet provides for secrecy and anonymity”, DiMarco points out, “it is of little surprise that many users are increasingly exploring aspects of their sexual identities and experimenting with their sexuality in ways that may be precluded in ‘real’ life by a variety of social and personal impediments, constraints and repressions.” (DiMarco 2003) Assuming, with Yurchisin et al. (2005:736), that our identities transcend “online and offline boundaries and [are] actually a collection of both online and offline categorisations of oneself,” it is clear that our offline selves help to constitute our online selves – sometimes by contrast as pointed out by DiMarco, sometimes by similarity – and that the reverse must also be true: that our online identities help to constitute our offline selves.

Foucault's contention that sexuality is **discourse** does not question the reality of sexual desire, but highlights the way in which ‘**sexuality**’ as an identity or as a uniform type of person is a social construct. Introduced to the academic community by the German sex researcher Richard von Krafft-Ebing, in his *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), the terms homosexual and heterosexual were but two of a multitude of categories that carved up human sexual practice into a set of sexual identities - sexualities. This new sexological practice, according to Foucault's argument, was socially constructive, and constituted a set of new identities, not just sexualities. Arguably, this contention has been one of the most powerful developments on the intellectual horizon in recent decades, and the origin of much of post-feminist and certainly of queer theory. In what might now be considered approaching a post-sexuality era, the category ‘men-who-have-sex-with-men’ has been coined, in part to distinguish those men who do not identify as homosexual yet engage in sexual activity with other men, and in part as a catch-all for male same-sex sexual relations regardless of sexual identity. The websites Gaydar and Fitlads, the focus of the study in

this chapter, cater to all men-who-have-sex-with-men. A more exhaustive study would also encompass websites targetted at all women-who-have-sex-with-women, and all women-who-have-sex-with-men/men-who-have-sex-with-women. There is not the space for such an exhaustive study in this chapter, but the arguments, I believe, are generalisable – a contention that will have to await further work to be supported.

When creating an online profile on one of these sexual social networking sites, one must provide information about one's physical appearance, demographic characteristics, and personality traits. Photography, and increasingly video, provide information about appearance, demographics are often simply age and location, and personality traits often boil down simply to likes and dislikes (both social and sexual). Such data, moreover, beyond free text boxes for self-description, is often collected in a multiple-choice format, and then used as criteria to enable the website to offer matchmaking services, linking profiles with similar choices through a variety of search mechanisms. The requirements of the matching criteria asked for by the two sites being focussed on in this chapter, ostensibly to enable easier connections between people, are arguably constitutive of sexual identities. As Light et al point out, "Not surprisingly we find dominant cultural stereotypes reproduced and reinforced through technological design...Although the free text element implies freedom to define oneself as one chooses, the presence of menus and tick boxes shapes a pre-defined notion of what may or may not be an acceptable expression of identity." (Light et al 2008:307) Computer mediation, then, arguably shapes and constrains the representation of sexual identities, which could be reproduced on a large (or massive) scale. "As of January, Gaydar.co.uk has over 5.2 million registered users." (QSoft, 2010) Making such choices at the outset, when creating one's profile, may in fact have the effect of locking individuals into specific roles, prior to meeting, from which they are then unable to escape without admitting online dissimulation once face-to-face, at the risk of losing the connection as soon as it is made. Importantly, though, "the greater level of anonymity provided by the internet, as compared to face-to-face encounters, allows individuals to present aspects of their current perceptions of themselves that they would not ordinarily present to other members of society." (Yurchisin 2005:737). In other words, the options may enable individuals to 'role'-play at being one of the pre-defined 'types,' online, despite reservations regarding such behaviour offline. The ability to amend one's profile later, unchecking some boxes and checking others, indeed allows some element of play with such interests and identities – at least, within the constraints of what is available to be checked.

The author has made an ethnographic study of the two websites, one global the other specifically for the UK, aimed at the gay male community, specifically to examine the impact of video-sharing on these websites.

During the sign-up process, each individual new member of both sites sees, and must choose from, a range of options to make visible about their own sexuality. Much of the terminology is familiar only to those 'in-the-know' and both explicit and too graphic for inclusion here: the reader must take the author's word for it, the range of potential sexual identities from which one is able to choose, when signing-up, or later when modifying one's profile, is comprehensive, including what fetishes and sexual activities are 'preferred.'

Gaydar, though it began in the UK, is now global and all-encapsulating, and has maintained the same basic look, feel and features for a decade. Fitlads is aimed mainly at what is termed the gay 'chav' or 'scally' market - a self-consciously working class identity characterised by shellsuits and trainers - but also includes sportswear and bondage fetishists. Importantly, on Fitlads,

personal videos can be 'rated' 1->5 by their viewers, and their ratings are added up by the system, such that those with the highest ratings appear in a weekly Top Ten. There seems to be a good deal of competition to get personal masturbatory and coital videos into this list.

The inclusion of video in these internet dating profiles is a relatively recent but very important development. Fitlads introduced it during 2008, and Gaydar began to introduce it in early 2009. Online videos have existed long before this time, but uploading videos, managing, sharing and watching them has been very cumbersome due to a lack of an easy-to-use integrated platform. Technologically, therefore, video on the web has long been beyond the easy reach of most web developers. The technological challenges of delivering streaming video across the web were so great – requiring additional (and expensive) server software, a good deal of bandwidth, and often unreliable plug-ins - that it was not, in fact, until the advent of YouTube in 2005 that video began to become an everyday part of the World Wide Web experience. YouTube solved the challenges by streaming video through the use of Flash, which had become an almost ubiquitous add-on within browsers around the world. The addition of easy reformatting of uploaded videos into Flash, and of a social network of video-sharers, propelled YouTube into one of the most successful websites yet, along with a host of imitators. Three years later, video-sharing became easier for smaller web developers to implement on their sites, and indeed, almost a necessity for sexual social networking sites wanting to maintain the loyalty of their membership. The advent of the HTML5 <video> tag and its associated formats, as browser makers begin to support these technologies, promises yet a further revolution in the availability and dissemination of video material on the web.

But video-sharing has had a significant impact on the nature of sexual social networking. The pornographic aspect of such sites has taken on some unusual and important characteristics, core to the contentions of this chapter. In classic pornography, both the traditional cinema version and the more recent online version, the 'ordinary' individual gazes upon the (inaccessible – or at least costly) 'extraordinary' – the fit, classically good looking porn star. Video sharing is different. In this case it is the 'ordinary' displaying themselves to each other, as if at once both claiming to be 'extraordinary', and glorying in the accessibility of their ordinariness – if you like the video you can write to the individual and try to arrange a meeting. Some are simply mobile-phone videos, grainy and not well shot, but others are carefully edited, with accompanying music, perhaps shot with expensive home video cameras, even by second or third parties who do not themselves appear in the video. These latter videos represent perhaps the individual's "perceptions of what are known as their *hoped-for possible selves*" (Yurchisin et al. 2005:737) – again a reference to the potential for online 'role'-play.

But the confessional manner in which young people take photographs and videos of their bodies in masturbatory or coital scenes and post these images and videos on their internet profiles, parading themselves to one another, is more than simply self-advertising in the hope of 'scoring' sexual partners. There is a competitive sexual exhibitionism apparent, encouraged on Fitlads by the 'rating' process and the kudos associated with having one's video of oneself in the weekly Top Ten, that is more to do with communication *about* sex – albeit that that communication is visual rather than oral or textual – than it is about *sex* itself. This is video-discourse - a *scientia sexualis videre* – in which the exchange of imagery online becomes a confessional sexual activity in its own right, quite apart from the physical meetings that may or may not be arranged through the website. The discourse outlined by Foucault between sexologists and psychoanalysts, around the judicial and penal response to and the medical definitions and

treatments of the multiplicity of **sexualities** which were ‘discovered’ in the nineteenth century relied heavily upon the ‘confessions’ of the subject – either patient or felon. Arguably, through the medium of online sexual social networking – and especially through video-sharing - such ‘confessions’ have now become performances by subjects that now bypass the professionals in order to perform directly to one another. Thus, Foucault’s argument that the *scientia sexualis* was also an *ars erotica* in its own right, a “pleasure in the truth of pleasure” (Foucault 1998:70), is perhaps borne out by these activities. But what are we to make of such role-play and performances?

## **FOUCAULT, BUTLER AND THE BODY**

Seen in light of Butler’s **performativity**, the masturbatory display of one’s body in sexual arousal and orgasm on video in an online sexual social network is an act that enunciates and defines one’s gender-role, a presentation and definition of self as porn star, which constitutes one’s body as desirable, and mirrors back to oneself an observable body image of self which is both the lived AND physical body at the same time as it is merely pixels upon a screen.

Butler’s notion of *citationality* is particularly important, though, in this instance – that the roles we perform pre-exist us, that we cite them in the knowledge that they will be understood because they are as known to those to whom we perform them as they are to us. Crucially, this citational aspect of Butler’s **performativity** allows performative behaviour to fail, by implying that only specific performative actions will succeed. This is very important, because it allows choice among possibilities, trial and error, and the development of “personhood” through experience (Goffman 1990:30).

The citational aspect of Butler’s work, moreover, dovetails neatly with many of Foucault’s concepts. Despite their differences (Butler 1989), Butler is explicit in acknowledging her debt to Foucault, despite Foucault’s apparent disinterest in – even hostility to - feminism. Butler’s feminism is in truth as post-feminist, as non-gendered as Foucault’s approach to sexuality, in this author’s opinion, and the tensions between them perhaps somewhat overplayed. Foucault’s approach to sexuality is as much that of a **social constructionist** as is Butler’s approach to gender. His study of sexuality rests upon a study of identity, because it addresses the fundamental question of the evolving nature of the self that “experiences” emotions, and places both desire and the desirer in historical context. According to Butler, however, they differ over the question of the nature of the body, and we must examine and overcome this difference to see how video-sharing proves exemplary of the inscriptive **power** of the confessional discourse of sexual roles taking place in online sexual social networking. Inscription, of course, is a concept not only used by Foucault. Inscription forms a key part, along with translation, of Latour’s mechanism by which actor networks impose their programmes upon people, (Latour 1987; 1991). It also forms a key part of how Akrich’s mechanism of delegation achieves its desired behaviours in the users of technological artefacts, (Akrich 1992).

Inscription refers to the way artefacts embody patterns or scenarios of use. This is not to suggest that action is hard-wired into an artefact. Halfway between a perspective that would suggest artefacts determine the use and, contrastingly, a perspective suggesting an artefact is always interpreted and used flexibly, the term inscription can be used to describe how “concrete anticipations and restrictions of future patterns of use are involved in the development and use of a technology” (Hanseth & Monteiro 1998). According to Latour, there is a process in society of continual negotiation, a social process of aligning multiple and disparate interests. Stability

therefore rests on the ability to translate, “that is, re-interpret, re-present or appropriate, others' interests to one's own” (Hanseth & Monteiro 1998). In this sense, all design is translation.

Latour (1991) provides an excellent explanatory example of this aspect of his theory: getting guests to leave their keys behind when leaving a hotel. This is a ‘desired pattern of behaviour’ and the problem is how to inscribe this pattern into the network of hotel guests, keys, staff, and so on. This network is what is termed the ‘actor-network’ in actor network theory, and includes both human and non-human actors. The question is how to inscribe the desired pattern of action, and into what? Hanseth and Monteiro (1998) take up the story: “This is impossible to know for sure before hand, so management had to make a sequence of trials to test the strength of different inscriptions. In Latour's story, management first tried to inscribe it into an artefact in the form of a sign behind the counter requesting all guests to return the key when leaving. This inscription, however, was not strong enough. Then they tried having a human door-keeper -- with the same result. Management then inscribed it into a key with a metal knob of some weight. By stepwise increasing the weight of the knob, the desired behaviour was finally achieved. Hence, through a succession of translations, the hotels' interests were finally inscribed into a network strong enough to impose the desired behaviour on the guests.” Hanseth and Monteiro (1998). Of course, in today's more technologised society, hotel keys are programmable cards, easily dispensable and replaceable.

Foucault and Butler's approaches to the social construction, on the one hand of sexuality, and on the other of gender, are not mutually exclusive, despite the critique Butler offers of Foucault's position. In her article, “Foucault and the Paradox of Bodily Inscriptions” (1989) Butler attests that Foucault's position is incoherent. With gratitude to David Dudrick's critique of this paper (Dudrick 2005), it is clear that she is mistaken.

Butler's reasons are summarised by Dudrick as follows:

- “1. Foucault holds that ‘bodies are constituted within the specific nexus of culture or discourse/power regimes’ (Butler 1989:602)
2. Foucault is therefore committed to the claim that ‘there is no materiality or ontological independence of the body outside of any one of these specific regimes’ (Butler 1989:602)
3. Foucault holds that the process of cultural construction [may be understood] on the model of “inscription” (Butler 1989:602)
4. Foucault is therefore committed to the claim that the ‘body [has] an ontological status apart from’ inscription (Butler 1989:602)
5. Discourse/power form a regime just in case they constitute the locus of inscription
6. Therefore (2) and (4) are inconsistent
7. Therefore (1) and (3) are inconsistent
8. Therefore Foucault's understanding of the body, as expressed in (1) and (3) is inconsistent.” (Dudrick 2005:226)

However, as Dudrick says, “In order for Butler's paradox to hold, the claim she attributes to Foucault must concern bodies understood as objects.” (Dudrick 2005:227) If, however, in (1), it is the body as a *concept* that is constituted within the nexus of power/discourse, that it is *concepts, ideas* to which Foucault refers and about which he writes, then Butler's assertion (2),

that Foucault is committed to the claim that there is no materiality or ontological independence of the body outside of power/discourse no longer follows. As Dudrick points out, to support Butler we must actually read (1) as:

“1b. Foucault holds that *physiological bodies themselves* are constituted within the specific nexus of culture or discourse/power regimes.” (Dudrick 2005:228)

Whereas, in fact, it is more in keeping with Foucault’s own work on disciplinary power (Foucault 1995) and in the History of Sexuality (1998) to render (1) as:

“1c. Foucault holds that *bodies ‘directly involved in a political field’ – that is, souls, - themselves* are constituted within the specific nexus of culture or discourse/power regimes.” (Dudrick 2005:228).

One might additionally include here bodies as understood in the context of Whitehead’s discursive masculine subject, engaged both in maintaining and resisting traditional gender roles – the re-introduced subject whose experiences help him to choose, as awareness grows, behavioural codes in the power/discourse matrix that free him from outworn traditions.

Contrary to Butler’s reading suggesting that Foucault claims that the very ‘materiality’ of the body is invested with ideas, Dudrick (and this author) read Foucault’s conception of sex as an *idea*, something “formed inside the deployment of sexuality” (Foucault 1998:152), and quite separate from the anatomical actualities of organs, functions, pleasures etc. It is – to use Butler’s own term – the ‘imaginary morphology’ of which Foucault writes, and not the visceral body itself. Her criticisms, thus, fail.

We can thus begin to locate these young gay men sharing videos of themselves with each other in sexual social networking sites not only within a Foucauldian model of power and subjectivity, and a Butlerian model of performative identity, but as instantiators of unique masculinities the like of which have probably not been seen since antiquity, in the baths of Pompeii; as citational constitutors of new forms of masculine sexuality in the virtual context of social media; as newly invented digital sexual identities – albeit shaped and constrained by the mediation of the sexual social networking site’s category list.

## **FUTURE TRENDS**

The latest social media phenomenon, the website ChatRoulette.com, generates one-on-one Webcam connections between each visitor and another randomly chosen user. This promises to take sexual social networking into a whole new space. As the New York Times says of it, the site is “intensely addictive—one of those gloriously simple ideas that manages to harness the crazy power of the Internet in a potentially revolutionary way.” (Anderson 2010) In the experience of the author of this paper, any session is likely to include a mixture of immediate ‘Next’s’ – the result of the vast majority of connections – interspersed with a handful and fascinating, brief meetings and conversations. In one session, in February 2010, by which time there were upwards of 20,000 regular users of the site, I chatted with a French teenager playing live electronic music on a keyboard in Paris, and a middle-aged man eating noodles in a café in Szechuan. I also saw a strangely still mug-shot of a classically beautiful Far-Eastern woman, and – very briefly as my finger reached for the ‘Next’ button – a close-up of a naked man masturbating. This latter is emblematic of the early use of the site. As Anderson notes, “One man popped up on people’s screens in the act of fornicating with a head of lettuce. Others dressed like ninjas, tried to persuade women to expose themselves,” (Anderson 2010). The

experience will be, for many, as described by Tossell, “Naked guy. Click. Naked guy.” (Tossell 2010). All the press attention given to the site during its moment of recognition, in February 2010, has concluded that ChatRoulette is NSFW – Not Safe For Work. In this open, wild, so far unfiltered version of ChatRoulette, exhibitionists can thrill at the prospect of displaying themselves to those who have not consented to the experience. The technology, indeed, almost encourages it. Without such filters, then, the future for ChatRoulette is clear – it will be gradually taken over by exhibitionists and voyeurs, and eventually no-one else will use it. Sexual social networking on ChatRoulette promises thrills very different from the walled (and gay male) gardens of Gaydar and Fitlads.

## CONCLUSION

Video sharing in online sexual social networking then, proves to be illustrative of Foucault’s concepts of the body as Idea, of sexuality as discourse. Significantly, if this videoed discourse of sexuality, this *scientia sexualis videre*, bypassing professionals and undertaken *between* ‘confessors,’ through sharing videos of the body performing sexual roles, takes part in constituting the individual’s performative body image of self, as discussed above, then it is not the physical body which is thus constituted, but the videoed body.

This is important because we are now free to understand the process of social **construction** on the model of “inscription,” as Foucault enjoins us to. It transpires, from this perspective, that inscription and technological design and its outcomes are very much in play within online sexual social networking. As Light et al point out, “The developments in social networking technologies, in their many variants, similarly inscribe specific understandings of the social world and act to enrol users in specific ways.” (Light et al 2008:302). This model of inscription holds that social construction *does* have physiological effects in a literal sense: “The intentional body is made out of the physiological body.” (Dudrick 2005:239). In short, the workings of disciplinary practices cause the physiological body to bear intentionality: the videoed body constituted through the performative and psychological power of the body image of self, encourages exercise and dietary regimes towards attaining physiological resemblance to pre-existing physical ideals of desirability. After choosing one of the ‘types’ in the multiple choice, experience both online and offline through the site encourages the individual not only to dress the part, and act the part, but to look the part naked, too. The auto-erotic video is public, shared, as if the mythologised Ancient Greek/Roman bath-house were walled with mirrors, and the choices one makes when signing up to Gaydar or Fitlads, for all that they may at the time reflect possible hoped-for selves or secret explorations of as yet unformed aspects of our offline identities, nonetheless through the experience of using the sites on a regular basis can have so profound an effect on the body image of self as to bring about physiological changes the better to resemble one’s fantasy - and therefore the more likely to gain entry to the weekly Top Ten.

Foucault’s work grew and developed during the course of his lifetime, and indeed towards the end took an interesting turn from the political technologies of the body towards a notion of Technologies of the Self (Foucault 1988). In this late work Foucault outlined some of the ways in which the work of the self – identity work – takes place over time, himself reintroducing the Subject, in the way Whitehead affirms in his conceptions of masculinities. Contrary to the overarching Christian tradition of *knowing* oneself, Foucault recalls the former classical tradition of *taking care* of oneself, a process by which one observed, amended, and honed one’s behaviour over time, not in a judgemental way, but as a continual process of refinement. This concept of

the self, albeit gendered, pinned at the nexus of interpenetrating lines of power/discourse and reiterating codes of pre-existing behaviour, sees purpose, agency, choice, and the ability to change the balance of maintaining and resisting in the behaviours one adopts. Taking care of the self brings the potential of maximising resistance. It also brings the potential of making of ourselves a paragon of whatever we desire.

Our examination of Foucauldian and Butlerian concepts of sexuality and performed gender roles, then, particularly in the notion of inscription where the two theorists seem to clash, has shown that video-sharing proves exemplary of the inscriptive power of the confessional discourse of sexual roles taking place in online sexual social networking. Whitehead's concept of the discursive masculine subject, moreover, introduces us to the possibilities of unique masculinities being instantiated online, in a collective virtual experiment with the potentials – and physical consequences - of digital identity. Online sexual social networking, moreover, where the 'confessors' address each other rather than the professionals, may not only be illustrative of Foucault's conception of sexuality as discourse, but the means by which the categorisation of sexualities which began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century might gradually be overcome. The nexus of power relations within which these young men express their resistance to the traditional masculine roles their upbringing may have introduced them to, finds itself upturned and destabilised, *deconstructed*, in this gay sexual social networking milieu, bringing us truly to a post-sexuality era, where the array of potential digital identities and the possibilities of play they open up, might enable us all to return, simply, to the humans-who-have-sex-with-humans we have, arguably, always been.

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## Key terms

1. **Social Constructionism** - an approach which focuses on the ways in which people and the groups they form contribute to the creation of their perceived social reality – the collective power of society to determine individual identity
2. **Discourse** - Foucault's units of discourse, which he terms, 'statements' gain their power and validity from the status of those who make them, and collectively come to form bodies of knowledge known as disciplines or fields of study. These he dubs 'discursive practices' which collectively form into epistemes that roughly equate to historical periods.
3. **Performativity** - The concept, in short, suggests that, at least with reference to some cultural realities, 'doing' pre-exists 'being,' and that being, moreover, is something that only exists in the 'doing' of it.
4. **Citationality** - the roles we perform pre-exist us, that we cite them in the knowledge that they will be understood because they are as known to those to whom we perform them as they are to us
5. **Inscription** - can be used to describe how “concrete anticipations and restrictions of future patterns of use are involved in the development and use of a technology” (Hanseth & Monteiro 1998).
6. **Masculinities** – “What is for sure is that notions of masculinity are increasingly multiple, rendering traditional forms of being male, if not redundant, certainly marginal” (Whitehead 2002:6)
7. **Sexuality** - Foucault critiques the commonly held view that sexuality is something that we have, particularly since the nineteenth century, "repressed". On the contrary, he contends that what appears as a "repression" of sexual drives has actually formed, defined, categorized, delineated, and constituted a concept - 'sexuality' - as a core feature of our identities. Far from being suppressed, he argues, we have witnessed a proliferation of discourse on the subject.